

FPFWC Christian Development



Courageous Prophets of Change

May 2021

Spring Quarter

May 8, 2021

Lesson #2 – Offering Hope for the Future

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Isaiah 29:13-24

ICE BREAKER –

1. How can we ensure that our heart matches what we say about God?
2. What steps can you take to make sure that your worship is heartfelt, not just an act?

Key Verse: “They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine.”—Isaiah 29:24

LESSON BACKGROUND

A predominant theme of the book of Isaiah is God’s sovereignty over history. The fictitious pagan fertility gods were imagined to be caught in never-ending cycles of birth, life, and death. For pagans, history endlessly turned on itself. Their gods were doomed to the same repetitive beats as were mere mortals.

By contrast, the God of Israel stood outside of history. Since He brought all things into being (Isaiah 40:21–31), how could it be otherwise? He demonstrated mastery over history by giving Isaiah visions of what would occur before, during, and after the Babylonian exile. That tragedy extended from the destruction of the temple in 586 BC until release from captivity in 538 BC.

The most immediate new thing that God would do was to use a foreign power, Assyria, to accomplish His will by disciplining Israel for their sin and corruption. During Isaiah’s tenure as a prophet (740–681 BC), Assyria was the region’s sole superpower. Founded in Mesopotamia in about 1750 BC, that nation’s period of most militant expansion began in about 1100 BC.

Assyria’s most coveted prize, Egypt, lay to the west. However, several smaller nations on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, including the divided northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, stood in its path. The risk of invasion was constant.

Two centuries before Isaiah’s time, King Solomon had accumulated immense wealth through his initiative of international commerce. That fact, along with prosperity in the interim, made the covenant people an attractive target for the aggressive Assyrian Empire. Both Israel and Judah experienced years of prosperity after they divided into two kingdoms (Isaiah 2:7; etc.). Assyria menaced both for years.

The threat diminished during the reigns of less bellicose Assyrian monarchs. However, Tiglathpileser III (reigned 745–727 BC) renewed Assyrian designs against both Israel and Judah (2 Kings 15:29). The prophets Hosea and Amos had issued the earliest warnings, in the eighth century BC (examples: Hosea 10:6; Amos 3:11). At the time, their prophecies must have been seen as outlandish to a nation enjoying peace. But during Isaiah’s ministry as a prophet, predicted doom became reality.

Ahaz, king of Judah from 735 to 715 BC, allied with Assyria to foil aggression by Aram and northern Israel, paying steep tribute in the process (2 Kings 16:7–8). Eventually, however, he felt pressure to rebel against Assyria and shift allegiance to Egypt. The prophets warned both northern Israel and southern Judah against such entanglements, but they were ignored (Hosea 7:11, 16; etc.). God instructed both nations to place their trust in Him, not pagan empires and their fictitious gods.

Beginning in the period of Hezekiah's reign (about 724–695 BC), Isaiah preached five "Woe Sermons" that included further warning against such alliances. These five sermons are found in Isaiah 28:1–33:24, each opening with the word *Woe* (28:1; 29:1; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1). The sermons establish the rationale behind God's judgment, yet also offer hope that God would someday restore the nation predicted to fall. Today's study concerns both.

Leading into today's text is a sad observation regarding ignorance of the Word of the Lord as delivered through the prophet (Isaiah 29:11–12).

LESSON COMMENTARY

Without divine words, the people are left with only human rules. God's message to the people is of no use because only the spiritually deaf and the blind lead the nation. They hear the words but do not believe them. They see the events around them, but do not look to God to deliver them. Without the ability to hear God, there is no chance for the people to honor God. Their superficial reverence of God had become a vain activity comprised only of ritual.

If, as Proverbs asserts, the "fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Pr 9:10), wisdom cannot be founded on human rules. The people appear to have been fooled into thinking that their reality is the only reality. God will once again shake up their perceptions. He will astound them "with wonder upon wonder" (NIV, Is 29:14). The human **wisdom** (v. 14) that has driven the lives of Israel will be removed. God will so explode the people's understanding of reality that what once counted as wisdom and intelligence will be overshadowed by God's wisdom, knowledge, and power. God's people must be reminded that life with God is never without possibility. There is always hope, always potential. God's astonishing acts are designed to call God's people to believe once again that God does not operate within the limits of human possibility or vision.

