
Isaiah Series 1

Lesson 6

“Isaiah 29:9-24”

Objective - To understand the meaning of specified passage from Isaiah for both the original audience, and what it came to mean to those that came later; especially to the Jews of the first century A. D. The passages were specifically selected because of their usage in the Gospel of Mark, either as direct quotes, or as allusions. The goal is to understand this material better in its original context, to its original audience, and in the fall to be able to examine the Gospel of Mark with a better understanding of the role of Isaiah in the theology of that Gospel and of the church.

Materials - Commentaries, Journal articles, Targums, Books.

Procedures

1. We will seek to set the basic background for the writing of the book of Isaiah.
2. Choose the texts that are applicable to Mark's Gospel.
3. Translate those texts from the Masoretic Text, with reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targum of Isaiah.
4. I will search commentaries, journal articles, and books for understanding of these texts both to their original audience and to later Judaism, especially the Judaism of the 1st century A. D. and the early church.

⁹ Be astounded and be dumbfounded and be totally blinded, they become drunk, but not from wine, they stagger, but not from strong drink. ¹⁰ For Yahweh poured out a spirit of deep sleep upon you and he closed their eyes, the prophets, and your heads, you seers, he covered. ¹¹ The Whole vision became for you like the words of a scroll having been sealed. Which they give it to the one knowing the scroll (who can read) to say now read this aloud and he says I am not able because it has been sealed. ¹² And if the scroll be given to whoever cannot read a scroll to say now read this aloud and he says I cannot read a scroll. ¹³ The Lord said because the people draw near to me with their mouth, and their lips they honor me, but their hearts stay away from me, and their fear of me is a human commandment learned by exercise. ¹⁴ Therefore, behold I will again do miracles among this people, extraordinary miracles. And the wisdom of their wise will perish and the understanding of their intelligent will be concealed. ¹⁵ Alas, the one making deep efforts to conceal from Yahweh a plan, and in a dark place a deed of them, and they think who will see, and who will know. ¹⁶ Your perversity, will the clay value itself as the potter, will what is made

say to the maker of it he did not make me, or the thing formed say to his potter he has no intelligence? ¹⁷ In just a little while will not Lebanon return to a garden land and the garden land be considered as a thick forest. ¹⁸ In that day the deaf will hear the words of a scroll and from gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. ¹⁹ And the humble will add joy in Yahweh and a poor man will rejoice in the Holy one of Israel. ²⁰ For a tyrant will cease and a mocker will be finished and every one intent on wickedness will be exterminated. ²¹ A man who causes sin in word, and the one who causes an adjudication at the gate they will lay snares, and deprive by emptiness the innocent. ²² Therefore, thus says Yahweh to the house of Jacob, who redeemed Abraham, no longer will Jacob be ashamed and no longer will his face grow pale. ²³ For when he sees his children, the work of my hands in his midst, they will cause my name to be sanctified, and they will cause to be sanctified the holy one of Jacob, and they will be caused to tremble before the God of Israel. ²⁴ The ones deceived in spirit will know understanding and the slandering ones they will accept instruction.

This section is a part of a larger section that begins at verse one of this chapter and is made up of smaller poetic units, that as a whole, testify to Yahweh's judgment on Jerusalem and his concern for the rehabilitation of the city. The first eight verses bring a stinging indictment against the occupants of Jerusalem who seem to be oblivious to the threat that faces them.¹ I am sure it has often been this way throughout history as people fail to see the fullness of the threat against them because everyday life fills the horizon of their thoughts and concerns so fully that there is scarcely room for more. Those that focus on the horizon, like the prophet, are often seen as naysayers and to be avoided at all costs. I am sure that Isaiah was someone that people avoided like he had Ebola because of the news that he brought. The people of Jerusalem were mesmerized by the cult and the grandeur of their city to such a degree that they failed to see the rot that had long ago set in and eaten away the true heart of the life of the city. Though they paid lip service to Yahweh, and underwent enormous activity in his name, their hearts were far from him. Then come the words of Isaiah in verses 1-8.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, in The Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 230, 233.

