

# EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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## ISAIAH CHAPTERS THIRTY-SIX TO THIRTY-NINE

### THE HISTORIC INTERLUDE

WE NOW GLANCE at the next four chapters which relate certain important incidents in the life of Hezekiah, King of Judah. I say "glance at," because I do not intend to take these chapters up verse by verse, quoting and endeavoring to explain them, as in the case of the first prophetic division of the book. These chapters are almost duplicates of II Kings 18:13-21:26 and the major events are also covered by II Chronicles 32, 33. In all probability it was Isaiah who wrote these records and who was guided by the Holy Spirit in transferring the lengthier one into its place in his great prophetic book.

There was a very special reason for giving us these four historical chapters. They all have to do with a son of David upon whom all Judah's hopes were centered, who came down to the very verge of death but was raised up again in order that the purpose of God might be fulfilled. That, of course, points forward to our Lord Jesus Christ, who went down into death actually and was raised up again to carry out God's counsels. They have to do with certain events in the life of King Hezekiah, who in some degree foreshadowed this in the experiences through which he was called to pass.

In the fourteenth year of his reign the invasion of the Assyrians under the cruel and ruthless Sennacherib took place. After destroying or capturing various fenced cities, he sent a great army to besiege Jerusalem. This host was under the direct leadership of a general named Rabshakeh, a bold but vulgar and blustering officer who had a supreme contempt for the Jews and for their religion. He took his stand at a prominent place outside the wall of Jerusalem, where his voice could be heard easily by the defenders of the city, and called upon the leaders to surrender before he undertook to destroy them completely.

Eliakim, Shebna and Joah, who were what we would call members of Hezekiah's cabinet or privy council, undertook to parley with the arrogant Assyrian. Speaking on behalf of his master, Rabshakeh inquired as to what confidence they trusted in, daring to refuse to yield to his commands. Insolently he declared that if they hoped for deliverance to come through the power of their God, their expectations were doomed to disappointment. Had not Sennacherib proved himself more than a match for all the gods of the surrounding nations?

And had not Hezekiah himself destroyed the altars of the Lord and thus forfeited all claims upon Him even if He did have the power to protect him? Not realizing that the destroyed altars were connected with idolatrous shrines, Rabshakeh supposed that they had been dedicated to the God of Judah (chap. 36:1-7).

Demanding unconditional surrender to be ratified by a large tribute, as pledge that the Jews would abide by the proposed terms, Rabshakeh even went so far as to insist that it was by direction of the Lord that Sennacherib had come against Judah.

He may in some way have become familiar with some of the prophecies which we have been considering; he knew of Samaria's fall, and so may have learned that their own God had declared that He would use Assyria as a rod to punish Judah for their disobedience and waywardness (vss. 8-10).

Fearful that these words might have an ill effect upon the morale of the defenders of the city, the Jewish leaders asked that the Assyrian general speak to them in his own language with which they were familiar, and not in the Hebrew tongue. This request only roused Rabshakeh to greater insolence. He used language that was disgusting and revolting as he declared that he had been sent not to parley with the representatives of Hezekiah as such, but with all the people of Jerusalem, of whom he continued to demand instant obedience to the call for surrender and the promise of allegiance to the king of Assyria.

In that case their lives would be spared and they themselves transported as prisoners of war to other lands where they would be permitted to live in peace and security.

Derisively he referred again to the folly of trusting in their God and reminded them that the gods of Hamath, Arphad, Sepharvaim and Samaria had been unable to cope with the might of Sennacherib. What reason had they then to hope that the Lord should intervene on their behalf and deliver Jerusalem from threatened ruin?

To all these demands and taunts the people answered "**not a word**," for the king had so commanded them. Eliakim and his companions returned to Hezekiah with their clothes rent in token of their grief at being unable to come to terms with the Assyrian general whose arrogant and defiant words they reported to their king (vss. 12-22).

When Hezekiah heard it, he too rent his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and "**went into the house of the Lord**" (chap. 37:1). There he could pour out his heart to the God of his fathers who had so often given deliverance to His people in times of great distress and adversity. Feeling the need of counsel and prayer he sent Eliakim, Shebna, and the elders to call upon Isaiah, to whom he said,

**"Thus saith Hezekiah, This day is a day of trouble and of rebuke and of blasphemy: for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth. It may be the Lord thy God will hear the words of Rabshakeh, whom the king of Assyria his master hath sent to reproach the living God, and will reprove the words which the Lord thy God hath heard: wherefore lift up thy prayer for the remnant that is left"** (vss. 3, 4).