29:15–16. The third **woe** of six is for Israel's leaders' attempted deception of God. Israel's leaders have some sort of hidden plan that they are attempting to keep from the Lord (v. 15). The language of hiddenness and darkness suggests that the plans were not simply hidden from the Lord, but from everyone. Though it is not explicit within the text what plan has been made, it may be that a secret political alliance is in mind (cf. 30:1–2; 31:1). In any case, the nature of the plan is secondary to the manner in which it was conceived.

The hiddenness of the plan and the exclusion of God from the planning process is a sign of disrespect (v. 16). It represents yet another instance of the leaders' rejection of God, as well as highlighting the leaders' hubris in relation to their own knowledge. The **clay** has said of the potter **He has no understanding**. Here again, the leaders reveal their lack of imagination and trust in God's sovereignty. Paul addresses the principle of God's sovereignty over humanity when he explains

election using this passage (see comments on Rm 9:19–21). Nevertheless, Israel's leaders lack recognition of God's sovereignty over them and therefore solve their current difficulties based on their rejection of God and their skewed understanding of the relation between Creator and creation.

29:17–24. Having attempted to deceive God, what follows is a depiction of the coming reversal of their human assumption. That which humanity took as an absolute will become unreliable. The divine surprise will overturn established knowledge and wisdom. It will showcase the possibilities available through the power of God. A series of reversals illustrates the futility of plans that exclude God and, instead, limit potential options to those that seem to be within the realm of human control. With God involved, the great forests of **Lebanon** will become **fertile** fields and the fertile fields will grow into a great **forest** (v. 17).

The reference to the **book** in v. 18 echoes the previous referent to the sealed book in vv. 11–12. While the leaders could not read the scroll, God will allow others to receive His message. He will empower the eyes of the blind to see despite the darkness. These lines may refer to the transformation of a spiritually insensitive nation. There will be yet another reversal as God who previously “shut your eyes” and “covered your heads” (v. 10) will now open the eyes of the blind and make the **deaf** hear (v. 18). Though the generation to whom the prophet's message was delivered was blind and deaf to God's word, there will come a day when the blind and deaf will see and hear.

Even those who have no cause for rejoicing under the current regime will find cause for worship. The blind and the deaf, the humble and the needy represent the downtrodden of Israelite society. They have no opportunity to abuse their power or to lead the nation astray because they have no position, no influence, and no hope within human government. God will change the situation of those who have no standing in the nation and give them reason to rejoice (v. 19). By contrast, those who have done evil and benefited through injustice will be destroyed.

The first two categories of people noted in v. 20 are mentioned at other points in the book of Isaiah. The Hebrew word translated **ruthless** in v. 20 is also used in 13:11; 25:3–5; 29:5; and 49:25. The term refers to those who practice wickedness. In 25:3, “cities of ruthless nations” are used in parallel with “a strong people,” suggesting that they occupy a privileged place in society. The **scorner** is only mentioned in 28:14 (“scoffers”), but the description is used numerous times in Proverbs to refer to those who mock godliness and degrade the wisdom of God (e.g., Pr 1:22; 14:9). The deeds of those who watch and do evil are made explicit in 29:21. They use empty arguments (the word **meaningless** is the same word as used in the creation narrative [Gn 1:2], indicating that the new creation was “formless and void”) to pervert justice while actively oppressing and mistreating their countrymen. Each of these groups, then, stands against God and opposes His moral order.

These reversals will result in the removal of shame from Jacob (29:22). The reference to God's redemption of Abraham is likely designed to remind Israel of God's steadfast faithfulness to them. God has been working on Israel's behalf since He called their first forefather out of the desert. Just as He redeemed Abraham, so He will redeem Jacob, a reference not to the patriarch but to the

nation by way of metonymy. The allusion to Abraham may also have a second purpose related to vv. 22–23. Jacob’s shame and embarrassment will be lifted because of the children God will produce among them. Much like God’s provision of children to Abraham, He will now bring prosperity to a new generation of Abraham’s descendants with offspring. The people of Israel will turn and honor God when they see the children He has provided (vv. 23–24).

LESSON NUGGET – When the Lord returns and establishes His kingdom, things will change! God’s people will hear and see His truth, rejoice in it, and honor the Holy One of Israel. But you need not wait to have Him change your life. Give Him an honest heart, and let the Potter have His way in your life.

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary and Wiersbe Expository Outlines on the New Testament*