

Lesson 14 Isaiah 29 Historical Deliverance and Spiritual Transformation

Introduction

Isaiah <small>"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."</small>						
Book of the King 1-39						
The Lord of History 28-37						
Six Woes 28-35						The Rock of History 36-37
The One Foundation 28:1-29	A Problem Solved, a Problem Stated 29:1-14	Spiritual Transformation 29:15-24	Human Faithfulness and God's Faithfulness 30:1-33	Deliverance and Renewal 31:1-32:20	Victory, Proclamation and Pilgrimage 33:1-35:10	1 st Assyrian Embassy 2 nd Assyrian Embassy Finale: Assyrian Defeat

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

God has declared His purposes to us in His Word through His prophets. Some of those purposes have already been fulfilled, some we are experiencing, and some are for the future. The purposes fulfilled are our past heritage. We look back to Adam and Eve, to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses, to David. We look back every time we take the Lord's supper to that most important of all fulfilled promises: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We look back to Pentecost, to the birth of the Church, and to the spread of the Gospel to the ends of the Earth through history down to our days. That is past.

God's present work is where we find ourselves participating in the story. This is our time. This is our moment to see God at work in us, in our local church, in our society, in the global Christian community. This is the present. Many of God's purposes are not yet fulfilled. Jesus Christ does reign in Heaven. But spiritual and human powers of evil have not yet been abolished on Earth. Jesus has not yet come back. We still groan, longing for the glorification of our bodies, longing for our new home. The new Heavens and new Earth are still our future hope.

Experiencing God's Word come true in the present strengthens us in our faith as we hope in the fulfillment of God's future promises, and to trust that those promises will be fulfilled at the right time according to His sovereign plan. Isaiah points out that truth to the people of Israel in chapters 28-37. He reminds them of God's deliverance from the Assyrians who had surrounded Jerusalem. This was part of their present. He exhorts them to remember how they struggled to trust God for that deliverance, and to remember how God kept His word in spite of their weakness: the word He had communicated through Isaiah. This large section makes the point, just as God fulfilled His word in our present circumstances, you better believe that He will bring about the future that he has described in the previous section. The *Universal Kingdom*, chapters 13-27, gave to Judah all kinds of promises that were yet to be fulfilled. It's all in the future.

That future vision of the mighty empire Assyria coming to an end and the great city Babylon becoming a deserted wasteland, and that further future vision of the city of man being overthrown and the city of God being established on Earth where God's glory will shine brighter than the sun, and where the super-power oppressors of God's people will come to share in the inheritance of Israel, all of those far off realities will be realized. And yet, the people hearing this prophecy could ask, "How do we know, Isaiah? How do we trust your vision of these future events?" Well, what if Isaiah were to tell you that Assyria would surround Jerusalem, only to be stricken down by the hand of God? If you saw that, would you believe? Or what if I were to tell you that Assyria as an empire is only going to last another 70 or 80 years tops, if you saw that happen in your lifetime, would you be prepared to believe the word given to you for the future?

Let me give you an example. This is from more recent history, in the past 100 years or so. In the early twentieth century, not a lot of Christians believed that any predictions concerning Israel were meant to be interpreted literally. They read that in their Bible, and they think there must be a symbolic or spiritual meaning, or this must be about the Church. I can't be about Israel the people or Israel the

nation. Because there was no Israel. There was only a small Jewish presence in the Promised Land. Jews had not ruled in Jerusalem since the Roman destruction of the city and the Temple in 70 AD.

In fact, this was not the first time Jerusalem, and her Temple were destroyed, and the people removed from the land. The first time happened in 600 BC with the conquest of Babylon. About 70 years later, the Jews were back, the Temple and the walls were rebuilt. And that was incredible. Who has ever heard of a people being totally removed from their land, and then coming back and re-establishing themselves? But it was only 70 years, so it's happened and maybe it was in the realm of possibility.

