

Isaiah 29, Beginning of the Woes

Overview

The first half of Isaiah is dominated by ten “Burdens” and six “Woes.” The Burdens emphasized the effect of the Day of the Lord on all nations. The Woes zoom in on Israel.

This chapter contains two Woes. The first one emphasizes the futility of formal religion and the judgment, both physical and spiritual, that the Lord will bring on hypocrites. The second looks ahead to the physical and spiritual restoration of the Messianic age.

1-14, Woe to Ariel

The first two verses are a summary of God's coming judgment on Jerusalem, followed by three paragraphs, united by the theme of a nightmare. Vv. 3-4 describe the nightmare. Vv. 5-8 look forward to the awakening. Vv. 9-14 then explain the sleep in which the nightmare takes place.

The main body is thus chiasmic, with judgment (nightmare, sleep) on the outside and restoration in the center.

1-2, Summary

1 Woe to Ariel, to Ariel,--The reference to David makes clear that this is Jerusalem. But what does the word mean? It appears in Ezek 43:16 as a name for the altar. This sense likely appears in the Moabite Stone as well (line 12, “And I brought back the fire-hearth אראל of his uncle from there”). It means “the fire-hearth of God,” a reference to the temple and its altar. 31:9 recalls this as a distinctive mark of Jerusalem: “the LORD, whose fire *is* in Zion, and his furnace in Jerusalem.”

Such a description contains a poetic ambiguity. Jerusalem is God's altar, where the righteous offer sacrifices to please him, but where the wicked themselves are consumed by the fire of his wrath.

the city where David dwelt!--The verb חנה is literally “encamped.” It does not describe dwelling *in* a city, but what an army does in laying siege *to* a city. The reference is to David's conquest of the city from the pagan Jebusites in 2 Sam 5:6-8. This event reminds us that there is nothing in the city itself to protect it from conquest.

add ye year to year; let them kill sacrifices.--The people go from one year to the next, celebrating the annual round of sacrificial feasts,¹ oblivious to the fire of God that will consume them.

2 Yet I will distress Ariel,--Since 1:10-15, we have known that hypocritical religious ceremonies have no power to deter God's wrath.

and there shall be heaviness and sorrow:--In place of their joyful feasts will be the sorrow and mourning that comes with enemy conquest.

and it shall be unto me as Ariel.--The city will indeed be an altar hearth. Isaiah looks beyond the

¹ The verb in the last clause is the only instance of a Qal of נקף. This stem can mean either “strike off” (as the head of a sacrifice), or “rotate, revolve.” The latter sense seems better suited to the associated noun חגים “feasts.”

Assyrians, who departed, to the Babylonian invasion a century later, when the city was burned:

2Ki 25:8-9 And in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, which is the nineteenth year of king Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem: 9 And he **burnt** the house of the LORD, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great *man's* house **burnt** he with fire.

The lesson of this paragraph is not to trust our rituals. God's people are not immune from God's judgment, and diligent performance of religious ceremonies offers no protection.

The next paragraph amplifies this threat of judgment.

3-4, The Nightmare: Judgment on Jerusalem

3 And I will camp against thee round about,--Just as David encamped against the city to capture it, so the Lord will encamp against it in the person of the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

and will lay siege against thee with a mount,--The word appears only here. The LXX renders it *χαράξ* "stake," referring to a barrier of stakes designed to keep people from escaping.

and I will raise forts against thee.--This is probably a reference to siege engines, wheeled towers that provided shelter to the operators of a battering ram on the lower level, along with an elevated platform for archers. The figure on the handout is from an engraving of Sennacherib, the Assyrian, but it is likely that the Babylonians had similar equipment. Alternatively, the "mount" and "fort" may refer to a siege wall with camps, such as the Romans used (see figure of Masada).

These details again look beyond the Assyrians to the Babylonians. Of Assyria, Isaiah predicts,

Isa 37:33 ... He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast a bank against it.

But Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon did besiege Jerusalem and defeat it:

Eze 4:1-3 Thou also, son of man, take thee a tile, and lay it before thee, and pourtray upon it the city, *even* Jerusalem: 2 And lay siege against it, and build a **fort** against it, and cast a **mount** against it; set the camp also against it, and set *battering* rams against it round about. 3 Moreover take thou unto thee an iron pan, and set it *for* a wall of iron between thee and the city: and set thy face against it, and it shall be besieged, and thou shalt lay siege against it. This *shall be* a sign to the house of Israel.

