

Isaiah 1: 1-20 God's Verdict on His People

One of the unusual things about the book of Isaiah is that we have to wait until chapter 6 before we read how God calls Isaiah to take his message to his people. And so chapters 1 to 5 function as an author's preface. They introduce themes and ideas that will be developed later, and they do so with a clarity that leaves us in no doubt about the seriousness of Israel's sin and the perilous state in which they found themselves.

All this talk of sin and judgement doesn't sit well with many people today. We live in a culture which seeks to deal with problems and issues by ignoring them and building self-esteem instead, so pointing out people's failings and weaknesses runs completely against that idea. But the only way we will ever change is by confronting the truth about ourselves. And whilst, in the words of Scottish poet Robert Burns, it's a wonderful gift of God to see ourselves as others see us, it's far better to see ourselves as God sees us. He is able to look not just at the outside, to our actions and words, but inside to, where our hearts and attitudes are exposed to him.

And if that feels scary, then we haven't yet grasped the character of God. You see, as we work through the book of Isaiah and read God's words of judgement and condemnation against his people, we need to remember that God's purpose in bringing them face-to-face with their failings is redemption not rejection; love and grace, not punishment and judgement. His desire is that his children would turn back to him and choose life, rather than death.

So this morning whilst we're going to look at the charges God lays against his people, we will also see the remedy God offers and weigh the decision that God's people had to make. But here are three very quick points before we do.

Firstly, we need to remember that these words were written to God's people, not the Gentile or pagan world. That means that the parallels between God's words to his Old Testament people and to us in his church today are much easier to make. So we need to weigh ourselves against these charges too.

But secondly, we need to remember that we live the other side of the cross. Whatever sin the Lord, by the working of his Spirit, helps us recognise in our own lives this morning, we must remember that for those who are in Christ there is no condemnation. As Christians, our continued sin may rob us of our peace and joy and take away a sense of God's love and presence with us, it may wreck our lives, damage our relationships, even damage the church, but our own salvation is secure. We must never forget that. That's no excuse for continuing in a pattern of disobedience against God, by the way. But it should encourage us to confess and to seek God's help to change.

Thirdly, as a reminder of God's purposes in this book, we only need to look to the name of the man who wrote it. Isaiah means God saves, and God saves sinners like us. So let's not be frightened to ask God to search our hearts this morning. His purposes for us are good and as our sin is uncovered, so God's grace is offered in greater measure. Let's remember that as we dive in to chapter 1 and see first of all the charges that the Lord lays against his people.

1: The charges

The whole of chapter 1, and we will think about the rest of the chapter next week, works as a courtroom scene. God's people are in the dock, and the Lord is the judge, setting out the serious charges that are against them.

The first charge is that God's people are **stupid**, they have forgotten who they are. Isaiah tells them that even dense animals, like oxen and donkeys, understand who they belong to and who provides for them, but that God's people have forgotten. They have forgotten that the Lord is their Father, the one who reared them, cared for them, and adopted them as his children. They have forgotten that he is the one who rescued their forefathers from slavery Egypt and brought them into the promised land. They have forgotten that he is the one who gave them his covenant promises, revealed his laws, and whose presence was with them in the temple. The LORD was their God, their provider, their shield, their defender, their redeemer, their hope, their glory – but they had forgotten all that. They had forgotten that they had been bought with a price; forgotten their history, and forgotten their identity.

And their stupidity, their forgetfulness, had led them into **sin**. Verse 4 gives us the headlines, they were “*a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption.*” Theirs was sin at an individual and society level. Verses 15 to 17 make that clear don’t they. This is a society where the poor are mistreated, the fatherless and widows are exploited, and where no one seems to care. They are self-centred, greedy, violent, corrupt. Like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan, many are in need, but they are walking by on the other side.

The way they are described in the last phrase of verse 15 is stark isn’t it: Their hands are full of blood. God is accusing them of active participation in evil and a refusal to do anything about wrong they see others doing. They are corrupt to the core, and actually that isn’t surprising. They had forgotten who they were, so no wonder they were behaving just like everybody else.

And that’s a danger for us too. If we, as Christians, forget who we are in Jesus, if we forget our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit in which Christ dwells, if we forget that we are people made for communion with God, made to be a light to the world, in spiritual terms saints of God: if we forget those things then it is far easier for us to fall into sin. And whilst we may not have literal blood on our hands, we should not think we can get away lightly. When it comes to levels of sin Jesus raises the stakes and says that hatred for someone is akin to murder, that lust is as much of a sin as adultery, that what goes on in our hearts and in our thoughts is just as important to God as what we do with our hands. The apostle James explains that as children of God our lips should be kept free of lies or gossip or unkindness because our lips are made to praise God.