Such faith could not go unrewarded. God never fails those who commit everything to Him. He has said, **“Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me”** (Psalm 50:15). Hezekiah was soon to prove the truth of this promise, even though his faith must first be tested severely.

Isaiah’s answer was most cheering and reassuring. He said, **“Thus shall ye say unto your master, Thus saith the Lord, Be not afraid of the words that thou hast heard, wherewith the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me”** (vs. 6). It was not a question between the two opposing forces, or between Rabshakeh and Hezekiah. The Assyrian had dared to challenge the power of the Lord. He, Himself, would take up the challenge, and would manifest His power and might, thus showing that He was not a mere idol, nor an imaginary deity like the gods of the heathen whose inability to save their devotees from destruction had been so readily manifested.

Sennacherib and his servants had dared to rush upon the thick bosses of the bucklers of the Almighty (Job 15:25, 26), and were soon to prove the folly of daring to fight against the omnipotent God who had created the heavens and the earth, and who declared through His prophet, **“Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land”** (vs. 7).

The **“rumour”** was a report that Tirhakah, King of Ethiopia, was on his way to fight against Assyria, whose armies were divided; part besieging Jerusalem, and part warring against Libnah. Reluctantly, Rabshakeh was obliged to lift the siege and to withdraw to Assyria, but he sent a last defiant message to the king of Judah as his armies were withdrawing. **“Let not thy God, in whom thou trustest, deceive thee, saying, Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Behold, thou hast heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands by destroying them utterly: and shalt thou be delivered?”** (vss. 10, 11).

Again he taunted Hezekiah concerning the folly of presuming that his God would prove any more powerful than the gods of other nations. This message was put in the form of a letter which Hezekiah received at the hands of certain messengers who brought it from the camp of the Assyrians. It was a letter of blasphemy, and Hezekiah did right in not attempting to answer it himself. Instead, he took it into the house of the Lord and spread it out before God.

Bowing in His presence, he pleaded that the Lord would intervene to save His people. He frankly acknowledged that the fake gods of the nations had no ability to save, but he confessed his confidence that the living God would undertake for those who put their trust in Him. The conclusion of his prayer is very beautiful and heart-moving: **“Now therefore, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art the Lord, even Thou only”** (vs. 20). Such confidence could not go unrewarded, nor such a prayer unheard.

The answer came through another message from Isaiah, assuring him that God had heard and was about to answer his petition; and that in such a way, that **“The virgin, the daughter of Zion,”** should despise the haughty foe whose army had at first seemed invincible.

Rabshakeh had reproached the Lord. He had blasphemed the God of Judah. In his pride and folly he had lifted up himself against the Holy One of Israel. Trusting in the vastness of his army, the number of his chariots and horsemen, he had thought it would be but a small matter to conquer Jerusalem and to carry its inhabitants away as captives, but he was soon to learn the difference between the senseless idols of the heathen and the One in whom Hezekiah had put his trust (vss. 21-28). Therefore the word of the Lord came to him saying: **“Because thy rage against Me, and thy tumult, is come up into Mine ears, therefore will I put My hook in thy nose, and My bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest.”**

To Hezekiah the promise was given that the land which had been overrun by the enemy should bring forth of itself for two seasons and in the third year should be planted and would produce an abundant harvest, while the remnant of Judah, escaped out of the hand of the Assyrian, should once more begin to prosper and **“again take root downward, and bear fruit upward: for out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out of Mount Zion: the zeal of the Lord of hosts shall do this.”**

As for the king of Assyria, he should not be permitted to enter Jerusalem, nor even shoot an arrow into it, nor threaten it again in any way. He was to return by the way that he came, for the Lord had undertaken to defend Jerusalem for His own sake and for His servant David’s sake.

The judgment was not long deferred, for God sent a terrible plague upon the camp of the Assyrians, so severe in character that in one night one hundred and eighty-five thousand died, and the scattered remnants of the once-great army of Sennacherib departed for their own land, led by their defeated and crestfallen ruler.

Upon reaching his home city and worshiping in the house of his god he was set upon by two of his own sons, Adrammelech and Sharezer, who slew their dishonored father with the sword and escaped into Armenia. One of their brothers, Esarhaddon, became king in his father’s stead.

Thus had God vindicated His holy name and freed His people from the impending doom that seemed about to fall upon them.