But this second exile, the Jews being gone again, has lasted so much longer, almost 2000 years. Romans ruled, and Muslims ruled, and then a brief period of Crusaders, and then back Muslim and the Ottoman Empire, up until World War I when the British finally took over. There is no Jewish government. There is no Israel.

In the modern era, nobody thought Israel would ever exist again. So, Christian theologians just assumed that it was going to be fulfillment through the Church, or that it's all metaphoric, it's symbolic.

Well, then the unthinkable happened. The Jews came back. A nation state was formed in ancient lands. The Hebrew language was resurrected. There were not just Jews living in the land, but a government, an actual geopolitical Israel. And so, we can ask those same theologians, "Now what do you think about the possibility that some of those end time prophecies apply literally to the people of Israel and the city Jerusalem?" Well, a lot of Christian theologians, since 1948 have started to say, "You know what, maybe some of these things are meant to be taken literally."

I am not going to make a case right now for anything in particular. We still have to do careful Bible study, as we see through studying Isaiah. Some things are meant to be literal, and some things are meant to be metaphorical. And we address the literature, whichever genre we are looking at, with skill and with wisdom, and we faithfully handle the Bible. But we certainly don't discount literal fulfillment. Think about all the prophecies of Jesus hundreds of years before His appearance. The Messiah really did come as a man. He really was pierced. He really was betrayed. He really was sold for gold. He really was born in Bethlehem, and He really did grow up in Nazareth. The prophecies literally came true.

Remembering some of the amazing things that God has done in history helps strengthen our faith in His word, particularly when that word applies to major political events, or even unthinkable events. However likely or impossible something sounds, it's not impossible for God. God's word is true. Build your house on this rock.

Isaiah challenged Hezekiah and his fellow countrymen to trust God and His word as they set policy for the nation. Israel and Judah were caught in the middle of two major superpowers as Egypt in the south and Assyria in the north fought over the territory in-between, which included Israel and Judah.

By the time the book of Isaiah was written, this story in chapters 28-37 has already happened. Hezekiah has already faced the invading Assyrian army. The story is a reminder. Remember what happened in our present, in our own day. We were afraid. We made bad decisions. But then Hezekiah trusted God. And good thing he did, because we saw Yahweh to truly be the Lord of History, the Lord over the nations, the Lord who acts when He is ready to act.

And if what God said about Assyria was true, you better believe that what He says about Babylon later will also come true. And if what he says about Babylon later comes true, you better believe that what He says about future events will come true. The coming of the Messiah who will die, that's going to come true. And even further than that: the coming of the Messiah who is going to reign and establish a new Heaven and new Earth, that is going to come true. Even if Israel were to be wiped off the map completely, God is able to bring them back. He is the Lord of History. Take strength in the unbreakableness of His Word.

That's the section we have entered into now, last week with chapter 28. God is the Lord of History. Isaiah is going to remind us of that by retelling the story of Hezekiah and his government as they try to make policy for the nation.

The whole section of chapters 28-37 is organized as six woes and a conclusion. We considered the first woe in our last lesson. We will consider the next two woes in this lesson. Motyer sees in the six woes a kind of parallel pattern, where the first three woes present principles, and the second three woes show those principles at work in the events leading up to the surrounding of Jerusalem by Assyria.

We will consider the 2nd and 3rd woe in this lesson. Both are in chapter 29. We will also consider the principle that Motyer sees suggested by each woe.

Chapter 28 gave us the 1st woe and the 1st of Motyer's principles. Each principle follows the structure of the woe. Here is Motyer's principle from the 1st woe.

"When God's people reject His Word" (remember how priest and prophet mocked Isaiah's call to faith as fit only for the nursery, that was in 28:9-13) "When God's people reject His Word and covenant" (remember, they called it, "the covenant of death"), "destruction follows" (remember the hail storm) "held within divine purposes" (remember the examples of a sowing and reaping; the farmer does violence to the Earth to bring about a crop in 28:23-29). Let me say that again without interjecting.

