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Why spend time writing a book on the solemn preaching of a prophet who addressed Israel and Judah over 2500 years ago – preaching that was largely rejected by his own people at the time? What’s the point? What can Isaiah have to say to us today? If his own people in his own generation didn’t listen to him, why should we?

Are these real questions? – asked by a believer, I mean.

If so, the answer is obvious – or ought to be: Isaiah’s recorded discourses – as those of all the prophets (indeed, as all Scripture) – are the very words of God. And, as such therefore, they are always alive and always relevant. In particular, although Isaiah is long dead, Abel-like (Heb. 11:4), he is still being used by God to speak today. And we need to listen to him! To crown it all, God told him to record his words so that people like us could read them (Isa. 30:8), a principle with God (Deut. 31:19; Ps. 102:18; Isa. 8:1; Jer. 36:2-3; Hab. 2:2; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11).

* * *

As we read in Isaiah 30, it was over 2500 years ago that Isaiah addressed the Jews,¹ but felt that he had laboured in vain. Indeed, in the immediate sense, he had. And Isaiah 30 is not the only time the prophet met this lack of response – and felt it!² Listen to him:

Who has believed what he has heard from us? (Isa. 53:1).

That is:

¹ Israel divided into Israel and Judah in the reign of Rehoboam. Scripture sometimes uses ‘Israel’ when referring to Judah. On occasion, the two words can be virtually interchangeable. Sometimes I speak of ‘the Hebrews’.

² Nor was he alone. See Jer. 7:13,25-26; 25:3-7.

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Who has believed our message?

Who has listened, who has paid any attention? The inference is plain: Nobody – or very few! As the prophet said,³ giving vent to his feelings:

I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity...

But:

...yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God (Isa. 49:4).

Moreover, the prophet had not laboured in vain: his words would not die. God told him (Isa. 30:8) to record his words so that following generations would be able to read his message,⁴ and *that* because it wasn't his message – that is, Isaiah's – but God's!

Jeremiah, likewise. As God told him:

Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that everyone may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin (Jer. 36:2-3).

Long before, Job had felt the need to have his words remembered:

Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever (Job 19:23-24).

And that brings us to why we, today, need to take heed to Isaiah's words.

³ Whoever is speaking – Messiah, Israel or Isaiah – Isaiah uttered and recorded the words.

⁴ I use 'message' in the sense of 'revelation'. Preachers today do not preach a message: they preach on the message.

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We know that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccles. 1:9-10); history has a habit of repeating itself. It is doing so in our day. I am convinced that many evangelicals in the UK and the USA – evangelicals throughout the Western world (I strongly suspect) – are, in essence, repeating the errors and sins of Israel and Judah in the days of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah *et al*, and this is why we, today, need to hear the same word from God as his old-covenant people did nearly three millennia ago.

Let me put it another way: allowing for the change of covenants – from the old to the new – the church’s contemporary sins (and their consequences) are, fundamentally, no different to the sins of Israel and Judah in those far-off days. Moreover, the consequences of, and answer to, those sins are, in essence, the same today as they were then.⁵

It is with that conviction, and to expose today’s sin, our sin, to highlight God’s response to it, and to point to the only solution to the plight in which we find ourselves, that I write now.

It is true, of course, that Isaiah and all the other pre-exile prophets were addressing Israel and Judah who, because of their sin, were being threatened by war and eventual captivity and exile in Assyria and Babylon. The same cannot be said of us, in a literal sense. Then again, we have no inspired prophets living and preaching among us today. The prophets of the new covenant were foundational to the church – see Romans 15:20; 1 Corinthians 3:20; Ephesians 2:20 – and, in my view, ceased when the apostolic scriptures were complete. Even so, the fundamental principles which the old-covenant prophets set out in their prophecies and preachings come over into the new covenant and, as nuanced by the New Testament, apply to us today.

⁵ See below for the role of 1 Cor. 10:6,11-12 in this.

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As John Calvin said,⁶ when commenting on Isaiah 30:8:

Here it ought to be carefully observed that prophecies were not written merely for the men of a single age, but that their children and all posterity ought to be instructed by them, that they may know that they ought not to imitate their fathers.

