

Count on it

Living in the certainty of God's Word



BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

Background material to help you prepare your sermon, youth or children's activities by getting a clearer picture of the story behind Isaiah 55.1–11

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The overall tone of Isaiah 40–55 (often referred to as Deutero-Isaiah) is one of encouragement and anticipation. It appears to have been delivered towards the end of the 6th century BC to Israelite refugees in exile in Babylon. This exile had started nearly 50 years earlier, when the Babylonians had conquered Judah and Jerusalem. The temple had been desecrated and severely damaged, and much of the city left in ruins. The Israelite leadership had been deported and was now part of the work force. Living conditions were not too bad, though; we certainly should not think of them as harshly treated slaves.

The prophecy comes from the tail end of this period. Militarily, the Babylonians were now too weak to control their empire. The Persians are rising up and their commander, Cyrus (mentioned in Isaiah 45.1) has already achieved several notable victories. The prophet urges the people to trust in the God of Israel, Yahweh. Through Cyrus, God is setting his people free and offers them the chance to return to the Promised Land.

Standard scholarly dates for these events:

587 BC Fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians;

539 BC Fall of Babylon to the Persians;

538 BC Edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1) allowing Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild it;

515 BC Dedication of second temple.

EMOTIONAL CONTEXT

What sort of psychological state was the audience in? This 50-year time gap means that the prophecy is delivered to the second or even the third generation of Israelites living in Babylon. Few of the people who left Jerusalem would still be alive. The bulk of the people listening would have been born in Babylon. Many would have had a confused sense of their identity: were they Israelite, or Babylonian? (We see similar issues among the variety of immigrant communities to the United Kingdom from the second half of the twentieth century.) The religious traditions of their parents and grandparents might have seemed increasingly irrelevant to them.

Their mindset said that the gods of Babylon had been shown to be stronger than the God of Israel. Previously, the Israelites believed they worshipped a powerful God who had saved their ancestors from Egypt. But if he had been helpless to save them from the Babylonians on home ground, what power could he have on foreign soil? To some it would have seemed more sensible to turn to the gods of Babylon.

Others will have remembered that the prophets warned repeatedly that the country would be overrun if the people and their leaders continued in their lack of faith (e.g. Isaiah 1.7–9, 7.17, 39.5–7). Daniel's attitudes demonstrated the actions of this believing group (Daniel 6.6–13).

So a significant number of the Israelites are reluctant to leave Babylon, wary of trusting in the God they saw as the weak, minor tribal deity of their ancestors. They may have started out as unwilling victims of a war, but now they are rooted in Babylon and sufficiently established to be uninterested in starting a new life of hardship in the ruins of a pokey backwater of the Empire.

THE PROPHET'S CHALLENGE TO THE PEOPLE

This statement about God's Word is a reference to the message issued through the prophet. The Babylonian idols are simple blocks of wood (44.9–20) with no power to predict the future (41.21–23). The God of Israel, however, announces the future: he speaks through his prophet. Through Cyrus and the Persians, he will liberate his people from their Babylonian captors and return them to the Promised Land (52.11–12, 55.12–13). He has spoken, so it *will* come to pass – they can count on it.

OTHER NOTES

The theme of God's Word previously featured within Isaiah 40–55 only in 40.5–8 and 45.23.

The statement about the water returning (10b) potentially implies knowledge of water cycles in ancient Israel. Even though they might not have known the detailed science of this, it seems they might still have grasped that the water must return to the clouds if it is to come down again.

QUOTES FROM THE COMMENTARIES

'It is not, however, the Bible alone, but the Word as applied by the Holy Spirit, that effects spiritual transformation.' (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983-85, pp. 1012)

'God's word...is a comfort to the one who yields to God's will. It will be felt as a threat and a warning to the one who stubbornly resists it.' (John Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, Waco: Word, 1987, pp. 247)

'...the word of salvation spoken to Israel...does not work automatically. It is spoken to [people] who have the power to accept it or refuse it.' (Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, London: SCM, 1969, pp. 290)