

Explore the Bible Series for March 5: Knowledge of Christ influences relationships

February 23, 2006

Posted: 2/23/06

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Knowledge of Christ influences relationships

• *Isaiah 1:1-4:6*

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What Christians believe has been the center of debate and controversy from the first century to the present day. Should Gentile converts be circumcised? Did the divine Christ descend on the human Jesus at baptism? Was Christ “of the same nature” as God the Father? Does Christ have two natures (divine and human) or one (divine-human)? Does the bishop of Rome have authority over other sees? Are the body and blood of Christ literally present in the eucharist? Which has greater authority, the Bible or the traditions of the church? Does God call women to positions of leadership within the church?



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Creeds and statements of faith are recited by many Christians on a regular basis, and some see them as a means of separating faithful (or true) from unfaithful (or false) Christians. Interestingly, Jesus never gave a list of doctrines the world could look at to determine who really were his followers. Instead, he said, “You will know them by their fruit.” In so doing, he endorsed the approach of prophets like Isaiah, who understood God to be more concerned with treatment of others than with doctrines and rituals.

The book of Isaiah has been called the theological high-water mark of the Old Testament, and the first few chapters address many of the major themes that will recur throughout the book—sin and punishment, repentance and forgiveness, peace and justice, concern for the poor, and the future reign of God, to name a few. We will explore selected passages and highlight applications from this prophetic book that apply to believers today.

Isaiah 1:1-20

The people of Isaiah’s day were diligent about bringing the correct sacrifices to the temple, and they worshipped God at all the appropriate times. However, their behavior toward their fellow human beings invalidated all their religious practices. “I hate your sacrifices!” God said. “I’m tired of your festivals” (vv. 11-14). “Even though you make many

prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood” (v. 15).

This statement is ironic, because someone performing a sacrifice naturally would have bloody hands, but the prophet is speaking figuratively about the human blood that stains the hands of the worshippers. Instead of empty ritual, this is what God demands: “Cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow” (vv. 16-17).

Does our Christianity consist of doing good to those in need, or are we content merely to congratulate ourselves for our orthodoxy?

Isaiah 2:1-4

Out of the ashes of World War II, the nations of the world came together with the goal of creating a lasting peace. War had ravaged many parts of the world repeatedly during the previous century, and the advent of the nuclear age was a harbinger of death on a previously unimagined scale. The League of Nations, born after World War I, failed to bring peace to the world, but delegates from around the world remained convinced an international peace organization was vital for the survival of the human race. The negotiations led to the creation of the United Nations. The preamble to the U.N. charter spells out its goals, which include:

- Save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.
- Reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights.
- Establish conditions under which justice ... can be maintained.
- Practice tolerance and live together in peace.

To stress the organization’s focus on ending war, the cornerstone of the

U.N. headquarters in New York City bears an inscription from the book of Isaiah: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (v. 4).

The message of this section from Isaiah is clear: God desires a world where warfare, hatred and internecine conflict are replaced by peace. Anything short of peace fails to meet God's standard for human behavior.

Isaiah 3:13-15

The recent electoral victory of Hamas in Palestinian elections shocked and dismayed much of the world, because Hamas is best known in the West for its violent campaign to destroy the nation of Israel. What is less well known is that Hamas builds hospitals, schools and relief centers for poor Palestinians. The concern for the poor is one of the fundamental tenets of Islam.

If outsiders were describing the characteristics of Christianity today, would they list care for the poor as one of our fundamental principles?

Isaiah, like all the other prophets, as well as Jesus himself, has much to say about his contemporaries' treatment of the poor, and it is not complimentary. "What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?" he asks in the Lord's name.

God calls particular attention to the rich, whose wealth has come at the expense of the poor. While we may not think of ourselves as rich, by the world's standards, the average American is very wealthy. When we realize about one-third of the world's population tries to survive on \$2 per day or less, our obligation to the poor is obvious and biblical.

Isaiah 4:2-6

After the judgment that is to come upon the people, the prophet imagines a new Holy City worthy of the name. He describes it as a city whose bloodstains have been cleansed, a city overshadowed by a fiery cloud that represents the presence and glory of God.

For Christians, this vision of God's reign does not refer to a particular geographical location or even a specific point in history. Rather, it refers to God's presence with those whose lives have been cleansed through grace and who experience the life-transforming power of God on a daily basis.

We may summarize these first four chapters of Isaiah succinctly:

1. We as humans have sinned against God.
2. God offers us forgiveness if we repent.
3. God expects the redeemed to live lives that reflect God's concerns for peace and justice.

Some people say Christianity isn't about what you do; it's about who you know. Remember, however, that the people of Isaiah's day also claimed to know God intimately. The prophet might argue who you know doesn't really matter if you don't do anything about it.

Discussion question

- What difference has your relationship with Christ made on the way you deal with others?



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