

SONS OF ADAM

Studies of Old Testament Characters in New Testament Light

by

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CHAPTER TEN

Isaiah Taking Hold of GOD

IF THE TRADITION recorded in the history of the wicked king, Manasseh, is true and he sawed Isaiah asunder, we certainly still have the pieces in the twentieth century! Critics tell us that besides Isaiah the son of Amoz (Isaiah 1:1) there was a Deutero-Isaiah who wrote Isaiah 40-66; and a Trito-Isaiah who wrote some of the sections of Deutero-Isaiah and also corrected or improved portions of the earlier prophecy.

Nobody knows who these triplets were or the names of their parents or their exact residence.

You are referred to the books of Edward Koning, S. R. Driver and George Adam Smith for their elaborate reasons regarding their sawing asunder of the text if not the authors. In the Bible it all seems very simple. The Old Testament speaks of one Isaiah, the greatest of the greater Prophets, first in order and foremost in his portrayal of the Manger and the Cross.

Our Saviour and the Apostles, especially Paul, seem to refer to the same well-known prophet (Matthew 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14; 15:7; Mark 7:6; Luke 3:4; 4:17; John 1:23; 12:38, 39, 41; Acts 8:28; 8:30; 28:25; Romans 9:27; 9:29; 10:16, 20).

A careful comparison of all these many references is very strong evidence for unity of authorship in Isaiah's book.

When one reads the various theories of the critics, one is amused more than enlightened.

At the end of a long discussion for and against the "three or two" Isaiah theory, one of the critics, for example, remarks:

"It should be borne in mind also that Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah may have been divinely inspired just as much as Isaiah. The later writers of the book may have been pupils of Isaiah's thought and therefore have been identified ideally and spiritually with Isaiah. At any rate there is a unity in The Book of Isaiah which cannot be overlooked."

Perhaps the ordinary reader and believer would never have seen anything but unity except for the radical critics!

The September issue of the *Biblical Archaeologist*, published by the American Schools of Oriental Research, gives a most interesting account of the discovery of the ancient scrolls concerning which much has appeared in religious magazines.

The discovery was made by wandering Bedouin, who chanced upon a cave near the north end of the Dead Sea, high up on the cliffs. The entrance to the cave had partially collapsed, but within some jars along the walls the scrolls were found. The Bedouin removed the scrolls and tore off the wrappings. Hoping to get money for them, they took them to the Moslem Sheik in Bethlehem, who sent them on to Jerusalem. The scroll of Isaiah is the only complete manuscript of any book of the Bible from such an early time. The date has been set about 100 B.C. It contains the entire book including the last twenty-seven chapters, the authenticity of which has been so disputed by the critics.

Robert Burns speaks of "Rapt Isaiah's wild seraphic fire."

Coleridge called Isaiah his ideal of the Hebrew prophets and studied him "with unremitting attention and most reverential admiration."

One of William Blake's disciples said that "to walk with him was like walking with the prophet Isaiah." [1]

When one writer speaks of Isaiah as the climax of all Old Testament prophecy, another calls him the Evangelist before the New Testament; and when Delitzsch speaks of the chapters on the Servant of the Lord (52:13-53) "that they look as if written beneath the Cross of Golgotha and illuminated by the heavenly brightness that streams from the one hundred and tenth Psalm"; when the poets and artists have ever portrayed Isaiah as one stately figure of magnificent literary genius and a prophet who rejoiced to see CHRIST's day and spake of His glory - then we hesitate in spite of the critics to commit mayhem on Isaiah or his book. [2]

The book begins like sober history: "**The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah**" (1:1). And again: "**In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up and his train filled the temple**" (6:1). He lived in Jerusalem, was frequently in the temple, and his earlier and later prophecies and visions are linked to the court and the kings of his day.

We are not writing of his life and character. Little is said of either. But we limit our pen to a sketch of Isaiah as a man of prayer, especially to the great prayer recorded in Chapters 63:15-64:1-12.

It is one of the greatest prayer chapters of the Bible and could only have been written by one who saw a vision of GOD's holiness, his own and Israel's sin and who had seen the coming day of redemption.

It is a personal prayer, a poignant prayer, a prayer of deep contrition, ardent faith, and was uttered when **"the beautiful house where our fathers praised thee is burned with fire, and all our pleasant places are laid waste"** (64:11).

Isaiah seems to have hearkened personally to his own earlier invitation:

"Come my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment" (26:20).

One must read the whole prayer of eighteen verses, (disregarding the chapter division) to see its beauty and power. Almost in the middle of it Isaiah gives an incomparable definition of true prayer: It is **"To take hold of God,"** and that is what he does in this prayer, with holy boldness.

There are many definitions of prayer but none so apt, so penetrating, so bold as this brief word. It is Paul who speaks of Isaiah as **"very bold"** (Romans 10:20) when he said, **"I was found of them that sought me not."**

It was an act of great daring to speak thus to an exclusive fanatic race like the Jews. Paul, also, as apostle to the gentiles, is very bold when in like manner he cries out: **"Is God a God of the Jews only?"**

The universalism of Paul and of Isaiah both had root in the universalism of GOD's redeeming love.

