Explore the Bible Series for March 26: Godâ□□s warnings are universal

March 15, 2006
Posted: 3/15/06

Explore the Bible Series for March 26

God’s warnings are universal

• Isaiah 13:1-23:18

By James Adair

Baptist University of the Americas, San Antonio

One of the biggest obstacles to understanding the prophetic books is that the material often is not arranged in chronological order. This situation especially is true of the three major prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Much of the material in these three books is arranged thematically rather than in historical order. In particular, each of these books contains a distinct section of oracles against foreign nations; in Isaiah, this section appears in chapters 13 to 23.

The chief duty of most prophets was to prophesy to their own people, so what is the setting and the significance of the oracles against foreign nations?

Most scholars agree that although many prophetic oracles were directed toward foreign powers, the prophet almost always uttered those words within the confines of Israel or Judah, perhaps at a religious celebration of some sort. Amos 1:3-2:3 is perhaps the best example of a series of oracles against foreign nations delivered at a single time.

The significance of the oracles against foreign nations varies. All were oracles of judgment, but while some certainly are intended as warnings to foreign nations, others probably are better understood as warnings to Israel or Judah not to follow in the footsteps of the surrounding nations, lest they incur the same fate on the day of God's judgment. We will examine a selection of Isaiah's oracles against the nations in this week's lesson.

Isaiah 14:3-23

Probably the best known oracle against a foreign nation in the book of Isaiah is found in Isaiah 14, but its fame is dependant more on a traditional, but hermeneutically questionable, interpretation than on an understanding of the passage based on history and context.

Isaiah 14 is part of an oracle, or series of oracles, against Babylon, and 14:3-21 is a taunt against the king of Babylon (v. 4). The taunt makes use of figurative, even mythological language to describe both the sin of the Babylonian king and the inglorious downfall that awaits him.

The description of the king does not allow us to choose from among the 14 or so occupants of the throne of Babylon during Isaiah's long ministry, but the passage does make one thing very clear: the king, despite his delusions of grandeur, is a human being, and not one of the gods (14:4, 10-11, 16, 19-20).

At some point in the history of interpretation of this passage, readers noted the figurative language that described the king as the "Morning Star, son of the Dawn" (v. 12), who said in his heart, "I will ascend to heaven, I will raise my throne above the stars of God, … I will make myself like the Most High" (vv. 13-14). Based on a combination of reading the figurative language literally, seeing the passage as referring to an extrabiblical Jewish tradition concerning the origin of the fallen angels, and overlooking the clear references to the king as a human being in the immediate context, many people concluded that the passage referred to Satan's fall from heaven.

This interpretation gathered an important proof-text when Jerome translated the book of Isaiah into Latin in the fifth century, for he translated the term "Morning Star" with the Latin word lucifer, a word that literally means "light bearer," but is used in Latin texts to mean "the morning star." It also happens to be a word Christians adopted as a name for Satan, and on the authority of the Latin Vulgate, the King James translators rendered the word as "Lucifer" in their 1611 translation. All modern scholarly editions, however, translate the word as a common noun rather than a name, and that is certainly how the verse should be understood.

Taking into account the context of the entire taunt, the prophet is portraying the king of Babylon as a person who has a false sense of his own worth, comparing himself to the gods. The words the prophet directs toward this king who exalts himself in his pride are clear: "You are brought down to the grave (literally, Sheol), to the depths of the Pit" (v. 15).

The passage equally is applicable to people today who think themselves more important than others or who puff themselves up in order to lord it over their fellow human beings. Those who do so are in danger of a fall like that experienced by the king of Babylon, who imagined himself someone great, but found out to his dismay he was a mere mortal.

Isaiah 20:1-6

In response to Sargon of Assyria's conquest of the nearby Philistine city of Ashdod in 711 B.C., Isaiah removed his clothes and walked about Jerusalem naked for three years (periodically, not continually). This story is shocking to our contemporary sensibilities as Christians, because we tend to view public nudity as pornographic. However, in Isaiah's day, such public nudity would not have been viewed as sexual but rather as a sign of servitude, for only slaves could be forced to walk the city streets naked. Isaiah's nakedness was a prophetic object lesson for Egypt and Cush (the region of Nubia and Ethiopia), but also for Judah: unless they repented, they would soon experience the shame of being slaves to the Assyrians.

When we see people in our cities and towns poorly clothed or acting in bizarre ways, do we look down upon them as shameful, or do we feel compassion for them? Perhaps we should view the homeless, many of whom are mentally ill, as a sign from God to awaken us to our pride and self-sufficiency. It is true for all of us that "there but for the grace of God go I."

Isaiah 22:1-14

Every year during hurricane season, we hear of people who, despite evacuation orders, decide to ride out the storm at home. Some even get

together and hold “hurricane parties,” as though they were daring the hurricane to strike them.

Perhaps such parties will be less fashionable this hurricane season, after the devastation that Hurricane Katrina wrought last year, but I would guess there still will be some who try to make a party out of a potential disaster.

After the Assyrian army led by Sennacherib withdrew from Jerusalem during the reign of King Hezekiah, many citizens of the city rejoiced in their deliverance. Their joy was misplaced on two counts, however. First, the Assyrian threat remained real; they could return at any time. Second, although Jerusalem was spared, many of the surrounding towns and villages were devastated.

The proper response to the disaster, Isaiah said, was weeping and mourning, not riotous rejoicing (22:12-13).

Too often, we focus exclusively on ourselves and our immediate families or neighbors, and we forget that though we may have cause to rejoice in our own good fortune, we have neighbors who live a little further away who have reason to weep and mourn. Americans are good at responding to major disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami in Southeast Asia and the earthquake in Pakistan.

We are not as good at responding to problems that are chronic rather than acute, like the AIDS crisis in Africa, the suffering of war victims and refugees in the Middle East or even the poverty that affects about 50 million Americans.

While it is certainly appropriate to rejoice in God’s blessings, it is important to remember our neighbors who do not share in those blessings. When we do respond to the need we see around us, we need to take to heart Isaiah’s warning in 22:11: “You did not look to him who did it (delivered the people), or have regard for him who planned it long ago.”

God is in the business of loving people and meeting their needs. When we do the same, we should always remember that we are joining God's ongoing work, not performing great works for which we deserve praise.

Discussion questions

• We are good at recognizing the sins and problems that affect other countries, but are we equally adept at speaking prophetically to the problems in our own country?

• What signs do we see around us that inform us of either the blessings or the possible impending judgment of God?

• How can we balance a proper appreciation for God's gifts to us with a concern for the less fortunate, both in our communities and across the globe?