

Isaiah: Offering Hope for the Future

Bible Background • Isaiah 29

Printed Text • Isaiah 29:13-24 | Devotional Reading • Jeremiah 29:10-14

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will CONSIDER how God’s promise of mercy will triumph over God’s judgment, BELIEVE that an essential characteristic of God’s nature is forgiveness, and REJOICE in the manifestation of God’s love in our own lives.

In Focus

Pamela was in a bind and needed help with an unexpected car repair, so she called in a favor from her friend Aisha who was always willing to lend a helping hand. What Pamela didn’t know was that Aisha was fed up with being her emergency fund and had already determined the next time she made one of her 9-1-1 calls for financial help she was not going to help. The reason: Pamela was not a good steward over her finances and was known for making poor choices. Aisha loved her friend but for her well-being and the sake of their friendship, she had to set that boundary. Also, Pamela was slow to return what she borrowed, and when she did, there was always an excuse for not repaying the full amount.

She called Aisha and asked for a five hundred dollar loan and said: “I promise I will pay you back next week when I get paid. I will set it up to send electronically.” Aisha thought, “My Father in heaven is rich, but I am not your bank!” But instead, she responded, “Girl, I don’t have the full amount, but I will give you half. I am so sorry that’s all I can do right now.”

“I understand,” Pamela said, “I have been to your well too many times. I need to make changes.”

If someone was a repeat offender, would you continue to give your resources to help them?

Keep in Mind

“Then the wayward will gain understanding, and complainers will accept instruction” (Isaiah 29:24, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Poor (Isaiah 29:19) ebyon (Heb.) — In need or in want; destitute; a beggar, or needy

B. Redeemed (v. 22) padah (Heb.) — To ransom, deliver or to rescue

Say It Correctly

Sennacherib. seh-NACK-rib

Mosaic. mow-SAY-ik

Assyria. ah-SEER-ee-ah

KJV

Isaiah 29:13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:

14 Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.

15 Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?

16 Surely your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter's clay: for shall the work say of him that made it, He made me not? or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, He had no understanding?

17 Is it not yet a very little while, and Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be esteemed as a forest?

18 And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness.

19 The meek also shall increase their joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

20 For the terrible one is brought to nought, and the scorner is consumed, and all that watch for iniquity are cut off:

21 That make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of nought.

22 Therefore thus saith the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob, Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now wax pale.

23 But when he seeth his children, the work of mine hands, in the midst of him, they shall sanctify my name, and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and shall fear the God of Israel.

24 They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine.

NLT

Isaiah 29:13 And so the Lord says, "These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.

14 Because of this, I will once again astound these hypocrites with amazing wonders. The wisdom of the wise will pass away, and the intelligence of the intelligent will disappear."

15 What sorrow awaits those who try to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their evil deeds in the dark! "The LORD can't see us," they say. "He doesn't know what's going on!"

16 How foolish can you be? He is the Potter, and he is certainly greater than you, the clay! Should the created thing say of the one who made it, "He didn't make me"? Does a jar ever say, "The potter who made me is stupid"?

17 Soon—and it will not be very long—the forests of Lebanon will become a fertile field, and the fertile field will yield bountiful crops.

18 In that day the deaf will hear words read from a book, and the blind will see through the gloom and darkness.

19 The humble will be filled with fresh joy from the LORD. The poor will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

20 The scoffer will be gone, the arrogant will disappear, and those who plot evil will be killed.

21 Those who convict the innocent by their false testimony will disappear. A similar fate awaits those who use trickery to pervert justice and who tell lies to destroy the innocent.

22 That is why the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, says to the people of Israel, "My people will no longer be ashamed or turn pale with fear.

23 For when they see their many children and all the blessings I have given them, they will recognize the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob. They will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

24 Then the wayward will gain understanding, and complainers will accept instruction."

The People, Places, and Times

Isaiah. One of the greatest prophets of his time, Isaiah had a vision of God and was called by God to do God's work bringing his nation to repentance to save it from a whirlpool of destruction. His very name means "Yahweh is (the source) of salvation." Isaiah came to the people with messages of judgment tempered with hope. He ministered for 60 years or more and prophesied during the reign of five kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and Manasseh. He pleaded with the people to turn from their wicked ways back to a loving God who would forgive and restore them. Isaiah saw the deliverance of Jerusalem from her enemies, the Assyrians. It was through his prayers and by the intervention of God that Jerusalem was spared from being destroyed. But even this great show of God's mercy and protection did not sway the people back to the worship of Yahweh alone.

