

Lecture 12
Woes and Blessings
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Well, it's a new year and a new challenge of discipline for Bible study. We're well into the book of Isaiah, the first of the four Major Prophets and, as we told you when we started, the first 39 chapters of his book are like much of the Old Testament and deal with law and judgment for disobedience. The last 27 chapters have more of the tone of the New Testament of grace and wonderful hope for the future.

In chapters 13-23 we had several lessons on the oracles against the nations foretelling of immanent judgment to come as God would use both Assyria and Babylon as His instruments to carry out the judgment and then bring His wrath back on them for their pride and arrogance.

In chapters 24-27 that we closed with before our Christmas break, we got a glimpse of what is called "Isaiah's Apocalypse" – a view toward the future . . . a glimpse into God's future plan. It reminded us a lot of what we studied in John's writing of the book of Revelation. Remember he wrote about the four horsemen of the Apocalypse – they were War, Pestilence, Famine and Death.

There is a legend dated around 89 A.D. that says there was a fifth horseman of the Apocalypse. This rider actually led the other four and entered every village, every city, with a great cry and terrifying predictions of what was coming. As proof, he showed the rulers of each place the blood on his own horse's hooves. Then, as always, he went on, for his urgency was great.

Behind him citizens fell into profound arguments. Some called him a liar. They said that the blood was that of goats, not humans. Others considered him insane . . . a few claimed he had not passed that way at all. Theological, philosophical, and political debates abounded. In the end, no one said, "A prophet has been among us," so his warnings did not prevail. The four horsemen ultimately arrived, and as predicted, slew three times tens of thousands.

Meanwhile, the legendary fifth horseman came to the outermost reaches of the earth and turning around, he was satisfied he had completed his work. However, he realized nothing he had said made one bit of difference. Unrepentant, arrogant, indifferent, and disobedient, they had refused to act upon the truth they had been told. What is the identity of him who led – the fifth horseman of the Apocalypse?

REALITY!

Isaiah's Apocalypse told us about the earth going to be laid waste and the Lord reigning on Mount Zion. There would be an end to tyranny; an end of darkness and death; an end of pride as people would be saying "This is our God, we trusted in Him, and He saved us. Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation." Through all the upheaval of the Tribulation period, however, Isaiah reminds – "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in You."

Isaiah 26:19 said "But your dead will live; their bodies will rise." 27:6 "In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom..." That is a wonderful promise for the future!

For those of you who may be new to Bible study or perhaps just need a review of eschatology (which is the study of end time events), I personally believe the Bible teaches what is called a premillennial position. In a nutshell that means that at any moment the trumpet of God will sound and the dead in Christ will rise first and then we who are believers, who are alive, will join them in the twinkling of an eye to meet Christ in the air and go to heaven – that is called the rapture of the church as taught in 1

Thessalonians 4:13-18. (The word “rapture” is not in the Bible, but it means a catching away) There is no prophetic event that has yet to be fulfilled before that will take place. It could be today.

Then a seven-year period of tribulation will break forth on the earth fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel. The Antichrist will be revealed whom the world will believe can bring order out of chaos. With the church gone, the Lord will commission 144,000 Jews to evangelize the world. Many will come to know Jesus during this tribulation period, but most will be martyred for their faith by the Antichrist. True believers will refuse to take the mark of 666 and die.

At the end of the tribulation period, the Lord Jesus will return to Mount Zion with the church (His saints) and will defeat the Antichrist, judge the nations, and set up His earthly kingdom.

Jesus will rule from Jerusalem for a thousand-year reign of peace with the promises made to Israel throughout the Old Testament being fully fulfilled. At the end of that time, Satan, who has been bound for the thousand years, will be set free for a short period. There will be another battle ending with Satan being cast forever into hell. There will be a Great White Throne judgment for those who did not accept Christ and a renovation of the earth by fire. God will establish a new heaven and a new earth.

Others may hold a different view of future events, and certainly I don’t bind my viewpoint on you. It is not a test of fellowship. That’s why we’re in Bible study – to see what God’s Word has to say and decide for ourselves what Scripture reveals. Certainly, however, you deserve to know what viewpoint any teacher holds as it colors how we teach the Scriptures.

Isaiah got just a small glimpse of future events. Much of what Isaiah prophesied he would never see in his lifetime. He would not see the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians; nor would he see the conquest of the Babylonians by the Persians, the coming of Immanuel (the Savior), the millennial kingdom, nor the restoration of Israel. By the next section we’ll be studying at the end of the month, we’ll see several historical events that Isaiah would live to see. But his prophesies have given both the people of his day – and us – a hope and a promise for things to come.

