

Isaiah Part 19: The highway of holiness...

Isaiah 34 and 35

Judgment on the nations (Isaiah 34 v 1 to 17)

In the immediate context, Isaiah continues the thought of the coming judgment against the Assyrians. But in the larger context, we can see this passage as an announcement of the judgment of come upon the nations during the ‘Great Tribulation’ (Matthew 24 v 21), when because of the judgment of God, conditions on earth will be the worst human history has ever seen. “O nations” (v 1) – here there is a shift of emphasis from Judah and their immediate enemies, to the (Gentile) ‘nations’, noting that Israel is not one of the ‘nations’, but is dealt with as God’s people separately. Revelation chapters 6, 8 and 9, and 16 to 18 describe this horrific time, when there will be widespread ecological, economic, cosmic, and human catastrophe. No wonder Isaiah pleads with the nations: “Draw near, O nations, to hear, and give attention, O peoples” (v 1) – given that the stage is set for the fulfilment of this prophecy, we should hear and take heed!

“All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine...” (v 4) – similar imagery is used in Matthew 24 v 29, 2 Peter 3 v 10, Revelation 6 v 12 to 14, Psalm 102 v 25 to 27, and the phrase ‘the skies roll up like a scroll’ may be an allusion to modern physics, pointing to dimensions beyond the classical four dimensions of space-time.

- How does Isaiah describe God’s ‘rage’ and ‘fury’ against the nations, and particularly against Edom?

“For my sword... descends for judgment upon Edom” (v 5) – the Edomites were near neighbours to Israel, and often bitter rivals. The Edomites rejoiced whenever the people of Judah or Israel were afflicted (see Psalm 137 v 7; Lamentations 4 v 22), so Isaiah focuses on the judgment that will come against Edom, using them as an example of the more widespread judgment that will come upon all the nations. “The LORD has a sword; it is sated with blood” (v 6) – God’s anger finds its final fulfilment in ‘Armageddon’ (Revelation 14 v 20). “For the Lord has a sacrifice in Bozrah” – בֹּזְרָה (*Bozrah*, Hebrew), or *Petra* (Greek) means ‘sheepfold’ or ‘fortress’ (Amos 1 v 11, 12; Jeremiah 49 v 13). Bozrah was the capital of Edom, and a city of great antiquity (Genesis 36 v 33). At his Second Coming, Jesus returns first to Bozrah (or Petra, where the remnant of Jewish believers have fled for safety), to bring vengeance and judgment upon the enemies of Israel and God (including Edom). See Isaiah 63 v 1 and Revelation 19 v 13.

“The streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulphur” (v 9) – in the day of God’s vengeance known as the ‘Great Tribulation’ there will be unparalleled ecological disaster. Before Jesus returns, one third of the earth’s vegetation, one third of the oceans, and one third of its fresh waters will be destroyed and become unusable (Revelation 8 v 7 to 12).

“But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it” (v 11) – the earth will be destroyed to such an extent that in some places only wild animals will be able to live. The King James translates ‘wild goat’ (v 14) as ‘satyr’, a mythical demonic creature: Isaiah may mean that wild goats will inhabit the desolate regions of Edom, or that it will be the haunt of demonic spirits. The Hebrew word for ‘night bird’ is *lilith*, the feminine form of the word for ‘night’, and in Jewish folklore ‘Lilith’ was a beautiful night-demon, who seduced men and killed children. Isaiah may be using the term to describe the demonic habitation of Edom after God’s judgment.

“Seek and read from the book of the LORD, not one of these shall be missing” (v 16) – Isaiah understood that his words were the words of the LORD, and that his prophecy should be taken literally. Isaiah clearly challenges doubters to ‘look it up’ once the prophecy was fulfilled. Times of trials are certainly coming upon the earth. Our part is not to prevent them, but to be ready, and to pray always that we may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21 v 36).

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The ransomed shall return (Isaiah 35 v 1 to 10)

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom” (v 1) – after the judgment on the nations described in chapter 34, God will bring about a beautiful restoration. In the immediate term, Judah was restored after the invasion of the Assyrians was turned back. In the longer term, modern day Israel has turned the wasteland into productive farms, and has made the ‘desert blossom’. And in the ultimate fulfilment of this prophecy, God will restore the earth’s environment after Jesus’ Second Coming and during the Millennium (see Isaiah 11 v 6 to 9; Romans 8 v 19 to 22).

- “Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you” (v 5) – in the context of the preceding chapters of Isaiah, why will God ‘come with vengeance’, and against whom? What do you think is the ‘recompense of God’? How would this apply today?
- Applied spiritually, what blessings are described in this chapter that are available for us now? In verses 8 to 10, what are the four or five characteristics of the ‘highway’, remembering that in the Book of Acts the Christian life was referred to as ‘the Way’ (e.g. Acts 9 v 1, 2)?

“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees” (v 3) – the coming judgment is enough to make anyone feel weak and feeble, and ‘hands’ speak of work, while ‘knees’ speak of prayer. But in the light of the glorious restoration God will bring, it is no time to have weak hands or feeble knees! We need to keep strong, work and pray. Hebrews 12 v 12 quotes this verse to make the point that even in a time of discipline from God, we should be strong, knowing that it is his fatherly love and care that has allowed the discipline. “Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not!’... He will come and save you” (v 4) – in our trials we need a strong hope in God to overcome our anxious hearts, and confidence that he will come and save us.

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened...” (v 6) – when God’s salvation comes, it is accompanied by miraculous power. It is a miracle for the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to run, and the mute to speak. When John the Baptist was in prison, he began to wonder if Jesus really was the Messiah. When John’s disciples brought this question to Jesus, he replied, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear...” (Matthew 11 v 4 to 6). Here Jesus uses similar words to show that as the Messiah he had come to bring God’s salvation, and that would be accompanied with miraculous power.

“For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert” (v 6) – when God’s salvation comes, miraculous provision comes with it. What was dry and useless becomes well-watered and fruitful. Jesus said he would bring this kind of beautiful provision in the lives of his people: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive.” (John 7 v 38, 39).

“A highway shall be there, called the Way of Holiness” (v 8) – today we take good roads for granted, but in the ancient world a ‘highway’ was an amazing blessing for travel, progress, and business. Isaiah announces that in the ministry of the Messiah, there will be a wonderful highway known as the Way of Holiness. The Hebrew word for highway speaks of a raised road, lifted above the ground. “The unclean shall not pass over it” – this highway is not for everyone: you are only allowed on this highway if you are cleansed by Jesus.

“And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing” (v 10) – we use this highway to come to where God lives and reigns – Zion – and we come there with singing! The word ‘redeemed’ (v 9) is related to the word גֹּאֵל (*go-el*), and refers to someone who has been rescued by the ‘go-el’ or ‘kinsman-redeemer’, that is, Jesus. “Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads... and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” –when we arrive at our destination, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes; there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the former things have passed away (Revelation 21 v 4).

Prayer – thank you we can see the glory of the Lord, and the majesty of our God. Help us, when we are anxious, to be strong and not fearful, for you will come and save us, and there will come a time when we will obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away. We praise you in Jesus’ name, Amen.