Lebanon. In biblical times, Lebanon was synonymous with the cedar trees that grew there. Cedars were most often referred to as "the glory of Lebanon" (Isaiah 35:2; 60:13). The trees grew very tall (Isaiah 2:13) and had plenty of branches to make shade (Ezekiel 31:3). Much of the Temple, Solomon's palace, and public buildings in Jerusalem were made from Lebanon's cedar.

Background

For sixty years, Isaiah served as the prophet in Judah; he stood as the voice of God amid the people's disobedience and his message was to call them back to God. At the start of Isaiah's divine appointment, Judah experienced military and financial strength. As a result, the elite disregarded God's commands—especially in their treatment of the poor, widows, and orphans—as well as their arrogance. Then neighboring Assyria grew in political and military power. Rather than turn to the God of their salvation for refuge, Judah's government leaders looked to the surrounding nations for safety, which was an insult to God.

Isaiah 29 opens with the prophet making a sorrowful declaration upon Jerusalem using the alias Ariel, which means "lion of God." Isaiah predicted how God would deal with Jerusalem's disobedience. The holy city would be under siege and in mourning because of the coming distress at the hand of their enemies as punishment for their idolatry and selfcenteredness. But the message also shifts focus that after enduring punishment, He would also handle those enemies who would rise against His chosen people (vv. 5–7).

Have you experienced times where you thought God's help wasn't needed?

At-A-Glance

1. Far From Center (Isaiah 29:13–16)
2. Return to Center (vv. 17–21)
3. Return to Covenant (vv.22–24)

In Depth

1. Far From Center (Isaiah 29:13–16) God caused the false prophets, rulers, and seers to fall into deep delusions for choosing to follow after darkness. As a result, Judah was unable to understand the word of the Lord and brought into a drunken stupor (vv. 9–12). Isaiah called them out for their hypocrisy, lip service, and religious performances. The Lord would go on to pronounce spiritual judgment against them through Isaiah, saying that their worship of Him was misguided. While Judah followed what had become man-made rituals, they failed to reach His heart. Further in their conceit, Judah's leaders thought they could outsmart and hide from God and live without His wisdom. He warned that they would soon be met with sorrow for being so high-minded. The Lord God reminded them that nothing is hidden from Him. He is the potter, the one who fashioned and created everything.

What are some instances when worship becomes routine?

2. A Return to Center (vv. 17–21) The Lord shifts the message to bring forth hope for what is to come. God delivers the message through Isaiah that He would turn from judgment to restoration of Judah. God did a review of His covenant and promised that if the people repented, they would be restored. They would see fruitfulness in the land; the deaf would hear and understand what the Lord says, the blind will see and have the ability to read, those that would humble themselves for Him would be filled with joy and the poor would rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. In contrast, those who were oppressive, corrupt, evil, and deceivers would be killed and banished from the land. The people would be brought back to their place of dependence and trust in the Lord God because their idols would be destroyed.

How does God's promise of redemption give us hope today?

3. Return to Covenant (vv. 22–24) God reinforces His message to the Children of Israel by reminding them of their forefather Abraham. Although He chastises the people for their waywardness, He assures them that they would no longer live in shame and spiritual poverty. God would continue to fulfill His promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations and that his seed would be great in the land (Genesis 12:1–3; 15:1–5). If God's chosen people would return to a position of worship and awe of God, then the spiritual plug would be removed to comprehend and follow God's commands. God's people need only remember to look for how God has remained faithful to the promises He made to Abraham, all those hundreds of years ago. With those blessings of wealth and progeny fulfilled, even those who scoffed at God and ignored His instruction would change their ways.

What does it mean for us that God would remind Judah of His promise to Abraham and reaffirm the nation's position as Jacob's descendants?

Search the Scriptures

1. What was God's accusation against Judah (Isaiah 29:13)?
2. How did Judah insult the Lord (vv. 15–16)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. How can we examine the sincerity of our private worship and watch out for hypocrisy in our public worship?
2. What are the themes of hope in verses 17–24 that connect with your faith to trust God in every situation?

