

COME WITH ME THROUGH ISAIAH



David Pawson

Come with me through
ISAIAH

David Pawson



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REACH THE WORLD

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Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	9
	INTRODUCTION <i>1:1</i>	11
1	WHITE AS SNOW <i>1:2-31</i>	19
2	SWORDS INTO PLOUGHSHARES <i>2-4</i>	27
3	HERE AM I: SEND ME <i>5-6</i>	41
4	A CHILD IS BORN <i>7:1-9:7</i>	55
5	A REMNANT WILL RETURN <i>9:8-10:34</i>	65
6	A BRANCH OF JESSE <i>11-12</i>	78
7	PLAN FOR THE WHOLE WORLD <i>13-23</i>	89
8	KEPT IN PERFECT PEACE <i>24-27</i>	102
9	PRECIOUS CORNERSTONE <i>28-29</i>	114
10	THIS IS THE WAY <i>30-31</i>	127
11	THE KING IN HIS BEAUTY <i>32-33</i>	137
12	ENTER ZION WITH SINGING <i>34-35</i>	150
13	ROOT BELOW AND FRUIT ABOVE <i>36-37</i>	163
14	POULTICE OF FIGS <i>38-39</i>	175
15	PREPARE THE WAY <i>40:1-11</i>	188
16	WINGS LIKE EAGLES <i>40:12-41:29</i>	204
17	SING A NEW SONG <i>42</i>	215
18	JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES <i>43:1-44:23</i>	227
19	NO OTHER GOD <i>44:24-46:13</i>	239
20	THE FIRST AND THE LAST <i>47-48</i>	251
21	CAN A MOTHER FORGET? <i>49-50</i>	263
22	BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET <i>51-52:12</i>	276
23	LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER <i>52:13-53:12</i>	289
24	WHILE HE MAY BE FOUND <i>54-55</i>	305
25	NO PEACE FOR THE WICKED <i>56-57</i>	319
26	NO-ONE TO INTERCEDE <i>58-59</i>	334
27	ARISE, SHINE! <i>60-62</i>	347
28	TREADING THE WINEPRESS <i>63-64</i>	360
29	NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH <i>65</i>	372
30	UNDYING WORM, UNQUENCHABLE FIRE <i>66</i>	385

This book is based on a series of talks. Originating as it does from the spoken word, its style will be found by many readers to be somewhat different from my usual written style. It is hoped that this will not detract from the substance of the biblical teaching found here.

The outlines at the head of each chapter are intended to help with the reading, and were not necessarily fully followed in the talks.

As always, I ask the reader to compare everything I say or write with what is written in the Bible and, if at any point a conflict is found, always to rely upon the clear teaching of scripture.

David Pawson

PREFACE

The studies on which this book is based were originally preached some years ago at Gold Hill Baptist Church, Chalfont St Peter, Buckinghamshire. The unexpected attendance of a number of Anglican students from the then London College of Divinity was due to Isaiah being the set book for examinations that year!

But God's Word is timeless. Apart from the odd reference to current affairs, the content of Isaiah remains as relevant today as ever, even though it was first spoken two and a half thousand years ago. It is also the most quoted book of the Old Testament in the New. A case could be made out that it was Jesus' favourite scroll in his scriptures. The chapter titles are taken from the portion expounded. Outlines of each study were put up on a large blackboard or, later, on the service sheet. Their purpose was to reveal the shape or structure of each passage. Their only drawback was that the congregation could calculate how much longer they would have to listen!

Alliteration, the rhyming of the headings, is said to be 'the province of fools, poets and Plymouth Brethren'. I am neither the first nor the third category, so must belong to the second. It can be an aid to the memory of the preacher and the attention of the congregation. Actually, much of Isaiah is poetic as well as prophetic. The printing layout of the New International

COME WITH ME THROUGH ISAIAH

Version clearly indicates the difference between prose and poetry. (For an analysis and description of Hebrew poetry, see my book *Unlocking the Bible*, chapter 11. There is also a useful overview of Isaiah in chapter 21.)

The Hebrew name of God is written in four consonants: JHVH, but pronounced 'YAHWEH'. Older English versions added vowels and pronounced the letters in national style to produce 'JEHOVAH', familiar from hymns such as 'Guide me, O thou great' Hence the rather risky title of chapter 18.