Jer 52:4 And it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, in the tenth *day* of the month, *that* Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he and all his army, against Jerusalem, and pitched against it, and built **forts** against it round about.

4 And thou shalt be brought down, and shalt speak out of the ground, and thy speech shall be low out of the dust, and thy voice shall be, as of one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground, and thy speech shall whisper out of the dust.--Their speech will have two characteristics.

First, each of four parallel statements indicates that Jerusalem will speak "out of the ground" or "out of the dust." She is dead, and can only speak from the grave, under the command of a medium, "one that hath a familiar spirit" and claims to be able to cause the dead to speak (compare the history of the witch

of Endor calling up Samuel for Saul in 1 Sam 28, and 8:19). Jerusalem is dead.

Second, her speech is described as a “whisper.” Mediums often used ventriloquism to make their voice sound as though it were coming out of the ground, and the result was a thin, far-away sound. Compare again 8:19, “wizards that peep and that mutter.” This dampened voice may anticipate the dream imagery that dominates vv. 7-14. In a nightmare, bodily actions are restrained. You try to run but your legs are leaden. You try to scream but you can only whisper. The Israelites are frozen in a nightmare.

The lesson of this paragraph is not to trust our environment. Living in the Holy City (or the US) is no guarantee of protection. God conquered Jerusalem once through David; he will do it again through Babylon (and much later, Rome, and in the future, “all nations”).

5-8, The Awakening: Judgment on her Oppressors

5 Moreover the multitude of thy strangers shall be like small dust, and the multitude of the terrible ones shall be as chaff that passeth away: yea, it shall be at an instant suddenly.--Suddenly the picture reverses. Now it is not Jerusalem that is overwhelmed, but the strangers and terrible ones that oppressed her.

When will this happen?

6 Thou shalt be visited of the LORD of hosts with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise [voice], with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire.--These manifestations accompany the Lord's presence (see the columns in the Table on Mount Sinai, and John's vision of the heavenly throne room). They also anticipate the culminations of the three great cycles of judgment in the Revelation, which align with the Lord's return to earth. As v. 3 looked beyond Assyria to Babylon, so this verse looks beyond any of the historical sieges of Jerusalem to the coming Day of the Lord.

| Isa 29:6 | The Presence of the Lord | | | | The Lord's Return to Earth, Revelation | | |
|---|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| | Exo 19:16-18 Sinai | Heb 12:18-19 Sinai | 1 Ki 19:11-12, Sinai | Rev 4:5, Heaven | 8:5, end of seals | 11:19, end of trumpets | 16:18, end of vials |
| ...with thunder , and with earthquake , and great noise [voice] , with storm and tempest , and the flame of devouring fire . | 16 ... there were thunders and lightnings , and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; ... 18 And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire : and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. | ...the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire , nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest , 19 And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; | And, behold, the LORD passed by , and a great and strong wind rent the mountains,... and after the wind an earthquake ; ... 12 And after the earthquake a fire ; ... and after the fire a still small voice. | And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices : | there were voices , and thunderings , and lightnings , and an earthquake . | there were lightnings , and voices , and thunderings , and an earthquake , and great hail. | there were voices , and thunders , and lightnings ; and there was a great earthquake , |

7 And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel, even all that fight against her and her munition, and that distress her,--Neither Assyria in 702 BC, nor Babylon in 586 BC, nor Rome in AD 70 or AD 136, nor Hitler in the last century, constituted a “multitude of all the nations.” Again, Isaiah is looking beyond Assyria and Babylon, to a time when many nations are gathered against Jerusalem. Compare Zech 14:

Zec 14:2-3 For I will gather **all nations** against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city. 3 Then shall the LORD go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle.

shall be as a dream of a night vision.--The dreamer here appears to be Israel. Her long oppression at the hands of Gentiles will vanish like a nightmare.

8 It shall even be as when an hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth; but he awaketh, and his soul is empty: or as when a thirsty man dreameth, and, behold, he drinketh; but he awaketh, and, behold, he is faint, and his soul hath appetite:--Now the Gentiles are the dreamers. They think that they have enriched themselves at Israel's expense, but they will awaken and find that their ambitions are unfulfilled.

so shall the multitude of all the nations be, that fight against mount Zion.--Again, Isaiah emphasizes that this culmination is broader than any single nation's conquest of Jerusalem.