To understand the prayer as a whole in its depth and breadth and height, we must remember Isaiah's vision in chapter six of GOD's throne of glory surrounded by "Those flames devout," as Dante says, "which of their six wings make themselves a cowl."

Nor can we forget that back of this prayer was his prophetic vision of the Man of Sorrows with pierced hands; wounded and bruised for our iniquities (Chapter 53).

Isaiah prayed under the shadow of the Cross.

- He saw CHRIST's coming day and was glad.
- He saw His glory and spake not only of Him but to Him.

His prayer is addressed to the Creator (63:16; 64:8) but also to the Redeemer of Israel (63:8, 9).

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRAYER

Invocation "Look down from heaven and behold from the habitation of thy holiness and of thy glory" (63:15).

I. His petitions for mercy - Where? Why? How long?

- A. Where is thy zeal and thy strength?
- B. Why are thy mercies restrained?
- C. Art thou not better than Abraham and Israel, Our Father and Our Redeemer?

II. His complaints.

- A. Why hast thou made us to err?
- B. Why is our heart so hardened?
- C. Return and save us from our foes.
- D. We are called by thy name. Thou art our Father.

III. His boldness in pleading.

- A. Do not only "look down" but "come down." Rend the heavens (64:1).
- B. Remember Sinai's wonders and Elijah on Carmel (64:2-5).
- C. He pleads GOD's exceeding great promises (4-5).
- D. He acknowledges his sin and Israel's prayerlessness (vv. 6-7). No one takes hold of GOD.
- E. Thou are the Potter, we are the clay (8-9).
- F. He pleads for the sake of Jerusalem and GOD's holy temple.

What Alexander R. Gordon says of the whole of Isaiah is true of this his one great prayer:

"The Book of Isaiah is the crowning glory of prophecy. As literature it stands supreme, being distinguished alike for majesty of thought, brilliance of imagination, and elevation of style and diction. Its religious quality is conspicuous. In no other prophetic book have we so many rays of heavenly light; in no other are we pointed so clearly forward to the perfect day." [3]

Matthew Henry calls the remarkable prayer, "The Lamentations of Isaiah," and designates it as a "most affectionate, importunate and pleading prayer."

Why? It is the psychology of the prayer that arrests attention when we study it. Isaiah surpasses all others in his effort to define prayer. And he does it in one short sentence, "To take hold of God."

There are many definitions of prayer.

James Montgomery crowds fourteen into a single hymn of six stanzas.

- Prayer is the soul's sincere desire;
- Prayer is often inaudible;
- Prayer is hidden fire;
- Prayer is a sigh, a tear;
- Prayer is the upward glance to GOD;
- Prayer is simple as the lisp of a child;
- Prayer is sublime as GOD's majesty;
- Prayer is the cry of the prodigal,
- Prayer is the breath of the soul,
- Prayer is the mountain air that invigorates,
- Prayer is the watchword at death,
- Prayer is the key to heaven and the pathway of our Saviour.

To meditate on these definitions alone would lead us into all the wealth of the Scriptures on prayer.

George Herbert, the saintly poet who died in 1633, has some quaint lines that indicate other and unusual aspects of prayer; he writes in epigrammatic phrases fit to stir our sluggish imagination, if we take time to fathom their depth:

"Prayer - the Church's banquet, Angel's age,
 GOD's breath in man returning to his birth,
 The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
 The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;

"Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's towre,
 Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
 The six-daies-world transposing in an houre,
 A kind of tune which all things heare and fear."

In the sixty-fourth chapter of Isaiah (one of the five great chapters on prayer in the Bible) we have a definition of prayer that surpasses all others in its boldness, simplicity and psychological accuracy.

After saying that "**men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen . . . what He hath prepared for him that waiteth for Him,**" the Prophet confesses his own sins and those of his people. "**Our righteousnesses,**" he says, "**are as filthy rags.**"

Then follows Isaiah's definition of prayer in the seventh verse:

"There is none that calleth upon Thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of Thee." It is a bold definition. Literally (in the Hebrew text) he says that prayer means to rouse oneself out of sleep and seize hold of the Lord. Of course, it is not a carnal touch like that of the heathen who embrace their idols or beat them to obtain their answers. Yet we have here the pathos of a suppliant who is in deadly earnest; the arms, the hands, the very fingers of the soul reaching out to lay hold of GOD; man's personal, spiritual appropriation of deity!

No wonder Paul calls Isaiah very bold! The human soul is poor and needy, yet can take hold of the infinite and eternal Spirit.

"Speak to Him thou, for He hears, and spirit with spirit may meet.
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

This is the psychology of true prayer - the outreach, the communion and union of the whole soul with GOD as revealed in CHRIST through the Holy Spirit. JESUS is the ladder of Jacob by which we climb to GOD. Anything less than this is not real Christian prayer.

Prayer is not only "the highest exercise of the human intellect" as William E. Gladstone said; but it is also the highest exercise of the affections, the will, the memory, the imagination and the conscience. All the powers of the human soul find an adequate field of action only in prayer. The person who never prays is literally godless. He who does pray is godly in proportion to his inner prayer-life. This is true in all theistic religions, but supremely true in the Christian faith.