So let me ask you, have you forgotten who you are? In the core of your being do you know that you are a child of God, bought by the precious blood of Jesus, loved, cherished, the valuable to him? If you are a Christian, then forgetting those truths is as crazy as forgetting who you are married to, who your children are or forgetting what your name is. And if you don’t bring your true identity in Christ to mind, if that’s not how you see yourself, then you won’t live like it. The stupidity of Israel led to sin and forgetting who we are in Christ will lead us to sin also. But that wasn’t their only problem. The third charge is that they were **stubborn**.

When God’s people were about to enter the promised land he told Moses to read out the covenant promises to them. You can read about that in Deuteronomy chapters 28 and 29. After reminding his people of who they were and what he had done for them God gave his people a choice. Blessings and protection would flow from their obedience, but discipline, disease and disaster, a removal of God’s blessing and protection, would result from their disobedience.

Sadly, if you read the Old Testament history books God’s people were disobedient many times, and they reaped the results of their sin, but in his grace and mercy God had sent them prophets and kings to bring them back to himself and the people almost always responded. But now they had stopped noticing the signs. They had grown stubborn in their hearts and had refused to change. A sinful lifestyle always has consequences, but at this point it was as if they didn’t notice. The description in verses 5 to 6 compares God’s people to a punch-drunk boxer. He is beaten and battered, no part of his body is without wounds and yet he keeps going back for more. Verse 7 puts it in terms of the political reality. The nation is being overrun, their wealth is being captured, walls are being broken down, cities burnt. The glory and strength of Zion was no more sturdy than a lean-to in an allotment. And still the people wouldn’t change.

The depth of their sin is obvious when you read verses 9 and 10. I don’t know what the worst insult you could have thrown at you, but for God’s holy people to be described as **Sodom and Gomorrah** must have come pretty close. In Sodom and Gomorrah sin became so commonplace, paraded around as if it was perfectly acceptable, that God destroyed them with fire from heaven. That’s how bad things had got in Israel. The moral compass of God’s people had been turned upside down and they didn’t care.

And the reason they didn’t seem to be bothered was that they were **oh so religious**. Verses 11 to 15 show that whilst the hearts of the people were far away from God their religious practices were flourishing. Temple sacrifices, burnt offerings, the use of incense, feasts and festivals, they were all continuing with great fervour. The people were

religiously religious, but it wasn't real. As Isaiah will say in a later chapter, *"these people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me."* There was a what one writer described as "an unholy alliance of religious duty and personal iniquity." The temple was busy, the sacrifices were performed beautifully but it was all a front. Jesus called people like that whitewashed tombs. They looked great on the outside, but inside were rotten and dead. Religiously they were impressive but the rest of the lives revealed the wickedness, selfishness, pride, greed and ungodly attitudes that ruled in their hearts. What was worse they seemed to think that the organised, temple-based form of religion was all that mattered, but they were wrong. It's almost as if things were so bad that God himself felt like saying "do I really have to go to church today?"

They were in a terrible state, and it's easy to condemn them. Their sins are there in black and white for all to see. But before we come to the remedy, let me ask you to check your own heart and your own life. Is your faith pretty much only the repeated rituals of church on Sundays or is it a life-shaping relationship with the living God? Does your whole life, from family to work and play, reflect the values of God? Does your life show a care for the poor, the lonely, the widow, the orphan or are you simply living for yourself? Are you someone who rejoices in the fact that God has forgiven you, but who can't or won't forgive those who have hurt you? Is your behaviour or your language one way at work or at home, but completely different when you walk through the doors of the church? If so, whilst the levels may be different, that is exactly the kind of thing God was appalled by here. Being in God's family means living with God's values 24-7 – does that describe you? If not, there is a remedy, there is a way out. There was for God's people, and there is for you and we see it down in verses 16 to 18.

2: The remedy v16-18

One of the wonderful differences of the Christian faith compared to all other religions is that we do not need to do anything to win God's favour. In Christ, God has done it all for us. Our job is to receive what God has already done for us. And whilst that begins with asking for God's forgiveness, the word the Bible uses – repentance – goes much further than just saying one or two words.

Verses 16 and 17 explain the remedy this way: *"wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."*

You see what Isaiah is saying here? The remedy begins with a wash. For the Jews that meant acknowledging their sinfulness, and with a true and sincere heart seeking God's forgiveness by making appropriate sacrifices.

