



Highlights From the Book of Isaiah

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Corrupt Worship (Isaiah 1:10-20)

¹⁰ Listen to the LORD's message, you leaders of Sodom! Pay attention to our God's rebuke, people of Gomorrah! ¹¹ "Of what importance to me are your many sacrifices?" says the LORD. "I have had my fill of burnt sacrifices, of rams and the fat from steers. The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats I do not want. ¹² When you enter my presence, do you actually think I want this – animals trampling on my courtyards? ¹³ Do not bring any more meaningless offerings; I consider your incense detestable! You observe new moon festivals, Sabbaths, and convocations, but I cannot tolerate sin-stained celebrations! ¹⁴ I hate your new moon festivals and assemblies; they are a burden that I am tired of carrying. ¹⁵ When you spread out your hands in prayer, I look the other way; when you offer your many prayers, I do not listen because your hands are covered with blood."

Corrupt Worship (Isaiah 1:10-20)

¹⁶ Wash! Cleanse yourselves! Remove your sinful deeds from my sight. Stop sinning. ¹⁷ Learn to do what is right. Promote justice. Give the oppressed reason to celebrate. Take up the cause of the orphan. Defend the rights of the widow. ¹⁸ “Come, let’s consider your options,” says the LORD. “Though your sins have stained you like the color red, you can become white like snow; though they are as easy to see as the color scarlet, you can become white like wool. ¹⁹ If you have a willing attitude and obey, then you will again eat the good crops of the land. ²⁰ But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” Know for certain that the LORD has spoken.

(New English Translation)

¹⁰ *Listen to the LORD's message, you leaders of Sodom!
Pay attention to our God's rebuke, people of Gomorrah!*

- This verse, which introduces the *second* section of chapter one, begins with a command to hear the "*LORD's message*".
- The *same* imperatives which were addressed to the "*heavens*" and "*earth*" in verse 2 of the *first* section ("*Listen*" and "*Pay attention*") are directed here to the sinful people *themselves*.
- Although a new section is introduced here, the reference to "*Sodom*" and "*Gomorrah*" connects this verse with the *last* verse of the preceding section.
- According to preceding verse (verse 9), "*a few survivors*" have been spared, and consequently the fate of Judah is *not* that of Sodom.
- Nevertheless, in terms of their sinful behavior, Jerusalem's "*leaders*" have become a spiritual "*Sodom*", and her inhabitants a "*people of Gomorrah*" (cf. Rev 11:8).

¹⁰ *Listen to the LORD's message, you **leaders of Sodom!** Pay attention to our God's rebuke, **people of Gomorrah!***

- Though a milder outcome has been granted to Jerusalem than to Sodom and Gomorrah, it is **not** due to any **merit** found in Jerusalem. ¹
- In verse 9, Isaiah says that it's only because of the **mercy of God** that Judah hasn't **already** been destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah were. ²
- But if the people of Israel think they are **immune** from **judgment** because they are God's chosen people, they'd better think again! ²
- Ultimately, if their **behavior** is no different from that of the **world**, their **fate** will be no different either. ²

¹ *The Book of Isaiah*; Edward J. Young; Eerdmans; p. 59

² Oswalt, John . *Isaiah (The NIV Application Commentary)* (p. 77). Zondervan Academic.

¹¹ “Of what importance to me are your many sacrifices?” says the LORD. “I have had my fill of burnt sacrifices, of rams and the fat from steers. The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats I do not want.

- In answer to the prophet’s condemnation, the people of Judah ***might*** have pointed to their ***religious*** activities.
- Did they not bring ***sacrifices*** as the Lord commanded? Did they not stretch out their arms in ***prayer***?
- How then could Isaiah speak so ***harshly*** to them?
- Whether those questions were actually ever asked by the nation, we don’t know for sure.
- But Isaiah proceeds to take away any such refuge, and clearly condemns ***mere formalism*** in religion.

