

## Martin Luther - PREFACE TO THE PROPHET ISAIAH 1528

If anyone will read the holy prophet Isaiah with profit and thus understand him the better, let him not despise this advice and instruction of mine, unless he has better advice and is better informed.

In the first place, let him not skip the title, or beginning, of this book, but learn to understand it as thoroughly as possible, so that he may not think that he understands Isaiah well, and afterwards have to put up with, it when someone says that he has never understood the title and first line, let alone the whole prophet. For this title is to be considered almost a gloss and a light on the whole book, and Isaiah himself points his readers to it, as though with his fingers, as the occasion and reason for his book. But to him who despises or does not understand the title, I say that he shall let the prophet Isaiah alone or, at least, that he will not understand him thoroughly, for it is impossible to gather or observe the prophet's writing and meaning rightly and dearly, without a thorough understanding of the rifle.

When I speak of the title, I do not mean only that you read or understand the words "Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Kings of Judah"; but that you take up the last book of Kings and the last book of Chronicles, and take in the whole contents of them, especially the stories, speeches, and events that occurred under the kings named in the title, clear to the end of those books. For if one would understand the prediction, it is necessary that one know how things were in the land, how matters lay, what was in the mind of the people, and what kind of intentions they had for or against their neighbors, friends and enemies; and especially what attitude they took, in their land, to God and the prophet, toward His Word and His service.

It would be well, also, to know how the lands were situated with reference to one another, so that the strange, unfamiliar words and names might not make reading disagreeable and understanding dark and hard. To do my simple Germans a service, I shall briefly describe the country situated about Jerusalem or Judah, where Isaiah lived and preached, so that they may better see whither the prophet turned when he prophesied toward "noonday" or "midnight." On the East, the nearest thing to Jerusalem, or Judah, is the Dead Sea, where, in ancient days, Sodom and Gomorrah stood. Beyond the Dead Sea lies the land of Moab and of the children of Ammon. Farther beyond lies Babylon, or Chaldaea, and farther still the land of the Persians, of which Isaiah speaks much.

Toward the North, lies Mount Lebanon and, across it, Damascus and Syria, but farther on, and to the East, lies Assyria with which Isaiah deals much. Toward the West, along the Great Sea, lie the Philistines, the worst enemies of the Jews; and along the Sea, to the North, lie Sidon and Tyre, which border on Galilee. Toward the South are many lands, — Egypt, the land of the Moors, the Red Sea, Edom, and Midian, so situated that Egypt lies to the West of the middle. These are the lands and the names about which Isaiah prophesies as neighbors, enemies, and friends, surrounding the land of Judah like wolves around a sheepfold. With some of them they made alliance after alliance, but it helped them not at all.

After this, you must divide the prophet Isaiah into three parts. In the first he deals, like the other prophets, with two subjects. First, he preaches to his people and rebukes their many sins, especially the manifold idolatry which has got the upper hand among the people, — as godly preachers, now and at all times, do and must do, — and keeps them in check with threats of punishment and promises of good.

Second, he disposes and prepares them to expect the coming Kingdom of Christ, of which he prophesies more clearly and more often than does any other prophet. He even describes, in

Isaiah 7:14, the Mother of Christ, how she is to conceive and bear Him without injury to her virginity, and in Chapter 53, His Passion together with His Resurrection from the dead. He proclaims His kingdom powerfully and in plain language, as though it had then come. This must have been a splendid, highly enlightened prophet. For all the prophets do the same thing; they teach and rebuke the people of their time, and they proclaim the coming and the Kingdom of Christ and direct and point the people to Him, as to the Savior both of those who have gone before and of those who are to come; but one of them does this more than another, one more fully than another; among them all, however, Isaiah does the most and is the fullest. In the second part, he has to do especially with the empire of Assyria and the Emperor Sennacherib. He prophesies more and at greater length than any other prophet about how the emperor shall subdue all neighboring lands, including the kingdom of Israel, and impose much misfortune on the kingdom of Judah. But there he stands like a rock, with the promise Jerusalem shall be defended and be saved from him; and that is one of the greatest miracles in the Scripture, not only because of the event, that so mighty an emperor should be defeated before Jerusalem, but also because of the faith, with which men believed it. It is a miracle, I say, that any one at Jerusalem could have believed in such an impossible thing. Isaiah must, without doubt, have heard many bad words from the unbelievers. But he did it; he defeated the emperor and defended the city. He must have stood well with God and been a precious man in His sight!