They fall like a hammer blow on the people of Jerusalem who have been living in a stupor as if induced by a narcotic like heroin. The words of Isaiah, from Yahweh, sting them and effort is made to awaken them from this narcotic stupor induced by the rote and heartless observance of ritual and festivals. It is perhaps the case that the shock of the first 8 verses has brought at least a semblance of waking from their stupor and it appears that they have questions. To answer these questions the community is addressed in a series of six imperatives, all of which indicate, confusion, inability to reason, and loss of the powers of discernment on the part of the audience. The words of Yahweh urge the inhabitants of Jerusalem to stupefy themselves, to blind themselves, to be drunk, because Yahweh has poured out upon them a spirit of deep sleep. For years and years they had been doing these things to themselves and now Yahweh gives them the full measure of what they have repeatedly inflicted upon themselves.²

This passage of Scripture continues the theme of Israel's inability to comprehend what has been sounded from the beginning

² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 233.

of the book. This theme is now intensified by a return to the subject of the hardening of Israel. Israel is ordered to act stupidly, drunkenly, and the reason for this is because Yahweh has drugged them with a spirit of deep sleep. In this prophetic paradox is formulated the theological complexity of the prophetic understanding of hardening. The reverse and stupid behavior that has now been initiated derives from the prior decision of divine judgment.³ Yahweh blocks them off from all the things that would enable them to make good decisions and leaves them blind, defenseless and helpless. This is troubling to us, but I suspect that it is often so for children as they do not understand the decisions that their parents make for them. Yahweh has a plan, and that plan will come to fulfillment and a part of that plan is for Israel to go through this period when they do not have Yahweh to rely upon, to give them guidance, or even allow them to see.

Yahweh, himself, will be the cause of the downfall of Israel. In their arrogance and ignorance, Israel had come to believe because of the name of Yahweh being associated with the city of Jerusalem they

³ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, in the Old Testament Library series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), p. 218.

were invulnerable to the misfortunes and calamities of the wider world. The narrative sequence then proceeds to verses 11-12 where the vision that is sent from the prophet is compared to the words of a scroll for someone who is illiterate. They cannot comprehend it, it is sealed. The people cannot understand the vision.⁴ Some people state that any and everything in the Bible is easily comprehensible, if that is in any sense so then these words need to be heard, there are some parts that are meant to be sealed, incomprehensible, that is their purpose. They are a sign that the hand of Yahweh is at work. The ways of God are a mystery to us (Romans 11:33). In the moment that we think we have God all figured out, it is at that moment that we can be assured that what we have in view is not Yahweh, but an idol that we have put in his place. This was perpetually a sin that plagued Israel.

Verses 13 and 14 comprise two distinct poetic units and in each of these units it is made clear that Jerusalem has negated the governance of Yahweh. These verses are arranged as a standard speech of judgment. In verse 13 the people are condemned because

⁴ Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 376.

though they express their piety in very visible ways and with very pious words they are lacking in sincerity and in true devotion. They are people that are merely going through the motions without having any real intent of devotion in their hearts. Their faith has no serious consequences for their life. The phrase translated as “human commandment” (מִצְוֹת אֲנָשִׁים - ἐντάλματα ἀνθρώπων) indicates that they follow the rules and regulations of “prescribed piety,” and that this piety is lacking in the serious commitment of the heart. Jesus will quote this text as a critique of his opponents who abandon the command of God and instead hold to human tradition. The problem of people connecting their worship with the way they live their life is a continually recurring theme.⁵ This remains a huge problem to this day as people of faith are virtually indistinguishable in thought, action and in ethics from the wider community in which they live.