The lesson of this paragraph is that God's chastisement of his people is temporary.

Psa 30:5 For his anger *endureth* but a moment; in his favour *is* life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy *cometh* in the morning.

9-14, The Sleep: Blinding of Jerusalem

Awakening must be preceded by sleep. How has Israel entered into this troubled sleep, this slumber dominated by such horrible nightmares? How can we avoid God's chastisement?

Note the shift in the pronouns, from 3fs in vv. 1-8 to mp here. The disaster strikes at the level of the whole nation, but responsibility lies at the level of individuals.

The section is chiasmic. It begins and ends with a description of the sleep, and in the center sets forth the reason for which the judgment falls.

9-12, The Sleep

9 Stay yourselves, and wonder; cry ye out, and cry: they are drunken, but not with wine; they stagger, but not with strong drink.--The verbs in the first half of the verse express the behavior that leads to the conclusion in the second half. “Stay” and “wonder” describe the halting staggering and easy distraction of a drunkard; “cry out”² his uncontrolled utterances.

10 For the LORD hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep,--The sleep in which the nation

2 The verb can mean either “be blind” or “be delighted.” The AV appears to have the second in view. Either can be the result of inebriation.

dreams the nightmare of destruction comes from the Lord himself. It falls on two groups:

and hath closed your eyes:--The first group is the people at large. Their eyes are covered.

the prophets and your rulers [heads], the seers hath he covered.--The second group consists of the prophets and seers, those who ought to have special access to God's revelation. He has not only closed their eyes, but put a bag over their entire heads.

11 And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: 12 And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.--Again, we have the two categories of people, this time in chiastic order. "One that is learned" would be the prophet or seer; "him that is not learned" would be the people at large. God has not withheld his reservation, but he has made the people unable to understand it.

Learning by itself is not sufficient to understand God's revelation. He can make foolish the wisdom of this world (1 Cor 2:20).

This is not the first time we have heard of such judicial blinding.

It is central to Isaiah's mission:

Isa 6:9-10 And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. 10 Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; **lest** they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.

And it was the purpose of speaking to them in tongues:

Isa 28:13 But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; **that** they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.

13, The Reason for the Sleep

But why would the Lord withhold understanding of his word? The next verse gives two reasons for this terrible judgment.

13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me,--The first reason is that they worship God outwardly rather than inwardly.

The people are not outwardly profane. They talk a good talk. They know how to pray, and sing the hymns, and quote the Scriptures. They sound pious.

but have removed their heart far from me,--But this outward behavior does not reflect their inner attitude.

The need for worship from the heart is emphasized throughout Israel's history.

At the nation's founding, Moses' last charge to the people of Israel emphasized the need to begin with the heart:

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Deu 6:5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine **heart**, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

He does not start with the might, but with the heart.

David was Israel's greatest king, prototype and ancestor of the Messiah. When God sent Samuel to anoint him, Samuel was initially attracted to Jesse's older sons. But the Lord corrected him:

1Sa 16:7 But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for *the LORD seeth* not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but **the LORD looketh on the heart**.

David fell into grievous sin with Bathsheba. He tried to hide it by murdering Uriah, but he could not deceive God. Nathan rebuked him of his sin, and he repented. Note the words with which he confessed his sin in Ps 51:

Psa 51:6, 16-17 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and **in the hidden part** thou shalt make me to know wisdom. ... 16 For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give *it*: thou delightest not in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit: **a broken and a contrite heart**, O God, thou wilt not despise.

Perhaps based on this experience, in Ps 139 he exhorts his readers not to try to hide from God. At the conclusion of this Psalm, he prays,

Psa 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my **heart**: try me, and know my **thoughts**: 24 And see if *there be any* wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Solomon, unhappily, did not learn from his father's exhortations.

1Ki 11:1-4 But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, *and* Hittites; 2 Of the nations *concerning* which the LORD said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: *for* surely they will turn away your **heart** after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love. 3 And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his **heart**. 4 For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, *that* his wives turned away his **heart** after other gods: and his **heart** was not perfect with the LORD his God, as *was* the **heart** of David his father.

Perhaps after this failure, he warns,

Pro 4:23 Keep thy **heart** with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.