Here's that principle: the principle of the first woe, "When God's people reject His Word (28:9-13) and covenant (28:14-15), destruction follows (28:18-22), held within divine purposes (28:23-29)."¹

That's the 1st one. We will get to the 2nd and 3rd principles after we consider the text of each woe. So, here we go. The 2nd woe.

2nd Woe (29:1-14)

The 2nd woe begins with this verse.

¹Woe, O Ariel, Ariel the city *where* David *once* camped!

Ariel is identified in that second verset as the city of David. But why Ariel? Jerusalem has many names, but up to this point in history Ariel has not been one of those names. All the Bibles I have, English and Croatian, simply transliterate the Hebrew as "Ariel." But what does it mean? Does Ariel have a meaning?

There are two main options. "Ari" is the Hebrew word used in Genesis 49:9 as part of the prophecy describing the tribe of Judah, David's tribe. There "ari" is "lion." "El" means, "God." So, "ariel" means "lion of God." Robert Altar prefers this meaning.

The second option recognizes that the word here is spelled the same as the word used in Ezekiel 43:15 for "altar hearth," or literally, "hearth of el." The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew lexicon defines this word as, "the top, mostly flat, fire-holding area of an altar." Motyer and Oswalt both prefer this meaning.

I lean towards the "altar hearth" translation because of a point Oswalt makes. The concept "Lion of God" does not seem to have any relationship to the rest of the text, but "altar hearth" does. We are going to be talking about traditional, outward religion through chapter 29, so the idea of the altar hearth connects to the mention of feasts in verse 1, to consuming fire in verse 6, and to religious lip service in verse 13.

The full 2nd woe occurs in 29:1-14. It can be divided into four sub-sections, disaster and deliverance, then blindness and illumination. Our principle from the 1st woe recognized that, even though God's judgment brings destruction, that destruction is part of a wider plan for God's people.

¹ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 228.

This woe indicates that part of God’s plan after judgment is transformation. We begin, though, with disaster. Isaiah 29:1-4.

Disaster (1-4)

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| ¹ Woe, O Ariel, Ariel
Add year to year, | the city <i>where</i> David <i>once</i> camped!
observe <i>your</i> feasts on schedule. |
| ² I will bring distress to Ariel, | And she will be <i>a city of</i> lamenting and mourning; |
| | And she will be like an Ariel to me. |
| ³ I will camp against you encircling <i>you</i> , | And I will set siegeworks against you, |
| | And I will raise up battle towers against you. |
| ⁴ Then you will be brought low; | From the earth you will speak, and from the dust |
| | <i>where</i> you are prostrate your words <i>will come</i> |
| Your voice will also be like that of a spirit
from the ground, | And your speech will whisper from the dust. |

The altar hearth is the place a sacrifice is consumed by fire. Ariel is not the sacrifice. Ariel is the place of sacrifice, the place of judgment and atonement. True worship is offered humbly at the altar. False worship goes through the motions of humility, observing feasts on schedule year after year. But lacking sincere humility, the people of Judah will experience humiliation in defeat. That’s the language here.

The people of Jerusalem will be brought low. They will lie in the dust. They are not dead. They are humiliated. “From the dust where you are prostrate your words will come...and your speech will whisper from the dust.”

From this point of humiliation, God will bring about deliverance. That’s in verses 5-8.

Deliverance (5-8)

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| ⁵ But the multitude of your enemies
will become like fine dust, | And the multitude of the ruthless ones like the
chaff which blows away; |
| | And it will happen instantly, suddenly. |
| ⁶ From the LORD of hosts you will be punished
<i>With</i> whirlwind and tempest and the flame of a consuming fire. | with thunder and earthquake and loud noise, |
| ⁷ And it will be like a dream, a vision of the night- | And the multitude of all the nations who wage
war against Ariel, |
| Even all who wage war against her and
her stronghold, | and who distress her, |
| ⁸ It will be as when a hungry man dreams—
and behold, he is eating; | But when he awakens, his hunger is not satisfied, |
| Or as when a thirsty man dreams—
and behold, he is drinking, | But when he awakens, behold, he is faint
and his thirst is not quenched. |
| Thus the multitude of all the nations will be | Who wage war against Mount Zion. |

A great reversal happens between the people of Jerusalem and their enemies. First, the enemies are successful. The citizens of Ariel were pictured face-down in the dust, now their enemies become like fine dust. It is more than a reversal. Their enemies are not now prostrate. This is like Marvel’s *Infinity War*. The enemy becomes fine dust and like chaff blows away. “And it will happen instantly, suddenly.”

