

personally, as a warning not to 'walk in the way of this people.' (8:11). Isaiah seems to be speaking to others and continues with good advice; don't listen to gossip and fear the Lord (8:12,13), allow yourselves to be 'set apart' for the Lord, a phrase which means 'be made holy', and hold the Lord in awe (8:13). It is advice which is as relevant today as it ever was.

Isaiah went on to speak prophetically about the Lord, but because of the way that he clearly had 'Immanuel' (God with us) in mind as he spoke (see 8:8,10), the extraordinary message which came next was clearly linked with 'Immanuel'. Isaiah said he would be 'an obstacle and a stumbling stone' to all God's people (which is what is meant by 'both houses of Israel' – 8:14). Isaiah had just experienced rejection by King Ahaz, and foresaw the time when Immanuel would be rejected by God's people as well. He went on 'many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken ...' (8:15).

It is amazing to read through the New Testament and find that Jesus picked up these words from Isaiah when he said; 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone ...' (Matt 21:42) speaking about Himself! Paul also used the same words to describe the rejection of Christ by the Jews (Romans 9:32, 11:11), and the same is true in Peter's first letter (1 Peter 2:4-8). Further searches on words such as 'stumbling' and 'stone' will yield even more passage which speak of the unique nature of Christ's work as the Lord's servant and the means of our salvation. All this comes from Isaiah's vision of Immanuel becoming both 'a sanctuary' (8:14) and a 'stumbling stone'. Faced with God's truth through Jesus, He will always be either one or the other for any who enquire.

Application

It is surely the last part of this passage from which we can learn spiritual truths. Isaiah places an emphasis on being 'set apart' (8:13) for the Lord, and this is a genuine part of the call many people have today. When faced with the truth about Jesus, they long to be 'set apart' to do God's work. It is strange that in so many churches, people who experience such a powerful sense of call are often told that their only option is to apply to 'enter the church' on some programme for ordination, for example. Other more visionary churches have programmes which allow young people and new converts to explore the meaning of such a calling for them, and this is invaluable.

It is essential that the church of God values and supports all those who feel led to change their lives completely and be 'set apart' for the Lord in prayer, service, worship, ministry or whatever calling they are given. Clearly, all of us need to live and need income of some kind in order to exist within current society, and such issues must be addressed; but we should never belittle those feel called to be set apart for the Lord, different from others in living, lifestyle and work; and certainly different from the rest of the world.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Evil can come over us like a flood. How can we protect ourselves against the attacks of the enemy?
2. Discuss in your group whether it is evident that the Lord is in control of history.
3. What can we learn from Isaiah's prophecies in verses 11 to 15, and how can we put it into practice?

Discipleship

To what extent do you 'follow the crowd', or are you someone who always has an independent mind on things? All of us who call ourselves disciples need to demonstrate to each other that we are not slaves to the world's opinions or to our own agendas. We are called to be 'holy', and set apart because of our trust in and obedience to God's call, as a priority over all else.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us to be patient with life. If things have not gone well today, we offer them to You and wait on tomorrow for better things. If people have frustrated us today, we await the refreshment of a new day to deal with things better. Help us, in this way, to translate our faith into action; through Jesus Christ our Lord; AMEN

Prayer

Bless us with Your presence, Lord God, in our daily lives;
Give us courage, Lord God, in the face of difficult situations;
Fill our hearts with great joy, Lord God, as we do Your will;
Inspire us to use all of the gifts You have given to us;
Lead us on, Lord God, with glory in our hearts;
AMEN, Lord God, and ALLELUIA!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Environment

Pray today for scientists who work on global warming and environmental issues. Pray that they may give us an accurate picture of what is happening, for everyone's benefit.

On-going prayers

- Relief work around the world
- The nomination of Clinton or Obama
- Personal thanks for answered prayers

Meditation

All the colours of the rainbow
belong to Him who made the light:
All species and varieties of creature
belong to Him who conceived real life:
All the peoples throughout the world
belong to Him who made us in His image:
All the knowledge ever discovered
belongs to Him who primed the Universe:
All paintings, books and objects of art
belong to Him who fashioned creativity:
All the notes of a symphony or song
belong to Him who made the sound of music:
All praise in the past, for now and for ever
belongs to Him who has done all things well!