Toward the end of Israel's history, as Jerusalem is about to fall, God says to Ezekiel,

Eze 33:31 And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee *as* my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, *but* their **heart** goeth after their covetousness.

It is worth comparing this principle with 1 Cor 13, the love chapter. Love there is more than just doing loving deeds: it is possible to “bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and ... give my body to be burned,” and yet “have not charity” (v. 3).

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Israel's worship had degenerated into external ceremonies and rituals. Their hearts preferred the world to the Lord. When people yield to this temptation, he confirms them in their unbelief.

and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:--With Alexander, follow the accentuation to translate, "their fear toward me has become a commandment of men, a thing taught." This failing has two aspects, reflected in the two predicate nominatives.

The first is on the side of the one who claims to fear God. I should never think that my duty toward God is exhausted by doing "a thing taught," what people tell me to do. Such teaching and action are outward. As the first part of the verse says, God desires an inward response, which results from regeneration, not education.

The second is on the side of the one teaching, emphasized here as "a commandment of men," to be contrasted with one from God. There is always the danger that those who teach will corrupt the truth of God's word with their own ideas.

One might ask the relation between this clause and the role of parents and government in instructing people. Clearly, both have a role:

Pro 6:20 My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother: (also 2:1; 3:1; 7:1)

Rom 13:1-2 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. 2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

Wise parents can point children toward God's revelation. The principles of God's law, whether administered by family or by government, are a schoolmaster, to bring us to Christ (Gal 3:24), as it shows the weakness of our flesh. But neither Christian parents nor Christian magistrates can save those under their care. Individuals must respond in Spirit-given faith to God's revelation. And in fact, one feature of the Messianic age is that God himself instructs the children of his people:

Isa 29:23 But when he seeth his children, **the work of mine hands**, in the midst of him,

Isa 54:13 And all thy children *shall be* **taught of the LORD**; and great *shall be* the peace of thy children.

Parental teaching must be a channel for God's teaching. It must be based on his word rather than "commandments of men," and it must emphasize the child's responsibility to respond personally to God rather than simply mimic the parents.

Our Lord's Use of v. 13

Our Lord quotes v. 13 in his debate with the Pharisees in Matt 15, which furnishes an excellent commentary on the warning.

- The Pharisees condemn the disciples for not washing their hands before eating bread (1-2). This washing goes beyond a simple hygienic practice. It requires running water, must extend to the elbows, and is only applicable when one eats bread. El Al, which caters to Jewish travelers, serves buns made of potato flour rather than wheat so that its observant customers don't need to

go through this ceremony.

- The Lord replies to their criticism:
 - In 3-6, he cites another tradition that has the effect of annulling God's command to honor one's parents. They would dedicate their property to the temple, while retaining possession of it. Since in principle it belonged to the temple, it was no longer available to help their needy parents.
 - In 7-9, he quotes Isa 29:13. The relevance of this verse to what goes before is its condemnation of how the “commandments of men” can supersede God's law.
 - Then in 10-11, he returns to the question of hand washing, and emphasizes that defilement originates internally, not externally.
- In 12-20, he instructs the disciples privately. Their question focuses on his statement in v. 11. His explanation goes back to the first part of Isa 29:13. It is “from the heart” (vv. 18, 19) that true defilement arises. That is where people turn from the Lord.

14, The Sleep

14 Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, *even* a marvellous work and a wonder:--God claims the agency in this blinding as a demonstration of his miraculous power.

for the wisdom of their wise *men* shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent *men* shall be hid.--He will override their learning and leave them blind.

May God graciously preserve us from such a fate. May he enable us by his Spirit to serve him first of all from the heart, and to rest on the authority of his word above all human wisdom.

15-24, Woe to Them that Hide Counsel

The Woe on Ariel portrayed the whole sweep of God's dealings with Israel:

- their hypocritical worship,
- the sleep by which he overwhelms their fleshly learning,
- the nightmares of chastisement they experience,
- and the final awakening and restoration.

This Woe focuses on the first and last of these.

15-16, *Sinners Hide their Counsel*

15 Woe unto them that seek [go] deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?--When a child is planning to do something she knows is wrong, she will try to hide her intentions from her parents. The very fact that

she hides it shows that she knows it's wrong.

People behave the same way toward the Lord. They try to hide their fleshly intentions from the Lord. At the least, they do not consult him on their plans.

