

ISAIAH — LESSON THREE

CHAPTER ONE (Verses 1- 20)

The first chapter of Isaiah is an introduction to the entire prophecy. If you understand it you are in position to understand the entire prophecy. Isaiah does not always use the same words. However, if you keep this chapter in mind you will find that when you run into difficulty understanding Isaiah a return to this chapter will help you decipher at least the subject with which Isaiah is dealing. A second step will be to put that which Isaiah is discussing into the proper historical context provided in the Introduction.

The outline that you have divides chapter one into:

- 1) Introduction (1);
- 2) The sin-sick rebellious nation (2-9);
- 3) Corruption and hypocritical worship (10-15);
- 4) God's call to reformation of life (16-20);
- 5) The lament over Jerusalem (21-23);
- 6) Redemption through purging (24-31).

Edward J. Young, in his three-volume commentary on Isaiah, provides four basic themes of Isaiah's prophecy from the chapter:

- 1) The sinfulness of Judah and Jerusalem (3-8);
- 2) The tender appeals of the Lord (16-19);
- 3) The certainty of the coming judgment (24,25, 29-31);
- 4) The blessedness of the salvation to come (26, 27).

Bryan Bear, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, provides this breakdown of chapter 1:

- 1) God's Witness against the People (2-3);
- 2) God's Description of the People (4-9)
- 3) God's Indictment of the People;
- 4) God's solution for the People (16-20);
- 5) God's Lament over the People (21-26);
- 6) God's Promise to His People (27-31).

Given the significance of the first chapter we will spend more time on it and then move more rapidly through the remaining 65 chapters so that we can finish our study within the 24 weeks available for classes in the two quarters allotted for our study.

Verse 1 – Introduction.

Some prefer not to call verse 1 an introduction (see Byer's outline above that omits reference to v. 1); however, whatever it is denominated, even Beyer admits that it "prepares readers well for the prophetic words that lie ahead."

The author identifies himself as Isaiah the son of Amoz,¹ and affirms that he saw a vision (the vision is the same as the word that Jehovah spoke, 2:1).² He thus asserts that the message is not his own but is the message that God delivered to him. In other words, the message that Isaiah proclaimed was of divine origin; it was inspired.³ A

1. How can you not like a man who lists his father's name when, as far as the Bible is concerned, nothing is known about him. Once again, however, there is some ancient speculation that Amoz was the brother of Amaziah, the father of Uzziah, which would make him the cousin of Uzziah.

2. "Of Isaiah" is not used to identify the originator or provider of the vision, but the recipient.

3. "Vision" indicates specific visions, such as Isa. 29:7; Hos. 12:10; Hab. 2:2; 1 Chron. 17:15, *et al*. To say that he "saw" the vision is simply to say that he "saw" that which God had placed in his

prophet of God spoke the word that God gave him (Deut. 18:18-19). The vision that Isaiah received concerned Judah and Jerusalem, including the 10 northern tribes of Israel (9:1-10:9). It even extended to the heathen nations to the extent that their conduct related to the people of God. Clearly Judah (occurs 29 times) and Jerusalem (occurs 49 times) are the center of the vision's attention.

The time frame is fixed as being in the days of Uzziah (aka "Azariah," 2 Kings 15). Isaiah's call is found in chapter 6 and the time given there is "the year that King Uzziah died." It may have been that Isaiah began his preaching in the last year of Uzziah's life. It is unclear whether Isaiah lived into the reign of Manasseh, but if so it was likely a period of writing his prophecies and other works that he did (See 2 Chron 26:22, "Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, first and last, did Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, write," and 2 Chron 32:32, "Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and his good deeds, behold, they are written in the vision of Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz, in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel.")

