

THE MESSAGE— A SURVEY OF CONTENTS

J. Sidlow Baxter states, “What Beethoven is in the realm of music, what Shakespeare is in the realm of literature, what Spurgeon was among the Victorian preachers, that is Isaiah among the prophets.” Proof of Isaiah’s immense significance is found in the fact that he is quoted in the New Testament more than any other prophet, with more than 250 allusions to his prophecies. Additionally, revealing the character who is the chief focus of many of the wonderful prophecies of this book, the New Testament says that Isaiah saw the glory of Christ and spoke of Him (John 12:41).

The main theme of Isaiah—salvation—is certainly uplifting. The prophet’s name means “the salvation of Jehovah,” and the message of salvation permeates this book.

It has been suggested that Isaiah’s prophecy is the Bible in miniature. Its 66 chapters are divided into two parts: 39 chapters in the first (corresponding to the number of books in the Old Testament) and 27 chapters in the second (corresponding to the number of books in the New Testament). As with the Old and New Testaments, the first 39 chapters emphasise judgment, and the last 27 highlight mercy and comfort. While the parallel is true in broad outline (and some chapters can very definitely be harmonised), to what extent it can be developed in detail is questionable.

Chapters 1–39: Condemnation

“Lord of hosts” is Isaiah’s favourite name for God. It means “Lord of the armies,” and the first section of this book demonstrates that Jehovah is the God of holy warfare.

These chapters show that Isaiah lived in and around Jerusalem at some point during the eighth century B.C. This was a critical time for Judah as the Assyrians were threatening them with invasion.

Isaiah lifts up his voice against the backslidings of the people and charges them with sin and impiety as the cause of their troubles. With typical flourish, the prophet compares them to a fine vineyard that produces only wild grapes. Social injustice was rampant in the land, with rich landowners exploiting the poor (Isaiah 5:8). Spiritual life was at a low ebb, with both priests and prophets flattering the wealthy in hope of gain (Isaiah 56:10–12; cf. Micah 3:11). Jerusalem itself was a boiling pot of political factions, intrigue, and corruption.

Accordingly, the prophet pleads for genuine reformation of life. He denounces the people’s prejudice and foolish trust in rituals and calls on them to repent (Isaiah 1:16–17). He also rebukes the nation’s leaders because they looked to political alliances for security instead of trusting in the Lord.

While Isaiah warns Judah of coming judgment and foretells their seventy-year captivity in Babylon, he “sweetens that bitter pill” by prophesying of eventual deliverance and a coming glory. He looks beyond all the events of his own troubled time, to the coming, suffering, and reign of the Messiah.

The opening section of the prophecy can be subdivided as follows:

- a. Chapters 1–12: Denunciation of Judah and Israel;
- b. Chapters 13–23: Denunciation of

foreign nations including such long-standing enemies as Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Egypt, Edom, and Tyre;

- c. Chapters 24–27: Songs of future glory for the nation;

- d. Chapters 28–35: Woes against the sins of the people;

- e. Chapters 36–39: Historical interlude (events in the reign of Hezekiah and the invasion of Sennacherib).

Chapters 40–66: Consolation

Isaiah 40–66 is often called the New Testament or Messianic section of the book. It begins with the ministry of John the Baptist (compare 40:3–4 with Matthew 3:1–3), and its emphasis is Christ and salvation. At the heart of this section is chapter 53, the greatest Old Testament prediction of Christ’s sacrifice for sin upon the cross.

While Isaiah 1–39 emphasised God’s judgment on His people, chapters 40–66 repeatedly sound notes of comfort and redemption. They were written to encourage the Jewish remnant that would be delivered from the Babylonian captivity, an amazing prophecy considering the fact that Isaiah wrote it over 150 years before the remnant would ever need it for its encouragement!

Three major subdivisions are evident:

- a. Chapters 40–48: Deliverance from impending Babylonian captivity;
- b. Chapters 49–57: The Lord’s suffering servant who would appear for the redemption of His people;
- c. Chapters 58–66: The coming glory of Messiah’s kingdom.