The specific case that Isaiah has in mind is the plan of the Jerusalem department of state to seek an alliance with Egypt (30:1-2; 31:1). But Isaiah begins with the general principle rather than the specific instance. The problem is not just the specific nature of Egypt, but the attitude of heart that tries to plan one's course of life without consulting the Lord.

This behavior is a manifestation of serving the Lord outwardly but removing one's heart from him (v. 13). The rulers of Jerusalem thought that they could worship God in the temple services while excluding him from their daily thoughts and plans. Such compartmentalization always brings God's solemn declaration, "Woe."

16 Surely your turning of things upside down.--This attitude toward the Lord constitutes a denial of the most essential feature of our relation to God: he is the creator and we are creatures.

Isaiah develops this contrast with an image inspired by Gen 2:7, "the LORD God formed *אֲדָמָה* man of the dust of the ground." The verb from Genesis is the basis of the Hebrew word "potter," and Isaiah presents three parodies to show the error of ignoring the creator-creature distinction.

Shall [the potter] be esteemed as the clay?--The first error is to put the creator and the creature on the same plane. God is like us, only bigger. This was the error of the Greeks, whose gods shared human passions and frailties. It is the error, in a more sophisticated way, of the Mormons, whose fifth president Lorenzo Snow declared in June 1840, "As man is, God once was; God is, man may become."³

For shall the work say of him that made it, He made me not?--The second error is to deny that we are created in the first place, and thus disown any responsibility to our creator. This is the error of modern scientific humanism.

or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, He had no understanding?--The third error is to challenge God's wisdom and assert the need to go off on our own. This is the error that leads to reliance on human wisdom, as in v. 15.

Isaiah's point is that when we try to plan our lives independently of the Lord, we are effectively denying his role as our creator.

17-21, The Lord Reveals his Counsel

Humans may seek to hide their counsel from the Lord, but he does not hide his counsel from us, and Isaiah now reveals God's purposes for the creation.

We are studying this passage at Christmas season, 2009. The alignment is appropriate. Christmas celebrates the coming of Christ, the Messiah. But our modern emphasis on the baby in the manger is unbalanced. The significance of the coming of the Messiah is the inauguration of the millennium, his physical dominion over all the earth, succeeding as the second Adam where the first Adam failed. The first advent foreshadowed the second, and prepared for it, by providing the redemptive work that

³ http://www.lightplanet.com/mormons/response/qa/god_sinner.htm

allows sinful people to be citizens of the renewed earth. If the millennium is a movie, the first advent is the trailer. Like a trailer, it should excite our interest in what is yet to come. Our Lord's first coming should stimulate us to "love his [second] appearing," 2 Tim 4:8.

Isaiah's vision encompasses three aspects of God's counsel for this coming age: renewal of the creation, healing of human frailty, and punishment of evildoers. Our Lord's earthly ministry anticipates all three.

The three categories move from physical restoration, to a restoration that is both physical and spiritual, to a justice that is completely spiritual.

17, Renewal of Creation

First, Isaiah describes a physical restoration of the fallen creation.

17 Is it not yet a very little while, and Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field [orchard], and the fruitful field shall be esteemed as a forest?--This verse is essentially repeated in 32:15,

Isa 32:15 Until the spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest.

The first half of the couplet anticipates the taming of wild nature. **Lebanon**, home of the mighty cedars, is the prototype of the wild forest, ruled by wild beasts. To be useful to the agricultural Israelites, it had to be cleared, as Joshua's instructions to Ephraim and Manasseh make clear,

Jos 17:18 But the mountain shall be thine; for it *is* a wood, and thou shalt cut it down:

The **wilderness**, in 32:15, is the steppe land, suitable for grazing sheep but too dry for farming. Both are to be turned into "a fruitful field," more precisely an orchard.

The second half of the couplet is less clear, but I understand it as emphasizing the first half rather than reversing it, for reasons detailed in the notes. So wonderful will be the orchards that result from the renewal that what you now call an orchard will seem only a wild forest by comparison.

This transformation is foreshadowed in our Lord's ministry by his miracles of feeding:

- turning water to wine at Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11)
- twice providing a miraculous catch of fish for his disciples (Luke 5:4-7; John 21:1-14),
- feeding the 5000 (Matt 14:13-21) and the 4000 (Matt 15:32-38)

In our day of agricultural surpluses and overstocked grocery stores, we forget that the foremost preoccupation of humanity for most of its history has been getting enough food. In this light, these miracles anticipate the day when the wild places become fruitful orchards and food is abundant.