Verses 2-9 – The Sin-sick Rebellious Nation

V. 2 -- Isaiah calls on heaven and earth to give ear and hear; Jehovah is about to speak. His call is reminiscent of Moses call in his farewell address. In Deuteronomy 31:28-29 Moses gives the basis for such a call: after his death Israel "will utterly corrupt" itself and "turn aside from the way" that God had commanded. Isaiah now calls upon the same heaven and earth upon which Moses called to witness that that which Moses had predicted had come to pass in Isaiah's day. Commentators describe this scene as a court scene in which God is the prosecuting attorney and heaven and earth are his witnesses. These witness are important – they indicate that all is at risk in this rebellion against God. It has always been the case that the welfare of the world depends upon how God's creation responds to his word. It does not bode well for our day that this principle is as true now as it was then.

mind, *i.e.*, that which God had revealed to him. It includes everything that is in the book and declares that that content had its origin in God. It is often attributed to "the word of Jehovah." Here "vision" seems to be used collectively to refer to all of the contents of the prophecy.

God begins by declaring that he had nourished and brought up children who had responded to his love by rebelling against him. He had brought them out of Egypt, created them a nation, led them through the wilderness, and provided them a promised land that flowed with milk and honey. At Sinai he had given them a law that they might know his will. For all of this they owed God the respect and honor due a father; instead, God said, they rebelled⁴ “against me.” Whether we realize it or not all sin is ultimately a sin against God (Psalm 51:4).

Deut. 21:18-21 provided that the father of a rebellious son had power to bring that son before the elders and recommend that he be put to death; Judah was indeed in a precarious position! Its conduct was not some minor infraction. Judah had first departed from the law of God. That inward departure from the faith was followed by outward manifestation – rebellion and spiritual adultery. The greatness of Judah’s sin was not just in the rebellion, but also in the fact that it was a rebellion of sons. Edward J. Young comments:

When thus set in contrast with the free grace of God in adopting the nation and bringing it to maturity, the transgression of the people stands out in relief as the more heinous.

Verses 3-9

V. 3

These rebellious sons were so unthinking that God could only compare them to animals generally considered as dumb brutes – the ox and the ass. Even though they are considered dumb they are smart enough to know where the barn is. Moreover, they knew it belonged to their master – the one who cared and provided for them. Judah did not understand. She did not understand the first thing about what it meant to follow God. Nevertheless, God still loved them. He said it was “my people” who did

4. Rebellion is a major theme in Isaiah. Three different words are used in Chapter 1 to describe this rebellion. Vv. 2 and 28 have the concept of “political revolt”; vv. 5 and 23 have the concept of “turning aside” or “deviation”; v. 20 has the concept of “bitterness.”

not consider. This description of Judah occurs 23 times in Isaiah, demonstrating that God is true to his promises and that he has not forsaken his people. He does care and will care for his chosen.

Vv. 4-9

These verses describe Judah as God sees them in their rebellious state.⁵ “Ah” may be translated “Alas.” It is considered by some to convey the concept of lamentation, threat, or execration as it does in some passages of Isaiah. Here, however, some suggest that it also contains the concept of “pain, pity, wonder, and deep abhorrence at the unbelievable ingratitude of the nation” (Young). Even if the word itself does not contain the latter concepts, the context certainly conveys them.

Judah is a sinful nation burdened with the weight of sin (Heb. 12:1). They are the offspring of evildoers and their children have followed in their steps. The reason for their corruption is that they have forsaken Jehovah and despised the Holy One of Israel. As a result they have become estranged from God and they have moved in the wrong direction (v. 4).

In v. 5 Isaiah addresses the people directly. His first question can be understood in several ways. Some understand it to ask, “upon what part of the body will you be stricken⁶”; some “where can you be smitten with effect,” *i.e.*, God hardly knows where he should strike, or the body is so wounded that there is no place remaining where it can be smitten; some argue that, since the administrator of punishment usually does not care where he strikes, render the Hebrew with “wherefore” or “why,” with the meaning, “to what purpose will you be further stricken.” The latter seems to have the most in its favor. Thus, Isaiah is not asking why God should further punish, but observing that further punishment will not accomplish anything, *i.e.*, it will not lead to repentance (see Amos 4:6-11). Isaiah’s real purpose seems to be to tell his hearers that continued sin is the height of folly because it will continue to bring punishment

5. Isaiah has begun speaking in v. 4. However, these words are no less the words of God than vv. 2-3. God speaks through his inspired prophets.

