

Isaiah 2: 6-22: God Punishes the Proud

For those of you are new to our series on the book of Isaiah, or if you just have a short memory, let me briefly bring you up to speed.

Isaiah lived in and around Jerusalem some 600 years or so before Jesus. Born probably into a well-connected family Isaiah had a specific call of God on his life to be God's special messenger to his people. And it was not an easy calling. Starting way back in time with Abraham, God had called a people to himself. He had rescued them from slavery in Egypt, placed them in the promised land, and given them his laws both to govern their lives and to allow them to truly flourish with him as their King. They had been blessed, saved, protected, taught and given a calling to be God's witnesses to the wider world. They were supposed to be his holy people, living justly and righteously in a broken world but they had failed miserably.

In these early chapters of the book of Isaiah we get introduced to the big themes of Israel's rebellion. We've already seen the blatant hypocrisy in the religion of their day and noted that instead of being a nation where justice ruled, they were a nation where money talked and where the poor, the weak and the widow were oppressed. In this passage today we see something else rotten within God's people. In fact, it is the root of both of the things we have looked at already: these were God's people, called to worship him alone but instead they were chasing after other gods. Idolatry was rife.

Now I guess what comes to mind when I mention the word idols are the kind of statues we see in Hindu temples or pagan shrines. And to be sure there are plenty of those mentioned in this passage. But there is another kind of idolatry which is even more insidious and it's one that we are prone to in our society today. By idolatry I'm speaking about the worship of those things which Tim Keller calls counterfeit gods. They are what we live for, what we hold as our greatest ambition, what we value most. It could be success; achieving something notable, getting a name for ourselves or a position of significance. It could be power and influence; getting promoted, being popular, having people listening to us. It could be money and wealth; being able to afford the car or the holidays or a house that you think will bring you the greatest joy. It could even be family; a desire to have that perfect family unit, the perfect wife or husband, the perfect children.

Now none of those things are necessarily bad in themselves. It's good to be in positions of leadership because there we can accomplish the greatest good. It's good to work hard and gain promotion. We need money to live and to give generously, and our families are wonderful gifts from God. However, none of these things are ultimately trustworthy. Fame and success and power even money and family, are ultimately fickle and frail, and they cannot ever deliver what we hope they will. However much money we have, it's never quite enough. However much success or power we have there is always someone either threatening our position from below or looking down on us from above. And our families are as flawed as we are. Mortal, sinful, greedy, frustrating, just as we are. They cannot deliver on the promises they seem to make and they are terrible masters because they demand more and more from us with diminishing returns. But even more seriously, they lead us away from the God who can and does truly deliver all we need.

Perhaps you want to respond to me by saying that really all you are seeking is happiness. That's what most parents wish for their children isn't it. We don't wish that our kids would be multimillionaires or prime ministers, we just want them to be happy. But if our routes to happiness are in these fickle temporary things, we and our children will be terribly and perhaps even eternally disappointed.

Now that's a major problem for us, as we'll see later, but it was a huge problem for the people of Israel. They had been set apart as God's people: rescued, blessed, taught, reminded and disciplined to keep them on the right track but they had gone off the rails. And like a father who can do no more God had reached the point where he had given them over to what they wanted to chase. Sometimes we have to do that with our children don't we, however painful the outcomes may be. We have to let them go the way they choose because that's the only way they will ever learn. We would much rather our children learnt from our wisdom because we have been that way before and we would

save them the pain that will come, but sometimes children are headstrong and stubborn and want to try and prove us wrong. Israel wanted to prove God wrong. But they were never going to win that battle, and neither will we.

So when Isaiah says in verse 6 that the Lord had abandoned his people, this is what he means. It's not that God has given up on them, it's just that he's got out of the way to allow them to make their own mistakes without being there to soften their landings.

With those things in mind, let's look briefly at these verses together.