In chapter thirty-eight we read of Hezekiah’s illness and recovery. It might have been supposed that after such a remarkable experience of God’s intervention on behalf of His people, in answer to prayer, Hezekiah would have been drawn so close to the Lord that he would never have doubted His love and care again, but have lived constantly in the sunshine of the divine approval. But alas, with him, as so often with us all, it was far otherwise. When new tests came doubts and fears again prevailed and only the grace of God could bear with His poor failing servant.

The first test came through illness. Hezekiah was **“sick unto death,”** we are told. The prophet Isaiah was sent to say to him, **“Thus saith the Lord, Set thy house in order; for thou shalt die and not live.”**

To the stricken king these words were evil tidings indeed. He was still a comparatively young man, for he had come to the throne at the age of twenty-five, and his entire reign was but twenty-nine years, so that at this time he was but thirty-nine.

Long life was one of the promises to the obedient Israelite. Therefore the announcement that he was to die ere he was forty seemed to Hezekiah like an evidence of the divine displeasure. He received the message of the prophet with real distress and pleaded for a reprieve from the sentence imposed upon him.

In reading his prayer we need to remember that Old Testament saints, however godly they might be, did not have the light on the after-life that has now been vouchsafed to the children of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel (II Timothy 1:10).

He has revealed the truth as to that which God has prepared for those who love Him. Having gone down unto death and come up in triumph, He has annulled him that had the power of death, even the devil, and so delivers those who, through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Hebrews 2:14, 15). We know now that for the believer death simply means to be absent from the body and present with the Lord (II Corinthians 5:8), and that this is far better than any possible earthly experience (Philippians 1:23).

But all this was unknown in the days before the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, who declared, **“If a man keep My saying he shall never see death”** (John 8:51).

Therefore when the word came to Hezekiah that he must die, his soul was filled with fear, and he cried to God in his wretchedness, pleading the integrity of his life as a reason why his days should be prolonged. God who sometimes grants our requests but sends leanness into our souls (Psalm 106:15), heard his cry and sent the prophet to him once more; this time to tell him that his prayer was heard, and that God would add to his life another fifteen years and would also continue to defend Jerusalem from the evil machinations of the Assyrian king.

To confirm the promise, a sign was given which involved a stupendous miracle, for God said, **“I will bring again the shadow of the degrees, which is gone down in the sun-dial of Ahaz ten degrees backward.”** When this actually took place, Hezekiah knew, beyond all question, that the prophet had spoken by divine authority.

This is not the place to discuss the miracle itself. Whether it was caused by some amazing event in the planetary system, or whether it was a miracle of refraction, we need not try to decide; but the fact that the astronomers of Babylon had knowledge of it would indicate that it was something far-reaching and of grave import.

Upon his recovery, Hezekiah wrote of his exercises and described vividly the experiences he passed through when he felt that he was under sentence of death. Bitterly he complained that he was about to be deprived of the residue of his years. To leave the world seemed to him like being banished from the presence of the Lord. His days and nights were filled with grievous pain, not only of body, but of mind, as he awaited in fear the carrying out of the decree, when God, as he put it, would **“make an end”** of him. He mourned **“as a dove”**; his eyes failed from **“looking upward.”** Yet he knew that he was in the hands of the Lord, and his heart cried out to Him for help.

It is evident that as his exercises continued, his soul entered more restfully into the truth that all must be well when one is in the care of a covenant-keeping God. **“O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit: so wilt Thou recover me, and make me to live. Behold, for peace I had great bitterness: but thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for Thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back.”**

These precious words express his realization of the goodness and the wisdom of God, after health returned, for he took this as an evidence that God had pardoned all his sins and cast them away forever. As an unenlightened Old Testament believer, he could only think of early death as, in some sense, an expression of divine disapproval.

He could see nothing in the grave but darkness and forgetfulness. In life the Lord could be praised, not in Sheol. He wrote, of course, of conditions as he understood them; but he closed his writing with a note of praise and thanksgiving for renewed strength and added years of life.

The deliverance came in a very simple way. He had been suffering from a malignant boil, but a poultice of figs, prescribed by Isaiah, drew out the poison, and started the king on the way to recovery.

It is hardly necessary to point out that had Hezekiah died at the age of thirty-nine, Manasseh, who proved to be the most wicked king who ever sat on the throne of Judah, would never have been born, for he was but twelve years old when he began to reign (II Chronicles 33:1). He tried to undo everything that his father had done. Hezekiah had destroyed the altars of idolatry, had swept the land clear of idols. Manasseh brought in more forms of idolatry than were ever known before and he went to spiritists, mediums, and filled the land with those who professed to be able to talk with the dead, practices which God had forbidden. And he brought down the indignation of God upon Judah, because of the corruption and sin committed.