When we think of the Pharisees today there is so much that is unclear to us. Do we view them as a political party, a religious movement, or something else. Jacob Neusner deals with the issue of

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 235.

what can be known about the Pharisees in the period before the destruction of the temple (A.D. 70). We have almost nothing composed by the Pharisees from this period, and not a great deal that has been written about them. The two main sources of information regarding the Pharisees from this period (1st century A.D.) are the New Testament and the writings of Flavius Josephus. The writings of Flavius Josephus, are highly unreliable despite the fact that he claims to be a Pharisee. What we know about the Pharisees from this period of time is that they were primarily a table fellowship group predominantly interested in extending priestly purity standards to the laity. This was for them a vision of national renewal, but it must be remembered that at this time they did not hold the reins of political power, and they were not a dominant social force during the first third of the first century. We will deal with this issue more at another time, but there is much in our view of the Pharisees that needs to be examined with great care.⁶

We have a great many misconceptions about who the Pharisees actually were and the power that they exerted. Much of

⁶ Jacob Neusner, "Mr. Sander's Pharisees and Mine," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 2 (1992), pp. 143-169.

our vision is clouded by the intervening history, and even what we know regarding them today is clouded by centuries of redaction performed by the predominant surviving sect of the Jews (the Pharisees). It was during the period of the first third of the first century A.D. that the Pharisees were attempting to become a real influence once again in Israel. They had in previous times been more of a force to be reckoned with, but those days were more than fifty years before the birth of Christ and possibly even double that period of time. In one account, John Hyrcanus (ruled 134 - 104 B.C.) had largely stripped them of their power because they chose to criticize him, according to Josephus. There is some reason to doubt this account, because Josephus also records that they did not come to prominence as a political force until the period of Salome Alexander (76 - 67 B.C.). At any rate, they appear to have had little political clout during the time of Jesus and appear to have been striving for relevance: this may be part of the reason that they were repeatedly brought into conflict with Jesus.

It is highly likely that the Pharisees, due to their weak position used the idea that the things that they taught were traditions passed

down to them by the fathers. They were trying to deliberately give their teachings a pedigree, that in reality their teaching probably lacked. They used the idea that their teachings were handed down to them by the fathers in order to defend their tradition at a point of vulnerability. They hoped to raise their teaching up as a long held tradition that was passed onto them by the fathers in order to induce the nation to accept their teachings.⁷ As one might have come to expect from Jesus he attacks them at this weak point, which he knows to be untrue and ties it to a common tendency among the Jewish people, and probably all people, to follow their own traditions rather than the traditions that are passed down by God. There also is likely meant to be sting in the words of Jesus in the following of the traditions of men in general. So often it can become the case that the traditions of men become more important than the devotion behind their observance and surely in Jesus using these words in Mark 7 he is calling upon those who can hear to comprehend this and to be challenged not to set aside true devotion to God by following the tradition of men.

⁷ A. I. Baumgarten, "The Pharisaic Paradosis," *Harvard Theological Review* 80:1 (1987), pp. 63-77.

In Mark's gospel the words from Isaiah are quoted from the Old Greek translation (The Septuagint) of the Scriptures. Jesus indicts the people of his time with these words that had been delivered long ago to the people of Jerusalem and they will have known all too well what happened to the audience who originally received this indictment. These words should have, and still should, cut deep into our soul as we examine our own hearts to see if these words were not only true of the opponents of Jesus, but might possibly be true of us today. They are a challenge that Yahweh wants and expects far more than rote actions that are not deeply connected to our heart. A consequence of such actions, a heart without true attachment is that judgment will come from God as a consequence. In verse 14 of Isaiah 29, Yahweh speaks and indicates that he will do amazing and shocking things. The words here perhaps are intended to draw the minds of the audience to the amazing and shocking things that Yahweh has done in the past history of Israel such as the rescue from Egypt, and the great panoply of miracles that he had done throughout the history of dealing with his people. What he promises here relates to what has already been said previously in that he will

take away discernment from this people. They will be unable to make wise decisions. They will be left to their own, inadequate, powers of reason and understanding. They will be a cursed people. “The public life of Israel will be one of dismay, because the leadership will now act foolishly and destructively.”⁸


