

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for April 5: The sacrifice Is sufficient

March 25, 2009

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Going through a crisis usually will merit similar problems and similar questions.

There is a huge anger among American people over the economic boondoggle and failure. Questions and opinions are coming from every direction. Few would suggest the problem has a deeper cause than the immorality of capitalism. That is unfortunate. Capitalism, as an economic system, is not the primary issue. The issue is the people who participate or process this successful concept that has helped build a great nation.

There is a common thread of blaming American greed and lax laws for the most precarious economic times since the great depression, resulting in the loss of trillions of dollars of wealth, high unemployment and a deepening mistrust of Wall Street. No longer does money trickle down but rather trickles up more and more into the pockets of the rich.

The answers tend to be more and better laws to regulate the actions of the deal makers. It is a worthy goal, but ignoring the laws and playing the loopholes is the American way. Most Americans are looking at a messianic president, a caustic congress, the might of the military, some prudent genius and new economic overhaul for some immediate relief and long term correction.

Madoff made off with his billions, AIG and other TARP recipient employees made off with their millions, and everyone is left with losses, questions, doubt and contempt. Suffering is taking place and the responsible people

are suffering the most. However, the economic failure has revealed to us the depth and disaster of American greed, greed that cannot be controlled by laws and regulations. The character of our human nature, again, has proven frail and inept. When man becomes the center of his universe, things fall apart quickly.

Would it not be a good thing to look beneath the problem to the cause. Morality is related directly to the issues of faith in a Holy God who demands righteousness of his people. Where is God in all of this? Why should we have to suffer? How do we overcome this economic bondage and captivity? How do we reconcile the economist's view with religious beliefs? How do we reconcile human freedom and irresponsibility?

Where is the hope and peace to which we have looked forward? Are we not a Christian nation? Are we our international brother's keeper? Where is justice? What is our place in the universe? Are we in the clutches of circumstances? Is Obama our savior? Or, do we look for another?

The very nature of the universe, the meaning of human history and human character are called into question. Israel, in bondage in Babylon, looked ahead to the promises of God.

The questions asked by Israel and are similar to those of the people of America. Where is the prophet when we need him? Can Israel be any more or less secular and godless than America? When will restoration take place? Can there be restoration without God's blessings? Is the future of America now in the hands of foreign investors and powers as some form of punishment for idol worship, greed, selfishness, adultery and pride? Do we look outward or inward for our salvation?

"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord had laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

Historical background

This writer assumes the view that the book of Isaiah is the prophetic product of Isaiah and a school of disciples working through several generations. First Isaiah, chapters 1-39, addressed the crisis of the Assyrian military's many assaults and invasions into Palestine in their quest to conquer Egypt during the second half of the 8th century. Second Isaiah, chapters 40-66, addressed the Persian period, two centuries later, in the second half of the 6th century.

Those who would affirm the singular authorship by Isaiah would assert that chapters 40-66 would be entirely predictive of the subsequent future era, time, places and events. Chapters 40-55 specifically engage the prediction of the return of Israel from Babylonian captivity because of the rising political prowess and power of the Persian emperor Cyrus.

This 6th century prophet, second Isaiah, brings a message to the people of Judah who had been taken into custody and captivity in 587 B.C. after the destruction of Jerusalem and devastation throughout the region by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The time frame of the captivity is from 587 B.C. to 539-38 B.C., when Cyrus releases Judah to return to her homeland.

Set free by Cyrus, Israel was unsettled again as they were called upon to leave their homes, businesses and friends in Babylon to make the journey back to Judah and Jerusalem with God to lead them and to protect them (52:11-12). Their punishment had been long enough and severe enough. Jehovah restated his sovereign and universal purpose for Israel that "all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God" (52:10). Israel had rebelled in disobedience, burdening Jehovah with their sin, but was not cast off. Their transgressions were blotted out and the covenant people of God became the servant people who suffered in fulfilling their service to God.