1: Israel: Full but empty

The description Isaiah gives of God's people in verses 6 to 9 is of a nation that looks prosperous, strong, wealthy and multicultural, perhaps not unlike the UK today. The people had embraced the superstitions of the East, they were practising divination like the Philistines, and pagan customs were rife, and did you see the number of idols mentioned in verse 8? There was great wealth in the land, no end to their treasures, verse 7. The talk of horses and chariots at the end of that verse represents military strength and might. This was a nation that was strong and self-confident, that had embraced wider ideologies, it was open to business, open to the world and it didn't see that it had done anything wrong. The coffers were full, the barracks were full, the culture was full, varied and exciting. Walk round many parts of our big cities today, and this is what you will see. Flashy cars, smart suits and expensive dresses, posh restaurants, nightclubs, casinos, temples, mosques, weird new-age shops selling crystals and tarot card readers on many street corners. It all reads like a vibrant multicultural society.

And you might want to ask what's wrong with that? What's wrong with success, military strength, splashing the cash now and again? What's wrong with being open to new ideas? What's wrong with enjoying different cultures? What's wrong with people being able to practise their own religion? Everything looks good and full – what could be wrong with that?

For God's people there was much that was wrong with that. The one, true, living and only God had revealed himself to them in power and might and majesty. Having rescued them from slavery in acts of great power he had given them his law, set them apart as a people of his own, and called them to be different and live holy lives. But look what they had become! They had taken on the practices of other nations. They were putting their confidence in their own wealth and their own military, rather than trusting in God. They were bowing down to idols of their own making and feeling pretty good about it. Their trust was anywhere but in the one true living God.

And that's a big problem, because ultimately those things cannot be relied on to protect us or rescue us or provide for us. As I said earlier, these are counterfeit gods with no power to save or to help or to heal or to rescue. They look great! They look strong! They look good! But they cannot deliver. They are frauds and thieves and liars and untold numbers of lives are ruined when people chase after them.

Superstitions, divinations, spiritualists and mediums, all claim to offer hope to grieving people but they are based on lies and they will lead you away from trusting the one true living God. If we are honest, we know that no amount of money or military strength can protect us from fear or death. And how stupid do you have to be to bow down and worship a God that you have made yourself! Israel looked full, looked good, looked confident and safe but in reality, their storehouses, their savings were empty. And the way to see that is to compare the things they were hoping in with God himself. That's what we see happening in verses 10 to 21.

2: God: Supreme, glorious and overwhelming.

I wonder if you noticed the number of times that pride and humility were mentioned in these verses? Pride is something that is encouraged these days isn't it. Be proud of yourself. Be proud of who you are. Be proud of what you've done. But in the Bible, we are told that humility is the greater virtue, that pride comes before a fall, and that the problem of pride is that it fixes our hopes on things that cannot deliver. We've looked at some of them already.

In verses 10-11 when God comes on the scene the proud are brought low and humbled, in fact they hide away from the fearful presence of the Lord because ultimately with God in their midst their empty boasts are shown up for what they are. How can worldly or military power compare to the God who created the world? How can all the wealth accumulated by great trading nations compare to the one who holds the universe in his hands? How can a bit of wood, covered with gold or jewels, or weird mystical rituals compare to the God who spoke and creation came into being?

Even the might and glory of creation, the best that human society can do, the greatest buildings, the greatest inventions and human achievements, those are the things listed in verses 12 to 18, none of those compares to the Lord Almighty. We laud Stephen Hawking for his vast intellect and ability to understand how the cosmos works but it was God who created the cosmos Hawking studied! We honour explorers and round the world sailors for their bravery and courage, and compared to me they are incredibly courageous and incredibly talented, but God made the oceans and when Jesus came on the scene he calmed the raging storm with just a word. What is man and all of man's greatest achievements compared to him?

And in verses 19 to 21 we see what happens when God shows up. When this great day of the Lord appears, money and power and wealth count for nothing. It's interesting here that the idols of silver and gold which the people made to worship are thrown away to the moles and the bats. In Jewish culture those creatures were unclean; vermin to be avoided at all costs, and yet that is where these once precious and honoured idols are thrown. Their idols are of no use, because they have no power or worth compared to Almighty God.

When God comes on the scene, as he one day will, the false gods in which we trust will shrink to nothing. When God comes on the scene the true value of the things we strive for will be revealed. When God comes on the scene the false promises we have believed will be shown to be empty. When God comes on the scene we may find ourselves in huge trouble. I hope you can see that.

