

A Prophet for Today

Isaiah 1:1-20

Isaiah was a prophet who lived a long time ago. Two thousand, seven hundred fifty eight years ago, to be exact. It was “the year King Uzziah died,” according to Isaiah 6:1. Historians will mark that year as 740 BC.

Uzziah was a good king, one of eight good kings in the southern kingdom of Judah. Remember that after the Kings Saul, David, and Solomon, Israel had divided, north and south. From the Walk Thru the Bible seminar, remember that it was “divided kingdom, 400 years, north, south, Israel, Judah, 19, 20, 0, 8.” 19 kings in the north, 20 in the south. 0 good kings in the north. Only 8 in the south. And there was a useful summary of the message of all those prophets, “Shape up or ship out.”

So that’s the message of Isaiah. Shape up or ship out, in the exile that would come at the hand of the Babylonians. And Isaiah had a lot to say about that as he warned the people of Judah about the future.

The introduction sets the stage,
v.1

Then we get an overview of his whole prophecy here in the first half of chapter 1. There are really two parts to this specific prophecy that we will study today, and they represent the two parts of the whole book of Isaiah. Actually, in a general and somewhat simplistic sense, they are the same two parts of the whole Bible. In the New Testament, we would call them the law and the gospel. The one being a definition of God’s will for our lives. And the other his promise of forgiveness. The one brings death, because we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And the wages of sin is death.

But the other brings life, and most clearly, that life comes through faith in Jesus Christ. It is a gift of grace. That’s the message of Isaiah. That’s the gospel of Isaiah. That’s simply the gospel. So let’s look at that gospel today, in Isaiah 1.

Let me explain my overall plan here. We just started studying Isaiah in the Wednesday night Bible study two weeks ago, and I really want to encourage all of you to come to that study. It is a great opportunity to study, verse by verse, chapter by chapter. I like the interactive context, because it lets me know where your minds are, what you are understanding and what you don’t understand. And we will be going through the whole book over the coming months, more likely a couple years. And I’ve chosen to preach on just a handful of texts in Isaiah in the next coming months on Sunday afternoons, to give you an overall sense of the whole book. I would hope that it would peak your interest to study further by coming Wednesday evenings. And I also want to coordinate this with our study of the gospel of John in the morning, because when I finish that sermon series I intend to preach from an Old Testament book in the morning and switch in the afternoon to a study of a New Testament book. I like to keep that balance in the big picture of what we study as a church.

So, Isaiah. First, the law. Actually, an indictment. That is to say, a legal presentation of charges. Somewhat formal. This first chapter, like the whole book, forms an indictment against the rebellious people of the southern kingdom of Judah. So we have that indictment, which is my first main point today. Then the specific charges, in my second point. And then the gospel, both the call to repentance and the promise of forgiveness spoken as plainly and as clearly as anywhere in the Bible.

Something else to emphasize as we start. Notice my sermon title, “A Prophet for Today.” Isaiah obviously has an historical

context, the 8th century BC, the southern kingdom of Judah. But for all the specific details of that time and place, this prophecy transcends that age and applies to circumstances of today just as clearly and obviously as it applied then. Isaiah is a prophet for today. Despite the Old Testament context, there is nothing out-of-date in what the prophet has to say. As I preach through various passages in this book, then, the applications will be very direct and personal. And the promise of the gospel plain and clear. We begin with a legal indictment.

I. THE LORD INDICTS HIS COVENANT PEOPLE.

Again, listen to these words in the context of a legal document, an indictment, charges of an offense. The Lord is the accuser. And he calls heaven and earth to be his witnesses.

v.2a

I believe the Lord is saying that he has already spoken. There is nothing new here with Isaiah, but the prophet begins with the warnings already given. Specifically, Amos and Hosea have already addressed the people of Judah, but they have not listened. The Lord has already spoken, and the people have not listened.

Then notice how the offense is described, the context of it all.

v.2b

There is a wounded spirit there, the wound a father feels when his children rebel against him. And here, the father is innocent. He has not exasperated his children, to use the language of Ephesians 5. He has not provoked them. Rather, he has nourished them. What a marvelously gentle and personal word, usually a word we associate with mothers. God has nourished his children, given them every good thing they could need, provided for their well-being. Literally, it means he has made

them great. He brought up his children in every good way. And they rebelled!

That's what sin is. Always.

A. Sin is rebellion against a father's love.

It's a rejection of love. And rebellion really is the best word to use. It refers to the breach of a relationship, a turning away. A rejection. And it's a big deal! It's good for us to see our sins in this light. Every sin is an act of rebellion. Every sin is a turning away from God. And notice just how terrible that sin is described in,

v.3

Even the ox is loyal to his master. Even that beast of burden is faithful to his owner. Likewise, the donkey. Even the animals are faithful and loyal. They don't rebel. They willingly submit and do as they are trained. But the children of Israel have become worse than the brute beasts. They are worse than the animals.