Yet how wonderful is the mercy of God; at last an old man fifty years of age and almost facing eternity, God brought that godless king to repentance. Manasseh broke down, confessed the sins of a long, ungodly life, undertook again to cleanse the land of its idols and tried to bring about a reformation, but it was too late to recover the people. His son Amon went right on in the sins of his father.

But in the next generation, God came in in wondrous grace again and raised up another son of David, King Josiah, who honored the Lord in his very youth and was the means of bringing about the great revival in Judah.

The thirty-ninth chapter tells of another failure on the part of this king who was, in the main, so devoted to the will of God. We read in II Chronicles 32:31 concerning him,

**“Howbeit in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to enquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left him, to try him, that He might know all that was in his heart.”**

There are few of us indeed, who could stand such a test as this. To be left alone by God, in order that our own hearts might be manifested, our inmost thoughts revealed, could only mean a moral or spiritual breakdown. Such was the trial to which Hezekiah was now exposed, and in which he failed through self-confidence. He acted upon his own judgment instead of turning to the Lord for guidance, and the result could only bring harm instead of blessing.

After the Lord had so graciously granted his request and raised him up from the very brink of the grave, we are told that **“Merodach-Baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah: for he had heard that he had been sick, and was recovered.”**

How would the King of Judah react to this apparently friendly overture from the prince of the great city which was the very fountain-head of idolatry?

When Rabshakeh sent a letter of blasphemy, Hezekiah went into the sanctuary and spread it out before the Lord; but when there came a letter and a present, he felt no need of bringing this before God, or seeking instruction from Him. Do we not all know something of this self-confidence when we have to do with the world, not seen as in open opposition to that which we cherish most, as of God, but rather when it approaches us in an apparently friendly, patronizing manner, extending the hand of friendship instead of the mailed fist of enmity?

Yet we are never in greater danger of missing the mind of God than at such a time as this. The letter that is accompanied with a present may cover up a far greater danger than the letter of blasphemy.

Evidently elated by the visit of the Babylonian envoys and their retinue, and pleased with the present, Hezekiah felt no need to ask counsel of the Lord, but without hesitation he received the embassy, **“and shewed them the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all the house of his armour, and all that was found in his treasures: there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah shewed them not.”**

This was exactly what the Chaldeans desired. No doubt, as they looked with covetous eyes on all these things, they were pondering in their hearts how best they should proceed in order that, some day, they might conquer Judah and have all this vast treasure for themselves.

Scarcely had they gone from the presence of Hezekiah before Isaiah appeared upon the scene to confront the king with two questions: **“What said these men? And from whence came they unto thee?”** Ingenuously Hezekiah replied, **“They are come from a far country unto me, even from Babylon.”** Surely he could not have been ignorant of the prophecies Isaiah had spoken as to this reserve power in the northeast that was yet to come against Judah, and be used by the God whom His people had neglected, as a rod to punish them for their willful disobedience.

Isaiah put another question: **“What have they seen in thy house?”** The king answered: **“All that is in mine house have they seen: there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shewed them.”** He had no idea of the serious import of this, for he had not realized that the princes were actually spies, who had come to search out the land, and to report to the King of

Babylon all that which they found.

It must have been a real shock therefore to the unsuspecting monarch, when Isaiah said, “**Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the Lord. And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away: and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.**”

All this was fulfilled years later, when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah, and carried away their chief men as captives to Babylon, including a large number who were of the blood royal, as well as those very treasures (II Chronicles 36:18).

One can imagine Hezekiah’s disappointment and his deep chagrin, as he heard these words of the prophet; but he could only bow his head and accept them as the revelation of the judgment of God. So he replied, “**Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken . . . For there shall be peace and truth in my days.**”

The after-history of Judah shows how, in spite of occasional revivals, things went from bad to worse, until at last “**there was no remedy**” (II Chronicles 36:16) for their evil condition, and the prophesied judgment was fulfilled in the days of Zedekiah.

One to whom so many owe so much in rightly dividing the Word of truth, J. N. Darby, aptly points out that in this first part of the book, “We have had rather the outward history of Israel, but now we have their moral or inward history in their place of testimony against idolatry, in their relationship with Christ and the separation of a remnant.”

That inward history was a complete failure as the next part of Isaiah’s great prophecy clearly shows.

~ end of chapter 36-39 ~

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