Several major truths rise to the fore in these chapters:

1. There is a constant reminder to “fear not” (41:10–14; 43:1, 5; 44:2, 8). The Jews were afraid of the mighty Gentile nations that were sweeping in conquest across the world. Israel had been conquered by Assyria, Judah would be captured by Babylonia, and then a new empire—Persia—would emerge. Each of these nations was worshipping idols. Some of the Jews were tempted to argue, “If these nations



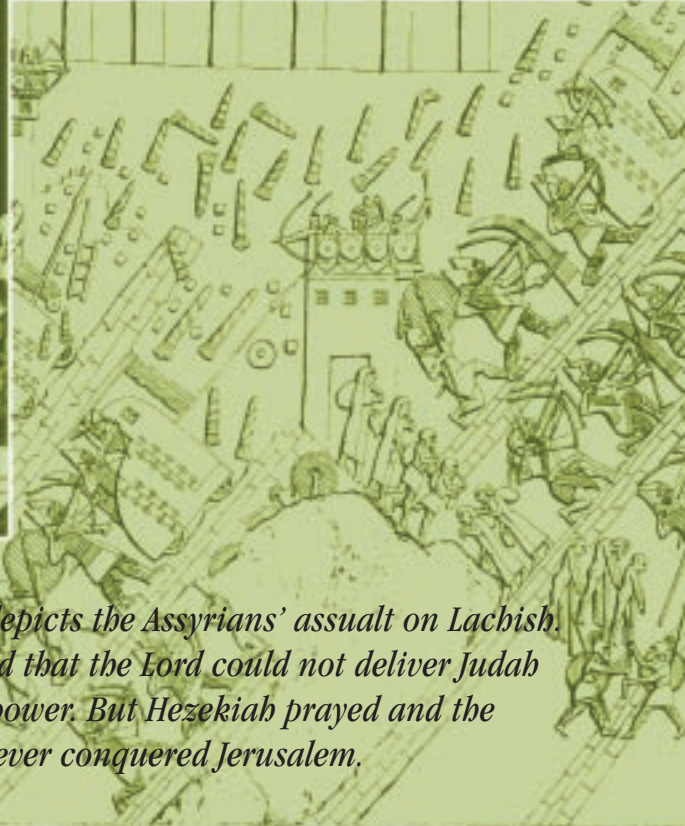
are so successful, attributing all their victories to the power of their gods, then their gods must be true gods, and Jehovah cannot be trusted!”

2. The greatness of God and the vanity of the heathen idols. Read carefully 40:18–20; 41:6–7, 29; 42:8, 17; 43:10–12; 44:9–20 (a particularly scathing exposure of the folly of idol worship); 45:16, 20; 46:1–2, 5–7. The statement that God is true and without rival repeatedly appears in this section of the prophecy (40:18, 25; 43:10–11; 44:6, 8; 45:5–6, 14). Isaiah exposes the folly of idols and exalts the greatness of Jehovah. His message is simple: The Jewish remnant need not fear; their God is able to deliver them from the bondage of Babylon and bring them back to their own land in safety.

3. The reliability of prophecy. One of the most astounding prophecies in this section of the book centres on Cyrus, King of Persia, the man whom God was poised to raise up to conquer Babylon and enable the Jews to return to their own land (41:2–5, 25; 44:28–45:25; 47:11). The same Cyrus is mentioned in Ezra 1:1; he reigned from 559–529 B.C. The fact that Isaiah identifies him by name two

centuries before he was born is another proof of the divine inspiration of the Bible.

These prophecies in Isaiah have their immediate fulfilment in Cyrus and in the return of the remnant from Babylon, but they find their ultimate fulfilment in our Lord Jesus Christ and the redemption we have in Him. Appropriately, Isaiah 42:1–9 represents Christ as God’s obedient servant, bringing glory to the Jews and salvation to the Gentiles (cf. Matthew 12:18–20). Isaiah looks beyond all the events of his own troubled time to the coming, suffering, and reigning of the Messiah. Isaiah



This relief depicts the Assyrians’ assault on Lachish. They boasted that the Lord could not deliver Judah from their power. But Hezekiah prayed and the Assyrians never conquered Jerusalem.

earns his title of the Messianic prophet because he increased significantly the awareness of the coming Christ. Interlaced through his messages are glorious glimpses of one who will be the redeemer of God’s people. An embattled people can receive no greater encouragement than to be assured of Messiah’s glorious appearance. ■

Rev. Ian Brown is the minister of Londonderry Free Presbyterian Church, Northern Ireland.

