

Mercy, Truth And Righteousness

We take chapters 15 and 16 together this week because they both contain ‘the burden of Moab’ given to Isaiah concerning the destruction of the Moabites. The Moabites were an ancient people with whom the Children of Israel had a long and uneasy history. They were sworn foes to God and His people. The founder of the Moabite nation was Moab, son of Lot by incest. The shameful legacy of righteous Lot reminds us of the sad and far-reaching consequences of sin.

A devious neighbour

When Israel came out of Egypt Moab refused passage through their land. Yet, for Lot’s sake, God warned Moses not to go to war with Moab, nor possess their land, nor distress them in battle. That did not stop Moab distressing Israel. Balak hired Balaam, a soothsayer, to curse Israel. Balaam could not do it, but not for lack of desire. His advice, instead, was to infiltrate the camp of Israel with young women to seduce the men of Israel and turn them to idolatry. This shows how wicked and devious the Moabites, and Balaam, were to Israel.

Spiritual lessons

But there are other strands to Israel’s ties with Moab when history is viewed with spiritual eyes. For example, one can see the Promised Land from Moab and believers can see heaven from earth. It was from the top of Pisgah on Mount Nebo, highest part of Moab, that Moses looked out over Canaan, the land God had promised to His people. It was here, in Moab, in a valley, the Lord secretly buried His faithful prophet.

A mother to Christ

So, too, Ruth, daughter-in-law to Naomi and afterward wife of Boaz, was a Moabite and coincidentally, great-grandmother to David, King of Israel in the direct lineage of the Lord Jesus Christ. Though a Gentile, like Tamar and Rahab before her, Ruth was ancestor to our Saviour. God’s grace and salvation was never restricted only to the Jewish people.

Isaiah’s passion

These details perhaps shed light on Isaiah’s burden for Moab. He knew the heart of these people. He knew their rebellious nature. He knew their wickedness deserved and demanded punishment, and he knew that punishment it was imminent – hence his prophecy. Yet Isaiah also understood how warning of judgment to come is, in itself, an opportunity for repentance. With the passion of an evangelist he declares, ‘my heart shall cry out for Moab’.

Moab’s grief

Chapter 15 prophesies about Moab’s grievous howling and relentless weeping. Isaiah speaks of the nation shorn and shaven, bald and beardless. This typifies humiliation and disgrace. Shameful defeat is coming upon Moab. Its enemies shall break the nation in battle, their cities will be quickly overrun, their high places of idol worship will be broken down, their land will be made barren. Even the few survivors who escape these ravages will be met by lions in the way as they try to flee. Utter destruction beckoned.

The gospel in Isaiah

Seeing this, Isaiah does not gloat. Nor does he offer Moab a way of escape. That is not in his gift, nor his purpose. Judgment was coming and soon. This message was for the comfort of the Lord’s elect not the nation whose destruction was being foretold. And yet, there is gospel in the opening verses of Chapter 16. Who is to say that in God’s grace there were not those who heard this burden with an ear to hear and in faith fulfilled its direction?

Moab could and should do good

Isaiah reminds the people of Moab of their failures and faults; their rebellion against Israel, their refusal to pay the tribute due. He calls Moab to right this wrong. The outstanding tribute would have been paid in lambs but Moab defaulted. This should be remedied for the good of the Lord’s hungry people. Also, the displaced refugees of Judah need protection, this too, should be supplied by Moab. Moab was able to show kindness to God’s people and should!

Take counsel, act wisely

Isaiah was not a statesman, nor a negotiator. He was a prophet from God with a spiritual message for God's elect. Israel was about to go into captivity, Moab was under the heavy displeasure of the Lord. Let Moab offer up 'the lamb' as it ought to have done, but let it do so wisely, with understanding, with spiritual counsel and judgment. Send it for an offering in sacrifice. Do it with an eye to Christ, the Messiah of Israel. For, says Isaiah, in mercy, truth and righteousness Christ's throne shall be established in the tabernacle of David. Salvation shall come through God's mercy to the Jews.

The God of all grace

Isaiah advises the Moabites to seek the favour of the Messiah by being kind to Christ's people, advice that holds good in all ages and for all nations. This is not salvation by works. It foreshadowed the apostolic ministry 'to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance'. If the Lord softens the heart of sinners to be kind to His remnant people, might it not encourage a hope, that He who gives the grace of love to His people, will give the grace of faith and repentance towards Himself?

Amen

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