

Isaiah 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 3. For behold, the Lord God of hosts is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and supply, all support of bread and all support of water, the mighty man and the soldier, the judge and the prophet, the diviner and the elder, the captain of fifty and the man of rank, the counsellor and the skilful magician and the expert in charms. And I will make boys their princes and infants shall rule over them and the people will oppress one another, every one his fellow and every one his neighbour. The youth will be insolent to the elder and the despised to the honourable. For a man will take hold of his brother in the house of his father saying, You have a cloak, you shall be our leader and this heap of ruin shall be under your rule. In that day he will speak out saying, I will not be a healer, in my house there is neither bread nor cloak, you shall not make me leader of the people. For Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence. For the look on their faces bears witness against them. They proclaim their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it. Woe to them, for they have brought evil on themselves. Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked, it shall be ill with him, for what his hands have dealt out shall be done to him. My people, infants are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O my people, your guides mislead you, and they have swallowed up the course of your paths. The Lord has taken his place to contend. He stands to judge peoples. The Lord will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of his people. It is you who have devoured the vineyard.

The spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor, declares the Lord God of hosts. The Lord said, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet. Therefore the Lord will strike with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts. In that day, the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents, the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarves, the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets, the signet rings, and nose rings, the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags, the mirrors, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils. Instead of perfume, there will be rotteness, and instead of a belt, a rope, and instead of well-set hair, boldness, and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth, and branding instead of beauty.

Your men shall fall by the sword, and your mighty men in battle, and her gates shall lament and mourn, empty she shall sit on the ground. In Isaiah chapter 2, the prophet described the haughty pride of the people of Jerusalem and Judah, that would be humbled by the Lord on the coming day of his judgment. The Lord would bring all of man's lofty might down low, but he would raise up the mountain of Zion and of his house over all of the other mountains. Rather than Zion going out to the nations and taking on their ways, the nations would flow up to Jerusalem, and the word and law of the Lord would flow out to the whole world. Chapter 3 continues the theme of the crushing of Jerusalem's pride. It takes the more general statements of the preceding chapter and expresses their import in more particular terms. The conclusion of chapter 2, with its caution against depending upon the frailty of man, sounds a note that is fundamental for much of what follows. Verses 1 to 7 fill out the picture of the cutting down of the lofty in verses 12 to 17 of the preceding chapter.

Support and supply would be removed from Jerusalem and Judah. The expression support and supply is one with two very similar words in the Hebrew, which various English translations try to convey with similar sounding words like support and supply. Judah and Jerusalem would be stripped even of the enjoyment of basic provisions like bread and water. These verses, however, focus more upon the people that would be removed from them. They would lose the men with military might, they would lose the rulers, and they would lose the prophets, diviners, counsellors and others that would give guidance and direction to the people. They would be left without skill, expertise, without might to perform things. The nation would be effectively decapitated, stripped of their prominent figures and people who could have formed an effective hierarchy. This is the sort of situation that Judah and Israel suffered when they were defeated by foreign nations. Their rulers and their authorities, their mighty men, and also their artisans, craftsmen and skilled workers were all stripped from them, leaving them utterly subject to their new rulers, dependent upon them and unable to mount any serious resistance.

The vacuum that was left by such figures would be filled by much meaner sorts, by rulers who were incompetent, unwise and immature. Boys and infants lack both might and wisdom, and as a result, their rule could be officious and domineering. We should think of a bossy child that throws around weight that he does not have. Since such a leader has not yet attained to self-mastery, he cannot easily lead his people by example. Since he lacks might, people will not submit to his strength.

[5 : 31] Since he lacks wisdom and maturity, people will not submit to his insight. Since he lacks deeply proven character, people will not submit to his goodness. A people led by such rulers will be stunted by their petty weakness. Where rulers cannot lead by genuine virtues, by self-mastery, by might, by wisdom, and by good character, they will often, in their insecurity and weakness, be thrown back upon vicious forms of rule. Rule by such figures is often violent, arbitrary, and oppressive. In a good society, we are ruled by our betters, by people that exhibit virtues to which we can aspire. However, Judah and Jerusalem would be humbled by being ruled over and oppressed by people who were without any virtues that would commend them to exercise such preeminence. Weakness and insecurity and meanness of character would produce tyranny, and the tyranny would spread out among the people. Each would oppress his own neighbour. And as the weak, vicious, and unworthy exercised authority at the heart of the nation, authority more generally would be held in poor esteem.