At verse 15, we return once again to indictment against the people of Jerusalem. They are a bit like a dog we once had. That dog believed that if it could not see you then it was invisible to the others in the room. It was hilariously funny, but what is being dealt with in these verses is far from funny. Israel makes plans and policies that are kept hidden from Yahweh. In practical terms the people are making themselves into an atheistic society. They do not rely upon Yahweh and even exclude him as an irrelevancy to their lives. Does any of this perhaps sound familiar? They believe that they answer to no one, and that no one sees the things that they conceive in the darkness of their hearts and in the secret meetings that they share with no one. No one sees, and no one knows, and therefore the people of Jerusalem see themselves as able to chart their own

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 235.

destiny. This perhaps relates to the fact that Israel sought alliances with Egypt in order to insure their protection rather than to rely upon Yahweh.⁹

The indictment continues in verse 16 with an indication that they have gotten things totally out of order. They are the clay made by the hand of the potter (Yahweh) and they are claiming that they have not been made by his hand. To me these words are chilling as I think of the world in which we live today. Human beings repeatedly return to the same themes. The theme of atheism here is powerful and prominent and in case you fail to see it atheism is a form of idolatry. In atheism we make god in our image and whatever understanding we might have had is obliterated by the blind ambition for us to control the reins of our own destiny. The imagery here is of clay, formed by the hands of the potter claiming not to have been made by his hands. Surely this is an indictment that should ring loud and clear in our ears today: we should see these words as relating to our utterly modern and yet they are from in the 8th century B.C. We find in the words of this Hebrew prophet this philosophy that sound

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 236.




so familiar to us today. These people claim to know and understand more than God, even more than that, in their minds they obliterate him from the horizon of reality.

Such a practice of autonomy of course upsets the long affirmed conviction of the people of Jerusalem and its people that they are subject to the governance of Yahweh. They, in their minds, are free to do and act as they will. In a form of poetic justice Yahweh removes from the people of Jerusalem exactly what they feel is their strongest point, their ability to discern, to make wise decisions. Jerusalem has long since given up trying to come to terms with Yahweh, to understand him and proceeded along their own path and determined their own destiny separate and apart from Yahweh. In their arrogance they have brought their own demise. Their quest for autonomous knowledge has brought them to disaster and it will be such a disaster as to be described as one of Yahweh's great "amazements."¹⁰

With verse 17, there comes an abrupt and positive transformation. The crushing prophecy given in the previous verses

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 236.



is now at an end and words of hope come instead. Though, even in these words there are things that should chill our blood and cause us to recognize the great power of the hand of Yahweh. The land that is now fruitless shall become fruitful, but a part of the reason for this fruitfulness is because the land will be uninhabited, or sparsely populated. Some see Lebanon here as a metaphor for Jerusalem. Lebanon is famed for its great trees and its forests. The prophecy here is that Yahweh will bring about a transformation by his own hand. He will turn that which is fruitless and barren into a forest. His words proclaim a day of apocalyptic transformation that will mean that those who were once deaf to the words of a scroll and blind will now see. The poorest and the neediest people in Israel will worship the holy one of Israel. Those who are unjust, and the tyrant, will be cut off by the mighty hand of Yahweh.

Those who have formerly preyed on the weak and the defenseless, the tyrant, the scoffer, the evildoer, and the one who denies the weak justice will be cut off. Public institutions will be restored to what they were intended to be. They are to bring justice to the poor, the weak, and the downtrodden. They are intended to

stop the strong and the powerful from inducing, and even promoting injustice. As a consequence of the promise in these preceding verses even more is introduced with the word “therefore.” We are reminded of who Yahweh is by what he has done in the past in redeeming Abraham and then we move onto the house of Jacob. The house of Jacob will become children that will be the work of Yahweh’s hands, perhaps this a play on the words previously given about the clay disavowing the potter. Here instead we have the imagery of children that are clearly the work of Yahweh’s hands, sanctifying his name and standing in awe (in fear) of Yahweh. The vision here is of a people becoming what they were always intended to be, but it is not as a result of their own hands, or their own might, it is even here because of the decree of Yahweh that these things come to pass. The focus is constantly on the sovereign decrees of Yahweh. Jerusalem will indeed be ended and then begun again. The adherents of practical atheism are restored by the hand of Yahweh to good sense and discernment. It must however, be remembered that all of this comes after a process of tremendous distress and pain.¹¹


¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 239.