I recently stood in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, where the entire scroll of Isaiah recovered from the Dead Sea caves at Qumran is the centrepiece. I thanked God for those who preserved the text so accurately and that it was discovered just when the State of Israel was declared. A providential coincidence. Finally, I hope the reader will have as much joy going through this book with me as I did myself in my study as I prepared this appetising food for people hungry for the truth. So 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the same', to quote the Book of Common Prayer. Bon appetit!

INTRODUCTION

Read Isaiah 1:1

(i) Who? (ii) When?

In the eighth century BC many things were happening around the world that have changed the course of history. Rome was being founded, as were Athens and Sparta. In the Holy Land, which is the corridor between Europe, Africa and Asia, at the centre of the then known world, a baby boy was born, to whom his parents gave the name 'Isaiah'. Of all the events of that century, Isaiah's ministry was the most important for the history of mankind. The name his parents gave him means 'salvation of God' or, in other words, 'Jehovah will save us'. They must have been a godly couple, but they could scarcely have imagined that their boy would grow up to be one of the greatest prophets of all time and would say more about salvation than any other prophet of the Hebrew people —and his whole book is a book of salvation.

Isaiah was brought up in the royal court. His parents were related to the king. Indeed, his father was the son of a king and the brother of a king of Judah. Therefore the boy grew up in high society. He was an aristocrat; he was in a wealthy family; he had access all his life to the royal court, and God used this to get his word right to the throne and the very top of the nation. He married, later in life, a prophetess, a woman whom God used to give his word to the people. This godly couple were used of God to bring a nation to listen to what he had to say to it. Isaiah laboured for some sixty years giving the word of

COME WITH ME THROUGH ISAIAH

God as God gave it to him. For those sixty years kings came and went — four kings altogether were on the throne during this man's life, and to each of them this aristocratic prophet brought the word of the Lord. He died at the age of 120, not of old age or sickness, he was murdered, sawn in pieces by a wooden saw in the days of the wicked king Manasseh. When you read Hebrews 11 and the list of heroes of faith, and come to that phrase 'some were sawn asunder', it is a reference, among others, to the prophet Isaiah. Such is the background of his life; we know very little more than this.

The important thing is not the man but his message. This book which contains the messages he delivered over forty years is a compiled collection of his writing and speaking, so there is no clear outline or order running through it. Each speech, sermon or address to the people needs to be taken by itself and we shall ask when it was given, why it was given and what it has to say to us.

I suppose that if I asked a group of Christians for their favourite passage or text in the Old Testament, many of them would choose one from this prophet, whether they knew it came from there or not. I think of such texts as: "*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord*" (6:1). We have heard that read again and again, though when we study it I will show you that most preachers who read it are very naughty and stop reading it at the crucial verse, at the words: "*Here am I. Send me!*" (6:8), and they do not go on to read the last part of that chapter which is the most important. Or I think of 40:21, *Do you not know? Have you not heard?* Or of the theme of Chapter 40, the Creator of the ends of the earth. Or again, 53:5 (NIV),

*But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

Or 55:6–7 (NIV),

Seek the LORD while he may be found;

*call on him while he is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way
and the evil man his thoughts.
Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.*

One could go on reciting passages, texts from Isaiah, and you would say that you know them because you have heard them. But there are whole sections of this book that many have never read. There are precious promises of God here that some could not recall if they tried. For while some of the passages of Isaiah are the best known in the Old Testament, other parts are the least known and we have missed a great deal because we have just had our favourite passages. If you listen to Handel's *Messiah* you will hear more from the book of Isaiah in that than from any other part of the Old Testament. *He shall feed his flock. Behold a virgin shall conceive. Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. Gross darkness the people . . .*, and all the rest of it.

Isaiah could be described as the whole Bible in miniature. It is as if God took the whole Bible and squeezed it down to one book. Whilst Isaiah is difficult to analyse and break up into parts, it is not *too* difficult. There is one obvious division into two parts which are quite different from each other: chapters 1–39 and chapters 40–66. They differ in subject, content, atmosphere and tone, so some people have even thought they must have been written by different authors, but that is by no means established. I am quite sure myself from studying the evidence that the same man wrote both. There are the same peculiarities of style and phrase. Notice there are thirty-nine chapters in the first part and twenty-seven in the second. Does that strike a chord? In the Bible there are sixty-six books: thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament. The astonishing thing is that the atmosphere of the first section chapters is the atmosphere of the Old Testament and the atmosphere of the second is the atmosphere of the New.

