

Isaiah: Offering Hope for the Future

Isaiah 29:13-24

¹³ The Lord said:

Because these people draw near with their mouths
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me,
and their worship of me is a human commandment
learned by rote;

¹⁴ so I will again do
amazing things with this people,
shocking and amazing.

The wisdom of their wise shall perish,
and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.

¹⁵ Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for the LORD,
whose deeds are in the dark,
and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"

¹⁶ You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay?

Shall the thing made say of its maker,
"He did not make me";

or the thing formed say of the one who formed it,
"He has no understanding"?

¹⁷ Shall not Lebanon in a very little while
become a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field be regarded as a forest?

- ¹⁸ On that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a scroll,
and out of their gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.
- ¹⁹ The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,
and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One
of Israel.
- ²⁰ For the tyrant shall be no more,
and the scoffer shall cease to be;
all those alert to do evil shall be cut off—
- ²¹ those who cause a person to lose a lawsuit,
who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate,
and without grounds deny justice to the one in the right.
- ²² Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham,
concerning the house of Jacob:
No longer shall Jacob be ashamed,
no longer shall his face grow pale.
- ²³ For when he sees his children,
the work of my hands, in his midst,
they will sanctify my name;
they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob,
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.
- ²⁴ And those who err in spirit will come to understanding,
and those who grumble will accept instruction.

Theme Statement

Despite the dire threat posed by Assyria, the prophet holds up the promise that the city will survive. Jerusalem's blind leaders would soon see the triumph of the Lord.

Exploring the Word

Isaiah 29 can be divided into three major parts:

- 29:1-8. Distress and eventual restoration of Jerusalem

- 29:9-16. Four sayings about willful spiritual insensibility
- 29:17-24. The great restoration

The second and third divisions are contextualized by 29:1-8. The imagery points toward the Assyrian invasion in the late eighth century BCE and the encirclement of Jerusalem by the Assyrian army of Sennacherib. As Isaiah foretold, the city survived (Isaiah 37:33-38; 2 Kings 19:32-37).

Isaiah 29:9-16 Willful spiritual insensibility

In 29:9-11, religious leaders are taken to task for their inability to accept or believe the impending deliverance of Jerusalem described in 29:5-8. Reflexive imperatives in 29:9 (“stupefy yourselves,” “blind yourselves”) imply that the behavior of prophets and seers is self-imposed. This criticism echoes that of 28:7. In the present context, however, the faculties of prophets and seers are impaired because the Lord deadened their perception with a narcotizing sleep. For them, the spirit Yahweh pours out is not revelation as might be expected (Joel 2:28-29) but an inability to see, signaled by closed eyes and covered heads.

The address to religious leaders transitions into the second saying, 29:11-12, and a new metaphor. Of the two groups that will not read, the illiterate might be excused since the command to read lies beyond them. In contrast, seers and prophets had the ability to obey but evidently lacked interest in “the vision of all this” (29:11).

Isaiah 29:13 draws a distinction between religious behavior and faithful living. The Bible repeatedly reflects the Lord's irritation at ritualistic lip service couched in liturgical language and ritual (1 Samuel 15:22; Hosea 6:1-6; Amos 5:21-24). Isaiah's audience was fully disobedient in this regard (see Isaiah 1:10-17). Consequently, his auditors would presently witness “amazing things,” “shocking and amazing” (29:14). Although it is the same Hebrew root, Isaiah does

not mean the “wonders” of the exodus (Exodus 3:20) or the psalmist’s “wonderful deeds” (9:1). Heedless religiosity led to a different sort of awe-fullness, illustrated by Deuteronomy 28:59. The KJV captures the meaning there: “Then the LORD will make thy plagues wonderful.” Isaiah’s audience could anticipate awe-full, awful events.

Isaiah 29:15-16 is a “woe” oracle addressing those who had designs alien to the plans of Yahweh. That Yahweh had plans there is no doubt; these have already been announced (14:24-27; 19:17). Rather than relying on Yahweh, however, Jerusalem’s leaders acted on their own under the foolish assumption that not even Yahweh could see the plan they intended to carry out. Other references of the leadership’s “plans” appear in 5:18-19; 8:10 (“counsel”); 19:3. Most telling is 30:1, where the leadership’s plans for survival are unmasked and condemned.

