

The Real Cause of Exile

THE PROPHETIC WRITINGS, including the other sections of Isaiah, frequently devote long passages to rebuking sin and predicting terrible punishment unless there is sincere repentance. Typical examples are found in Isaiah 1:2-23, 3:1-26, and 56:9-57:12. Yet the section with which we are dealing contains no lengthy passages of this type. This part of the book is written for people whose hearts are so filled with sorrow that direct rebuke might lead to despair.

Chapter 40 immediately follows the prediction at the end of chapter 39, in which Isaiah told King Hezekiah that the people of Judah would eventually be carried off into Babylonian captivity. Here the prophet addresses his followers, who realize the awful certainty that his predictions will be fulfilled. His present purpose is to bring them words of comfort. In so doing he gives a message that will be of particular help to the exiles more than a century and a half later.

While the apparent purpose of most of the early part of this section is to promise deliverance from exile, a more important purpose lies below the surface. Although sin is not often mentioned and rebuke is very rare in this section, a most fundamental part of Isaiah's purpose is to remind his listeners that sin is the real cause of exile and suffering. Unless something is done about the sin question, little will be accomplished by providing deliverance from exile.

Gradually the exiles are led to realize that deliverance from exile, important as it is, is not the final answer. The solution to the problem of sin is the greater need, and this section