Let me give one or two illustrations. The book of Isaiah begins

COME WITH ME THROUGH ISAIAH

with the sin of the people — so does the Old Testament. Right from the beginning, in Genesis 3, it is about *sin*. In the book of Isaiah this section ends with a promise of a coming King of righteousness who will redeem Israel — so does the whole Old Testament. The second half begins this way:

A voice of one calling:

“In the desert prepare the way for the LORD”

40:3a

In the New Testament Mark begins with John the Baptist and uses those exact words of him —

*“... a voice of one calling in the desert,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord . . .’”*

About half way through this section we have a chapter, Isaiah 53, about the cross; half way through the New Testament we have chapters on the cross. What does the book of Isaiah finish with? A vision of new heavens and a new earth. When we read the New Testament it finishes with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. I could continue drawing these parallels; I have just given a rough picture to show that Isaiah is the Bible in miniature.

Just as many people find the New Testament easier to read and understand than the Old, I warn you now that you will find the first section of Isaiah heavier going than the second. When we get to chapter 40 we will move into top gear, but in the first part we shall have to labour and struggle. There are some very long chapters, as there are some long books in the Old Testament, and it takes a certain amount of wading through and studying and understanding. But, just as we understand the New Testament best when we have got a knowledge of the Old, we will understand the later chapters when we have gone through the earlier ones.

In a sense, we have in chapters 1–39 the disease, and later we have the cure. If any doctor is going to help you he has got to tell you what is wrong with you first; he has to find out what

the symptoms really reveal that is going wrong in your body, and then he will give you a prescription or tell you that you need to go to hospital. In the same way the Bible always begins here, but people don't like this. They love to hear of the cure, they love to hear of the love of God and the mercy of God and the pardon of God, but that is only the cure for the disease that the justice and the wrath of God reveal. So we go through this first to that. When you get to chapters 40–66 you can really preach the gospel from that section, and many preachers do.

Of all the books in the Old Testament, this one says more (and most clearly) about Jesus Christ. His birth is there, his family background is described, his anointing with the Holy Spirit is given in detail. His character, his simplicity and his gentleness are here described. I need not underline how chapter 53 gives us a clearer picture of Christ's sufferings on the cross than anything else in the whole of the Old Testament. His resurrection is here as well as his death. His future reign in glory is described perfectly. So we are studying a Christian book! When Jesus was on earth he taught: search the scriptures for they are about me, they bear witness to me—and the only scriptures they had were the Old Testament. But I meet a lot of people today who think that the New Testament contains all the scriptures about Jesus and that the Old Testament does not contain any. But Jesus taught that the Old Testament is about *him*, and we are going to search Isaiah for what we can find about Jesus, and we will find for example the nativity in 7:14, with the promise, “. . . *The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*”

We start with a brief historical background before looking at chapter one. You can pretty well draw a graph of Israel's history. They were in slavery in Egypt at the very bottom of their history. They had no land, no name, no government, no king, nothing. Their history then began to climb. Moses brought them out, led them through the wilderness; Joshua brought them into Canaan and got them established and drove out the Canaanites. They had judges to rule over them and

fight their battles. Then Samuel the prophet led them, and through him they got their first king, until finally they reached a peak under King David. Never did they have such peace and prosperity as they enjoyed in that reign. To this very day the Jews look back to David as the king of that golden age. That is why they longed for another king like him. But as soon as David died they began to go down. Solomon with his grandiose building schemes, Solomon with his many wives, some of them from other nations, caused such trouble that as soon as Solomon died there was civil war, and from then on the nation became two nations — Israel in the north and Judah in the south. They even fought one another — the people of God divided and fighting one another, and down they went: lower and lower went the two nations — Israel in the north with ten of the tribes in it, Judah in the south with two of the tribes.

Why did things go wrong? The people inside Israel blamed everyone but themselves. They even blamed God. But they blamed the Philistines who kept raiding them from the west. They blamed the Edomites who kept raiding them from the south. They blamed the Moabites who raided them from the east. They blamed the Syrians who raided them from the north. They saw their land increasingly ravaged, and becoming desolate, before their very eyes, but they could not see that the real people to blame were themselves and no-one else. For God had said that provided they remained obedient to him then he would keep them safe in that land from all attack. Situated as it was on that corridor it was open to attack from every direction; it was the focal point of the world; every world conqueror passed through their land. The real difficulty was that they had become disobedient people, and God had allowed these attackers to come and make life difficult and take their land from them. The prophets, from Isaiah to Malachi, were people who were sent to say one thing: the dangers outside are due to disobedience inside. That sums up the message of all the prophets. They came to say: you are to blame for your troubles, no-one else; if you were right with God then things

would be right for you.