In the third part, he deals with the empire of Babylon. Here he prophesies of the Babylonian Captivity, with which the people are to be punished, and of the destruction of Jerusalem by the emperor of Babylon. And it is here that he does his greatest work, encouraging and upholding a people yet to come amid this future destruction and captivity, so that they might not believe that all was over with them, that Christ's kingdom would not come, and that prophecy was false and vain. What a rich and full preaching he presents! — Babylon, in its turn, will be destroyed, and the Jews be released and return to Jerusalem. He even tells, with proud defiance of Babylon, the names of the kings that shall destroy it, namely, the Medes and Elamires, or Persians; and he expressly mentions the king who shall release the Jews and help them back to Jerusalem, namely, Cyrus whom he calls "God's anointed," long before there is a kingdom in Persia. For he is concerned altogether with Christ, that His future coming and the promised kingdom of grace and salvation shall not be despised, or be lost upon His people and be of no use to them, because of unbelief or great misfortune and impatience; and this would be the case, unless they expected it and believed surely that it would come. These are the three things that Isaiah deals with.

He does not treat them in order, however, and give each of these subjects its own place and put it into its own chapters and pages; but they are so mixed up together that much of the first matter is brought in along with the second and third, and the third subject is discussed somewhat earlier than the second. But whether this was done by those who collected and wrote down the prophecies (as is thought to have happened with the Psalter), or whether he himself arranged it this way according as time, occasion, and persons suggested, and these times and occasions were not always alike, and had no order, — this I do not know. He has at least this much order, — he brings in and deals with the first and most important subject, from beginning to end, all the way through the second and third parts; and that is what we ought also do in our sermons, always running along with the other things our most important matter, viz., the rebuking of the people and the preaching of Christ, even though we may now and then undertake, as occasion arises, to preach of other things, such as the Turk or the emperor, etc.

Remembering this, anyone can readily comprehend the prophet and be at home in him, and not be led astray or become impatient because of the order of the prophecies, as it happens to those

who are not accustomed to it. We have done our best to make Isaiah speak good, clear German, though he has accommodated himself to it with difficulty and done his best to prevent it. Those who know both German and Hebrew well, will easily see that, especially the hair-splitters, who persuade themselves that they know everything; and there are enough words of threatening and terror against the stubborn, proud, hard-heads, — if that would help. What profit there may be in reading Isaiah, I prefer to let the reader discover for himself, rather than tell him; and for one who does not, or will not, discover it for himself, there is not much profit to speak about. He is full of living, encouraging, heartening sayings for all poor consciences and miserable, disturbed hearts; and there are enough words of threatening and terror against the stubborn, proud, hard-heads; if that will help.

You should not think of Isaiah, except as a man who was despised among the Jews and considered a fool and madman. For they did not regard him as we now regard him, but, as he himself testifies, in chapter 58, they shot out their tongues and pointed their fingers at him and held his preaching as foolishness, all except a few godly children in the crowd, such as King Hezekiah. For it was the habit of the people to mock the prophets and hold them madmen; and this has happened to all servants of God and preachers; it happens every day and will continue. It is also to be observed that the thing for which he most rebukes the people is idolatry. The other vices, such as display, drunkenness, avarice, he touches on hardly thrice, but reliance on their own self-chosen idol worship and their own works, or their confidence in kings and alliances, he rebukes all the way through. This was intolerable to the people, for they wanted such conduct to be right. Therefore they are said, at last, through King Manasseh, to have slain him as a heretic and deceiver and, as the Jews say, to have sawn him asunder.