¹¹ ***“Of what importance to me are your many sacrifices?”***
*says the LORD. “I have had my fill of burnt sacrifices, of rams
and the fat from steers. The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats I
do not want.*

- He begins by asking: ***“Of what importance to me are your many sacrifices?”***
- As the upcoming verses will show, Isaiah’s question is intended to express the idea: ***“What pleasure can I have in sacrifices unless they are offered from the heart?”***
- The answer, of course, is ***none***.

¹¹ ***“Of what importance to me are your many sacrifices?”*** says the LORD. *“I have had my fill of burnt sacrifices, of rams and the fat from steers. The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats I do not want.*

- This same idea is expressed in a number of ***other*** places in the Old Testament:
 - *Does the Lord take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as he does in **obedience**? Certainly, **obedience is better than sacrifice; paying attention is better than the fat of rams.** (1 Sam 15:22)*
 - *For I delight in **loyalty rather than sacrifice**, And in **the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.** (Hos 6:6)*

¹¹ ***“Of what importance to me are your many sacrifices?”*** says the LORD. *“I have had my fill of burnt sacrifices, of rams and the fat from steers. The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats I do not want.*

- This same idea is expressed in a number of other places in the Old Testament:
 - *I absolutely despise your festivals! I get no pleasure from your religious assemblies. Even if you offer me burnt and grain offerings, I will not be satisfied; I will not look with favor on your peace offerings of fattened calves. Take away from me your noisy songs; I don't want to hear the music of your stringed instruments. **Justice must flow like torrents of water, righteous actions like a stream that never dries up.** (Amos 5:21-24).*

¹¹ *“Of what importance to me are your **many sacrifices?**” says the LORD. “I have had my fill of burnt sacrifices, of rams and the fat from steers. The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats I do not want.*

- There was no deficiency in the **number** of offerings.
- The Lord here acknowledges that they have offered “**many sacrifices**”.
- Hypocrites **abound** in **outward religious observances**, often times in **direct proportion** to their neglect of the **spiritual requirements** of God’s word. Which is why **Jesus** said:
 - *Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You give a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you neglect what is more important in the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness! You should have done these things without neglecting the others.* (Mat 23:23).

¹¹ ***“Of what importance to me are your many sacrifices?”*** says the LORD. ***“I have had my fill of burnt sacrifices, of rams and the fat from steers. The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats I do not want.”***

- Though the Israelites offer “*many sacrifices*”, these sacrifices:
 - ***Mean*** nothing to the Lord (“*Of what importance to me are [they]?*”)
 - ***Add*** nothing to the Lord (“*I have had my fill*”)
 - ***Do*** nothing for the Lord (“*The blood... I do not want*”).
- “***Blood***” was the ***core*** of the sacrificial system (see e.g. Lev 17:11) but here the Lord says he does not “***want***” it.

¹¹ “Of what importance to me are your many sacrifices?” says the LORD. “I have had my fill of burnt sacrifices, of rams and the fat from steers. **The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats I do not want.**”

- The Hebrew word translated here as “**want**”, means literally “to delight, or take pleasure in”
- The same word appears **later** in Isaiah 53:10 (“**the Lord desired to crush him**”).
- And so, before Isaiah is finished with this book, he will reveal a sacrifice in which the Lord **does** delight.
- But **how** can the Lord so persistently **reject** the sacrifices offered by the people of Judah?
- Verses 12-15 supply the answer.