Israel, in the north, was worse than Judah, in the south. And to Israel God sent two prophets, Amos and Hosea, to tell them what was wrong. Amos came and told them of the judgement of God — of their sharp tricks in the shops, their false weights on their scales in the marketplace, their selling poor people for a pair of shoes. Amos came and told them what was wrong and they did not listen. Hosea came and in the most dramatic way: he married a prostitute. He said: I have done this to show you what you are like to God. God is your husband and he has got a prostitute for a wife and you are turning away from him, you are going after other lovers who will give you money and will make you prosperous, that is what is wrong. But Israel did not listen and in the eighth century BC the ten tribes were attacked by Assyria from the north-east and they were led off with fishhooks in their flesh; they were taken into slavery and the ten tribes disappeared from history. That left only two tribes in the south, Benjamin and Judah, with Jerusalem the capital in the centre. Unless they saw what was wrong and put it right they would go exactly the same way. To the two tribes in the south God sent two prophets, Isaiah and Micah. That is why it says, *The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw . . .* (1:1). Israel had gone; ten tribes had disappeared because they had got it wrong with God. And even though God had sent prophets to them they laughed at those prophets, they mocked them, they turned them out, they persecuted them, they would not listen. Because naturally a person who says, ‘It’s your fault’ is not a popular preacher. A person who comes and says to them, ‘Your troubles are due to you, you are not right with God’, is not going to be acceptable except to those who *want* to put their lives right. And the kind of preaching that the prophets gave is never popular preaching. Jesus said to his disciples, “*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me*” (Matthew 5:11, NIV). That is how they treated prophets, so I will not pretend

COME WITH ME THROUGH ISAIAH

that this study is going to be popular — at least not chapters 1–39. They are not comfortable, they are not nice, but when you get through to chapter 40 it is as if the thunder clouds clear away and the sun comes out again.

1

WHITE AS SNOW

Read Isaiah 1:2–31

A. THEIR REBELLION (2-9)

1. INIQUITY IN THE NATION (2-4)
2. RETRIBUTION IN THE PAST (5-9)
 - a. Ruin b. Residue

B. THEIR RELIGION (10-20)

1. INSINCERITY IN THE TEMPLE (10-15)
2. REPENTANCE IN THE PRESENT (16-20)
 - a. Judah b. Jehovah

C. THEIR RELATIONSHIPS (21–31)

1. INJUSTICE IN THE CITY (21-23)
2. REFINING IN THE FUTURE (24-31)
 - a. Purifies b. Punishes

Isaiah chapter 1 introduces the whole book but it may not have been the first thing Isaiah said in the course of his ministry. Looking into the chapter carefully, it was probably said much later in his ministry. But it is put at the beginning as a kind of summary of his message, a condensed version of chapters 1–39. We get the feel of a courtroom scene. Here is the judge sitting behind the bench; here is the dock; here is the jury; here are the witnesses; here is the charge; here is the prosecution; here is the defence; here is the sentence. On the judge's seat is God, in the dock Judah and Jerusalem, in the jury heaven and earth.

*Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth!
For the LORD has spoken*

1:2

COME WITH ME THROUGH ISAIAH

There are three basic charges: iniquity in the nation, insincerity in the temple and injustice in the city. To each of these three prosecution charges a defence is given, but God, the judge, answers that defence. One charge has already been dealt with, one is about to be dealt with and one will be dealt with in the future. God is on his throne, judging the nation.

The first charge is that of juvenile delinquency, for the judge on the throne is the Father of the prisoner in the dock. Here we have an extraordinary scene. Imagine a situation in which a magistrate said, 'Next case', and into the dock was brought his own son. What would he do? This is the drama of this chapter: God is the Father of Israel; they are his own sons and daughters, and yet God has to be the judge. He tells the jury that his children have rebelled against him. There are many parents who could echo the cry of the Father's heart here, having showered love upon their children, done everything for them, sacrificed for them, brought them up, cared for them—and when the children have got into their late teens they have rejected their parents. In this case it is even more tragic because here is a *perfect* Father who has done everything for his children, yet they are even worse than dumb brutes.