As we move now into a new section of Isaiah that covers chapters 28-35 we will be studying a series of six “woes” that would have near-term fulfillment, yet each has a promise of blessing. “Woe” means “You’re in big trouble!” It’s as if the Lord is saying, “Whoa!” as in trying to stop an out-of-control horse, locomotive, or another fast-moving object. The “Whoa, slow down!” is for those of us who need to apply the problems of Isaiah’s time to our own lives today.

Let’s look at an overall list of the six woes first:

♦ (1) 28:1 woe to Ephriam (Samaria) the northern kingdom

The blessing – “In that day the Lord Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of His people.” (vs.5) And vs. 16 “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.” That’s the promise of Jesus the Messiah.

♦ (2) 29:1 woe to Ariel (Jerusalem) and formalized religion

The blessing – “Your enemies will become like fine dust” (vs. 5). “God will astound with wonder upon wonder” (vs. 14). The promise of deliverance and seeing the mighty hand of God. One day Jesus would astound with wonder upon wonder – He healed, He gave sight to the blind, He raised the dead . . . and formalized religion took Him to the cross.

♦ (3) 29:15 woe to those who think they can hide anything from God

The blessing – Restoration of the land “Lebanon will be a fertile field” (vs. 17); redemption “they will acknowledge the Holy One of Israel” (vs. 23); receptivity “those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding” (vs. 24). – The promise of spiritual renewal. Jesus became the light of understanding; He sent the Holy Spirit to lead us into truth and gave us His Word that pierces the thoughts and intents of the heart.

♦ (4) 30:1 woe to the obstinate children – the disobedient people

The blessing – “The Lord longs to be gracious to you” (vs. 18). “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, this is the way; walk in it.” (vs. 21) The promise of God’s leading. Jesus said He was the way, the truth and the life.

♦ (5) 31:1 woe to those who go to Egypt for help

The blessing – “The Lord Almighty will shield Jerusalem; He will shield it” (vs. 5). A coming righteous king (32:1), the Spirit poured upon us from on high (32:15), people will live in peaceful dwellings. (32:18) Jesus was rejected at His first coming, but sent the Holy Spirit to guide us. When He comes again we’ll have that period of peace during His millennial reign.

♦ (6) 33:1 woe to Assyria the destroyer

The blessing – “Your eyes will see the king in His beauty” (vs. 17), “No one living in Zion will say I’m ill, the sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven.”(vs. 24) The promise of Jesus – every eye will see him, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Jesus said, “This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Chapter 34 describes the battle of Armageddon – The Lord has a day of vengeance and Israel will again possess the land.

Chapter 35 describes the millennial kingdom brought to this earth – the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing and everlasting joy will crown their heads.

That’s a brief capsule of where we’ve been and where we’re going. Today’s lesson was on chapters 28 and 29 – the first three “woes” . . . 1) against Ephraim and its drunken, prideful people; 2) against Jerusalem and its ritualistic worship, and 3) against those who think they can hide their thoughts and lifestyle from the Lord.

If you have your Bibles, I’d like you to open to Isaiah 28 because it will be easier to follow what I want to share if you can look at the Scripture for yourself. I want to key in on a verse – Isaiah 28:20 “The bed is too short to stretch out on, the blanket too narrow to wrap around you.” In other words – **SHORT BED, NARROW COVERS.**

Do you know how that feels? Ever tried to lie down on something and your feet hang over? Or been asleep and turned over only to have your backside exposed because the skimpy covers went with you? It’s uncomfortable to say the least. What you thought would be a place of rest, becomes instead a reminder that what you’re relying on is inadequate to meet your needs.

The northern kingdom of Israel (remember Ephraim was the largest tribe and Samaria the capital) would soon be invaded by Assyria. Ephraim is termed the “pride of the drunkards” alluding to Samaria the capital city built on a hill with a command of the lush surrounding countryside where drunkenness was rampant. It was also the seat of idolatry. As we’ve studied in previous chapters, God’s judgment in

Isaiah 28:3 was that Ephraim be trampled underfoot. Their fate would be like Assyria swallowing a ripe fig.

I want to admit to you that when I first prepared this lecture, my initial reading of this passage took me from verses 1-13 applying it to the northern kingdom. It seemed to be saying that priest and prophet were no better than the people – they too were drunkards, staggering from beer and befuddled with wine. Vs. 9 even asks sarcastically, “Who is it he is trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message?” Unbelievable filth and corruption. The religion they practiced and preached was just “do and do, rule on rule, a little here, a little there.” Ritualistic religion including idol worship.