And this is true, not only for the people who lived in the time of the old covenant: we, today, all need to hear the word of God – all of it, including that which God said to Judah through Isaiah; we, today, need to hear and heed the prophets – specifically, Isaiah 30.

Of course, we don't need Calvin to tell us that! As God explained when instructing Isaiah:

And now, go, write it [that is, what I have told you and what you have preached to the people] before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever (Isa. 30:8).

Indeed, Calvin was simply commenting on those words.

And as Paul told us:

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4).

Moreover, the apostle, when addressing the Corinthians, took them back to Israel's history as recorded in Scripture – especially Israel's sinful failure and consequent judgment. God recorded these things, the apostle declared:

...as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did... These things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:6,11-12).

And we have the cardinal passage:

⁶ Throughout my book Calvin's comments come from his Commentary on Isaiah.

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All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

All Scripture – including Isaiah 30 – is profitable for us today!

Isaiah was not the only prophet to address the appalling situation in those far-off days. I have mentioned Jeremiah. And there were other faithful men of God declaring the same word to Israel and Judah in the name of the LORD. But, alas, there were also other prophets – and there were far more of them – who were, at the same time as the faithful prophets, declaring a very different message. Those false prophets, it seems, always outnumbered the true. It was so in the time of Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:22), and when Micaiah was confronting Ahab and Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:6). Furthermore, whereas the faithful prophets had to exercise a solemn, confrontational, probing, challenging, convicting ministry, the discourses of the false prophets were upbeat, bright, easy-going and full of confidence and cheer, boosting the feel-good factor of their hearers, confirming carnality. Consequently the false prophets, with their ever-popular song to sing, had little difficulty in making themselves liked and getting themselves heard. The true prophets, however, delivering the burden the LORD had laid upon them, were anything but popular! Yet this, in itself – though the people of God and the false prophets would not have agreed – was a mark of God's judgment (Isa. 29:10). This is relevant because, don't forget, even in the days of the new covenant, judgment still begins with God's people (1 Pet. 4:17-18). Preachers who warn us of our sins and impending judgment may not be liked, but this does not mean they are necessarily wrong. The majority, as we well know, are not always right – not by a long chalk! Scripturally and historically speaking, a good case can be made for saying that the truth often lives in Minority Street.

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Jeremiah's experience confirms the point. And his life recorded in Scripture shows that he, like Isaiah and all the rest of them, had feelings. While they had a ministry of reproof from God, the popular, false prophets had devised a pleasant message to deliver. And Jeremiah, for instance, feeling his isolation, spread his complaint before God:

Ah, LORD God, behold, the [popular but false] prophets say to them [that is, to Judah – and to Israel before them]: 'You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place'.

God did not mince his words in his reply, reassuring his servant:

The [false] prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you [that is, to the people] a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds. Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name although I did not send them, and who say: 'Sword and famine shall not come upon this land': by sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed. And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and sword, with none to bury them – them, their wives, their sons, and their daughters. For I will pour out their evil upon them (Jer. 14:13-16; see also Jer. 5:13,30-31; 23:1-2,25-32; Lam. 2:14, for instance).

Let me pause to make a vital point about the false prophets – or rather, let Peter make it for us today: we must not think that this was Israel's problem and nothing to do with us. Far from it! As Peter told us:

False prophets also arose among the people [of Israel], just as there will be false teachers among you (2 Pet. 2:1; see also Matt. 24:5,24; Acts 20:29-30; 2 Cor. 11:13, for instance).

As for Israel, throughout their history God raised up true and faithful prophets to encourage his people to keep the covenant and its law. Not only that, he used them to rebuke

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the people whenever they were tempted to break the covenant, call them to repentance, demand that they return and reform when they did break the covenant (Ps. 105:44-45; Isa. 42:21-25; Jer. 9:13-14; 19:3-5; 35:12; Lam. 1:5-22; Ezek. 2:3; 5:5-7,12; 11:12; 20:8-29; Hos. 5:10; 8:1,14; Mic. 6:16; Zech. 7:11-14; 8:14, for instance). Furthermore, these prophets were not only clear in declaring both God's judgment upon Israel for their disobedience and his blessing for their obedience, but they were also explicit and detailed in pronouncing God's judgment on the pagans surrounding Israel. Again, these true men of God were constantly calling Israel to be a separated people, separated unto God, separated from the surrounding pagans, separated at all times and in all circumstances. They allowed no compromise: there was to be no going to the pagans and paganism, no adopting pagan principles and practices, but Israel must keep to – and strictly keep to – the Sinai covenant and its law.⁷