6. Some of the terms used here are used of the Suffering Servant in Chapter 53.

upon them. WHAT THEN IS THE CURE? V. 6 tells us that the cure will not be found by continuing in their present conduct. The last part of verse 5 implies that the cure lies in a changed head and a changed heart – *the whole head is sick and the whole heart faint*. The nation is sick both inwardly and outwardly. God is willing to cure the sick and strengthen the fainthearted, and will do so for the penitent remnant (Ps. 51:10; Ezek. 18:31; 36:26).

Vv. 7-8 These verses leave the metaphor of the body and moves to a discussion of the impact of the nation's transgressions on her land – the country is desolate, the cities are burned with fire, strangers who have overthrown the land and made it desolate enjoy that which should be enjoyed by God's people. There is not much left of the daughter of Zion:⁷ she is as a booth in a vineyard, a lodge in a garden, as a city under siege. The strangers, unidentified here, were God's instrument of punishment.

For these people the judgment of God was no mere theological abstraction, or something that existed somewhere else or might be experienced at some future time, as we tend to think of it. It was a very present, painful reality.”⁸

The desolation has left the Daughter of Zion without protection. The booth in the vineyard and the lodge in the garden provide views to see danger, but there is no protection from the winds and storms, much less from an invading army. Jerusalem itself is cut off with no hope of assistance and no way of escape.

V. 9 proclaims that if Jehovah had not left for himself a remnant, the Daughter of Zion would have faded into history in the manner of Sodom and Gomorrah. God's mercy and his faithfulness to his promise had saved her from extinction. Judah would go into captivity, but a remnant would return (10:20-21); under the Messiah a remnant would be saved (Rom. 9:29).

7. Isaiah often uses “Daughter of Zion” as a metaphor for God's people, 10:32; 16:1; 37:22; 52:2; 62:11.

8. Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1996, p. 42.

Verses 10-15 – Corruption Hiding Behind Hypocritical Worship

Vv. 10-13

Once again Sodom and Gomorrah are in the picture. Isaiah calls upon the rulers of “Sodom” and the people of “Gomorrah” to hear the word of Jehovah. The rebellion referred to in v. 2 is now specified: worship of Jehovah has been reduced to mere form with no concern for the fatherless and the widows, and no concern for loving God, loving obedience, or loving one another. Jehovah declares that he has had a sufficiency of their sacrifices and their burnt-offerings, and that he takes no delight in the blood of their offerings. His rejection is characterized by strong language – such oblations are vain and incense is an abomination. No amount of empty sacrifices could compensate for such loveless disobedience. From the beginning God was concerned for the poor and weak. It was that concern that led to his freeing them from Egypt (Ex. 2:23-25). It was that concern that led him to require his people to be concerned about the poor and weak among them (Ex. 22:21-24; see Luke 10:25-37; James 1:27).

God wants to know who it was that required these things at their hands and to trample (tread) his courts (the Temple) with such abominations. Did he not know? Did God himself not command sacrifices? The book of Leviticus describes the sacrifices and festivals that God commanded in detail (Lev. 1:1-7:38; 23:1-44) and God had not changed his mind. But neither had he changed his mind about mere formalism. Unquestionably God commanded sacrifices, but just as certainly he never had pleasure in sacrifices that were not accompanied by a right heart. King Saul learned this lesson the hard way: “22 And Samuel said, Hath Jehovah as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry and teraphim. Because thou hast rejected the word of Jehovah, he hath also rejected thee from being king (1 Sam. 15:22-23).” The prophet Micah declared the same truth: “6 Wherewith shall I come before Jehovah, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? 7 will Jehovah be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the

fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:6-8)? God declares that he cannot bear such empty worship anymore.⁹

The Daughter of Zion was now learning the same lesson. A serious question is whether we have learned the lesson. Surely the cross makes greater demand upon us than the Exodus did upon the Jews (see Luke 10:25-37; James 1:27).