18-19, Healing of Human Frailty

The next category of restoration has a double meaning. One can be blind or deaf or poor physically, but also spiritually (as we saw in v. 10). In our Lord's ministry, he healed the physically deaf and blind and provided for the poor, but his redeeming death also delivered his people from their spiritual infirmities.

18 And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book,--The Lord healed the physically deaf (Mark 7:32-37). But the full extent of the miracle includes what they hear—the words of a book. The verse stands in contrast with vv. 11-12. Under God's judgment, even the learned cannot understand God's revelation, but in the restoration, even the deaf will be able to hear it.

and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness.--The Lord healed the physically blind (Mark 8:22-25). But the darkness from which they are delivered is more than physiological. Isaiah described the times of foreign domination as darkness:

Isa 5:30 And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea: and if *one* look unto the land, behold darkness *and* sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof.

He promised the coming Messianic age in terms of light:

Isa 9:2 The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

There will be a change in the people themselves, corresponding to Paul's teaching in 2 Cor 4,

2Co 4:4,6 ... the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. ... 6 For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

19 The meek also shall increase their joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.--The “meek” are those who are humbled and oppressed. The “poor” are those who have no resources.

Our Lord introduced his ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth by announcing, in the words of Isa 61:1-3, that he had come “to preach the gospel to the poor.” He proclaimed a special blessing on the poor, both physically (Luke 6:20, “blessed be ye poor”) and spiritually (Matt 5:3 (“blessed are the poor in spirit”), and on the meek as well (Matt 5:5). The multitudes that followed the Lord would have included many in these categories, and their attention to him foreshadows the joy and rejoicing predicted here.

These marks of the Messianic age recur in Isaiah:

Isa 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to *them that are* bound;

Isa 35:5-6 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. 6 Then shall the lame *man* leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.

When John the Baptist, imprisoned by Herod, sent his disciples to ask the Lord, “Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another” (Matt 11:3), the Lord pointed him to these promises:

Mat 11:4-6 Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: 5 The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 6 And

blessed is *he*, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

20-21, Punishment of Evildoers

This aspect of the coming kingdom was not carried out during the first advent, though our Lord's teachings certainly indicate the Judge's attitude toward these offenses. The list here is helpful in warning us about attitudes that the Lord abhors. Isaiah presents two pairs of offenses, each using the figure of speech known as a merism (representing a totality by naming its extremes, as "heaven and earth" (Gen 1:1) or "my downsitting and mine uprising" (Ps 139:2).

20 For the terrible one is brought to nought, and the scorner is consumed,--The first pair contrasts an irresponsible attitude toward the weak and lowly (being terrible) with an irresponsible attitude toward those in authority (scorning). Often the two go together: those who oppose the weak do so in flagrant disregard of the law.

The rest of v. 20 and v. 21 show two contrasting forms of this arrogant oppression: condemning the innocent, and justifying the wicked.

and all that watch for iniquity are cut off: 21 That make a man an offender for a word,--First, they use the law to destroy the innocent. Grammatically, these two go together (see the notes). The picture is of those who look for some reason, however small, to accuse someone and condemn him. This was the attitude of the Pharisees toward our Lord.

Mar 3:2 they watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him.

As long as we live in bodies of flesh, we all have room for improvement, and someone who looks hard enough will be able to find some cause for criticizing us. Even among believers, too often we are eager to condemn others of error—but usually this is a ploy for stroking our own sense of superiority, as it was for the Jewish leaders. Recall Paul's description of love:

1Co 13:5-6 love ... thinketh no evil; 6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

When you feel you must accuse another, pay careful attention to your own heart. Do you rejoice in the iniquity that you have found? When another believer disagrees with you on some point, are you happier to prove him wrong, or to find some point of commonality? Sometimes we must deal with error among God's people, but we must be very careful, lest the heresy that we are attacking become the stimulus for our own sinful pride.

and [they] lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of nought.--The second form of arrogant oppression is blocking the prosecution of the wicked. The city gate was where the elders of the city met, and where the judges heard cases (cf. Ruth 4:1). "Him that reproveth" is the judge, dealing with an evildoer who has oppressed another citizen, the "just" mentioned in the second half of the verse. The wicked seek to derail this process for personal gain, perhaps a bribe. In doing so they "lay a snare" for the judge, and "turn aside" the plaintiff.