Bible Study - Isaiah 8:1-15

¹ Then the LORD said to me, 'Take a large tablet and write on it with common characters, "Belonging to Maher-shalal-hash-baz," ² and I wish to have it attested by reliable witnesses, the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah.' ³ Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, 'Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz; ⁴ for before the boy knows how to call out "My father" or "My mother," the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria.

⁵ The LORD spoke to me again and said: ⁶ 'Because this people has rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah, and melt in fear before Rezin and the son of Remaliah; ⁷ therefore look! The Lord is bringing up against them the mighty floodwaters of the River, the King of Assyria in all his power and might; it will overflow all its channels and flood all its banks; ⁸ it will flow on into Judah and keep going; it will reach up to the neck and spread out to its wingtips filling the whole breadth of your land, O Immanuel!'

⁹ Be broken, you peoples, be shattered; ¹⁰ create a plan together,
listen, all you far countries; but it will come to nothing;
prepare for battle and be defeated; speak a word, but it will not stand,
prepare for battle and be defeated! for 'Immanuel' (God is with us).

¹¹ For the LORD spoke in this way to me while his hand was strong upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people. He said, ¹² 'Do not call a conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, or be in dread. ¹³ But you will be set apart for Him, the LORD of hosts; let Him be your fear, and let Him be held in awe by you, ¹⁴ and become a sanctuary; but He will be an obstacle and stumbling stone to both houses of Israel; a trap and a snare for those who live in Jerusalem. ¹⁵ And many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken; they will be snared and captured.'

Review

The text for today's reading is lengthy, but it does two things which are helpful for our study. The first two paragraphs tell of the birth of another child, but although the name is difficult to understand, the basic story of war and judgement is not very different to what we read about in chapter 7, concerning the politics of Isaiah's day and what was happening to Judah under King Ahaz (8:1-8). After this, however, Isaiah breaks out into an amazing poetic prophecy about the Lord's control of all things, standing high above the war-like plans of the nations (8:9,10). This completely changes the tone of Isaiah's prophecies. He then begins to speak in very human terms about what it meant for him to prophesy (8:11), before prophesying encouragement to a group of followers who were faithful to the Lord in the midst of all that was going on around them. The words in this latter prophecy are quite remarkable, and they are a highlight for our study today.

Firstly, however, we learn about the birth of a child in somewhat strange circumstances. Under instruction, Isaiah prophesied this birth before conception (8:1,2) and obtained witnesses to the prophecy and the name 'Maher-shalal-hash-baz' which means 'quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil'. If we are to understand Isaiah's prophecies, then we must realise that this was a name designed to spread fear into the heart of all who heard it. We who live without fear of the invasion of our lands and homes barely know what it is like to anticipate the coming of an army that will destroy everything we know; home, work, crops, possessions, dignity and wealth. This was the fate coming upon the people of Syria (Damascus) and Samaria (Israel) before the boy with this name grew old enough to speak the most elementary of words; 'daddy' or 'mamma' (8:4). Isaiah's use of the picture of childbirth, yet again, tells us that the matter is fixed in the heart of God. This will happen! Judgement is coming!

The second paragraph prophesies the progress of Assyria southwards across Syria and Israel, but warns Judah that the Assyrian armies would continue to pour southwards like a flood with its extremities reaching as far as the boundaries of Judah itself (8:8). With the aid of a map of Israel and Judah we can see that this would have left Jerusalem surrounded and cut off, but at this point, Isaiah concludes his prophecy in a startling manner, as if addressing 'Immanuel' (8:8)! In our full study (later), we will look at some other possibilities for what this may mean, but it does at least as if 'Immanuel' ('God with us') is equated with Jerusalem; the city will be surrounded by evil, but not defeated! It might be that Isaiah saw this as a fulfilment of his prophecy about Immanuel, but as we know, there is much more to come.

The two poetic verses (8:9,10) have been interpreted and translated variously, but they appear to be a bold word from the Lord saying that nations would make their plans and have wars but nothing would stand in the way of 'Immanuel'! Isaiah had been very angry with Ahaz at the beginning of this incident, but it appears that he was now excited with what God was going to do through 'Immanuel'. He then began to speak to his followers about the strength of this prophecy (8:11) and began to give them some advice. Don't be afraid, said Isaiah, or be influenced by common gossip (8:12); fear the Lord alone and be 'set apart for Him' (8:13). Finally, Isaiah warned that 'Immanuel' would be a stumbling block to 'both houses of Israel' (8:14), an astonishing prophecy that surely looks ahead to days when all God's people would reject Immanuel, God's Messiah!