Vv. 14-15

These verses continue the same theme. Jehovah hates the manner in which the festivals, weekly Sabbaths, monthly New Moons, and the solemn feasts (Passover, Pentecost, and Fest of Tabernacles) were observed. He declares that he is weary of bearing them. As with sacrifices, God ordained these days in the law, the manner in which they were observed had become as detestable as offering a dog or a pig (cf. 66:3). In v. 15 we find the reason for God's rejection of their worship. Isaiah says that since their uplifted hands are full of blood, they might as well cease praying because Jehovah will not even look at them, much less hear them.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM? The problem is that they were using their worship (religious behavior) to manipulate God. If they will just bring more sacrifices, observe more festivals and Sabbaths, God will somehow be in debt to them and will have to bless them rather than punish them. With that approach, we feel that we are in control and that by our religious actions we can somehow obtain for ourselves the blessings that we seek. But God cannot be manipulated by any human activity. Nothing that we can do can put God in our debt. But if that is the case, then how can helping the poor, the widows and the orphans, dealing justly and lovingly with our fellow man, and walking righteously before our God have any affect upon our standing with God. Simple. Because such conduct is his will and expresses his own nature and character.

9. Young says that the last clause in v. 13 can be rendered, "I cannot bear iniquity and the solemn meeting."

If God's people want to walk with him they must agree to act like him.

WHAT WOULD HE SAY TO US TODAY? Listen to what Jim McGuigan postulates it might be:¹⁰

I'm tired of your mid-week Bible studies. Your worship assemblies make me ill. Your Lord's suppers are an irritant and an offense to me. I want no more of your assemblies. Who asked you to come to church? Your Sunday Schools are an abomination and your collections I loathe."

Impossible, you say. If we, like Israel, think that we are entitled to favorable treatment because we have God's revealed way of doing things, we had better think again. If our behavior is no different than the behavior of the world, our fate will be no different either.

Vv. 16-20 – God's Call to Reformation of Life

Vv. 16-17

In vv. 16-17 there are eight short imperative statements that call the people to reformation of life: 1) Wash you, make you clean; 2) put away your evil; 3) cease to do evil; 4) learn to do well; 5) seek justice; 6) relieve the oppressed; 7) judge the fatherless; and 8) plead for the widow. The covenant that contains the laws of sacrifice is the same covenant that contains the laws of moral and ethical treatment of the poor and oppressed. Neither has any value without the other. It is not possible for correct ritual to deliver us from the consequences of evil deeds.

Vv. 18-20

These three verses have been called one of the most famous expressions of the grace of God in the Bible. At the very point that all seems lost, grace intervenes. Although we are familiar with the KJV translation, "Come now, and let us reason together," some commentators feel that "reason" is too mild a word and suggest that God is calling for

10. *The Book of Isaiah*, pp. 62-63.

his people to “argue” their position. Use your best thinking, he says. If disobedience (rebellion and stubbornness) results in destruction (v. 20), and another type of conduct (obedience and changed living) results in forgiveness and restoration (18-19), which choice is the better course? Even an ox or an ass (1:3) should be able to figure that out. The divine judge is willing to reason with the rebel and makes an offer that is truly amazing – total pardon (v. 18). But the rebel must come to the table. However v. 18 is understood, “Come” is an imperative. What they had tried to obtain by manipulation is now offered to them freely, but conditionally. They need only cease their rebellion. The choice is theirs. The Lord is gracious, but he is not one to be trifled with.

