

19 Isaiah and His Contemporaries

until the distant future had a purpose in warning or reassuring the prophet's contemporaries. If we are to understand these future predictions correctly, we need also to study the messages that relate particularly to the prophet's own day.

The relation of Isaiah to his contemporaries is somewhat more complicated in this section of his book than in the usual situation. As in the case of all the prophets, he gave messages that would help the Israelites to whom he spoke and would also bring spiritual blessing to people in the distant future. In this particular case there was an additional purpose involved. Here the LORD led him so to write that a third group would receive special benefit - a group made up of people who would be living a century and a half after his time.

In the first thirty-five chapters of his book, Isaiah frequently pointed out the certainty that God's people would be taken into exile. At the end of chapter 39, just before our present section, he specifically declared that they would eventually be conquered by the Babylonians rather than by the Assyrians, who were then the great aggressive power. In our present section, the prophet turned his attention away from the nation as a whole, which was refusing to hear his message, and directed his words to the godly people of his day. These people, hearing his declaration of coming exile and knowing that as members of the nation they themselves were implicated in its sin, saw exile as certain, and might have been inclined to give way to despair. In chapters 40 to 56 Isaiah brought comfort to the godly of his day, assuring them that exile would not last forever, but God would deliver His people and bring them back to their homeland.

Although Isaiah had his contemporaries primarily in mind and sought to bring comfort to them as they imagined that the terrible Exile was already present, the Lord led him in such a way that his words would exactly meet the needs of the generation that would live in Babylonia one hundred and fifty years later, when it looked as if their captivity would never end. Isaiah's followers, knowing that his prophecies were sure to be fulfilled, would easily imagine themselves as already in this