

January 15 Lesson 7 (KJV)

God Promises to Guide

Devotional Reading: Psalm 119:81–96

Background Scripture: Isaiah 48:1–22

Isaiah 48:3–8a, 17

3 I have declared the former things from the beginning; and they went forth out of my mouth, and I shewed them; I did them suddenly, and they came to pass.

4 Because I knew that thou art obstinate, and thy neck is an iron sinew, and thy brow brass;

5 I have even from the beginning declared it to thee; before it came to pass I shewed it thee: lest thou shouldest say, Mine idol hath done them, and my graven image, and my molten image, hath commanded them.

6 Thou hast heard, see all this; and will not ye declare it? I have shewed thee new things from this time, even hidden things, and thou didst not know them.

7 They are created now, and not from the beginning; even before the day when thou heardest them not; lest thou shouldest say, Behold, I knew them.

8a Yea, thou heardest not; yea, thou knewest not; yea, from that time that thine ear was not opened.

17 Thus saith the LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the LORD thy God which teacheth thee to profit, which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go.

Key Text

Thus saith the LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the LORD thy God which teacheth thee to profit, which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go.

—Isaiah 48:17

From Darkness to Light

Unit 2: God's Promises

Lessons 5–9

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How to Say It

Cyrus *Sigh*-russ.

Hittites *Hit*-ites or *Hi*-tites

Isaiah *Eye-zay*-uh.

Messiah *Meh-sigh*-uh.

Persian *Per*-zhen

rabbir *ab*-eye.

Introduction

A. “Psychohistory”

In 1942, science fiction author Isaac Asimov created a fictitious world, in his Foundation series of books, in which a scientist developed an accurate model for predicting future events based on a discipline he called “psychohistory.” While this seemed fantastic at the time, current computer programmers use “big data” collected on web and smartphone activity to predict all sorts of things. Ads are created, based on this information, to motivate you to make a purchase for something you’re likely interested in. Elsewhere, computer data analytics are widely used in professional sports leagues to predict future performance of players, which influences player drafts, trades, and contracts.

There is a marked difference, though, between discerning a likely future and knowing the future infallibly and in detail. This lesson will examine why God sometimes reveals the future to people.

B. Lesson Context

As we noted last week, the Babylonians had taken full control of the southern kingdom of the Israelites, called Judah, by 586 BC. The temple was destroyed, its vessels were confiscated, and many people were deported to Babylon. That was about 136 years after Assyria had done the same to the northern kingdom, called Israel.

The various sections of the book of Isaiah are unified by their repeating of important themes about the Lord and His relationship to Israel. One such section that refers to the “servant” of the Lord is often recognized as Isaiah 40–55. Beyond seeing the role of the Lord’s servant (sometimes understood to be the nation of Israel, sometimes as an individual to come), the reader of this section will notice some consistent messages.

First, Isaiah points out the absurdity of worshipping idols (example: Isaiah 41:22–24). The idolater takes a piece of wood, uses part of it to make a fire and bake bread. And then with the rest of the wood he makes a “god” that he worships (44:14–17)! Second and closely related to the first, Isaiah emphasizes that there is no other God but the Lord (44:6; 45:6).

Third, Isaiah frequently notes the Lord’s knowledge and control of the future. He knows the “end from the beginning” and “will do all [His] pleasure” (Isaiah 46:10). Furthermore, the Lord challenges the false gods to match Him by revealing the future (41:22; 43:9; 44:7; 45:21; 48:14).

Fourth, the role of the Lord as the Creator of all things is also prominent (Isaiah 40:28). God laid the earth’s foundation and stretched out the heavens above (48:13; 51:13). Included in His activity is the creation of the nation of Israel (43:15), often expressed as childbirth (example: 66:7–13).

I. The Knowing God (Isaiah 48:3–8a)

Isaiah 48 begins by listing the various ways the people identified themselves as people of God, but it asserts that their identity was “not in truth, nor in righteousness” (48:1). God’s faithfulness stood in stark contrast to the inconsistency and hypocrisy of Israel.