THE WRATH OF GOD

That which has been discussed in these verses raises questions concerning God’s wrath. John Oswalt has a good brief discussion of it that should be kept in mind as we study through Isaiah¹¹:

Isaiah’s emphasis upon rebellion as an offense against nature speaks to the meaning of the *wrath of God*. Two extremes need to be opposed here. The one is the picture of God as a raging, red-faced tyrant who dares anyone to oppose his arbitrary decrees. But God’s decrees in the matters of the spirit are not more arbitrary than those in the realm of the physical. If I choose to smash my car into a brick wall while traveling at 100 miles per hour, I will most certainly experience the wrath of God—the natural results of my unnatural act. As someone has said, I will not have broken any natural laws, only demonstrated them. The same is true in the spiritual realm. If I live in ways contrary to my nature, I will experience the destructive results of my behavior. In this sense, the *wrath of God* is a

11. *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, p. 89 (Eerdmans, 1986).

metaphor, as is the *love of God*.

But this understanding can lead to an opposite error, namely, that God is without personality, a benign but unfeeling unmoved Mover. The whole import of Scripture is opposed to such a view. If God is anything, he is a Person, intimately and passionately involved with his creatures. His emotions are neither fickle nor arbitrary; they are real and deep. His hatred of sin is as intense as his approval of righteousness is profound.

Thus a genuinely biblical view of God's response to sin must always hold these two extremes in tension. On the one hand, he does not respond out of arbitrary rage, but on the other hand, he does respond personally and directly.

This raises another question. What right does God have to set boundaries and standards and punish if they are not met. Throughout Isaiah we will see the same four bases that are implied in these verses:

1. He is **The Holy One of Israel**. There is no other holy being; there is no other God. That which the pagans worshipped were not God; they were at best gods, and at worst pieces of wood, metal, or stone. Since they were in fact the latter, they could never become the former.
2. He is **Creator God**. He created and set up the boundaries for the heaven and earth, the two witnesses that he called. Since he created man, does he not also have the right to set his boundaries and standards?
3. He is the **covenant God**. God entered into a covenant relationship with man. He committed himself to his creation and to the fulfillment of promises made to them. In return, he calls upon us to commit ourselves to him.
4. He is **God the Father**. We are neither mere objects nor mere subjects to God—we are children (1:2; 1 John 3:1-2). It is as a loving father that he sets guidelines and boundaries for his children.

When we rebel, we rebel against **The** Holy One (the only God), the creator God, the covenant God, and our heavenly Father. Sadly, when we rebel in disobedience of the guidelines and standards that our God has set, we want mercy rather than the consequences that are the natural results of our disobedience. What we fail to understand is that there are consequences to breaking spiritual laws just as there are consequences to breaking physical laws.¹² If we plunge off a tall building death is almost certainly the outcome. Our survivors, or we ourselves should we survive, don't blame the law of gravity. It makes no more sense to blame God when, having violated his guidelines and standards, the consequences of our unnatural act fall upon us. After all, Man was created to live in harmony with God and according to his will. It is as unnatural for man's nature to disobey God's law as it is to disobey the law of gravity. Self-determination is contrary to the essence of both God and man. But if that is so, is man not reduced to a mere robot that must mindlessly follow God's will. As Paul would say, "God forbid." The alternative to rebellion is not mechanical obedience. God has not prescribed every action for us. What he had done is to define the outer limits beyond which we cannot go without hurting ourselves. The law of gravity does not render us mindless robots; neither does the law forbidding lying or stealing. The law requiring us to breathe oxygen does not make us mindless robots; so neither do the commands to believe, repent, confess, and be baptized for the remission on sins. They just tell us the boundaries within which we must live and the things that we are to do and not do if we are not to hurt ourselves either physically or eternally.

12. Remember what was said above, that we don't "break physical laws; we demonstrate their inviolability and the consequences that always accompany refusing to follow them."