I don't know of a good example of this in the gospels, but we can be sure that when the Lord returns to execute the judgment that the Father has assigned to him, no one will "lay a snare" for him when he "reproves" in the gate of heaven.

22-24, Summary of the Restoration

22 Therefore thus saith the LORD,--As in the previous woe, the Lord's voice summarizes what the prophet has been saying.

who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob,--It is curious that Isaiah describes the Lord as redeeming Abraham. To redeem someone is to deliver them from bondage by paying a price. The word is very commonly used often describes Israel's deliverance from Egypt, and some think that the reference here is to the nation rather than individual, much as the personal names Jacob and Israel sometimes represent the entire people. But I can't think of any text where the name "Abraham" is used collectively.

God's point is that even Abraham, the prototype of justification by faith, had to be delivered from bondage. Joshua reminded the people of Abraham's origins:

Jos 24:2 And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, *even* Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods.

In calling Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees, the Lord was delivering him from bondage to false gods. In addition, throughout his pilgrimage the Lord repeatedly delivered him from the oppression of other powers, an oppression that often resulted from sin: Pharaoh in Gen 12 (after Abram denied Sarah), the kings of Gen 14 (a consequence of strife between Abram's herdsmen and Lot's), Abimelech of Gerar in Gen 20 (Sarah again). And our Lord taught that Abraham looked forward to his coming as the ultimate redeemer:

Joh 8:56 Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw *it*, and was glad.

Abraham was not a sinless patriarch. Like all of his children, he needed to be redeemed. So Israel should not think it strange if God takes them through chastisement into deliverance.

Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now wax pale.-- "Now" implies a contrast with the past, cf.

Isa 61:7 For your shame *ye shall have* double; and *for* confusion they shall rejoice in their portion: therefore in their land they shall possess the double: everlasting joy shall be unto them.

The next two verses describe Jacob's deliverance in terms that recall ch. 28. There, the drunken neglect on the part of the prominent people led to the question,

Isa 28:9 Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? *them that are* weaned from the milk, *and* drawn from the breasts?

23 But when he seeth his children, the work of mine hands, in the midst of him,--Yes, in fact, God will teach the children, as he suggested in the second half of 28:9. Jacob's children will be "the work of [God's] hands," and they will worship God appropriately.

Note in particular God's role in the spiritual establishment of children. As we noted in our discussion of v. 13, this is not something that parents can achieve by their efforts. Christian parents must pray for the blessing promised in here and in 54:13,

Isaiah 29

Isa 54:13 And all thy children *shall be* **taught of the LORD**; and great *shall be* the peace of thy children.

The following three clauses describe the progress in the children's worship of the Lord, and shows their victory over the failure of 29:13.

they shall sanctify my name,--This is the only place in the OT where we encounter the phrase, “sanctify שׁקד C the name [of the Lord].” But it is the antonym of a common Levitical phrase, “to profane חלל D the name of the Lord.” This phrase describes the result of a number of offenses:

- sacrificing one's children to Molech (Lev 18:21; 20:3)
- swearing falsely by God's name (Lev 19:12)
- for a priest, contact with the dead (Lev 21:6)
- for a priest, conducting holy ceremonies while ceremonially defiled (Lev 22:2)
- keeping God's commandments concerning sacrifices (Lev 22:32).

The emphasis on ceremonial ritual and outward obedience suggests that this level of piety is that observed by those condemned in 29:13.

The next two phrases follow the instruction of 8:13. When Ahaz was considering an alliance with Assyria against Israel and Syria, Isaiah urged the people,

Isa 8:13 Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and *let him be* your fear, and *let him be* your dread.

and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob,--To sanctify the Lord is the next step beyond sanctifying his name. Now the worshiper recognizes the one whom the name identifies.

and shall fear the God of Israel.--The third step brings the worshiper to the fear of God that was so sorely lacking in v. 13.

24 They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine.--The allusion here is to the first half of 28:9, which lamented the lack of understanding among the nation's leaders, who had drunk themselves into incompetence. Now the Lord will restore them.