The description of their sin continues,

v.4

Nothing good there, to be sure. Nothing but the depth of sinfulness fully exposed. They have lost their natural birthright, they have forsaken their natural identity. They are a brood of evildoers, not faithful children. A wicked seed, a bad seed, we might say. Evil in their very nature. They are corrupters, acting corruptly, with reference to what is rotten and disgusting, like spoiled milk.

That's the nature of sin, and its effect is obvious and understandable.

v.4 "They have forsaken the Lord, They have provoked to anger The Holy One of Israel, They have turned away backward."

They deliberately turned away from God.

So what about you? Can you identify anything of this in yourself? I emphasize that to cause you to think of sin in these terms. We sanitize sin all too often. We downplay its seriousness. We underestimate its offense. We ignore its seriousness and make light of it.

But God doesn't! This is his indictment. The charge is willful and deliberate rebellion. And that's how we should understand all our sin. Every sin.

Isaiah continues to further emphasize the terrible nature of sin.

B. The sin of rebellion is deep-rooted and pervasive.

v.5

The people have already been stricken. They've already experienced God's hand of judgement and discipline. And they didn't respond. God has already dealt with their sin, and they ignored it. In fact, in going on with their sin, Isaiah says "you will revolt more and more." The more the Lord addresses their sin, the more they sin! The more he exposes the hardness of their hearts, the more they rebel.

With an obvious explanation and conclusion in verse 5, "The whole head is sick, And the whole heart faints."

Verse 6 is a definition of what we typically call "total depravity." The extent of sin in our heart.

v.6 "From the sole of the foot even to the head, There is no soundness in it."

Then disgusting language about open wounds and putrefying sores. Those words are gross. They are disgusting. That's what

sin is. It is a putrefying sore. It is like a rotten and infected wound on your body. Or worse, it is the decay of a rotting corpse. It smells like the fluid in an infection. And it poisons the soul just like a deep infection poisons the body.

So think of the worst possible examples. The flesh eating bacteria. The puss oozing out of a cut. Imagine the smell. That's what sin is! Deep-rooted. And pervasive. It's everywhere.

Again the prophet describes the effect of this sin of rebellion upon the whole of the nation.

v.7

Strong words. Desolate. Burned with fire. Think of that city of Paradise, CA, if you want a graphic image. It's gone. Burned. Destroyed, totally and completely annihilated. And the little nation of Judah is just that, little.

v.8

Just a little booth, in a great big vineyard. That's all that's left. A booth. A hut. With no glory. No honor. Nothing. That's the Lord's indictment of his covenant people. Then comes the specific charge.

v.10

That's powerful, isn't it? He calls the people of Judah Sodom and Gomorrah, cities whose complete and utter destruction at the hand of the Lord for their gross and immoral sin represents the response of a holy God to human depravity. He's calling them a name, a bad name, Sodom and Gomorrah. Then the specifics,

v.11

What's the charge? It has to do with their worship. The sacrifices. God prescribed sacrifices of worship, as we've been

studying in the book of Leviticus. God required his people of the Old Covenant to offer up sacrifices that would please him. There were a lot of details given, a lot of specifications required. The kind of animal. The way it was killed. Who could partake of the sacrifice. Where and when it would be killed. And on and on. And those sacrifices were to represent the worshipper. The sacrifice of an animal substitute was to represent the devotion and worship of the one bringing the sacrifice.

And the Lord says, “Why are you doing that?” Verse 11, “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?” There’s an obvious rebuke in that. And specific words of God’s rejection of them.

v.11b “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, Or of lambs or goats.”

Now, think about it. When God prescribed this offerings, he specifically said they were to be a sweet smelling aroma. He specifically said he WOULD take delight in them. So why his strong disapproval here? Why the condemnation of the sacrifices which he had previously required of them? Why does he take no delight in them?

There is a clear answer, I believe. An obvious answer. The people were just going through the motions. What I call “formalism.”

II. THE LORD IDENTIFIES THE HYPOCRISY OF FORMALISM IN WORSHIP.

I grew up going to an Episcopal church, where we recited the same liturgy every week. The same exact words spoken, every week. The same exact actions. And it was SOOO easy just to go through the motions. Just say the words. Now, 40 years later, I

could still go back to that church and say the same words by memory, so etched they are into my brain.

The problem was, they were not an expression of the devotion of my heart. Just words. Merely external words. And,

A. Merely external acts of worship do not please the Lord.

Just going through the motions does not please the Lord. Doing the right things. Saying the right words. That’s not enough.