¹² *When you enter my presence, do you actually think I want this – animals trampling on my courtyards?*

- The temple was in Jerusalem, and was regarded as the habitation, or dwelling-place, of the God of Israel. ¹
- Hence, to “*enter my presence*” means to appear in his temple as a worshipper. ¹
- When God asks “*do you actually think I want this?*” the Israelites would probably have replied, “Yes, we’re doing what you told us to do!” ²
- But their actions were missing the *most important ingredient*: “*The sacrifice God desires is a humble spirit... a humble and repentant heart*” (Ps. 51:17). ²
- Without this, their worship was merely a “*trampling on [God’s] courtyards*”, a figurative expression for “a meaningless *stomping* on God’s glory and honor”. ²

¹ Albert Barnes Commentary

² *Isaiah An Introduction and Commentary* - Paul D. Wegner - Tyndale OT Commentaries

¹³ ***Do not bring any more meaningless offerings; I consider your incense detestable! You observe new moon festivals, Sabbaths, and convocations, but I cannot tolerate sin-stained celebrations!***

- God commands them to “*not bring any more meaningless offerings*”.
- Even their “*incense*”, which was meant to be a pleasing aroma to God (see Lev. 6:15), was “*detestable*” to him, one of the strongest words for disgust and abhorrence (see Deut. 7:25).
- Observances that God required (such as “*new moon festivals, Sabbaths, and convocations*”) had become “*sin-stained celebrations*”, meaningless repetitions of contempt for his glory, which God says he can no longer “*tolerate*”.

¹⁴ *I hate **your** new moon festivals and assemblies; they are a burden that I am tired of carrying.*

- Here the Lord mentions *again* some of the nation's religious practices mentioned in the *previous* verse, emphasizing his *disgust* with them.
- But here he carries the thought a *step further*: he calls them "*your new moon festivals*".
- It is as though God had said, "These feasts of new moons are not *mine*; they're *yours*. Your way of celebrating is not what *I* wanted, but what *you* wanted."
- Had these been the *Lord's* new moon festivals they would have been observed in *true devotion* to *him*.
- *Their* new moon festivals on the other hand are something *quite different*.

¹⁴ *I hate your new moon festivals and assemblies; **they are a burden that I am tired of carrying.***

- The Lord goes on to say that these religious observances as they are being carried out by the people in Jerusalem “*are a **burden that I am tired of carrying.***”
- This is language which is used to describe the act of someone carrying a burden until they become weary and faint.
- So, God uses a *human comparison* where he describes himself as *burdened* with their vain offerings, and evil conduct.
- There could not be a more impressive statement of the evil effects of sin, than to say, as he does here, that even God in his *omnipotence* has become *exhausted* with their sinful behavior.

15 *When you spread out your hands in prayer, I look the other way; when you offer your many prayers, I do not listen because your hands are covered with blood.*"

- “*When [they] spread out [their] hands in prayer*”, a typical posture for prayer, Yahweh would “*look the other way*”.¹
- Even when offering “*many prayers*”, like the pagans who thought that their many words could appease their gods (cf. Mat 6:7), it would have *no effect*.¹
- The next phrase explains why: their “*hands are covered with blood*”.¹
- This is probably a *figurative* expression, not meaning *literally* that they were murderers, but that they were given to *injustice*; to the oppression of the poor, the widow, etc.²
- The idea here is, that because they indulged in sin, and came, *even in their prayers*, with a determination to *continue* indulging in sin, God would not *respond* to their prayers.²
- This same sentiment is expressed in Psalm 66:18: “*If I had harbored sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened*”²

¹ *Isaiah An Introduction and Commentary* - Paul D. Wegner - Tyndale OT Commentaries

² Albert Barnes Commentary

¹⁶ *Wash! Cleanse yourselves! Remove your sinful deeds from my sight. Stop sinning.*

- This verse contains **four** imperatives:
 - *“Wash!”*
 - *“Cleanse yourselves!”*
 - *“Remove your sinful deeds from my sight”*
 - *“Stop sinning”*
- These and other similar commands to sinners have often been misunderstood.
- Albert Barnes, for example, says that Isaiah addresses the nation as *“moral agents, and as having ability to [carry out God’s commands]. This is the uniform manner in which God addresses sinners in the Bible, requiring them to put away their sins, and to make themselves a new heart.”*
- This is the ancient error of **Pelagianism**.