But before I go on to offer you a way out I'd like you just take a moment to reflect on the things you value most, the things you hold in highest esteem, the things you worship and seek after. If you are unsure what they are, then consider what you spend your time thinking about, what things exert the greatest control on your diary, what things you spend most of your free time and money doing: those are your idols. And if those things not rooted in God then I hope you can see that when you stand before God those things, however valuable this world may find them, will ultimately count for nothing.

I know life is busy and frantic. Each day we are bombarded by all kinds of media that tell us to find our happiness, our purpose, our reality in the things of this world, but this life is not all there is. One day Jesus will return, and whether we have died before that or are alive when it happens we will all have to stand before God and give an account of ourselves. And on that day the true value of the things in which we have placed our trust will be revealed, and if we belong to Jesus, if our trust is in him, then God promises an eternity of greater joy and lasting pleasure than anything we have known here on earth. But if we have not turned to Jesus in repentance and faith, if we have not sought our meaning, our hope and our joys in God then on that day we will want to run and hide— but no rocks will be big enough and no caves will be deep enough: there will be no escape from the eternal justice of God or from his fearful presence and the splendour of his majesty for those who have rejected the one who gave them life.

And if you are already a Christian, don't for a moment think that this passage has nothing to say to you. Remember that it was to God's people that Isaiah brought these words of condemnation and challenge. So think hard; be brutally honest with yourself: Where are you really seeking your joy, meaning and pleasure? Are you actually running after other Gods as well? Are you, like Israel, spiritually adulterous? If your spiritual life seems dry it will be because Jesus is not your greatest joy, and like in the song we sang earlier, because you've been sneaking off to drink again from those dried and cracked cisterns that can never quench your spiritual thirst. If so, if that's you, then you need to repent also and to come humbly back to the God who is the author of life and the spring of hope.

Because there is hope...

3: You: a child of God?

It's there in verse 22. Did you see it? Just because Israel had been living this way for many, many years, just because you and I may have been living for things other than God, that does not mean we need to keep doing that. Change is possible. Forgiveness is available. God is accessible and willing for all to come to him!

Isaiah's appeal is for Israel to stop trusting in mere humans, or mere human creations, and to start trusting again in the God who is not just a breath but who is eternal. That offer, the cry of a father who loves his children, is at the heart of the Christian message. Despite our rejection of God, despite our chasing after other things and our worshipping of created things instead of the creator - God still stands there saying *"come to me; come to me all who are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Come to me and you will find true refreshment. Come and find deep peace and lasting hope, and real purpose. Come to me"*, says God, *"and I will lift you up."*

The counterfeit gods we trust in are designed to make us feel better about ourselves, to feel pride in ourselves without God. The trouble is that they have sold us a lie and they can't deliver on their promises. But strange as it may seem, coming humbly to God yields wonderful results. You see humility before God doesn't make you feel rubbish about yourself, it helps you see yourself as you truly are. And the thing is, when we come to God in repentance and faith he lifts us up. Do you want to be someone? Then come to God and know that you are adopted into his family, a beloved child of the King of Kings. What could be greater than that? Do you want to know real purpose in life? Then come to God and serve in his kingdom that will last for ever. Do you want to know real joy and peace? Then come to God, the one you were made to know, and receive his life-giving Spirit, Jesus calls the Spirit *"a spring of living water coming up from within, welling up to eternal life"* and he invigorates and refreshes every part of our souls. The things we seek from the counterfeit gods of this world are only available in God - let's not seek them anywhere else!

And the astonishing thing is that these great gifts of God are available to us free. But although they are free they are not cheap- they came at a great cost. Acceptance into God's family, being lifted up, comes to us because Jesus, the one through whom the world was created was lifted up on the cross. We deserve God's wrath yet Jesus took it instead of us. When we should have been cast aside, rejected, punished, Jesus took those things in our place and by his stripes we are offered true and eternal healing.

Friends, the day of the Lord is coming so I need to ask: is your hope in God or are you trusting in the things of this world, wealth, power or man-made idols? On that day all counterfeit gods will be shown up for what they are - but here and now today we get to change our eternal destiny. And if you doubt that this is possible for you, then let me just point you to our gospel reading today when Jesus shows power over evil. The boy's father wanted to believe but struggled to do so but he cried out *"Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!"* Perhaps you could start there because as Jesus says *"everything is possible for those who believe in him."*

Let's pray...