Explore the Bible Series for April 9: Pursue a vigorous righteousness

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Pursue a vigorous righteousness

• Isaiah 32:1-39:8

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Isaiah 32-39 includes a series of oracles about a future, righteous king of Judah (Isaiah 32-33), an oracle of judgment on Edom (Isaiah 34), a transition to the new themes that will begin in chapter 40 (Isaiah 35) and a historical section dealing with King Hezekiah (Isaiah 36-39). They repeat many of the themes of the earlier chapters, but in chapter 35 they reach new heights of poetic expression and introduce in earnest the theme of exile and return.

Isaiah 32:1-8; 33:17-22

The first large section (chapters 32-33) begins and ends with prophecy concerning a restoration to the throne of Judah a king who would rule in righteousness. The literary technique of beginning and ending a section

with the same theme is called an inclusio (Latin for “inclusion”), and it is a common literary device in both the Bible and other ancient writings, whose purpose is to delimit a distinct unit of written material.

These chapters describe both the good and the bad—the blessings of the righteous king’s reign and the villainies of the wicked opposition to the king. The king’s reign is described first as characterized by righteousness and justice. These two words appear in parallel half-verses in verse 1. The rules of interpreting Hebrew poetry (including prophetic oracles like this) suggest the two words have more or less the same meaning.

In English, we sometimes think of righteousness as an inward attitude of commitment to God and justice as the outward manifestation of that commitment. This understanding is not bad in English, but the two Hebrew words used here really mean just about the same thing.

The prophet probably would have been surprised to learn that people make a distinction between one’s inner attitude and one’s outer activities. The prophetic approach to the issue assumes the two are indistinguishable. If, like the fool, one practices ungodliness, lets the hungry starve, deprives the thirsty of drink and ignores the pleas of the needy (vv. 6-7), clearly these deeds are the result of inner unrighteousness. It is impossible, from the point of view of the prophet, to be inwardly righteous and outwardly unjust.

Isaiah 33:13-16

Three monkeys sit next to each other on a log. The first covers his eyes, the second covers his ears and the third covers his mouth. Their names? See-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil.

Many people approach the world's great problems with an attitude borrowed from these monkeys. As long as their lives are untouched, they don't want to know about the misfortunes of others or the sins of their contemporaries. "It's not the place of Christians to be involved in the world," they might say.

A cursory reading of these verses from Isaiah might at first seem to support such a position, but a closer reading shows this prophetic oracle teaches just the opposite. When God threatens to visit the people in judgment, the "sinners in Zion" ask, "Who can dwell with the consuming fire?"

The word translated "dwell" means "to live as a foreigner in the land," and it reminds us we are all sojourners in this world. Who can survive the consuming fire? Only the righteous, the prophet answers, those who refuse to profit on the misery of others or gain favor through bribery, two sins still quite prevalent in our day.

The righteous also are described as those who "stop their ears from hearing of bloodshed" and who "shut their eyes from looking on evil." Does this mean it is all right for God's followers to ignore the misery of others or evil in the world?

On the contrary, these verses mean just the opposite. The prophet says the truly righteous will refuse to participate in unjust schemes and will actively oppose them (implied in the phrase "speak what is right" in verse 15).

It is not enough for God's people to avoid committing evil ourselves. We also must take a stand for justice on behalf of those who cannot stand

effectively for themselves.

Isaiah 35:1-10

Many books of the Old Testament were put together over a long period of time, and in the process, sections were rearranged, modified, added and deleted. At some point in the composition of the book of Isaiah, it is likely chapter 35 came just before chapter 40, for it forms a nice thematic bridge between chapters 1-34 and chapters 40-66. Only later, according to this theory, were chapters 36-39 added as a sort of historical appendix (very close in content to portions of 2 Kings 18-20).

Isaiah 35 describes the rebirth of Israel after exile as a parched land that receives much-needed rain. Just as rain showers can bring forth wildflowers and other vegetation from the dry soil, so would the gentle rain of God's mercy bring the nation of Judah back to life after a period of suffering.

Not only will the land be healed in this idealized future, but even the common maladies that affect people will be remedied: the blind will see, the deaf will hear and the lame will leap like a deer. The people will see streams in the desert, and desolate wastelands will be converted to marshes full of water. The highway through the land will be so wide and straight even the person with the worst sense of direction can't get lost.

Moreover, the land will be cleared of dangerous animals like lions or wolves so the redeemed people of God will be able to return to their homeland in absolute safety, singing all the way.

This picture of return from exile is indeed idealized rather than strictly literal, but it uses poetic language well to emphasize the feeling of freedom a returning exile might feel upon being allowed to return to his ancestral

homeland.

In 1989, my family and I returned to the United States after spending more than a year in South Africa. Although we very much enjoyed our stay, because we were there during the waning days of apartheid, we also experienced a feeling of oppression (though our oppression was mostly vicarious, experienced through some of our South African friends) hard to describe. When we finally landed at the airport on U.S. soil, I remember the feeling of freedom and joy I felt when I saw the American flag flying.

I imagine the Jews who returned home from Babylonian exile felt a much more intense version of what I felt when they saw their homeland, many of them for the first time in their lives. If so, I don't think any of the descriptions in this chapter, even though they might be idealized, are exaggerated in any way.

Discussion questions

• How should Christians relate righteousness and justice in their own lives? Does the church do enough to advocate for justice in the modern world?

• How do we draw a distinction from "butting into other people's business" and taking a stand for what is right? Are there circumstances in which it really is better to keep quiet in the face of wrongdoing, or should we always speak up?

• What are the most intense feelings of joy or elation that you have felt in your life? Does the juxtaposition of sorrow/suffering and joy make the feeling of joy that much more intense?

• How would you evaluate the following words from the poem The Prophet, by Kahlil Gibran? "When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy. …

[Joy and sorrow] are inseparable.”