I. First of all, we must take hold of GOD with our thoughts.

The things which the angels "**desire to look into**" we may contemplate on our knees.

"**Wherefore,**" as Peter tells us, we must "**gird up the loins of our mind,**" and on our knees study to know GOD with all our mind; not nature, which is His garment; nor man only, although made in His image; nor the saints who are only His servants; but GOD Himself. By the exercise of our intellects, illuminated by His Spirit, we must strive to understand His being and attributes; to adore Him for our creation and preservation and His daily providence.

This is what David said, for example, in the one hundred fourth Psalm:

"O God, Thou art very great, Thou art clothed with majesty as with a garment."

Many chapters in the Book of Isaiah (especially chapter 40) and many of the nature Psalms consist almost entirely of this intellectual adoration of GOD.

Our mind also takes hold of GOD when we remember His goodness.

Thanksgiving is the exercise of our memory in the presence of the source of all blessings. Our imaginations are kindled when we contemplate the marvels of creation; the ocean of the fullness of His love; the firmament of His glory; and the exceeding greatness of His power. When we think of these things we shall regain the lost art of meditation.

"My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips: when I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches."

Lean souls may be restored to health and vigor by the exercise of this lost art. How little time we really give to this element in prayer!

II. The psychology of prayer also includes taking hold of GOD with our emotions, our passions and our deepest feelings.

We find them all in the prayers of David - awe, fear, sorrow, joy, love, hatred, jealousy, passion. All these emotions, exercised in the right way, find their place in secret prayer. Here they need not be stifled. The only cure for hypocrisy is to lay hold of the source of all sincerity-secret prayer.

This is what David meant when he said, "**Pour out your heart before him.**"

The scum, and the dregs! Paul makes reference in his Epistles once and again to his tears. It is worthwhile to look up the references.

In his *Private Devotions*, Lancelot Andrewes has a remarkable prayer for tears:

"Give tears, O God, give a fountain of waters to my head. Give me the grace of tears. Bedew the dryness of my desert heart. Give me tears such as Thou didst give David of old, or Jeremiah, or Peter, or Magdalene . . . Give me tears which Thou mayest put into Thy bottle and write into Thy book . . ."

In the confession of sin, daily and detailed, this element of prayer comes to its own. Not without reason does *The Book of Common Prayer* begin with a great confession. Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and Andrewes' *Private Devotions* are two books in which every page seems wet with tears. Both men were giants in prayer.

III. But prayer is even more than this.

It is indeed the highest exercise of the intellect and the noblest use of the emotions, but it is also the largest arena for the use of the will.

This power of contrary choice GOD has given us. It is not merely subjective and submissive, but objective and active. The will of GOD is not only a pillow on which we may rest our weary souls, but a power-house to give us strength for service. The will of a Christian in prayer is far-reaching because it is heavenly in its origin and earthly in its potentiality. When Daniel prayed, archangels were set in motion. True prayer sets in motion divine forces (and restrains evil forces) in a way we shall never understand until we stand in the Kingdom of Light.

True prayer will achieve just as much as it costs us. It is the little further that costs; it is the little further that counts. "He went a little further and prayed the same words." Gethsemane. Gabbatha. Golgotha. The Resurrection morning.

The ministry of intercession is a great battlefield. We need the whole armor of GOD, for we wrestle in the trenches against all the powers of darkness. On our knees we are kings and priests in GOD's universe. Napoleon or Alexander never had such an empire.

George Müller and Hudson Taylor were ambassadors plenipotentiary of their King.

The inner chamber into which we retire for daily prayer is the gymnasium of the soul. Dr. Karl Heim, of the University of Tübingen, in his book, *The New Divine Order*, has the following remarkable statement regarding prayer:

"It is part of the essence of prayer to have the certainty that the whole of world-history, from the solar orbits to the oscillations of the electrons, lies in this moment in the hand of GOD like soft clay in the hand of the potter. He can make of it what He wills. No sparrow falls from the roof without His will. Miracle is the victory of GOD in the strife of spiritual powers. Everyone who prays knows that this victory is possible at any moment and in any situation."

We must bear all this in mind if we would understand the true nature of prayer: its psychological elements and the arena in which true prayer becomes effectual because it is fervent. We need to read and ponder this prayer of Isaiah and study all his book as a school of prayer. Isaiah could take hold of GOD because GOD had taken hold of Isaiah. "**Here am I, send me.**"

O Thou that hearest prayer, we come to Thee because we can go to none else beside Thee. We take hold of Thee with mind and heart and will. Thou O CHRIST art all we want. More than all in Thee we find. Amen.

1 Jane Stoddard, *The Old Testament in Life and Literature*, p. 386.

2 Sidney Smith, *Isaiah*, Chapters XL-LV, London, 1944. He discusses the whole question of Literary Criticism and History and gives a Bibliography of more than 150 titles.

3 *The Faith of Isaiah: Statesman and Evangelist*, London, 1919.

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