¹⁶ *Wash! Cleanse yourselves! Remove your sinful deeds from my sight. Stop sinning.*

- For ***nowhere*** is it implied or taught in the Bible that fallen man has the moral ***ability*** to do what God has commanded him.
- John Calvin goes to the heart of the matter when he says: *“Now we know that the sacred writers attribute to men what is wrought in them by the Holy Spirit of God whom Ezekiel calls ‘clean water’ because to him **alone** belongs the work of repentance”* (cf. Ezek 36:25)
- So, you might ask, why are these commands ***given*** if the men of Judah did not have within themselves the ability to obey them?
- The answer is that they serve to bring men to a ***conviction*** of their ***need*** for washing and cleansing.

¹⁶ *Wash! Cleanse yourselves! Remove your sinful deeds from my sight. Stop sinning.*

- Like men today, the inhabitants of Judah thought they had ***no need*** for such washing and cleansing.
- They brought sacrifices! Wasn't that enough?
- These commands serve to ***convince*** men of their ***inability*** to obey.
- What man in his own strength is able to wash and cleanse himself from the stain of sin?
- Commands such as these serve the purpose of causing a man to seek after the ***true*** source of cleansing – the grace and mercy of God!

¹⁷ ***Learn to do what is right.*** Promote justice. Give the oppressed reason to celebrate. Take up the cause of the orphan. Defend the rights of the widow.

- After the ***negative*** exhortations given in the preceding verse, Isaiah now gives five **positive** exhortations, the ***first*** of which lays the groundwork for all the others.
- To “***learn***” implies that the people need to be ***taught***.
- To “***do what is right***” was something new to them, something that had to be ***learned***.
- From ***whom*** were the people to learn this lesson?
- Certainly ***not*** from ***themselves***, but from ***God***, who is the only ***true*** teacher of doing what is right.

¹⁷ *Learn to do what is right. Promote justice. Give the oppressed reason to celebrate. Take up the cause of the orphan. Defend the rights of the widow.*

- To “*do what is right*” consists in obeying the remaining four commands:
 - “*Promote justice*” – this justice was not merely civil righteousness, but right judgment in *every* sphere of life.
 - “*Give the oppressed reason to celebrate*” – up to this point, wrongdoing has been unrestrained. This needs to stop. If the strong oppress the weak, there can be no justice. Such wrongdoing must be restrained.
 - “*Take up the cause of the orphan*” – Give the orphan the right of a just judgment in order that he may present his case and receive a thoroughly just treatment.
 - “*Defend the rights of the widow*” – The widow and orphan are mentioned together because of their helplessness. They represent those who are weak and without help.

¹⁷ *Learn to do what is right. Promote justice. Give the oppressed reason to celebrate. Take up the cause of the orphan. Defend the rights of the widow.*

- This passage clearly reveals a concern over the social injustice of the time.
- Such social injustices however could only be corrected by a change of heart on the part of *individuals*.
- Christians should pray for their rulers – specifically that God would give them *righteous* rulers.
- They should remember that they are “*the salt of the earth*” (Mat 5:13), and that the best thing they can do with respect to social conditions is to live as Christians and seek to apply the principles of Christianity to every aspect of life.

¹⁸ “Come, **let’s consider your options**,” says the LORD.
“Though your sins have stained you like the color **red**, you can become **white** like **snow**; though they are as easy to see as the color **scarlet**, you can become white like **wool**.”

- In the next three verses, the Lord commands Judah to consider the “**options**” that she has, going forward.
- Her present **sinful** condition is described metaphorically by the color “**red**” or “**scarlet**” – the color of unjustly shed blood (bringing to mind their “**hands... covered with blood**” mentioned in verse 15).
- But the Lord tells them that they **can** become **pure** and **without sin** – a condition metaphorically described as “**white**” like “**wool**” or “**snow**”.
- Here Isaiah, who has been commanding **repentance**, shows himself to be a prophet of **grace**.