Isaiah 29:17-24 The great restoration

The prophet imagines a great restoration of a land and peoples devastated by war and hardship. Lebanon, famous both for its forests (1 Kings 4:33; 7:2; Psalm 92:12) and for its fertility (Psalm 72:16), suffered at the hand of Sennacherib (Isaiah 37:21-22, 24-25). That breadbasket would be reforested, once again producing fruit and grain.

Good news comes to the marginalized persons in Israelite society. Those who are deaf shall hear and those who are blind will see (Isaiah 35:5). The neediest people will exult in the Holy One of Israel.

The news, however, is not good for everyone. Tyrants and scoffers—and especially those who have corrupted justice (29:20-21) will get their comeuppance. In 29:5, “tyrants” refers to oppressive invading foreigners, as it does in 25:3-5 (there translated as “ruthless”). In 28:14, “scoffers” are those rulers of Jerusalem who rejected prophetic assurance

of divine protection in favor of their own schemes. Isaiah 29:19-20, therefore, anticipates the termination of all foreign and domestic powers that oppose Yahweh.

The chapter ends with a promise characteristic of the wisdom tradition. In the great restoration, those who err and those who grumble will be corrected and brought into the company of all those who stand in awe of the God of Israel.

The Word Today

In many ways, Isaiah 29:17-21 encapsulates the essence of the promised reign of God:

- Environmental restoration and a creation that provides abundance.
- Hope to the hopeless coupled with universal physical health.
- Economic relief and joy for needy people and the poor. Note, “meek” (29:19) appears as “poor” in Isaiah 32:7, Amos 8:4, and Psalm 9:18.
- An end to corrupt leadership, both foreign and domestic.
- Justice for all.

Is this not what we seek whenever we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”?

At present, it is difficult to see how that reign of God might come. As I write in the early summer of 2020, the United States struggles between terror and Pollyannaish disregard of a lethal pandemic. Its people are confronted with a too-comfortable history of racism and with strident voices who shout, “Enough!”

Perhaps they cannot see signs of God’s reign because too many religious leaders’ lack of vision causes them to confuse God’s reign with nationalistic ideology (29:9-11).

Or perhaps their political leaders, like Isaiah's, mislead them. Are they sincere? Or do they work out their secret plans, operating as if a malleable God merely provides a prop to hold before the public as a sign that God backs their schemes? What, reader, has changed since 2020?

And yet, Isaiah stubbornly insists that God is at work, present lack of clarity notwithstanding. God's reign will come in ways we cannot yet anticipate.

So, we pray for it. We work with others for change in our homes, at work, and in our community. We demand justice from our leaders. And we live in hope that God's will indeed will be done "on earth as it is in heaven."

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Describe a time when you had a money crisis.

Exploring the Word

1. Why might religious leaders (seers and prophets) have been averse to "the vision of all this" (Isaiah 29:11)?
2. List modern examples of worship practices that amount to "a human commandment learned by rote" (29:13).
3. Although the NRSV translates the exclamation in 29:15 as "Ha!," the word is more often rendered "woe" or "alas." What merits a "woe!" in the following?

Isaiah 3:9, 11

Isaiah 5:8, 11, 18, 20-21

Isaiah 10:1

Isaiah 45:9-10

Jeremiah 22:13

Jeremiah 23:1

Habakkuk 2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19

Matthew 23:13-16

Matthew 23:23, 25, 27, 29

Luke 6:24-26

4. The "meek" in 29:19 refers to persons who are overwhelmed by want and therefore poor and wretched. How is it that these will obtain fresh joy and exult in Yahweh?

The Word Today

1. Write down what percent of the American population you guess live in poverty.
2. Regarding the practices of business corporations, the church should
 - ___ Avoid commenting on secular business.
 - ___ Speak out only when the law is broken.
 - ___ Actively advocate for governmental action.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we often do not discern how you are at work in the world. Open our eyes to see how you are creating the wholeness that is your reign, and guide us to be your laborers in that work. Amen.

Further Study

Isaiah 28:1-29; 2 Kings 18:9—19:28; 2 Peter 1:1-21

Daily Readings

M. 1 Corinthians 5:1-5

T. Exodus 23:1-9

W. Jeremiah 29:10-14

T. Mark 7:1-8

F. Isaiah 29:1-8

S. Isaiah 29:9-12

S. Isaiah 29:13-24

Memorization

Isaiah 29:24

Those who err in spirit will come to understanding, and those who grumble will accept instruction.