There are many lessons in this prophecy. We are called to recognize the hand of Yahweh in our daily lives and to insure that as we make our plans and set our feet upon the path we never do it without a conscious dependence upon Yahweh. We are the clay, and he is the potter and we must never forget that. He is the source of true wisdom and understanding. He brings these things to those who are truly devoted to him in heart and soul and not to those that through tradition, or even heartless action claim allegiance, but do not have a heart for God. True understanding comes from Yahweh, and even though in our own time we see much that we know to be evil, unjust, and even stupid we should not give up hope for our hope never rested in the hands of our government, or in our hands as individuals; our destiny always has, and always will, rest in the hands of the great potter, Yahweh.

Synopsis

As we enter this section of Scripture we come into the second part of this prophesy that began in verse one. We begin with the sovereign decree of Yahweh telling the people of Jerusalem to be dumbfounded, blind and in a drunken stupor. This is to happen because Yahweh has sent a spirit of deep sleep upon them and has shut off any information from Yahweh that they might receive from their seers and prophets. He has also removed their ability to understand and discern wisely because they have forsaken Yahweh. They will make stupid decisions. They are still going through the motions of a life of devotion, but their heart is not in what they are doing. They have no real fear of God, they merely follow the rut of the traditions that have been passed onto them from other men who have gone on before. The hand of Yahweh now rests upon them cutting them off, but there will come a time when he will again do extraordinary miracles among them. At the time of this prophesy, a part of that is the miraculous removal of their knowledge and discernment.

Part of the reason for the decrees given here is because the people have been making plans for themselves without consideration, or consultation for Yahweh. They act as if they can even conceal their plans from him and their plans are made in deep darkness. In this attitude, Israel has entered into a practical atheism. In this context, the prophet charge is that the thing made (mankind) has acted with such perversity as to pretend that they know more than the maker (Yahweh). They act as if their intelligence and understanding surpasses that of God. As part of the decree of Yahweh he will restore the land to a garden-like state, a thick forest and miraculously restore Jerusalem. This will be done by Yahweh and he will bring justice and understanding to his people as well. Wickedness will be banished by God from the land and the people will prosper. They will turn to God and live in fear of him as they should. None of this will come about because of the greatness, or even the obedience of the people, it will come about because God has decreed that this is what will happen. The sovereignty of Yahweh will make all of these good things happen even after the punishment comes.



There are many things in this prophesy that should speak loudly and clearly to us today. We live in a time where we revel in our understanding and our ability to set our own destiny without acknowledgment of, our without fearing God. This prophesy should be a cautionary tale for us today as it has been for so many generations before us. We are called to recognize our place in the universe before Yahweh and we are to live lives of devotion in reverent fear of our maker. He is sovereign, and in our freedom we must not pretend to be more than we are. We can either choose to flow Yahweh willingly and devotedly, from the heart, or face the consequences of our arrogance.

Questions

1. What do you think it means for God to be sovereign?
2. Why do you think God punishes people?
3. What do you think it would mean for Israel, for God to withdraw his guidance from them?
4. What are some ways that people honor God with their mouth but not with their hearts?
5. What does it mean to honor God with your heart?
6. Are traditions bad? Why or why not?
7. Can we be commanded to fear God and it be affective? Why or why not?
8. What are some ways that people today act as if God does not exist?
9. How can we insure that we acknowledge God properly in all of our decisions?
10. What are some ways that acknowledging God might change decisions that we make?
11. What do you think a just world would look like?
12. How can we sanctify the name of God?
13. What do we need to do in order to be able to accept instruction from God?
14. In what ways do you think this prophesy should change the way you live life?
15. What does it mean to be humble?
16. What does it mean for God to be the potter and for us to be the clay?