A. Former Things (vv. 3–6a)

3. I have declared the former things from the beginning; and they went forth out of my mouth, and I shewed them; I did them suddenly, and they came to pass.

In contrast to all the false arts Israel had used to try to foretell the future (Isaiah 44:25; Jeremiah 27:9; 29:8), the Lord asserted in no uncertain terms that *He* was the one who *declared the former things*. The phrase *from the beginning* is not fatalistic. Instead, it gives confidence that God’s plan was not haphazardly thrown together as He encountered fresh disobedience from His people. Much evidence could be gathered for Israel to understand that God was in charge and was not caught off guard by anything the people said or did. Two key moments would be (1)

promising that Abram—despite his and Sarai’s childless and aged condition (Genesis 15:2–3; 17)—would become the father of a great nation (12:1–3); and (2) reassuring Jacob (also called Israel; 46:2) that God would bring Jacob’s descendants out of Egypt and back to the promised land (48:21). Isaiah’s prophecies themselves are examples, foretelling both Judah’s exile in Babylon (Isaiah 39:6–7) and the people’s return in the days of the Persian King Cyrus (45:13).

Although God’s plans are not haphazard, promises like these two can seem to take a long time to be fulfilled. But after God *shewed them*, they truly did seem to happen *suddenly*. So much waiting could make the people doubtful of the promises (compare 2 Peter 3:3–10), but each one *came to pass* just as the Lord had said (see Isaiah 48:5a, 6b–7, below).

4a. Because I knew that thou art obstinate.

Israel’s obstinacy is a common thread in the nation’s history (examples: Judges 2:19; Matthew 23:37; Acts 7:51), and Isaiah’s prophecy echoes other descriptions of the people’s being stiffnecked (examples: Exodus 33:3, 5; Deuteronomy 31:27). A related metaphor is the language of a hard heart (examples: 2 Chronicles 36:13; Psalm 95:8), as is refusing to hear or see (examples: Zechariah 7:11–12; Matthew 13:15; Acts 7:51, 57–58).

We can also look at the consequences of Israel’s stubbornness. For instance, the people’s refusal to trust in the Lord after He delivered them from Egypt resulted in His preventing the first generation from entering the promised land (Deuteronomy 1:32–40). Much later, King Rehoboam’s insistence on following his friends’ foolish advice led directly to the division of Israel into two kingdoms (1 Kings 12:8–21).

4b. And thy neck is an iron sinew, and thy brow brass.

Iron and brass were the hardest metals known at the time Isaiah ministered. Beginning sometime before 1000 BC, the Iron Age marked the time when iron began to be smelted to create steel. The Hittites in Turkey may have been the first to discover how to make steel by heating iron with carbon. This innovation quickly became known throughout the ancient Near East, and by the time Isaiah wrote, the people would recognize that iron was a formidable material. Brass was still widely used, especially in the beginning of the Iron Age; the Bronze Age came to an end around 1200 BC.

This illustration evokes the image of a beast of burden as hardheaded as these metals. A beast of burden wears a wooden yoke and leather harness strapped tightly around its *neck*. The obedient animal allowed itself to be directed by the reins of its driver. If the driver pulled on the right rein, the animal’s head should turn right, and the beast would walk to the right. But an animal with a neck of *iron sinew* would not turn or respond to the commands or will of its driver. The *brow* of *brass* emphasizes this stubbornness, suggesting a will so set that no new information or knowledge could cause the creature to change course. Together, a stiff neck and a brass brow prove completely unalterable, even to the creature’s own harm—much as Israel had often demonstrated.

5a. I have even from the beginning declared it to thee; before it came to pass I shewed it thee.

The first half of this verse largely repeats the thought from Isaiah 48:3 (above). Far from being merely redundant, repetition was a typical Hebrew writing convention. Whether word for word, with synonymous parallelism, or in other ways, repetition was used frequently to emphasize the

importance of a point. Verse 4b (above) is an example of nearly synonymous ideas being used to strengthen an image. Watch for this repetition in the rest of Isaiah 48.