The honourable and virtuous among the people would be dishonoured. A healthy relationship between generations would also break down. The youth would despise the aged. Traditions would be rejected and overthrown, and there would be a breach in the continuing life of the nation. Authority as such would break down, and order and proper hierarchy in society with it. Yet people still have a hunger for authority and for leaders, and in the rubble that remained of Judah and Jerusalem society, people would seek for people to rule over them. The prophet presents a situation where even the mere supposed possession of a fine garment would set someone apart as a potential ruler, and yet the supposed possessor of this garment does not in fact own one. His house is as empty as everyone else's, and he cannot even rule over the ruins. The desperate situation described in verses 1-7 will come upon the people as a consequence of their current sinful pride and their prideful sin.

Pride comes naturally before a fall, and there is about to come a day of reckoning, a day when people will taste of the harvest of their speech and deeds, which are both addressed here in this context. There is a contrast between the fates of the righteous and that of the wicked.

Even as others are judged, it will be well with the righteous. The organic connection between deeds and consequences is important here. It's not as if the Lord is just bringing a punishment upon people that has no relationship to their actions. Through their sinful actions, they sowed what would later yield the bitter fruit of their judgment. Perhaps the reference to their proclaiming their sin like Sodom in verse 9 looks back to chapter 1 and the comparison of the people with Sodom and Gomorrah.

Verses 12-15 focus upon the failures and the sins of the leaders, and announce the Lord's entering into judgment with them as a sort of divine lawsuit that is being carried out against them, focused upon their oppression of the poor of his people.

[8 : 24] The unworthy rulers of the people are once again described here. Infants are their oppressors, and women rule over them. The word translated women here might be better translated as creditors.

As Hugh Williamson argues, this is the reading more commonly adopted by commentators today. If women were in view, it would presumably be focusing upon their weakness in some way, or perhaps there's also a half glance back to the figure of Athaliah, who is the great usurper, the one female ruler of the people, and the one under whom Judah experienced some of its darkest days.

More likely though, looking at the context, the reference is to creditors, usurers that have a predatory relationship with the people. This might be what is in view in the crushing of the people and the grinding of the face of the poor that is described in verse 15.

The judgment is not merely upon kings, but more generally upon the ruling class, the elders and the princes of the people, and there is a special attention given to their economic oppression. The Lord's special concern for the poor and vulnerable among his people is a theme that can be traced throughout the entirety of the scriptures.

Verses 16 and following singles out the daughters of Zion and declares a judgment against them. Elsewhere in scripture we have judgments that focus upon the rich women of the people.

[9 : 37] For instance, in Amos chapter 4 verses 1 to 2, Hear this, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, bring that we may drink. The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fish hooks. There the women are presented as being indifferent to, complicit with, and also as instigating the sort of oppression that their husbands are carrying out for them. Their decadent hunger for feast and finery is behind the crushing of the poor.

In these verses here in Isaiah, the fashionable clothes and accessories of these rich women are enumerated. Their haughty and vain way of going about is described. If 8th century Jerusalem and Judah had had gossip mags, these are the women that would have filled their pages.

It is important to recognize that these women are not just individuals who come under the Lord's judgment. They stand for the wider people. These are the women that would have held the attention of the rich and powerful of the people, and also of the poor. The actresses, the models, the celebrities, and the socialites of their day. In humbling them, the Lord would be humbling the entirety of Jerusalem's high society. Verse 24 speaks of five different ways in which their future state would contrast with their present. The stench of rotteness would replace the scent of perfume.

Fashionable belts would be replaced by a slaver's rope. Women with the fanciest hairstyles would have their hair shaved off like prisoners of war. Rich robes would be replaced by the clothes of mourning.

The most arresting beauties would be branded like cattle. The daughters of Zion stand for the people more generally. They are the daughters that bear the image of their unfaithful mother, who is in view in verses 25 to 26. They symbolize and embody the false glory of the people. They symbolize and embody the character of the people among whom they enjoy such prominence. They face a bitter fate, and their mother, Zion herself, would be left bereft. Her sons would fall by the sword, and she would be abandoned in bitter mourning.

[11 : 47] A question to consider. How might reflecting upon the description of vicious rule within this chapter help us to understand better the character of good rule?