It is part of the remarkable nature of Isaiah's prophecies that are so firmly rooted in the history of the people of Judah and Israel in the eighth century BC, but they make sudden and powerful connections with the later history of God's people and ultimately to Jesus, our 'Immanuel'. Certainly, this is the case here!

Going Deeper

We will not go over the details of the politics of Judah, Israel, Syria and Assyria and their respective kings again, though it will be hard to follow this without having come to terms with it by reading the previous studies. What this text adds to the story is found in the name of the next child; 'Maher-shalal-hash-baz', the picture of Assyria coming into Judah itself and the amazing prophecy of 'Immanuel' rising above sin and destruction, and finally the advice he gave his followers. We will now look at these in detail.

The birth of Maher-shalal-hash-baz

Isaiah was told by God to announce the birth Maher-shalal-hash-baz before he was conceived, thereby showing complete confidence in the veracity of God's prophetic word. As was common with most of the Old Testament prophets, the word he spoke was integrated with his life and he was called to demonstrate personally that he believed what the Lord said through him. Isaiah therefore had to 'go to the prophetess' (here meaning his wife) to conceive the child in faith that it would be born alive and also a son. The meaning of the name is given in most Bibles, but with quite a few differences because the Hebrew is virtually untranslatable. It is best to leave aside trying to pin down the exact name and accept that it was simply a prediction of the devastation of war, in common with the general theme of this passage; Assyria would come and devastate Israel and Syria.

It is also very interesting to note that two witnesses were called to verify the prophecy. Isaiah was no longer confronting Ahaz (as in the last chapter) but speaking to others in Jerusalem, perhaps those who were prepared to listen to what Isaiah had to say. There was a long history of prophets living and working in Jerusalem, and as we will increasingly discover, Isaiah had a reputation (see 8:16f.), and supporters. The prophet's first duty was to address the leadership, and then the people.

The Assyrian flood and the futility of war!

In the second prophecy which likened the coming invasion of the Assyrians to a flood, Isaiah was speaking to the people, not to Ahaz. If Ahaz would not listen to Isaiah and his prophecy of Immanuel, then would the people? The Lord spoke by way of warning; the 'gently flowing waters of Shiloam' was the 'pool of Siloam' (John 9:7,11) of the New Testament and clearly had a history of being considered as a place of God's blessing for healing. If the Lord's people would not accept His provision then they would be overcome with a worldly flood! In Isaiah's day this was the Assyrian army, but in our day, any number of economic, political or secular forces could overcome us if we fail to rely upon the less spectacular but effective provision of God; the message is straightforward.

What is said by Isaiah about the flood goes further, however, than what we previously knew. Chapter 7 indicated that Israel and Syria would be invaded by Assyria (which they were in 733BC), but contained no mention of Assyria coming further south to invade Judea itself. The history of what happened is written in Isaiah 36-39 (2 Kings 18f.) and is a critical incident in the life of Isaiah and also the king who came after Ahaz, King Hezekiah. A few years later, somewhere around 710 BC, Hezekiah refused to pay the duties and taxes to Assyria for protection which his father Ahaz paid. Confrontation ensued, and the Assyrian army invaded all Judea and attacked Jerusalem; but Jerusalem was never conquered because of a miracle which saved the city (Isaiah 37:36-38).

Both the prophecy of the flood which covered Judah but did not engulf Jerusalem, and the prophecy of verses 9 and 10 end with the triumphant proclamation of 'Immanuel' (8:8,10). For Isaiah, Immanuel was a child born in his own day, a prophecy which came true for those who remained faithful to the Lord and were saved. But as a prophet, he would have realised that the prophecy meant this and also very much more. The words of the poem stand as a constant prophetic reminder to us that God is in control of all the world, and all the plans, schemes and battles of the world of whatever kind eventually count for nothing unless they are part of God's plan. What is fascinating is that Isaiah appears to have sensed that 'Immanuel', 'God with us', was at the heart of God's plan.

Advice for the remnant

It is fascinating to imagine we are hearing Isaiah's voice speaking with feeling as he says; 'the Lord spoke in this way to me while His hand was strong upon me ...' (8:11). Rarely for scripture, the prophet here reveals something of his emotions. What had happened to Isaiah had been a powerful experience, and he had taken the message he had been given