

Understanding Isaiah

The Book of Isaiah is one of the great masterpieces of the world's literature. It expresses in beautiful language many ideas that are so simple that a child can understand them; it also presents teachings so profound and so involved that scholars can spend their lives digging into them and constantly gaining new glimpses of God's truth.

Many verses from this great book of prophecy are known throughout the Christian world, but many others are rarely noticed. Yet Isaiah's teachings go far beyond what lies upon the surface. The more one studies this book, the more he is astonished at the marvels of divine revelation that it contains.

A few principles are of great importance for understanding what Isaiah wrote.

The first of these is the need to recognize the book's natural divisions. For this purpose the chapter divisions are of little help. In fact they can sometimes be quite misleading, for there are places where the last part of an important section and the first part of an entirely different one are united together in one chapter with no indication of the importance of the dividing point between them. Such a chapter division may cause the careless reader (and even some careful ones) to lose sight of the intimate connection of thought with what precedes or with what follows. Even verse divisions have sometimes been very poorly inserted. (Thus one Bible verse, Psalm 19:4, includes the last two lines of the first stanza of a poem and the first line of its second stanza.) Chapter and verse divisions are useful for finding references, but if taken as guides for interpretation they can be very misleading. If these artificial divisions are ignored it is not difficult in most cases to determine where important sections begin and end. When one carefully follows the trend of thought and notes how the ideas develop it is usually easy to recognize the major divisions and most of the lesser ones, and this often proves to be an important step toward determining a passage's meaning.

Another important need for understanding the book is to gain some knowledge of the historical background of its various portions. Some of this knowledge can be gathered from introductory statements in the book and from words that

Isaiah spoke. Additional facts can be learned from the