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The Book of Isaiah

An Overview and Introduction

The Book of Isaiah

In the Old Testament, we find four categories of books: 1) the Law (the Books of Moses), 2) Historical Books, 3) Wisdom, and 4) the Prophets. The Prophets are divided into the Major and Minor Prophets, not because one group of prophets is more important than the other, but because of the length of their respective books. Still there were prophets such as Moses and David who lived before the era of the Prophets.

The Book of Isaiah is one of the major prophetic books along with Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

The Book of Isaiah is quoted many times in the New Testament, and has often been called the “Fifth Gospel” because of the prophecies that were fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ. Saint Jerome says, “In the book of Isaiah, I see an evangelist narrating the life of Jesus Christ; besides being a prophet who speaks of things to come.”

What is a Prophet?

A prophet is not simply someone who reveals future events. The role of the prophet is to reveal God’s mind and will concerning man and his salvation. God spoke through His prophets, not only to foretell the coming of Christ, but also to chasten the people and to restore them. For instance, many priests became preoccupied with the life of luxury and needed to hear the words of the prophets to correct themselves. Others were kings and rulers who depended on men rather than God and fell into pride.

The prophets: 1) Preached repentance or the return to God with the heart and not with superficial practices, 2) Exposed wrongdoings, especially those of corrupt leaders, in order to truly care for them spiritually, 3) Prophesied near events of the future, 4) Prophesied far future events, such as the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and 5) Taught that God, alone is Savior, and that everyone’s thoughts should be preoccupied by God.

Who was Isaiah?

Isaiah is a Hebrew name that means, “God is my help.” Isaiah was born around 760 B.C. and descended from an aristocratic family. He married and had two sons. One of his sons was named Shear-Jashub, which means, “A remnant shall return,” while the other was named Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, which means, “Spoil quick, plunder speedily.” This points to two groups of people: the first, who will be saved, and the second who will suffer punishment on account of their sins.

Isaiah prophesied during the time of five kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Ezekiel, and Manasseh. Isaiah suffered a martyr’s death having been sawn in two. During his

lifetime, he was hated. Even several hundred years after his death, there are critics of this book who try to prove that the prophecies are untrue, or that he only wrote part of the book, while other parts were written after his lifetime. In 1947, the book of Isaiah was discovered in whole.

The Call of Isaiah

Isaiah was called to the prophetic ministry by a spectacular vision during the last year of the reign of Uzziah. He saw the Lord in a resplendent temple, sitting on a high throne, whose base was not on earth, which shone with divine brightness. Around the throne he saw the seraphim crying one to another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isaiah 6:3). This is a hymn and prayer that we often repeat, but unfortunately do not often feel its great splendor. It is the hymn of the angels.

When Isaiah saw this vision, he felt his sinfulness and said, “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5). Then an angel holding tongs took a coal from the sanctuary and with it he touched the lips of the prophet and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.” In this vision, we see a symbol of the Eucharist.

The Book of Isaiah during the Great Lent

During the great and holy fast of Lent, the church arranges the readings of the prophets read during the raising of morning incense. Each day, we read from the Book of Isaiah. Throughout the year, we become pre-occupied with the cares of this life. The Lenten period is a time for us to refocus as the Church leads us to our true purpose and spiritual goal. The book of Isaiah starts with the problem of humanity, that “the whole head is sick and the whole heart faints” (Isaiah 1:5).

In Christ, we are saved. Toward the end of the Book of Isaiah, we read, “Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard” (Isaiah 58:8).

Let us look at three themes in this book: 1) the condemnation of sin, 2) the coming of our Savior, and 3) the return to God.

The Condemnation of Sin

In the first chapter, Israel is condemned for her sins. God calls them saying, “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:16-18).

Satan's sin and fall is also described in Isaiah in chapter 14. He is called, "Lucifer, son of the morning" (14:2), who said in his heart that he "will ascend into heaven" and exalt his throne above the stars of God" (14:13). We see how pride is the root of all sin and evil. During Lent, the Church teaches us to fast in order to subdue the body, to return to Paradise before the fall of man, and to identify with the needs of the poor. All these lead to a kind of weakness that leads to humility in order to avoid the condemnation of sin and the imitation of Satan's fall.

The Coming of the Savior

In Isaiah, we find wonderful prophecies that give hope of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord gives us hope that He is God and man, born in a miraculous way as Isaiah prophesied saying, "Therefore, the Lord Himself shall give you a sign, behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

Also, Isaiah prophesies, "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom..." (Isaiah 9:6).

We also find in Isaiah 52 and 53, the price that Christ would pay on our behalf, "exalted and lifted up," "wounded for our transgression, and crushed for our iniquities" (52:13, 53:3).

We who sat in darkness had a great light shine for us, Christ Himself.

The Return to God

Lastly, in the book of Isaiah we see how God expects us to be righteous, to repent of our sins, to worship Him, and return to Him. The Lord says through the Isaiah, "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come, and my righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who lays hold on it" (Isaiah 56:1-2).

The reward for the righteous is a new heaven and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17). All our troubles will disappear. The voice of weeping will no longer be heard, but continual rejoicing.

Conclusion

The Book of Isaiah is a book of hope, which only can make sense in light of our Lord Jesus Christ. God draws attention to our weaknesses, but gives us hope in Christ, so that we may return to His light.