

Reformation Fellowship Notes • May 18, 2014

Teacher: David Crabtree

Handout #4

History and the Style of Isaiah

I. How is the Servant presented?

A. The first mention of the Servant is relatively abrupt.

1. The immediate context stresses:
 - a) the need of God's people, their rebellion, fear, insecurity;
 - b) the worthlessness of the other gods;
 - c) God's commitment to bless his people;
 - d) the lack of anyone who truly enlightens God's people.

B. Quick summary of the content of the Servant songs:

1. First song

The first Servant song begins with the phrase "Behold my Servant..." like he is stepping onto the stage for the first time. It then goes on to describe this Servant as a gentle individual who will bring justice, enlightenment, and freedom to the whole world.

2. Second song

The second Servant song talks about a special person chosen from before birth for his mission. To accomplish this purpose he has been kept hidden for just the right time when he will speak powerfully and effectively and manifest the glory of God. The Servant will experience discouragement, but he will trust God with the outcome. God will reward this faithfulness by expanding the Servant's mission from just restoring Israel to God, to taking salvation to the whole world. So although he will be despised for a time, the whole world will bow down to him in the end.

3. Third song

The Servant is a student of God who is therefore able to speak words of encouragement to the weary. He is obedient to God's instruction, and he is able to gracefully endure abuse from his enemies because he knows God will vindicate him.

4. Fourth song

The Servant will amaze because he will be blessed and honored by God although he will look like a loser. He will start out vulnerable and plain, and he will be shunned by others because he will look like he is cursed by God. But, in fact, his suffering will be because of our wrong-doing, and he will ultimately die because of our sins. He will be honored by God for his faithfulness, and because of his obedience, many will be justified.

C. Style

1. It creates an atmosphere of mystery.
2. The concept is introduced with little prefatory material.
 - a) At first the concept is only partially developed.
 - b) Concept is developed in a way that raises more questions than it answers.
 - c) So mysterious that one is tempted to give up without going further.
3. Intervening material is introduced that is not closely related.
4. The concept is brought back.
 - a) Picture is filled out slightly more fully.
 - b) Some help with some of the questions that were left hanging.
 - c) But more questions introduced.
 - d) It is not clear whether we have made progress or just raised more questions.
5. More intervening material.
6. Concept is brought back again.
7. Some clarity, but more questions.
8. Process is repeated two more times.

D. Result

1. Still wrapped in mystery.
2. But a more or less vague image emerges.
 - a) He is a gentle, compassionate, confident, spokesman for God.
 - b) He will suffer for us, even though we despise him.
 - c) God will accept the punishment the Servant suffered in the place of our own punishment.
 - d) He will bring salvation to the whole world

E. Isaiah has been using this general approach from the beginning of the book.

1. He introduces a concept.
 - a) It is frustratingly vague, and you cannot figure it out before moving on.
 - b) But as you proceed, some of the questions get somewhat resolved.
2. It progresses like a spiral.
 - a) You keep coming back to topics, but you never come back to the exact same point; you are always moving forward.

3. One has to have a high tolerance for unanswered questions.
4. But if you hang in there, the general picture becomes more or less apparent.

II. I think this style is in imitation of history.

A. God has created the history of mankind in a spiral fashion.

1. History is not cyclical.
2. Nor is it a straight line.
3. History cycles on a line—spiral.

B. He does this by repeating events.

1. Similar events are spread over history.
 - a) similar not exactly the same;
 - b) significant differences.

C. In Isaiah, one obvious example is God saving his people out of slavery.

1. Three related events:
 - a) Exodus;
 - b) Return from Babylonian exile;
 - c) There will be a future exodus-like event in the *eschatos*.
2. Isaiah has made frequent allusions to the exodus from Egypt while talking about the return from Babylonian exile.
 - a) God is going to save his people again and take care of them.
 - b) But there are differences.
 - (1) For example, they won't have to hurry this time.

(a) Exodus 12:39

They had baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into cakes of unleavened bread. For it had not become leavened, since they were driven out of Egypt and could not delay, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

(b) Isaiah 52:12

But you will not go out in haste,
Nor will you go as fugitives;
For the Lord will go before you,
And the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

- (2) This difference is significant. In the Exodus, God was just introducing himself. Haste made sense. It was not clear how big the window of opportunity was. In the return from Babylon, he is a known quantity. There is trust. This is even more true of the Exodus in the end.

D. Slightly expanded tracing of one concept in history—God as dispeller of chaos.

1. Creation

- a) God establishes order where there is chaos (material).
 - (1) God forms a place for every animated thing and puts every animated thing in its place.
- b) But this raises more questions than it answers:
 - (1) Is God just a neatnik?
 - (2) What does it mean for everything to be in its place?
 - (3) Is God primarily interested in physics and chemistry?

2. Exodus

- a) God leads the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt.
 - (1) God acts to establish the correct order.
 - (2) God dispels the chaos of antagonism and ignorance toward God.
 - (a) Pharaoh is destroyed.
 - (b) Law is presented (light in darkness).
- b) But more questions:
 - (1) What is this Passover stuff?
 - (2) What is the law all about?

3. Jesus

- a) God sends the Messiah to teach and die on the cross.
 - (1) God addresses the chaos of sin.
 - (2) Jesus teaches about how to understand the law.
 - (3) Jesus dies as atonement for our sins.
- b) But more questions?
 - (1) How do we become righteous (sanctified)?

4. End

- a) God ends history.
- b) God deals with the chaos of human rebellion against God.

E. This kind of tracing could be done with any number of concepts.

III. Isaiah presents his prophecy in a way that is both backward looking and forward looking.

A. Example—Return from Babylon:

1. He prophecies the return of the Jews from Babylon.
 - a) It will take place in the near future.
2. It has antecedents in the past history of Israel.
 - a) It is an Exodus-like event; Isaiah draws comparisons and contrasts to it.
 - b) It is a creation-like event; Isaiah draws comparisons.
3. But the return from Babylon is just a dress rehearsal for a bigger event that is like it.
 - a) It is a foreshadowing.
 - (1) Isaiah suggests this by using elevated language.
 - b) God will lead his people out of a spiritual slavery at the end of time.
 - (1) Gathering of Jews in promised land?
 - (2) Removal of believers from the culture?
 - (3) Rapture?
 - (4) Other?
 - (5) All of the above?

IV. What is the relevance of this for us?

A. The God who dealt with Israel is the same God we deal with.

B. We have the potential of gaining some understanding of what is coming.

1. Big picture;
2. Reassurance that things are in God's hands.

C. What God does in history with the people of Israel has many analogs in the life of each individual believer.

1. Every believer goes through a spiritual Exodus-like event.