Liberating Lesson

God's love is boundless and He freely lavishes His grace on those who would receive it. God's kindness is intended to lead to repentance. However, He will allow circumstances and experiences to chastise and bring us to a place of surrender. After chastisement, God lovingly restores. What would happen if our current system of justice followed God's model? The intent of the criminal justice system should not only be to punish for offenses, but to be effective it should also be restorative. Offenders should have access to programs within the system that rehabilitates—bringing mental, emotional, and spiritual healing that gets to the root causes of deviant behavior for true transformation. Essential to restoration and cultivating honorable citizens is access to education that teaches life skills and provides opportunities to be productive members of society rather than breeding criminalization. Look for ways your small group or church can support a charity working toward criminal justice reform.

Application for Activation

When you consider God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ, how can you focus your attention on making disciples? How can you mentor and support individual or group their development? Is there a person or population you feel called to serve? What hope from your testimony is an indicator of what you can offer to bring healing to another soul?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Isaiah 29:13–24 Isaiah 29 falls within a group of chapters in Isaiah (28–33) that make up a series of prophetic oracles against Jerusalem. Each chapter begins with the word, “Woe!” a translation of the Hebrew, hoy (HOH-ee). Oracles are generally declarations of warnings for disobedience followed by blessings for obedience. For example in verses 1–4, the Lord pronounces judgment against Jerusalem and in verses 5–8 promises them deliverance and protection from the hands of their enemies (fulfilled in chapter 37). This apparent change is not consequent from pessimism to optimism; it is not derived from or dependent on Israel’s positive response or change of heart, but it is derived from God’s counsel and attributes—His sovereignty and His covenantal relationship with Israel. This is reflective of the Christian relationship with the Father through Christ Jesus (see Romans 5:8). This assurance of deliverance should have motivated the people to trust and worship properly, but they continued in their defiance and senseless behavior. Therefore the Lord dragged them deep into spiritual sleep and blindness by hardening them, leaving them to act without understanding (vv. 9–12).

13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: 14 Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.

Verse 13 commences with an introductory formula laying out new charges against Jerusalem that would warrant more punishment. With the word, “Wherefore” (i.e. therefore), which points back to the preceding actions, the Lord charges them of hypocrisy in their worship. They outwardly tend to worship and honor God, but not from their hearts. They profess to know God, perform all acts of worship, but their hearts are far from Him and from keeping His precepts. Rather they are more concerned with man-made legalistic rules than with the rules they already covenanted to follow, which encourage mercy, justice, and equity. Because of that, God would judge them; their wisdom would vanish. This is one major sin of Israel; it is reminiscent of what Hosea prophesied, “And they have not cried unto me with their heart, when they howled upon their beds: they assemble themselves for corn and wine, and they rebel against me” (Hosea 7:14; 8:2; 10:1–2). Prophet Micah decried against this practice of false piety (Micah 3:11; 6:6ff).

This attitude in worship did not end with the Old Testament times, it continued during the time of Christ Jesus too. Jesus quoted this passage to denounce the hypocrisy of the Pharisees’ pretentious and ritualistic type of worship (Mark 7:6–7; cf. Matthew 15:8–9). Jesus used this prophetic oracle to make the same point as Isaiah. Here Isaiah denounces the leaders’ religious practice, “their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men,” and Jesus quotes him to describe the tradition of the elders as rules “taught by men.” Jesus’ reaction to the Pharisees’ hypocrisy mirrors Isaiah’s prophecy against Jerusalem. Jesus pronounced judgment to those who

practiced empty rituals (Matthew 23:1-36) and blessings to those who live by faith (Matthew 5:1-11). Speaking through Isaiah, the Lord pronounces judgment against the people for their insincerity in worship.

The word “behold” (hinni, heen-NYE), also translated lo! (i.e., look!), is often used to call one’s attention to the importance of what is about to follow. In this case, it calls their attention to what God is about to do because of their religious practices without true worship of their God. The phrase “I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people” tends to suggest that the people are familiar with the consequence for their behavior. With the word “proceed,” (yasaf yaw-SAF) means “to continue to do.” The idea is that the Lord is saying, “Since you’re aware of the outcome of your action, I’ll go ahead and fulfill my own side of the covenant.” This covenant, known as the Mosaic covenant, which is conditional and, which simply stated says that “if you do this I will do that.” So after stating His case against the people, the Lord says that He is going to do such “marvelous” or “wonderful” things that would astound the people so much that those who think they are wise and intelligent will be confounded and go into hiding (cf. 44:25; Jeremiah 8:9).