When we consider that most of Isaiah's audience would have been illiterate, and even those who could read wouldn't have a copy of his prophecies *to* read, it makes sense to lean into repetition like this. What one hears over and over again tends to stick and form one's thoughts and actions. It's no wonder that God gave the Israelites words to repeat to themselves and their children—words to form who they would be (example: Deuteronomy 6:4–9; see Isaiah 48:8a, below).

5b. Lest thou shouldest say, Mine idol hath done them, and my graven image, and my molten image, hath commanded them.

Mine idol, my graven image, and my molten image are another example of repetition (see Isaiah 48:5a, above); all these are ways to speak of false gods, created by human hands. Some idols were made of wood (example: 44:13–17), while others could be made of or plated with gold and silver (examples: 2:20; 30:22).

Attributing any action—good, bad, or indifferent—to an idol is pure lunacy (Isaiah 44:18–19). And yet Israel fell into this trap time after time (example: 1 Kings 17:7–17). While the Ten Commandments prohibit worshipping other gods or making images of them (Exodus 20:3–5), Moses descended the mountain after receiving this command to find that his brother, Aaron, had already broken it! He'd facilitated the making of a golden calf idol that the people were worshipping as Moses walked back into their camp (32:1–6). This was a dark blot on the history of Israel. Not only were the people worshipping things they made by hand; they were also attributing God's great works to those false gods (Isaiah 46:5–13). Nothing is more foolish than this.

6a. Thou hast heard, see all this; and will not ye declare it?

Relating back to Isaiah 48:5a (above), God once again challenged the people to admit that He had told them what was to come. And what He said, they had *heard* and even seen. Still, they were unwilling to *declare* that God had done this (see lesson 6 on Isaiah 43:10–12 for more on being a witness).

B. New Things (vv. 6b–8a)

6b–7. I have shewed thee new things from this time, even hidden things, and thou didst not know them. They are created now, and not from the beginning; even before the day when thou heardest them not; lest thou shouldest say, Behold, I knew them.

The people did not want to admit that the gods they worshipped were imaginary beings and thus completely powerless. If Israel would not be convinced that this was the case even though God had told them what would happen (see Isaiah 48:3, above), would they be swayed when God *didn't* tell them in advance? The *new things* and *hidden things* were completely without prophetic warning or any other means of anticipation. No amount of foretelling would allow the people to *know* what God was going to do next.

The new things are truly novel, for they have been *created now*. Only God can create something that has never been before (contrast Ecclesiastes 1:10). We think of the physical

universe (Psalm 148:4–5), a man and a woman (Genesis 1:27), or a new heart (Psalm 51:10). Isaiah also proclaims that the Lord created the nation of Israel (Isaiah 43:1). This activity, then, is not so much the revealing of hidden things, but the display of God’s creative power at any time according to His pleasure. Knowledge of such things comes at the time they are revealed and implemented, so no one can claim, *Behold, I knew them*. Impossible!

8a. Yea, thou heardest not; yea, thou knewest not; yea, from that time that thine ear was not opened.

A foundational principle for Israel’s relationship with God was that Israel was to “hear” (Deuteronomy 6:4a). And what they were to hear was that “the Lord our God is one Lord” (6:4b) and to “love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (6:5; compare Mark 12:29–30). Furthermore, they were to teach what they heard to one another and their children (Deuteronomy 6:6–9).

Not to hear the Lord (and therefore not to know; see Isaiah 48:6–7, above) violates this foundational law in God’s covenant with Israel. The act of truly hearing the Lord always has included obedience to what He commands (see 30:9). Because Israel had hearing that did not result in understanding (6:9), it was as though *from that time*—the beginning of their relationship with God—their *ear was not opened*. This resulted in the people’s reputation of dealing “treacherously” with the Lord and being “called a transgressor from the womb” (48:8b, not in our printed text). Jesus would pick up on this language concerning those who would not or could not understand His ministry and identity (example: Matthew 13:10–15).

