

Isaiah 6-12

In my opinion, Isaiah is a marvelously crafted work. I think this is a generally accepted view among scholars, though those who haven't spent significant time in the book may simply be confused.

The immediate context of the Immanuel prophecy is chapters 6-12. Chapters 1-5 survey the major themes of judgment and salvation that will be developed throughout the book. On the other side, chapters 13-23 contain the oracles to the nation in which the Lord shows how he is sovereign over the whole earth even though his covenant people are subject to and exiled by foreign powers. It's not difficult to see that chapter 6, with Isaiah's vision of the Lord, is a transition. And it's easy to see that chapter 13 begins a new focus. The immediate context then is the section beginning in chapter 6 and ending in chapter 12.

In chapter 6, Isaiah is commissioned by the Lord to go to a people who will be ever hearing but not understanding, ever seeing but not perceiving. His message would in fact harden them. The prophet asks, "How long?," to which God responds, "Until the cities lie waste and without inhabitant." But, he says, "The holy seed is its stump." This is a pattern that we will see throughout chapter 12: devastating destruction but a glimmer of hope in the midst of it. The judgment is deserved because of the people's sin, but God is faithful to his promises.

Chapter 7, in my view, follows chapter 6 exactly. Ahaz is the first (recorded) recipient of God's word. Isaiah speaks to the king, but his heart is hardened and he refuses to trust God. Consequently the Lord says that "he will not stand." Ahaz is trusting Assyria to deliver him from the two kings, but instead God will deliver Ahaz into the hands of Assyria. The land will be destroyed and people will eat "curds and honey," the food of poverty. But a young woman will conceive and bear a child named Immanuel. He will eat the food of poverty, but unlike Ahaz, he will know how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

In Chapter 8, Isaiah gives a short-term sign of the destruction of Rezin and Pekah. The people rejoice in this deliverance, not in the Lord, and Isaiah tells them that the flood that destroyed the two kings will cover them as well. The land will be plunged into deep darkness.

But light comes to a people walking in darkness in chapter 9. "For to us a child is born, a son is given." Just as Isaiah is expanding his description of judgment in each chapter (same judgment, but more details), he does the same with the child. Immanuel is "Mighty God." The sign given to you all, that is, the House of David, is one who rules from the throne of David. Whereas Ahaz did not choose the good, Immanuel chooses the good, and his rule is established "with justice and with righteousness." He reigns forever.

But then Isaiah returns to prophecies of judgment, again developing with greater detail that not only is Ahaz faithless, but all of the people are godless. Assyria is God's chosen rod of anger, to bring the Lord's wrath upon his covenant-breaking nation. This is developed in the rest of chapter 9 and into chapter 10.

Beginning in 10:20, the light comes on again, and Isaiah gives greater insight into the coming king and his kingdom. The godless people will be restored (details of how they will be forgiven are held until the second half of Isaiah). The people return to "mighty God," a reference to the same figure of chapter 9. He is of the line of Jesse, a reference back to chapter 6. This ruler will have God's Spirit upon him. It's not just that he will do good things, but righteousness will be his belt. The blessedness of that day is described with various images of harmony in the animal kingdom. The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. Chapter 12 concludes the section with a wonderful hymn in which the people recognize that God is their only salvation, and they trust only him.

In my opinion, Isaiah is very carefully weaving together two opposite ideas – on the one hand, Judah must be judged. On the other, God will restore his people. How can both be true? How will this happen? This is what Isaiah is addressing. Furthermore, I see a direct connection between the judgment in chapter 6 with the judgment in chapter 7, as well as the note of hope in chapter 6 with that of chapter 7. I believe that Immanuel is intentionally equated with the son born in chapter 9. He shares the same characteristics, but we get more detail. Each judgment gives greater detail, as does each revelation of God's plan to replace the wicked kingdom of Ahaz with the righteous rule of his Messiah.

All of this is further developed in later chapters in Isaiah, but I conclude with a brief look at Matthew. I believe that Matthew not only understands Isaiah in a similar way to what I have just presented, but I believe that he deliberately incorporates it into his presentation of Jesus, the Messiah.

- 1) Matthew's genealogy breaks at two points: David and exile. We will see in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus is the new David who has come to bring his people out of exile.
- 2) Jesus is Immanuel, born to a virgin. Immanuel is not his proper name, but it is his title, it is what "they" call him, that is, you and I and all who recognize that Jesus is in fact "God with us."
- 3) Though the land of Israel is still under oppressive foreign rule and the people thus live in darkness, Jesus is the light who has come.
- 4) Naturally enough, the first words of Jesus' ministry are, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."