15 Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us? 16 Surely your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter’s clay: for shall the work say of him that made it, He made me not? or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, He had no understanding?

The Lord continues the discourse regarding the foolishness of the “wise” and pronounces “woe” on those who think that they can hide things from God. The people try to keep their plan secret. They think that God does not see, does not know, or is unaware of their secret plans. This perhaps refers to Hezekiah’s foolish alliance with Egypt for protection rather than seeking and trusting the Lord for deliverance and protection from their enemies (30:1–5). Indeed the people are not thinking clearly, but acting foolishly thinking that they can hide anything from the Almighty who sees and knows all things. They are delusional like the wicked who think, “God isn’t watching us! He has closed his eyes and won’t even see what we do!” (Psalm 10:11, NLT). They refuse to understand that God knows everything about us—that He examines our inward thoughts and that we cannot hide anything from Him (Psalm 139). Trying to hide anything from God is foolishness and “turning of things upside down” Doing that is reversing man’s and God’s roles.

The prophet uses the potter/clay metaphor to describe the foolishness of the people. He argues that giving God lip service and trusting to provide for one’s security is a role reversal. The Lord presents His case with a series of rhetorical questions. The answers are obvious—it is impossible for the thing made to deny the artistry of its creator. In the same way, it is foolhardiness for one to deny the One who made him or think that “He had no understanding.” Instead of counting on God to be the potter and shape them, Judah was treating God as the clay that can be manipulated by rituals and ceremonies. Isaiah would further denounce this attitude later and the “woe” (sorrow or anguish) that awaits those who challenge or argue with the Lord their maker using the same potter/ clay metaphor (45:9; cf. 64:8; see also Jeremiah 18:1–6). This passage is also quoted in part by Paul (Romans 9:20–21) to those who tend to question the sovereignty of God and His authority to do what He pleases.

Unfortunately, this hypocritical attitude in worship did not end in the biblical eras—it continues today. Like the people then, we often fall into routine patterns when we worship. We neglect to give God our full love and devotion, our worship is constantly becoming routine and ritualistic. If we want to be called God’s own people, we must be obedient and worship Him in honesty and sincerity. Today people go to church for miracles or what they can gain rather than to worship the living God with all their heart, soul, and mind. Hence false prophets and dubious pastors are on the rise.

17 Is it not yet a very little while, and Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be esteemed as a forest? 18 And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness.

Scholars differ in the interpretation of this part of the prophecy. However, based on the patterns of prophetic oracles, it appears a positive change in the land is being prophesied. After the seemingly gloomy situation, there seems to be a ray of hope in the land. Here we encounter another shift in redemption (cf. Isaiah 28:5–8). In spite of the people’s falsification in worship, Isaiah declares a change in their situation— there would be restoration in no distant time for Jerusalem. The question, “Is it not yet a very little” is another way of saying in a very short time, the people will experience change. Lebanon is known for its forest, which will be turned into a fruitful field. On the other hand the “fruitful field” will become “as a forest.” This seems to suggest that while God would cut one down, He would build another up. This probably again refers to Jerusalem’s deliverance as recorded in chapter 37, where God delivered Jerusalem and destroyed Assyria and their king, Sennacherib. Verse 18 seems to support this idea where there will be a reversal of the people’s condition described in the previous verses (29:10–12), which is referred to as the nation’s impaired sight. Nonetheless, this prophecy seems to have both immediate and futuristic interpretations, referring to the coming Messianic Age when things would be different. This tends to suggest that while the nation is perverse, sinful, and hypocritical now, a time of change would come. At that time, the wicked would be transformed and the number of the devout worshipers shall increase. Pure and true worship of God will replace general hypocrisy. Isaiah does not say when this will take place, but simply affirms that it will be “yet a little while” (32:15; 35:1–6).

The phrase “And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book” speaks of those who have the law and do not understand it. They seem to be deaf to the word of God, but the time is soon coming when they shall hear and understand it. Likewise, “the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness,” simply means the darkness would be removed and the people shall clearly see the truth of God’s word. This speaks of when the spiritual deafness and blindness of God’s people would be restored; pride would no longer prevent them from hearing God’s word or seeing God’s work.