Four passages have been understood as the servant passages (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). These passages do not specifically identify the

servant but read as though the servant is an individual, unlike some of the other passages (41:8-9; 43:19; 43:10; 44:1) where the servant is identified as Israel.

Jews interpret these four passages in context and see the suffering servant as the nation of Israel suffering to carry out her mission to all nations and generations and as God's instrument in the redemption of the world. The New Testament account of Phillip speaking to the eunuch identified the suffering servant as Jesus (Acts 8:30-38).

Turning points of the biblical story are not always obvious and can be controversial. Isaiah provides the biblical interpreter the emergence of the servant Christ out of servant Israel, just as God has planned from the foundation of the world and implemented with Abraham. Second Isaiah saw God's remarkable revelation of the anticipated transition from a nation to the individual Messiah, Jesus.

By tweaking Israel from a covenant people to a servant people, the introduction of the suffering messiah, servant leader, makes the smooth transition, foretelling the coming of the virgin born Jesus, son of God, who would carry out the purpose of God as the suffering Savior. Isaiah moves the reader from the general to the specific as no other prophet had or would do.

Unrecognized sacrifice (53:2-3)

Isaiah 53 is extraordinarily penetrating and profound in its prophetic poetic portrait of the coming messiah. Many scholars suggest chapter 53 should begin at 52:13 for the content is most similar. Before the glory and exaltation comes there must be the suffering and sacrifice.

The chronicler laments that "his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness" (52:14). Turning to more subtle tones, there is nothing about his personal appearance that

would draw people to him. In fact, he was “despised and rejected” and “a man of sorrows.”

This servant is unrecognized, unheralded, unattractive, unknown, unorthodox, unpopular, unremarkable and unlikely, but he “will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted” (52:13).

In his death, Christ was exalted as the foretold Messiah. Christ did not live a glamorous royal life and though his divine power was evident at times, he chose the role of humble servant dwelling in humble circumstances and identifying with the common man. By doing so, Christ felt the sting of rejection and spite. Jesus, of his own volition, went to Jerusalem to die as the bruised, beaten, battered and crucified sin-offering, reconciling the world with God.

Costly sacrifice (53:4-6)

This suffering servant came to bear the burden of others, vicariously taking upon himself the evils of this world. He “took our infirmities,” “carried our sorrows,” was “pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities,” “oppressed and afflicted,” “like a lamb to the slaughter,” and “by oppression and judgment, he was taken away.” While being rejected, Christ became the sin-bearer for every person as the “Lord laid upon him the sins of us all” (53:6).

Willing sacrifice (53:7-9)

While love and forgiveness was his mantra, the crowds cried, “Crucify him.” Dying like a thief, “though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth” (53:9), Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, was “led like a lamb to the slaughter yet he did not open his mouth” and “for the transgressions of my people he was stricken” (53:7-8). Jesus, voluntarily and willingly, became the sinner’s substitute, dying for us, taking upon him our sins, thereby offering forgiveness from the Father. Jesus was the sacrificial

Lamb of God. The sinless died for the sinner, the perfect for the imperfect, the righteous for the unrighteous.

Effective sacrifice (53:10-12)

Paul, the apostle, expressed this truth: "Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus, the Messiah Christ, had bridged the distance between man and God, "making intercession for the transgressors" (53:12) so atonement could be possible. The tragedy of the suffering servant, Jesus, became the glory of the father for the salvation of the world.

Isaiah makes it clear that "it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand." The plan implemented with Abraham was absolutely and finally fulfilled, freeing all mankind from the bondage of sin.

Crises that come at various times in history usually can be attributed to the sinfulness of man which can only be resolved by repentance and forgiveness to restore the character of people and nations. Legislation never will be adequate to change human behavior. Ultimately, the crucified and resurrected Christ is the answer and the only answer to man's spiritual, economic, social and moral needs. The prophetic nature of his coming reveals the overall plan of God so that "all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God" (52:10).