As the psalmist recorded:

[God] gave [his people, Israel] the lands of the [Canaanite] nations, and they took possession of the fruit of the [Canaanite] peoples' toil, [in order] that they [that is, Israel] might keep his statutes and observe his laws (Ps.105:44-45).⁸

Do not forget how David addressed Solomon, and the emphasis he laid upon obedience to God in his word:

Now, my son, the LORD be with you, so that you may succeed in building the house of the LORD your God, as he has spoken concerning you. Only, may the LORD grant you discretion and understanding, that when he gives you charge over Israel you may keep the law of the LORD your God. Then you will prosper if you are careful to observe the statutes and the rules that the LORD commanded Moses for Israel. Be strong and courageous. Fear not; do not be dismayed (1 Chron. 22:11-13).

⁷ For more, see Graeme Goldsworthy: *The Goldsworthy Trilogy*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, 2000, pp91-97.

⁸ But see, for instance, Ps. 106 for Israel's signal failure.

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Not only Solomon, alas, but Israel as a whole did not keep to this path, did not listen to the true prophets, and so inevitably came under God's judgment (2 Kings 17:7-23). The same goes for Judah. While there were a few exceptions among the kings of Judah – Josiah, for instance, put things right after the dreadful reigns of his grandfather, Manasseh, and his father, Amon (2 Kings 22:1 – 23:30) – nevertheless the trend was downward.

But there was a remnant within Israel (many references in the Old Testament; Rom. 9:27-29; 11:1-6, in the New) who did not allow themselves to be swept along with the crowd. They might be only able to grieve over the defection all around them, and pray about it, but they did that much – and God noted it with approval (Ps. 119:53,136; Ezek. 6:11; 9:4; 21:6; Dan. 9:4-19). The concept of 'the remnant' comes over into the new covenant (Rev. 12:17 AV).⁹

That was the key word for Israel: separation. Separation was God's overriding requirement for his people.

Balaam, describing Israel, declared they were, as a nation:

...a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations! (Num. 23:9).

At least, that is what Israel should have been. How many times God spelled this out to Israel! He was always insisting that they should, without fail, maintain their distinct, separate position (Num. 33:50-56, for instance).

Take the book of Deuteronomy. God could not have made it any clearer. Over and over again, he stressed that he had brought the Hebrews out of Egypt in order to be a separate people, distinct from all others in every way; consequently,

⁹ Contrary to the view of D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones (see his interview with Aneirin Talfan Davies on YouTube), it is the *ekklēsia* itself that is the remnant in the new covenant, not true believers within the professing church. See my *Battle for the wrongness of 'a church within a church'*, including Lloyd-Jones' self-contradiction on the matter.

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they should never adulterate God's covenant, never introduce pagan principles into it, never incorporate, accommodate or adopt pagan ways and systems into Judaism. No deviation would be tolerated. The Hebrews had – without fail, at all times and under all circumstances – to maintain their separateness under the covenant and its law. It is no exaggeration to say that Israel's separation and distinctiveness – which had to be maintained at all costs – was the leading item on God's agenda in this second giving of the law just before they entered the promised land. See scores of references throughout the book of Deuteronomy.¹⁰

Take just three:

You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way. But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the LORD your God has blessed you. You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes (Deut. 12:2-8).

When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and

¹⁰ Deut. 4:20,34,37,45-46; 5:6,15; 6:14; 7:2-6,16,25-26; 8:19; 11:16-17; 12:2-5,8,13,29-32; 13:1-18; 16:3-6,12,21-22; 17:2-7,14-16; 18:9-14,20; 20:1,16-18; 26:8; 28:14,27,60,64,68; 29:16-29; 30:17-18; 31:16-22; 32:9,12,16-18,21,23-25,37-38; 33:27. Also, see my 'Thoughts on Deuteronomy' on my sermonaudio.com page. Better still, read the book of Deuteronomy.

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dwell in their land, take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying: ‘How did these nations serve their gods? – that I also may do the same’. You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it (Deut. 12:29-32).