II. The Living God (Isaiah 48:17)

In Isaiah 48:9–11 (not in our printed text), God asserted that it was for His own glory that He had not already punished Israel for all their disobedience. Verses 12–16 (not in our printed text) go on to assert that God would not leave Babylon unpunished for what the empire had done to Judah (compare Isaiah 13). This is another example of God’s showing His previously hidden plans with the intent of demonstrating that He carries out what He promises.

A. Of Israel (v. 17a)

17a. Thus saith the LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the LORD thy God.

Thus saith the Lord (and variations on the phrase) is a very common way of emphasizing that God, not the prophet, is the source of the prophet’s words (examples: Exodus 4:22; Joshua 24:2; Jeremiah 2:2). Going on to add *thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel* emphasizes the relationship between God and the people (see lesson 6; Isaiah 12:6; 44:24; 47:4; 54:5, 8). We might say that *Redeemer* reflects closeness while *Holy One* reflects distinctiveness in that relationship.

B. Who Teaches the Way (v. 17b–c)

17b. Which teacheth thee to profit.

The source and content of correct teaching is the Lord himself (see Psalm 119:68). This teaching came to Israel first in the form of the Law of Moses. We learn and grow when we do the right thing, but we also can benefit when we learn from our past sins (see 119:71).

God is not often depicted as a teacher in the Old Testament, though of course it would be appropriate to do so. But we do see Jesus called “rabbi” (John 1:38, 49; 3:2, 26; etc.). And while this is *also* appropriate, it does not reflect a complete understanding of Jesus’ role. He is not only a teacher but also the Christ (Matthew 1:1). Jesus still teaches us for our own good; we do well when we obey Him (Luke 9:23–26).

17c. Which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go.

The Bible frequently pictures living as a way that we travel (Genesis 6:12; Psalm 1:6; compare Matthew 7:13–14). There are good paths and bad paths, roads that lead to prosperity and those that lead to destruction (see Deuteronomy 30:15). Isaiah pictures the only wise pathway as following the Lord, living according to His teachings. The Lord is both the teacher of Israel and the way-maker for His people.

Whereas we might think a teacher would take a hands-off approach—“I’ve taught you, and now you must take your test”—God chooses to both teach *and* lead. The Lord does not tell His people the right way to live and then retreat to the background. This is a popular but erroneous understanding of who God is and how He chooses to interact with people. Instead, God leads His people *by the way that they should go*. He is like a shepherd who leads his flock of sheep to safe pastures (Psalm 23:2).

In the New Testament, it is even more striking that Jesus claims himself to be the only “way,” the exclusive pathway to the Father (John 14:6). And the image from John 10 of Jesus as our shepherd resonates because we know the lengths He went to for us. This too is an imperfect metaphor. But taken with other images—including that of teacher—we get a fuller picture of who God is, and how Jesus lived as God incarnate among us (Philippians 2:6–8).

The book of Acts also refers to the Christian faith as the way. Paul’s momentous trip to Damascus was occasioned by his desire to detain Jews who had begun to follow “this way” (Acts 9:2). Toward the end of Acts, Paul appeared before the Roman Governor Felix, who had a rather thorough knowledge of “that way” (24:22). Far from being a theoretical framework, our faith is the very way that we live. When our lives are in step with Jesus and the Spirit, we find ourselves traveling by the way that we should go.

Conclusion

A. Living, Learning

The tragedy of Israel’s history is that God had revealed many things to them: His law, His will for their nation, His choices of leaders, and so on. Despite the long history of such revelations, the nation often acted as though the people did not have ears to hear. Time after time, Israel ignored the Lord’s directives and warnings.

Iron-necked Judah would not change its course of action despite the warnings of the Lord’s prophets, making punishment inevitable. We have a major advantage: we are empowered by the Spirit to grow in our relationship with the Father and become more like Jesus each day.

When we do so, we will be better able to hear warnings when we are following a way not set out by the Lord. And we will have ears hearing what the Lord is doing as He calls to us to join His work. Listen for the call!

B. Prayer

Lord God, forgive us for the times we have been too stubborn to seek You and Your will for our lives. Please give us ears to hear so that we can follow Your way. All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Learn from the Lord and follow in His ways.¹