*“The ox knows his master,
the donkey his owner's manger,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.”*

1:3 (NIV)

This is a charge that could be brought against the whole world. Animals know their owners, but which men know their Creator and realise that their owner and master is the Lord? By the way, the ox and the donkey mentioned here are the origin of the Christmas cards that depict those animals, and it is the mention of the master's crib that did it! But that is quite incidental — just the first little link with Christmas in this book. The point is that those animals know better than God's children. The animals recognise and obey their owner,

their master, but his own sons have dealt treacherously with him; they do not know their Father and there is no discipline in the family.

Three words are used of them. They have *forsaken*, they have *despised* and they are *estranged*, and those are progressive steps. That they have forsaken God means they have deliberately decided to have nothing more to do with him. That they have despised him means that they not only leave him but they talk about him with contempt, with laughter. And that they are estranged means that they have got so far away that they cannot come back from their side now; the relationship has been broken utterly, they do not recognise when he comes near. That has happened and is happening this very day to family after family. Children have forsaken their parents then despised them, and are now so estranged from them that the relationship has gone and they might not even recognise their own parents if they passed them in the street. That is the charge.

One of the most awful things said here in v. 2 is this. I give you my own translation: *"My people do not think, do not understand, do not consider."* There are many young people who just do not think what they are doing to their parents, nor about how their parents feel. And God, the Judge, the Father, says, *"I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me"* (1:2). They have forsaken, they have despised and now they are estranged; they do not recognise him any more. This charge God has dealt with in the past. As a good Father he has chastised his children; he has punished them. And frankly he says that he has got to the point where he cannot punish them any more. In a most awful vision Isaiah sees a man covered from head to toe with bruises, open sores and bleeding wounds. A man who has been beaten from top to bottom, a man on whom there is no flesh left to beat. And in the picture Isaiah realises that God has punished Israel in every way he can and they still go on in this rebellion.

COME WITH ME THROUGH ISAIAH

*“Why should you be beaten any more?
Why do you persist in rebellion?”*

1:5a

There was no part of them that had not been touched. In fact the whole nation had felt these raids from enemies all around their borders. There was not a part of the nation that was not suffering; the whole body was sick. There were bruises that needed softening with oil, there were sores that needed pressing out, there were bleeding wounds that needed binding up from head to toe. They had been punished in every part of the body and still they did not come any nearer to God. Their land was desolate, they were like a besieged city; there were so few inhabitants left throughout little Judah that it was like a hut in a vineyard, like a little shelter in a cucumber field. That was all that was left of the cities. Even the city of Jerusalem was desolate (1:9). If there were any left, it was because God stopped punishing.

You would think that people who rebelled against God and despised him and became estranged from him would not worship, but the peculiar fact of our human race is this: we are incurably religious. We read now that, though they had got away from God, the temple was packed, they had no shortage of sacrifices, they still held their religious feasts; they still burned their incense and they still brought the blood of rams, goats and bulls. Religion was booming! We need to learn this lesson: booming religion does not mean that people are near to God; full churches do not mean that people are near to him. Because we are incurably religious we can rebel against God and be estranged from him and go to church and go through all our ritual and services. You can have a beautiful cathedral and the most moving songs and music, the most eloquent preaching and prayers, and the people in that cathedral may be a million miles from God. We need to know that religion does not mean godliness. Although these people had got away from God they kept up their religion. I find this a very deep challenge and I want to pass it on to your heart too. Because

you are in church, because you like the services, because you are regular every Sunday, it does not mean you are godly. You can go through all the outside of it without having the inside of it, and many people do. Why do people do this? For one thing it keeps their conscience quiet. You feel that if you have done your bit in the services that will keep God happy for another week! That is what they thought here. And God speaks through the prophet and says that he is fed up with it. That is the literal Hebrew. It may be translated ‘I have had enough’ or ‘I am filled’, but literally, in modern English, God is ‘fed up’. He is fed up with people who have the outside of religion and not the inside, people who don’t behave as his children during the week, and come on Sunday with their big collection, people who worship with the right ritual but don’t have righteousness in their hearts.

This is a strong message but it is the message of most of the prophets. God looks at the heart, and if their hearts are not right he will not listen to their prayers. (See v.15.) So the first question we must ask of every service is this: what has God got out of it? What is it to him? It does not really matter whether we have had a good time or not in church, the important question is has God had a good time? Has God been blessed? Has God been glorified? Have our prayers and our praise reached him and pleased his heart? They may have come away from the temple service saying, ‘Great service this morning — packed out. And did you see all those sacrifices? Wonderful service, and the music and the incense, wasn’t it great?’ And God might say: I didn’t have a good time. I was fed up with it because you are not my children. You don’t recognise your heavenly Father during the week.