Vs. 11 “foreign lips and strange tongues” (Assyria) will teach you, vs. 13 “you will fall backwards, be injured and snared and captured.” Trust in idols and your prosperity? Mock God?

You’ll find you have **A Short Bed – Narrow Covers.**

Most of the commentaries, however, break this passage at verse 6 and apply vs. 1-4 to the northern kingdom, vs. 5-6 to the millennial kingdom, and begin at vs. 7 with an admonition to Jerusalem. They suggest that the leaders of Jerusalem had signed an alliance with Egypt and were celebrating to the point of drunkenness. They believe vs. 9 is a mocking of Isaiah himself – “Who is he trying to teach?” He’s just giving us “do and do, rule on rule, a little here a little there.” Very well then, if you won’t listen to Isaiah, God will speak through foreign lips and strange tongues. They will have rules you’ll follow because you’ll be injured, snared and captured. So either way you want to apply those verses, the lesson is the same . . . If you trust in idols or Egypt or trust in your prosperity or errant leadership – if you mock – you’ll find you have

A Short Bed – Narrow Covers

Vs. 14 is specifically addressed to the southern kingdom with its capital of Jerusalem. They had entered into this alliance with Egypt and scoffed that the coming scourge of attack by Assyria “cannot touch us.” They had learned nothing from the example of the northern kingdom! Isaiah writes in vs. 18-19 “When the overwhelming scourge sweeps by you will be beaten down by it. As often as it comes it will carry you away; morning after morning, by day and by night it will sweep through.” Stop trusting in others to save you! It’s just **A Short Bed – Narrow Covers.** Vs. 22 “stop your mocking, or your chains will become heavier.”

Isaiah said, the Lord Almighty has told me of the destruction decreed against the whole land. We know that it would come in the near future from Sennacherib, leading the Assyrian army as it invaded Judah. Then, again, later from Babylon in the form of the destruction of Jerusalem and deportation.

Jerusalem had Solomon’s Temple, it had deep religious heritage, it had a thriving priesthood, it had prosperity, it had been blessed in the past; it had the powerful nation of Egypt as an ally. Prideful thinking – no way will God allow this city to be destroyed.

But past glory and achievement is no guarantee for the present, especially when idols filled the streets, injustice ruled, sin was rampant, and God was ignored.

Do you think heritage makes you immune from God’s judgment? Do you think alliance with some church is enough for your salvation? Unless you’re covered by the blood of Jesus Christ and have made Him your Savior, it is just a **Short Bed – Narrow Covers.**

Chapter 28 had a promise for the northern kingdom in vs. 5. “In that day” (when the remnant of Israel repents and enters the millennial kingdom) the Lord Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people.”

And for the southern kingdom Isaiah prophesies – vs. 16 God intends to lie a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.

A cornerstone is the block of stone, placed at a point where two adjacent walls of a building come together. Zion would be the place where Israel and Judah would once again come together under the leadership of the Messiah. Our lesson pointed out Scriptures that fulfilled this prophecy in the Lord Jesus Christ as the precious cornerstone. He will join them together with the perfect cornerstone of righteousness and justice.

While 28:18 is telling the prideful people of Jerusalem that their alliance with Egypt would be annulled, certainly there is a double fulfillment of that verse as we realize the work of Jesus on the cross did annul the victory of the death. With the power of His resurrection, He conquered death. When He comes again the world shall behold His glory and beauty. He shall reign with righteousness and justice.

The second “woe” (29:1) continues against Jerusalem. It will be brought low (vs. 4) but (vs. 6) in an instant the Lord Almighty will come and rescue leaving the enemy like a hungry and thirsty man who dreams of being satisfied, only to awake and find himself still hungry and thirsty. We’re going to read about how God did that in just a few lessons.

Now the Lord has a very specific charge – “The people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is made up only of rules taught by men.”

One of the most frequent things we hear as a charge against Christianity is “the church is full of hypocrites.” We profess one thing on Sunday and live a lifestyle that brings it into question the rest of the week. One wag wrote, “A Christian is a man who feels repentance on Sunday for what he did Saturday and is going to do again on Monday.” Let that not be said of any of us.

One of the areas of teaching that is sadly lacking in our churches today is church history. If you’ve not attended a Christian college or seminary, what you know about our Christian heritage you often have to learn on your own. Many of us do not recognize names like Charles Wesley, John Wesley, John Knox, John Wycliffe, Calvin, Savonarola, Hus, D. L. Moody, Charles Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards.