The LORD has said to you: ‘You shall never return that way [that is, to Egypt] again’ (Deut. 17:16).

I am trying to give this as much prominence as I can because, as I have noted, I see an unmistakable parallel between what was going on in Israel over 2500 years ago and the life of present-day evangelical churches. Of course, we are in the days of the new covenant, not the old, but separation is still a hallmark of the people of God. As it was for Israel (Ex. 23:20-33; 33:16; 34:11-16; Lev. 18:30; 20:24,26; Josh. 23:1-16, for instance), so for the *ekklēsia*. Indeed, the fundamental concept of the *ekklēsia* – the fundamental concept, I repeat – is that believers are the ‘called-out ones’, the ‘separated-ones’, separated from the world (1 Cor. 5:12; 2 Cor. 6:14-18). Grievously, many evangelicals and their churches today are breaking this scriptural principle, departing from the covenant, playing fast and loose with it, driving a coach and horses though it – in our case, not the Mosaic covenant, but the new covenant and the law of Christ. I have fully argued this in previous works.¹¹ In short, many modern¹² evangelicals are turning to pagans and stuffing the *ekklēsia* with carnal attractions and

¹¹ See my *Relationship; Attracting; New-Covenant Articles Volume 12; Dilemma; Performance*.

¹² In this book, by ‘modern’ I refer mainly to the radical re-engineering of the *ekklēsia* to accommodate the kind of ‘seeker-friendly’ or ‘deeds-ministry’ evangelism which began in the 1980s, and is fast becoming the dominant evangelical approach to church life today. See my *Relationship*.

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consumerism,¹³ breaking down the barrier between the church and the world.

The parallel continues. We, too, just like Israel of old, have two kinds of preacher and two kinds of preaching.¹⁴ On the one hand, we have those – the minority – who, maintaining their hold on Scripture, deplore the way things are going in the evangelical world, and are prepared to raise their voice and say so, unpopular as that may be; on the other hand, there are far more preachers and writers who are encouraging the people to adopt the new way. And, if we make numbers attending church meetings the litmus test, the latter are successful.¹⁵ Nevertheless, as in the days of the prophets, it

¹³ Not merely in ‘stuff’ – though there is no shortage of that – but in thought and ambience. The point about consumerism is not that it is ‘stuff’ for stuff’s sake, but for ‘image’ and ‘self’, and the feel-good, must-have factor. It is this which is wreaking havoc in the churches today. As for the world, there is a seemingly limitless supply of websites offering advice to would-be advertisers. Here is a very brief sample of what to expect: “‘Feel Good’ Ad Campaigns Give Consumers Comfort In A Time Of Uncertainty”; ‘Remind your customers how much you care that they care. These stories elicit a variety of emotions, but ultimately unite everyone... through an uplifting message of how our usage of the company reflects the best in all of us’; ‘Turn your audience into advocates, and use marketing and ad content to tell them why they should continue to enjoy the product or service you are already providing for them’; ‘...don’t [let them] feel like [they’re] being nagged... Consider using creativity to get your message across’. The point is, it is not the product itself – soap, coffee, car, whatever – but how it will make you feel if you buy it. L’Oréal’s advert slogan says it all: ‘Because You’re Worth It’.

¹⁴ Since ‘preaching’ will come up time and again, let me make it clear that I do not confine this to ‘pulpit work’. See my *Sowed; Performance*.

¹⁵ See my *Relationship* for the way such teachers overwhelmingly stress the number of attenders at the church. ‘Grow’ is a much used word by Ray Evans in his *Ready, Steady, Grow: Equipping Today’s Gospel Churches*, Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, 2014. He opens his book: ‘I want to help you grapple with the exciting challenge of growing a church’ (Evans p9), and by this word he

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was not the cheery, bright and breezy message that came from God, but the penetrating warning and earnest appeals for repentance and reformation – before it was too late. That was the real message! And in the case of the true prophets, it was God who was speaking. Of course, the men of God *were* speaking and writing, but it was God himself who was declaring his word through them. So we get the repeated chorus: ‘Thus says – or thus declares – the LORD’, or its equivalent, running throughout the scriptural prophets. Similarly, I contend that the minority of preachers and writers today who try to confront the modern innovators and their innovations, while they are not prophets, even so are far nearer the truth than the modern men with their new ideas.