19 The meek also shall increase their joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. 20 For the terrible one is brought to nought, and the scorner is consumed, and all that watch for iniquity are cut off: 21 That make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of nought.

Continuing the change that would take place, Isaiah says, “The meek shall increase their joy in the LORD,” and the “[the poor] shall rejoice (celebrate) in the Holy One of Israel.” The word “meek” (‘anav, aw-NAWV) also means the humble, the lowly and poor (in spirit). The word “poor” is a translation of ebyon (eb-YONE), with an idea of being in need or want; it is the feeling of destitution, a beggar, or the needy. People in these situations are usually unhappy and joyless, but when this prophecy is filled, both the humble (poor in spirit) and physically poor (the materially destitute) will have joy in the Lord; they will rejoice “in the Holy One of Israel.” On the Sermon Mount, Jesus affirms this saying, “Blessed (or happy/joyful) are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).

The phrases “in the LORD” and “in the Holy One of Israel” mean that both the humble and the poor will rejoice because of their belief and faithfulness in the Lord. On the other hand the “terrible” (‘arits, aw-REETS), i.e. the powerful and the oppressors, will be rendered powerless and brought to nothing. Both the scorner and those who crave iniquity will be consumed and cut off. These are people who unjustly mistreat the poor and humble. They plot evil and frame the innocent and the poor, falsely accusing them. So at that time, everyone will be affected. While the poor and the needy will rejoice in the Lord because of what He will do for them, the cruel and the wicked that deprived the innocent of justice will be punished (cf. Isaiah 29:5).

22 Therefore thus saith the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob, Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now wax pale. 23 But when he seeth his children, the work of mine hands, in the midst of him, they shall sanctify my name, and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and shall fear the God of Israel. 24 They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine.

Through Isaiah, the Lord makes a profound promise of redemption to the people and reminds them of His activity in the past as a guarantee of its fulfillment. Isaiah assures them that just as the Lord redeemed Abraham their forefather in the past, He will surely do the same for them. To reinforce this promise, Isaiah employs God's personal name, "LORD" or Yahweh (YAH-way), "self-Existent or Eternal; Jehovah." Yahweh is the Jewish national name of God—the only true God. The word "redeemed" (Heb. *padah*, paw-DAW) means to ransom, deliver or to rescue. This word is generally used in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt under Moses (Exodus 6:6; 15:13). The whole phrase "who redeemed Abraham" refers when the Lord delivered the patriarch from his pagan and idolatrous world, ordering him to "get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee" (from Genesis 12:1ff; cf. Joshua 24:2–3). Therefore based on this historical fact, Isaiah promises that "the house of Jacob" (Israel and Judah) shall no more be "ashamed" or grow pale because of their enemies. Fear makes the face look pale—that means they will no longer be afraid of their enemies. This promise is repeated over three times later in this book and it is a perpetual covenant to God's people: "But Israel shall be saved in the LORD with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be ashamed nor confounded world without end" (Isaiah 45:17; cf. 50:7; 54:4). This promise will also be for Israel's posterity.

When this is accomplished, they will experience visible change among themselves and their offspring. The house of Jacob will see God's handiwork in their children—and their attitude toward God will change. Every spiritual reformation and change is always God's work alone (Isaiah 60:21; Ephesians 2:10). Consequently, the people will revere God's name and worship Him. Sinners will be changed; they will understand the true worship and reverence of the Lord. Their eyes will spiritually open and their ears spiritually unstopped to see and hear the truth (Isaiah 29:18); their worship will be genuine from the heart and not with their lips only (v. 13). They will then adulate the Lord in truth and in spirit and their murmuring will cease. This speaks of a great revival among God's people.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Discipline the Immoral Person with Respect
(1 Corinthians 5:1–5)

TUESDAY

Uphold Justice for All Peoples
(Exodus 23:1–9)

WEDNESDAY

Seek and You Will Find Me!
(Jeremiah 29:10–14)

THURSDAY

Lip Service Is Not Enough
(Mark 7:1–8)

FRIDAY

Jerusalem Punished and Rescued
(Isaiah 29:1–8)

SATURDAY

Judah, Blind to God's Ways
(Isaiah 29:9–12)

SUNDAY

Israel Will Enjoy a Bright Future
(Isaiah 29:13–24)