¹⁸ *“Come, let’s consider your options,” says the LORD. “Though your sins have stained you like the color **red**, you can become **white** like snow; though they are as easy to see as the color scarlet, you can become white like wool.*

- Even if the nation’s sins are the deepest “*red*”, they may become the purest “*white*”: the very opposite of what they are now.
- We find within these words the doctrine of *forensic justification*.
- God *now* regards the people of Judah as blood-red.
- He *will*, however, regard them as snow-white.
- How can such a blessing be received?
- *Only* through God’s mercy in which forgiveness, pardon, and life are offered to men who are required to *repent* of their sins.

¹⁸ *“Come, let’s consider your options,” says the LORD. “Though your sins have stained you like the color **red**, you can become **white** like snow; though they are as easy to see as the color scarlet, you can become white like wool.*

- If the people’s sins are regarded as “*white*”, as *non-existent* by God, this is tantamount to saying that God has *justified* the people.
- We can paraphrase it this way: “I *now* regard your sins as *blood-red*, but I *shall* regard them as *white*.”
- Lest anyone should think, however, that this was a straightforward offer of pardon *regardless* of whether or not there was repentance on the part of those addressed, the Lord *immediately* calls the attention of the nation to the *need* for *repentance*.

¹⁹ *If you have a willing attitude and obey, then you will again **eat** the good crops of the land.* ²⁰ *But if you refuse and rebel, you will be **devoured** by the sword.” Know for certain that the LORD has spoken.*

- The people of Israel have a **clear choice** to make: they can either receive forgiveness and blessing by turning to God in repentance, **or** they can experience further punishment for their continued rebellion.
- Their choice is highlighted by a wordplay: They can either:
 - **Obey** God’s laws and “**eat**” the good things of the land (v. 19);
or
 - **Disobey** and **be “devoured”** by the sword (i.e. war; v. 20).
- God, the sovereign of the universe, is in earnest that Israel **must** change her ways; if not, punishment is coming.

Next Time

I plan to cover Isaiah 2:1-5 which talks about The Future Glory of Jerusalem.

Class Discussion Time



*Class Discussion Time

- We no longer offer animal sacrifices as they did in Isaiah's day. But are there external religious activities that we carry out in our day which, if done without our hearts being right, would cause God to say he has had his fill of what we are doing and, in fact, finds what we are doing to be detestable? Can you give an example?
- Isaiah speaks out against injustice that existed in ancient Judea. In that day, orphans and widows were often taken advantage of and treated unjustly because they often did not have the power to defend themselves, making it easy for people to take advantage of them. Do you think this is true of orphans and widows in our day? Are there **other** groups who tend to be treated unjustly in our day? If so, who?

*Class Discussion Time

- We talked about how man in his sinful state does not have the **ability** to obey the commands of God.
- A.W. Pink in his book *The Sovereignty of God* makes the following distinction between **natural** and **moral** inability:
 - *It is of first importance that we **distinguish** between **natural** inability and **moral and spiritual inability**. For example, we read, “**Now Ahijah could not see; he had lost his eyesight in his old age.**” (1 Kings 14:4); and again, “[The men] tried to row back to land, but they **were not able to do so because the storm kept growing worse and worse.**” (Jonah 1:13). In both of these passages the words “**could not**” or “**were not able**” refer to **natural inability**. But when we read, “**When Joseph's brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated Joseph and were not able to speak to him kindly.**” (Gen. 37:4), it is clearly **moral ability** that is in view. They did not lack the **natural** ability to “**speak to him kindly**”, for they were not **dumb**. Why then was it that they “**were not able to speak to him kindly**”? The answer is given in the same verse: it was because “**they hated Joseph**.”*
- What do you think of the distinction that Pink is making here? Does this distinction help you better understand how we can be held responsible for something we **cannot** do?