This is the underlying thesis of my book.

In what follows, in order to drive home this vital point, I will quote Scripture freely, allowing God himself to speak to us through his word. I know, reader, that you could look up the passages, but, in my experience, because it frustrates the flow of reading, this is not always done. And that would be far worse than a pity.

Yet again, by freely quoting Scripture, I want to make another point. I am trying to set out what the true prophets said to Israel and Judah in those far-off days, and make application to evangelicals today. I am convinced this message is the biblical message for us in our time, and needs to be heard and acted upon, and quickly! I am convinced that

often means in ‘church attendance’ by ‘the unchurched’, the ‘size’ of a church. See Evans p11, for instance. His second chapter is entitled: ‘Recognise that size matters: the good and the bad of small, medium, awkward and large churches’. ‘Numbers’ is a very common word and concept in his book. This is perfectly understandable. Numbers are essential to run, man and monitor these schemes. Incidentally, the process must be managed (and it is – highly professionally), and it inevitably becomes highly institutionalised. How often, I wonder, is this repeated: a visitor is given the official welcome by the designated ‘greeter’, but virtually ignored by the rest of the congregation?

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Isaiah 30 touches a raw nerve, one which needs to be touched for us.

I might, of course, be mistaken in this; that is for you, reader, to judge. Further, you must weigh what I say and test it against Scripture (Acts 17:11). But if you do find something here which has the stamp of God upon it, you know what to do about it. As Mary said about Jesus: ‘Do whatever he tells you’ (John 2:5). The words of the Lord Jesus Christ apply: ‘If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them’ (John 13:17; see also Matt. 7:24-27; Luke 11:28; Jas. 1:25). The opposite is also true: if you know these things and do not do them, the buck – and what a heavy buck it will prove to be – stops with you – and me, too, as a reader and hearer, and, above all, as a preacher (Jas. 3:1).

And that reminds me of Ezekiel 3:16-21; 33:1-20. As God made clear to the prophet – Ezekiel, in particular, but every prophet in those far-off days (and every preacher today – see 1 Cor. 4:2; Jas. 3:1) – the watchman has (note the tense) to sound the warning. If he does not, *he* carries the can; but if he does speak up and speak out, his hearers bear the responsibility.

Thomas Manton’s words are relevant:

When a fire is kindled in a city we do not say coldly: ‘Yonder is a great fire, I hope that it does no harm’. No! We cry: ‘Fire! Fire!’ Just so, in times of public defection from the gospel, we are not to read tame lectures on social action, or fight with ghosts and antiquated errors, but to oppose with all earnestness the growing evils of the world, whatever it may cost us.

C.H.Spurgeon commented:

If men valued truth as they do their goods and their houses, they would not regard error with such cool contentment [as they often do]. The cant of the present day cries: ‘Be nice, be nice!’¹⁶ As if it were not the truest love¹⁷ to grow

¹⁶ Original ‘Charity, charity!’

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indignant with that which ruins souls! It is not unloving¹⁸ to warn men against poisonous foods, or a deadly disease. And surely it cannot be more unloving¹⁹ to put them upon their guard against that which will poison or rob their souls! Lukewarmness of love to truth is the real evil to be deprecated in these times. We have new doctrines among us, full of great mischief, and against these there is need to raise an earnest outcry, lest they gain so great a headway that the church²⁰ should be set on fire! Lord, arouse your watchmen, and bid them arouse all your saints, for the times are full of danger!²¹

Well, in this work I do try to sound the warning, and to that extent, I hope I have cleared my conscience. All that remains – and what an ‘all’ it is! – is for us – if we are convinced that the present trends in evangelicalism are not of God, all that remains for us is to obey God in his word. Let us learn from Israel and Judah – learn from their sin, and learn from their failure to heed and act upon God’s word through the faithful prophets, and, as a consequence, learn from their subsequent exile. Let us learn the lesson before it is too late. Let us not repeat their appalling mistakes, and so reap the subsequent harvest. What a dreadful harvest that will be!

¹⁷ Original ‘charity’.

¹⁸ Original ‘uncharitable’.

¹⁹ Original ‘uncharitable’.

²⁰ Original ‘that both church and state’.

²¹ C.H.Spurgeon: *Flowers from a Puritan’s Garden*.