I believe this is a great danger for the reformed church of our day. We have the “regulative principle,” that we only include as elements of our worship those things which the Lord has commanded. Nothing else. And yet we can get proud of ourselves, can’t we? We’re worshipping the right way because we’re doing the right things. But that’s not enough! Merely external acts of worship do not please the Lord.

Here these words again, from the mouth of a prophet for today,

v.10-11

This is a common theme in the Old Testament. Do you remember what Samuel said to King Saul,

1 Sam. 15:22 “So Samuel said: “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He also has rejected you from being king.”

The Psalmist understood this too.

Ps. 50:7 “Hear, O My people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you; I am God, your God! 8 I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices Or your burnt offerings, Which are continually before Me. 9 I will not take a bull from your house, Nor goats out of your folds. 10 For every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine. 12 “If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world is Mine, and all its fullness. 13 Will I eat the flesh of bulls, Or drink the blood of goats? 14 Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High. 15 Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.”

David himself confesses his own sins in that context, when he prayed,

Ps. 51:16 “For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart— These, O God, You will not despise.”

The sacrifices of worship that please God are the sacrifices of your heart! True in Isaiah’s day. True today! And anything else is worthless.

B. Merely external acts of worship are an abomination to the Lord.

Thus the indictment continues,
v.12-14

And the consequence of that is all the more obvious.
v.15

It is a total rejection of worship offered with insincerity and hypocrisy. God says, “I will hide My eyes from you.” Why, “I

cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting.” You can’t have it both ways! That’s the point! You can’t offer worship to God that is pleasing to him and, at the same time, live a life filled with iniquity.

That’s the law. That’s the indictment. That’s the charge. Now, the solution.

What are we going to do? What are we going to do, here this afternoon, what are WE going to do? We have sinned, everyone of us. Every day. We have rebelled against God with every sin. So what are we to do? Well, just listen! Listen to God’s grace.

III. THE LORD DECLARES HIS GRACE TO HIS COVENANT PEOPLE.

We have already seen a glimpse of that grace in verse 9,
v.9

So even in the proclamation of the judgment of God, there is hope. Actually, the prophet says, we’re not like Sodom and Gomorrah. God will preserve a remnant of his people. In Sodom and Gomorrah, there was no remnant. Such is the grace of God. The remnant is preserved.

But look at just how that takes place. In verses 16 and 17 we see,

A. A call to repentance.

This indictment is not a condemnation. God is not cutting off his people, but rather calling them to repentance. Such is a father’s love. Their hands, says the Lord, “are full of blood.” In other words, guilty. And so the prophet gives this invitation,

v.16

That's the first half of repentance. Turning away from sin. And, of course, repentance is not just an outward and external act. As we read in,

Ps. 24:3 "Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart."

Scripture consistently calls us to repentance. On the day of Pentecost, this was

Acts 2:36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." 37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" 38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

The preaching of the gospel IS the call to repentance.

Luke 24:46 Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

So we all need to hear these words, and receive that invitation, to turn from sin. And, realize that sin is a matter of the heart, not simply a list of external duties and requirements. So the prophet says,
v.17

Justice is righteousness. Pursue what is right! Hunger and thirst for righteousness. And in that context, "rebuke the oppressor." Protect those who are vulnerable, especially the

fatherless and the widow, who have no one else to protect them.

Do you see how similar that is to what James writes in, James 1:26 "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

Similarly,

Micah 6:6 "With what shall I come before the Lord, And bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old? 7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?"

The prophet speaks today, doesn't he? This call to repentance is just as appropriate today as it was in 740 BC. And when you fail, when you sin, this promise is just as clear today as it was then, too.

v.18

The promise is then rounded out in the language and context of the Old Covenant,

v.19-20

Go back with me to verse 18. It is,

B. A promise of forgiveness.

It's a precious promise, isn't it? So clear in its meaning. Sin is like scarlet, red, as in the color of blood. Crimson. We are

stained by our sin. We have blood on our hands. We are guilty, each and every one of us, when we stand before the Lord.

And we are given a promise. The stain and pollution of our sin is removed. Washed away. “Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow.” They shall be as pure and as white as wool.

John would put it this way,

1 John 1:8 “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

And this is how Paul would preach,

Acts 13:26 “Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent...38 Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; 39 and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.”

And when Paul praises God for all the spiritual blessings we enjoy in the heavenly places in Christ, we read,

Eph. 1:7 “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.”

So hear the prophet speak today. Hear this indictment, especially the charge against hypocrisy in our service and worship of God, just going through the motions and thinking that is enough. And where that indictment convicts you, then turn from your sin in repentance. And turn toward God in faith, believing this promise with much encouragement and gratitude,
v.18 “Come now, and let us reason together,” Says the Lord,

“Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.”

1 John 1:8-9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”