You see simply appearing to say sorry by making the appropriate sacrifice wasn't enough. They had been doing that all along. They had been using the sacrifices as Christians across the ages have used times of confession, to cleanse one's conscience so they could go out and do exactly the same thing again. That isn't repentance as Isaiah makes clear. Repentance involves taking their evil deeds out of God's sight, in other words, they had to stop doing them. Repentance doesn't just mean saying sorry it means walking a different way from that point on. Verse 17, they had to *"learn to do right."*

True repentance begins with an honest assessment of our attitudes or behaviours, brings us humbly to the foot of the cross, asking for God's undeserved forgiveness, and it means that we walk from then on in a very different direction. And as Christians we know that we are not left to walk that path alone. It's not about determination, or strength of character or even the cajoling of our church family, although they are all useful. Our advocate, our help to change is God himself, coming to us by his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit assures us of God's forgiveness and then works in us, changing us from the inside out so that we are able to walk God's way from that point on.

Just pause for a moment and think how astonishing God's mercy is. This was a nation who had forgotten who they truly were, who had turned their backs on God, who had rejected his laws, who ignored his father-like discipline, who were evil, corrupt, unjust, selfish, idolatrous: this was a nation Isaiah calls Sodom and Gomorrah, whose hands are full of blood and yet God offers them complete forgiveness. Verse 18: *"come now, let us settle the matter," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall*

be like wool." What astonishing grace! What love! What mercy! Verse 9 tells us that they deserved to have been destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah and that it was only out of God's grace that some were left! They deserved his wrath, and yet what they are offered is grace.

And however grieved or guilty you feel about the state of your life right now, however far you have fallen, whatever sins are holding you captive, whatever false gods have taken the worship that belongs rightfully to the Lord, however cold your heart has become, however far you have wandered, that offer of grace is there for you today as well. What's more, there are no sacrifices that you need to make, because Jesus has done that for you.

You see we all deserve God's wrath. There is no religious duty, no acts of service, no amount of money we could give nor number of good deeds that we could perform that would undo our sin and rebellion against God. And so God came himself and took our punishment in our place. The price has been paid. What remains is a decision.

3: The Decision

If you've never made a decision to come to Jesus yourself, then that decision is laid out for you in black-and-white in verse 19 and 20. It is the choice between receiving God's blessing or God's wrath, and the decision has eternal consequences: come to Christ, repent, believe and follow Jesus and you will have an eternal destiny of glory, peace and joy which surpasses your wildest imaginations. But if you keep your back turned away from God, if you reject his offer of love then you stand condemned already. Don't think your church going or good works will save you, they can't. God's offer is still there for you but you must accept it to benefit from Christ's death.

But remember these words are written to those who called themselves God's people but who were not living like it. It could be those who are just going through the motions with a kind of cultural, *'survey form C of E tick'* faith, or they could be those who have simply fallen into sin and can't seem to get out. For God's Old Testament people resisting God, continuing to rebel against him would lead to the fall of Jerusalem and being devoured by the sword. For the Christian today the consequences may not be so violent, but they will be real. Sin always has painful consequences, for us and those around us. It robs us of the joy and peace and purpose that are our birth-right in Christ and it damages the reputation of the God who loved us and gave himself for us. Why would we deny ourselves that? It surely can't be fear! The father who calls to us is standing waiting to forgive and restore and bless. Like the prodigal son's father, he runs to those who return ready to put a ring on our finger, a robe around our shoulders, shoes on our feet and ready to throw a mighty celebration.

Whatever the Lord is pointing out in your heart today, don't resist. Come to him. Repentance and change leads to complete forgiveness, blessing, restoration to intimacy with the Father, the assurance of prayers heard, of our worship accepted, and renewed confidence in his promises of what is to come. It can feel uncomfortable, perhaps we might be fearful of how God will react to us, but the blessings are glorious.

One writer put it like this: *conviction of sin is the Holy Spirit being kind to us by confronting us with the light we don't want to see and the truth we are afraid to admit and the guilt we prefer to ignore. Conviction of sin is the severe love of God overruling our compulsive dishonesty, our wilful blindness, our favourite excuses. Conviction of sin is the violent sweetness of God opposing the sins that live comfortably undisturbed in our lives. Conviction of sin is the merciful God declaring war on the false peace we settle for. Conviction of sin is our escape from malaise to joy, from attending church to worship, from faking it to authenticity. Conviction of sin, with the forgiveness of Jesus pouring over our wounds, is life.*

What will you choose today? The people of Judah and Jerusalem heard the harsh verdict of God in the words of Isaiah and heard too the offer of full forgiveness and renewed faith yet they stubbornly refused to listen. They chose disobedience, disgrace, disaster and death instead of grace and forgiveness. That doesn't need to be our destiny. However rebellious you have been, however far you have fallen, God's grace is there for you today. Will you choose life in Jesus' name? I pray that you will.