This prophecy brings to mind the actual events of chapters 36 and 37. The army of Assyria marches in to Judah, surrounds Jerusalem, and taunts the defenders. The men of Judah hide in fear behind Jerusalem’s walls. They are humiliated. But in an instance, the army of Assyria is gone.

The Assyrians had full assurance of victory over Jerusalem. They looked at their numbers, their siege engines, their strength and ability and they knew that Jerusalem must fall. But their assurance turned out to be like a dream in the night. That’s what we’ve read in verse 8.

<p>⁸ It will be as when a hungry man dreams— and behold, he is eating; Or as when a thirsty man dreams— and behold, he is drinking,</p>	<p>But when he awakens, his hunger is not satisfied, But when he awakens, behold, he is faint and his thirst is not quenched.</p>
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They are so sure of their victory, it's like they're eating, and they are on their way to being satisfied, to awaken and to see that their work is empty.

God's wrath has two possible results, humiliation or death. God's wrath is always just. The wages of sin is death. God never executes wrath on an innocent human being. There are none. Still, God is extremely patient with those who love Him. But to those who rebel and turn to a covenant of death, God will eventually exact just punishment. That punishment may be final, the demand for life of the one punished, no hope of redemption. Or that punishment may be conditional, allowing for repentance. God may drop us into a pit so deep that we must give up the illusion of being able to save ourselves and finally, in humility from the dust, cry out to Him for salvation.

In this section, Judah as a whole community was humiliated. They became prostrate, clearly unable to save themselves. But then God did save. Their enemies experienced a worse punishment of near annihilation. Judah is given a chance to cry out to God.

The religious culture of the city had not produced a brokenness of heart. There was not true humility and worship. There was rebellion against God. So God made the whole city an altar of sacrifice upon which He sacrificed both the pride of Jerusalem and the pride of Assyria, so that some would repent, some would believe.

Hezekiah will exemplify humiliation that leads to faith. But that does not mean everyone who suffers and is given a second chance, turns to God in faith. We easily make promises during crises. Most of us have, at least metaphorically, found ourselves on a life raft in the middle of an ocean and promised, "God, save me, and I will live for you. Just do this one thing for me, God!" And how quickly the will to fulfill that promise dissipates after the crisis passes! Mostly we just return to the way things were. Rescue from physical trial and suffering does not guarantee spiritual transformation.

The second half of this woe shifts from the external disaster and deliverance to internal blindness and a promise of eventual illumination. The description of blindness is in 9-12.

Blindness (9-12)

<p>⁹ Be delayed and wait, They become drunk, but not with wine, they stagger, but not with strong drink. He has shut your eyes, the prophets;</p>	<p>Blind yourselves and be blind; ¹⁰ For the LORD has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep, And He has covered your heads, the seers.</p>
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¹¹ The entire vision will be to you like the words of a sealed book, which when they give it to the one who is literate, saying, "Please read this," he will say, "I cannot, for it is sealed." ¹² Then the book will be given to the one who is illiterate, saying, "Please read this." And he will say, "I cannot read."

These verses begin with the imperative, "Be delayed and wait. Blind yourselves and be blind." Now, the idea of waiting is often synonymous with faith in the prophets. "Wait on the Lord." But here, combined with the verb "be delayed" or "be stunned", the sense is one of indecision. They do not know what to do because they are blind. That blindness was at first self-inflicted, a refusal to see reality according to God's Word. The punishment for refusing to see is actual blindness. Mom used to say, "Don't make a face like that, it may freeze that way." Well, if we squinch up our eyes up refusing to recognize, to see God's light, God's will, He may grant that request, such that when we open our eyes eventually, they don't work anymore. We find that we are blind to moral and spiritual truth. Our conscience has been seared. We don't have sensitivity anymore to the things of God.

