

Isaiah 9:8–17 — His Hand Is Stretched Out Still

Four Paragraphs of Judgment: External Assault, Internal Pride, False Leadership, and the Recurring Refrain

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:8–17

“The Lord sent a word into Jacob, and it hath lighted upon Israel. And all the people shall know, even Ephraim and the inhabitant of Samaria, that say in the pride and stoutness of heart, The bricks are fallen down, but we will build with hewn stones; the sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars.

Therefore the Lord shall set up the adversaries of Rezin against him, and join his enemies together; the Syrians before, and the Philistines behind; and they shall devour Israel with open mouth. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.

For the people turneth not unto him that smiteth them, neither do they seek the Lord of hosts. Therefore the Lord will cut off from Israel head and tail, branch and rush, in one day. The ancient and the honourable, he is the head; and the prophet that teacheth lies, he is the tail.

For the leaders of this people cause them to err; and they that are led of them are destroyed. Therefore the Lord shall have no joy in their young men, neither shall have mercy on their fatherless and widows: for every one is an hypocrite and an evil doer, and every mouth speaketh folly. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.”

A New Section: The Refrain and the Four Paragraphs

With verse 8, the large parenthesis of chapters 6 through 9:7 closes, and the thread of judgment that ran through chapter 5 picks up again. The refrain “For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still” — first heard in 5:25 — now marks off four distinct paragraphs of judgment in chapters 9 and 10: verses 8–12, verses 13–17, verses 18–21, and chapter 10:1–4. Each paragraph has a particular character; each ends with the same solemn close. They are not isolated messages but links in a chain, each following on from the one before.

What is notable is that these four paragraphs with their refrain did not appear in chapters 6 through 9:7. That parenthetical section was entirely occupied with the person of Emmanuel — from Isaiah’s vision of the throne to the names of the Son. Now that Emmanuel has been brought forward, the passage returns to the subject of judgment upon the nation — out of which, eventually in chapters 11 and 12, Israel is brought into blessing.

The First Paragraph (vv.8–12): External Enemies and Pride of Heart

The word of the Lord sent into Jacob is a great privilege — “is there any word from the Lord?” the distressed soul asks. But what happens when that word is received with pride and stoutness of heart? The people of Israel, stricken by God’s governmental hand, respond not with humility and turning to God but with boasting: the bricks are fallen down but we will build with hewn stones; the sycamores are cut down but we will change them into cedars.

Is God against hewn stones? Is he against cedar trees? Not at all — the temple itself was built with hewn stones and cedars from Lebanon. That is precisely the point: those are the finest materials, the very ingredients Solomon used for the house of God. What God is against is the spirit behind the boast: independence of him, self-sufficiency, the refusal to read his governmental hand in the circumstances. Samson woke from his sleep and said, “I will go out as at other

times before, and shake myself” — and he did not know that the Lord was departed from him. The bricks fall down and the natural heart sees a building project, not a message from God.

The result of Israel’s alliance with the king of Syria was not the friend they bargained for but a new set of enemies. Confederacy does not make real friends — it is a political expediency that brings together strange bedfellows around a common enemy rather than a common heart. Syria’s enemies became Israel’s enemies; and then the Syrians themselves came from the east while the Philistines came from the west. They got the adversaries of both. The refrain closes this paragraph: for all this, his anger is not turned away.

The Word Sent and Upon Whom It Lights

The word sent into Jacob and lighting upon Israel reflects the distinction between the ethnic nation as a whole and the elect within it. The word is sent unto all; it is efficacious upon Israel — the people of God in the midst of the ethnic people. This parallels Romans 3:22: “the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.” The word reaches all; it accomplishes its purpose in those upon whom it lightly falls in sovereign grace. The remnant in faith will say: yes, God is just; the blow must fall, it is right — the Assyrian must ultimately come. The faithless nation receives the word only; the word lights upon Israel.

The Second Paragraph (vv.13–17): Internal Demoralization and Hypocrisy

The second paragraph turns from external enemies to the internal condition that made Israel vulnerable to them. The people turn not to him who smites them, nor do they seek the Lord of hosts — that is the diagnostic sentence. God’s hand is upon them, and they do not respond with turning. The last verse of Lamentations

captures what is needed: “Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned.” But this people does not turn of itself — and the natural heart cannot, which is why the prayer is right to ask God to do the turning.

The Lord therefore cuts off head and tail, branch and rush. The ancient and honourable is the head; the prophet that teaches lies is the tail. At first it might seem that the ancient and honourable are a good thing — they have venerable standing. But venerable standing combined with wrong direction is twice dangerous, because those who are misled by them are swallowed up. The blind leading the blind: both fall into the ditch (Matthew 15:14). The Lord spoke those words about the Pharisees — men of ancient and honourable appearance, men of visible religious standing, whose guides of the people caused them to err.

The prophet that teaches lies finds his final expression in the Antichrist — the false prophet of Revelation 13, the lamb with two horns who speaks as a dragon, the henchman and mouthpiece of the first beast. As there have been many antichrists (1 John 2:18) but one final Antichrist of prophecy, so there have been many lying prophets throughout Israel’s history but one final teacher of lies in whom all those characteristics converge. The worthless shepherd of Zechariah, the man of sin of 2 Thessalonians, the wicked of Isaiah himself — these all look forward to him.

The conclusion of the paragraph is devastating: for everyone is a hypocrite and an evil doer, and every mouth speaketh folly. J.N. Darby’s marginal note renders hypocrite as “profane” or “impious.” From the outside, this society had much that looked good: ancient and honourable men, prophets, guides, young men, fatherless and widows cared for. But the word of God exposes the reality beneath: hypocrisy all the way through. The Lord therefore has no joy in their young men and withholds mercy even from the fatherless and widows — not because God does not care for these, but because the whole condition of things has become so corrupt that even the normal outflow of his mercy is hindered.

The Mouth That Speaketh Folly

God never made the mouth for folly. The mouth was made for the praise of God. There is a particular form of this folly connected with the mob: when men release themselves from personal conscience and gather in a crowd, the mouth of each individual is freed from its restraint, and every mouth speaks folly together. “Crucify him, crucify him.” “Great is Diana of the Ephesians” — two hours of it. When men give themselves over to that kind of energy, what comes from every mouth is folly. The leaders are blind, the led are blind, and the combined voice of them all speaks folly. This is both what happened in Isaiah’s day and what will characterize the final state of the nation under the Antichrist.

The origin of folly from the mouth is in the garden. Adam sinned, and the very first words from his mouth afterward were an excuse that blamed God: “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me.” God made Adam with intelligence and language and knowledge; the moment sin entered, folly began to come out of his mouth. All the folly of all the mouths of all subsequent generations traces back to that opening.

For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.