What is God going to do about this? What the Judge now says has been handled badly in the translations. He says two things. He says that what he is really wanting from you when you come to worship him is not incense and sacrifices but, first of all, *repentance*. He wants people who realise that they are in the wrong, and who will wash themselves and clean themselves

up, cease to do evil and learn to do good and put right what is wrong. That is the sort of people God wants. That is what repentance is. When they came to John the Baptist and said will you baptise us? John said, “*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance*” (Luke 3:8), and they asked what he meant. He answered, “*The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same*” (Luke 3:11). He also told the tax collectors that if they were making more money than they ought to by sharp practice, then they were to go and put their books straight. He told soldiers not to extort money from people by accusing them falsely.

Supposing I did that. Supposing I repented of my past and put right what was wrong. Supposing I ceased to do evil and learned to do good. That has not been the whole answer to this charge of hollow religion. The whole answer is this: what do I do about those things I have *already* done wrong? Supposing I turn over a new leaf this morning and cease to do evil and learn to do good from now on — that does not deal with *past* evil, does it? It just stops the bill getting any bigger, but it does not cancel the debt of my sin. What deals with that?

The Judge says, “*Come now, let us reason together*” (1:18). But the best translation here is JB Phillips’: “Let’s settle the matter now.” The Hebrew word does not mean to *discuss* together. It is not as if God is saying, Let’s sit down and have a discussion group, you put your point of view, I’ll put my point of view and we’ll try to come to some agreement! God does not talk to us like that. God says: Come now, let us settle the matter, let’s deal with it. You repent and I’ll wash your sin away. Let’s try and get this case dismissed, let’s try and get it dealt with once and for all here in this court right now. You wash yourselves, make yourselves clean and that will mean that you have repented of your sin, and I’ll take those sins of which you repent and though they are double dyed I’ll get them out. Scarlet was the strongest colour dye in the ancient world. If you got some scarlet on your clothes you would never get it off, a bit like black currant juice today. This scarlet dye was

a very deep purple; incidentally, it was the colour of the robe that Jesus wore when they dressed him up with a purple robe (they called it purple then, but it was deep scarlet), and God says that though your soul is as deep-dyed in sin as that, if you repent he, the Judge, will wash you whiter than snow. There is nothing whiter than snow known to man, it sparkles with whiteness. All the soap powders in the world cannot get your clothes like snow — hang your clean clothes out against the snow and you will find out! So on this charge of insincerity in religion, if they would repent, cease to do evil, learn to do good, God would deal with their sins and wash them clean. If they accepted this they would eat of the fat of the land, no more trouble, but if they refused and rebelled they would die by the sword, as some of their fellow countrymen in Israel had already done.

The third charge is that because they had rebelled against God not only did their religion go wrong but their relations with their fellow men went wrong. When people get away from God, justice goes. Everybody is after a bribe, everybody is after money, everybody gets selfish — and is this not what is happening to our nation at the moment? The two groups that suffered most in those days at any rate, because there was no one to look after them, were widows and orphans. There were no pensions, there were no societies to care for them, and in a day when everybody became selfish they suffered.

Charge number three is that in this city of God which was a byword for justice and fairness, commerce was now the biggest thing. That is why the Judge calls the city a ‘harlot’. Instead of honour, profit has now become the main consideration. So we have a city that used to be the place where people went to find justice and fairness, to have their rights vindicated. This was the court of the nation — now injustice. The Judge says: *“I will turn my hand against you”* (v. 25a) In v. 31 we learn that this would result in fire —and within a very few years Jerusalem was burned down. God brought back into the city many years later, after it had been burned down, people who

COME WITH ME THROUGH ISAIAH

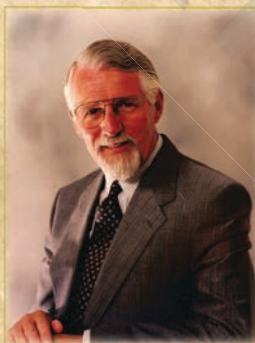
would be fair and honest and just, and that city was once again to be called the city of fairness, the city of righteousness, the city of justice, the city where people think of each other's needs and rights. But the city would have to go through a terrible time before it was cleaned up. History proved that God did clean up the city by fire.

That was the courtroom scene and it is a moving one. History has proved the word of God to be true. Everything that I have written in this chapter is historical fact. You can now read the history books and you can read this as history, not just as prophecy. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

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