They have memorized when to stand, when to sit, how to kneel, what the songs are, how to hold up their hands at the right time. They know how to look spiritual. They know how to seem to be praising Me. Are they? Commitment to ritual is not the same thing as heart commitment to relationship with God. They have the appearance of reverence, but it's not true reverence. They have the appearance of worship, but it's not true worship. God is not honored by people going through the motions. He is honored by a transformed heart that loves Him and loves people.

Here God says He will do something marvelous. "The wisdom of their wise men will perish," that is the religious scoffers who seem so wise. They are going to be shown to be foolishness. Their discerning men were not really discerning after all. And God is going to put an end to this false wisdom. God will bring about a transformation that reveals the falseness of cultural religion.

That's the 2nd woe. Let's remind ourselves of the principle of the 1st woe and then consider the principle suggested here by the text of this 2nd woe.

Motyer's first principle was this.

- (1) When God's people reject His word (9–13) and covenant (14–15), destruction follows (18–22), held within divine purposes (23–29)

Now we can add a second principle from this 2nd woe.

- (2) There is disaster and deliverance (that was verses 1–8) but historical deliverance does not change people spiritually. This needs a further divine action (verses 9–14), which is already planned.

Our 3rd woe assures us that, in spite of human resistance to God's planned good for His people, God will bring transformation to pass.

3rd woe (29:15-24)

This woe has three parts, the problem; the promise; and the fulfillment. The problem is stated in 15-16.

The problem (15-16)

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| ¹⁵ Woe to those who deeply burrow from
the LORD,
And whose deeds are <i>done</i> in a dark place, | to hide their plans

And they say, "Who sees us?" or "Who
knows us?" |
| ¹⁶ You turn <i>things</i> around!

That what is made would say to its maker, "He
did not make me"; | Shall the potter be considered as equal with
the clay,
Or what is formed say to him who formed it, "He
has no understanding"? |

The leaders of Judah have convinced themselves that they can determine truth on their own. They decide what is right for the nation. They make the plans. Isaiah describes it as a hiding from God, rather than a rejection of God. Even when we act as though God does not exist, there is a nagging sense in the human heart that He does. It is interesting to me how often modern people use the terminology of purpose and of right and wrong. They say things like, "The universe wants for us," or, "The universe teaches us," or, "The universe guides us." We can deny the Creator, but we cannot help using language as if there is some mind out there, controlling things. We can't help believing in right and wrong. Denial of God is a hiding from God, according to Isaiah.

Isaiah then uses the image of a potter to communicate the ridiculousness of declaring independence from God or in suggesting that we know better than God. That's like a ceramic bowl claiming, "Nobody made me." And furthermore, that he understands clay, and ceramics, and shape, and color much better than the Creator.

This failure of human sight in the realm particularly of spiritual and moral truth desperately needs a remedy.

of how those principles have worked out in this specific situation. The principles have come in these first three woes. The practical examples are going to come in the next three woes. That's what we're moving to in our next lesson. Let's end this lesson by summing up the three principles from chapters 28-29.

- (1) Isaiah 28:1–29, the first woe: When God's people reject His Word (9–13) and covenant (14–15), destruction follows (18–22), held within divine purposes (23–29)
- (2) Isaiah 29:1–14, the second woe: There is disaster and deliverance (1–8) but historical deliverance does not change people spiritually. This needs a further divine action (9–14), which is already planned.
- (3) Isaiah 29:15–24, the third woe: People may think to run the world without God (15), but He is the sovereign and His transforming purposes (16–17) will work out spiritually (18–19), morally and socially (20–21), fulfilling what began in Abraham (22) and establishing a truly renewed people (23–24).