Perhaps the name you’re most familiar with is Martin Luther. He was a Catholic monk who had lived by the rules of his church, ever fearful he was never good enough to deserve heaven. Fear can be a powerful tool for religion. One day the spiritual light dawned in Luther’s soul – the light of the meaning of grace that we know from Ephesians 2:8-10. It says, “For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” When Luther understood grace, and what that fully meant, he was a spearhead for the Reformation. He led a protest that has given us the basis for what we term ourselves today – Protestants.

But even as Protestant sects developed, each one had its own list of rules or standards of behavior. The key is that our eternal salvation is by God’s grace through our faith in the shed blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. What we do and how we behave after we accept that free gift of salvation is an outworking of the Holy Spirit. He develops the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, and as we grow in grace and knowledge of the Scriptures, we allow God to conform us to the image of His Son.

As quote “religious people” it’s easy to come to know the language, to talk “Christianese” if you will, but not really have love for God uppermost in our hearts . . . to know how to play the game but have no plan to practice what the Scriptures teach.

If there is one New Year’s resolution we need to make and keep, it’s to renew our worship fully in spirit and truth and walk in the clear light of Scripture; to renew our commitment to obedience; and to renew the joy of our salvation exalting the King of King and Lord of Lords. We can’t fool a God who knows the thoughts and intents of our hearts. Lip service won’t do. Relying on church attendance, or formalized ritual worship, or a myriad of service projects to make us “right with God” will be revealed one day as just – a **Short Bed – Narrow Covers**.

Chapter 29 closes out with a “woe” to those who go to great lengths to hide their plans from the Lord, who do their work in darkness and think, “Who sees us? Who will know?” (vs. 15) Did Jerusalem’s leaders really think they could fool the Creator, the potter? Could the pot say of the potter, “He knows nothing?” (vs. 16) Oh, the foolishness of men! **A Short Bed – Narrow Covers**

The prince of darkness has the world today believing that same lie (God doesn’t know or care) or the lie that there is no God, or that there is no hell, or the lie that you can sin now and repent later. There is no hiding sin from God. Whether it’s thoughts, words or deeds . . . God knows. When we recognize that fact, it is the beginning of true spiritual understanding. It means we acknowledge who God is – He is omniscient and omnipresence. We agree with God that we have sinned and fallen short; we accept His forgiveness and grace given us for salvation through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, we acknowledge His sovereignty.

One day, as chapter 29 concludes, God will turn all of men’s plans upside down. It may take some plowing, sowing, pruning, threshing and grinding like the parable in chapter 28, but God will bring a harvest of righteousness. The humble and needy will rejoice, the mockers will disappear, and the house of Jacob will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Israel and gain understanding and accept instruction.

If there is one thing we learn from history as it relates to Isaiah’s writing, it’s that the fifth horseman of the Apocalypse has a message that should be listened to. The reality of judgment was a fact for the people of Isaiah’s day, and it will be a fact for the world today. Is there any reason to doubt the reality that all prophecy will be completely fulfilled?

What can we apply to ourselves from this lesson? Ask yourself . . .

- ✓ The religious leaders you listen to – are they full of rules for you but they don’t apply them to themselves? Are they morally pure with integrity? Are they giving you the full counsel of God or just telling you what you want to hear? Is their God a God who wants you healthy and prosperous and without problems and never mind about sin and hell?
- ✓ The religious service you attend – is your worship participation only lip service and habit? Where is your heart? Is communion taken with repentance and awe of a holy God?
- ✓ The religious life you profess – is it just for show? Do you behave Monday through Saturday the same way you do on Sunday? Are you learning and growing? Are you cooperating with the Holy Spirit and not quenching the Spirit?

A Short Bed with Narrow Covers is reliance on something that will fail to meet your needs. For Ephriam it was pride in prosperity and idol worship. For Jerusalem it was trusting in Egypt and not in the Lord God.

The Lord's plan for us is that our reliance be in Jesus. Perhaps the place He's preparing for us is as comfortable and spacious as a king size bed with a huge downy comforter. Scriptures tell us that what we need is an intimate, personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. He is "my God and Savior." He is the reality that will keep us from facing God's judgment. His sacrifice in our place made peace with God possible. Romans 8:1 "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The blanket of grace covers us fully because the blood of Christ covers us fully. We can rest and stretch fully at peace in the warmth and security of Jesus.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for teaching us the truth about ourselves and about You. Help us not to make the same mistakes of pride and self-reliance as others have. Help us apply what we've learned from the past to our lives today. Our salvation rests on the finished work of your son, Jesus, and the comfort for our souls is the warmth of your enveloping grace. We praise you Almighty God and Father. In Jesus' name. Amen.