

20 Isaiah and His Contemporaries

situation. When the situation arrived and the exiles were suffering captivity and fervently longing for deliverance, they would read what Isaiah had written and would find that his words exactly met their needs.

This does not require us to assume that God simply dictated words to Isaiah without much personal thought or understanding on the part of the prophet. The situation of exile was very real to Isaiah. It was during his lifetime that the Northern Kingdom, which included two-thirds of the Israelites, was taken off into exile. Refugees must have escaped from time to time and brought news to the people in Judah about the sad fate of their northern brothers. Over and over, in earlier portions of his book, Isaiah predicted that Judah also would go into exile, and pointed out that the nature of its sin was such that any other result was clearly impossible. God could hardly leave the backsliding of His people unpunished.

It is one thing to talk about the troubles of a distant nation. It is quite another to look at your own people and know that they are headed toward misery and suffering. Not only would Isaiah have felt this way; the many godly in Judah who considered Isaiah a true prophet and accepted his words as coming from God Himself knew without doubt that terrible suffering and exile lay ahead. In these circumstances Isaiah brought them a message of comfort and deliverance. Awareness of the importance of this exilic situation in our present section is a prerequisite to understanding the section as a whole. Unless one has this background in mind, verse after verse is obscure and meaningless.

At this point we will glance at a few of the many verses in which exile is assumed and deliverance promised.

Isaiah 42:22 gives a vivid description of the situation of individuals in captivity:

But this is a people robbed and despoiled; they are all trapped in caves or hidden away in prisons. They have become a prey with no one to rescue them, and a spoil with no one to say, Give them back.