God comforted Israel in their time of chastisement by revealing his counsels to them. Those counsels center on a new age that he will bring in, an age marked by a natural order that serves humanity rather than threatening it, by the healing of human weakness (both physical and spiritual), and the establishment of true justice. Our Lord's first coming was the foundation for that coming age. As we remember his advent at this season, let us thank God for the blessings we now enjoy from our Savior's work, and look forward to the wonders of the age to come.

Notes

The Forest and the Garden (29:17)

This verse must be interpreted consistently with 32:15,

Isa 32:15 Until the spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest.

The two main interpretations are contrast and climax.

In the contrast interpretation, the two halves of the saying present a reversal. In the first, that which is wild and untameable (Lebanon, the wilderness) is turned into something good, while in the second half, that which is good (the garden) is turned back into something wild (the forest). This interpretation is often applied (e.g., Alexander in 29:17) to the replacement of Israel by the church. It's worth noting that Paul in Rom 11 uses the contrast of wild and cultivated plants in discussing this change.

In the climax interpretation, the first half anticipates the beneficial transformation of something wild (Lebanon, the wilderness) into a garden. The second half then says that in comparison with that coming garden, what you now consider a garden will be thought to be no more than a forest.

Most commentators apply the contrast to 29:17 but the climax to 32:15.

Two details might support climax over contrast. Both argue that the second half is not just a reversal of the first.

1. Note the difference in the verbs in each half of each verse. The first is “become” לִיְהִי or לִשׁוּב, while the second is “be reckoned as” לְהִשָּׁב. The first half is a transformation; the second half is a reassessment.
2. The case for contrast would be stronger if the first and last noun were the same. But they differ in both cases. Forest יַעַר appears only as the final destination, never as the initial origin, which is either Lebanon or the wilderness מִדְּבַר.

Other instances of transformation into a forest:

Jer 26:18 Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Zion shall be plowed *like* a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest. (Micah 3:12)

Hos 2:12 And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees, whereof she hath said, These *are* my rewards that my lovers have given me: and I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall eat them.

The garden כַּרְמֵל has a forest יַעַר (though here the reference is probably to the geographical region known as “Carmel”):

2Ki 19:23 = Isa 37:24, By thy messengers thou hast reproached the Lord, and hast said, With the multitude of my chariots I am come up to the height of the mountains, to the sides of Lebanon, and will cut down the tall cedar trees thereof, and the choice fir trees thereof: and I will enter into the lodgings of his borders, and into the forest of his Carmel

Isaiah 29

Mic 7:14 Feed thy people with thy rod, the flock of thine heritage, which dwell solitarily *in* the wood, in the midst of Carmel: let them feed *in* Bashan and Gilead, as in the days of old.

Solomon cultivated the forest (as a park?):

Ecc 2:6 I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees:

Danger of wild beasts in forest (but also in the field)

Jer 5:6 Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them,

Jer 12:8 Mine heritage is unto me as a lion in the forest; it crieth out against me: therefore have I hated it.

Amo 3:4 Will a lion roar in the forest, when he hath no prey?

Mic 5:8 And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the Gentiles in the midst of many people as a lion among the beasts of the forest, as a young lion among the flocks of sheep: who, if he go through, both treadeth down, and teareth in pieces, and none can deliver.

2Ki 2:24 And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them.

Psa 80:13 The boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it.

But both the wilderness and the forest will become a place of security:

Eze 34:25 And I will make with them a covenant of peace, and will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land: and they shall dwell safely in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods.

v. 21

The first clause of v. 21 is understood by most modern translations as parallel to the second and third, and thus to be understood as bearing false witness, “making a man an offender **with** a word.” However, the first clause is a ptc, parallel to the closing ptc in v. 20 and distinct from the finite verbs in the last two clauses. The resulting division gives a very nice contrast between two extremes of evil-doing: false accusation and false justification. With this division, it really doesn't matter whether we translate 21a “for a word” or “with a word,” since in both cases the point is accusing the innocent.

Note the unusual use of waw-consecutive + prefix after an imperfect! Waltke-O'Connor 33.3.3 c explains, “after regular *yqtl* referring to a present-time situation, *wayyqtl* represents a (con)sequential or explanatory situation in the same time frame according to a perfective aspect.” So the last clause of v. 21 explains how it is that the unjust “lay[s] a snare for him that reproveth in the gate.”