

Isaiah 1:1-9
An Alarm to Thoughtless Sinners
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We have spent a lot of time recently in Paul's epistle to the Romans and in the Gospel of John. That is all very well and good, but I believe we also need to spend some time in the Old Testament. One thing I appreciate about the theology of the Protestant Reformation is that it values the Old Testament Scriptures and sees their continuing relevance to the Christian today. Some churches today largely neglect the Old Testament Scriptures and even teach that they are largely irrelevant to the Christian today. We disagree and seek to study all of God's Word.

Now it is true that the Christian today is not directly under the old Mosaic covenant. If the Christian today were directly under the old Mosaic covenant, we would be offering bloody animal sacrifices in our worship services, we would be assembling for worship on Saturday and not on Sunday, and we would ban from our fellowship dinners all pork, shrimp and cat fish. No, we are not directly under the Mosaic covenant, and we can in this age eat with good conscience a ham and cheese sandwich. We today are directly under what the Bible calls the new covenant.

Yet that doesn't mean that we have nothing to learn from the Scriptures of the Old Testament. After all, the God of the Old

Testament is also the God of the New Testament, and God doesn't change with the passing of time. The Old Testament is the foundation upon which the New Testament is built, and we can't fully understand the New Testament without first understanding the Old Testament. The new covenant and the old covenant are but differing administrations of God's one overarching covenant of grace, each being appropriate for its own time in the progression of redemptive history. Old Testament Israel is the church in its childhood, and the New Testament Church is Israel come to maturity.

When we study the Old Testament, we are somewhat like an adult reviewing his school days from early childhood. Many things have changed. The adult is no longer required to take a nap every afternoon, and cursive writing has replaced the more primitive stick letter printing of kindergarten. Yet so much is still the same. One plus one still equals two, and words are still spelled the same way. Similarly, we no longer offer bloody animal sacrifices or worship on Saturday, but the ten commandments are still a good summary of God's moral law and salvation is still by grace through faith, as it always has been. The Old Testament saints trusted the Christ to come and we trust the historical Jesus who came long ago, but the Christ to come and the historical Jesus are the same person, just as the morning star and the evening star are both the planet Venus.

So we will be looking at the Old Testament this morning, and specifically we will be looking at the opening words of the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah is that great evangelical prophet who ministered at the midway point in redemptive history between

Moses and the Messiah. Isaiah pointed back to Moses as the one through whom God had given His law to Israel, and Isaiah used that law as the measure of Israel's sin. Isaiah also pointed forward to the coming Messiah as the one who would suffer for sin as a sacrificial substitute and thus give sinners hope for forgiveness and deliverance.

Our passage today is the beginning of an introduction to the prophecy of Isaiah. The opening verse introduces us to Isaiah. He is the prophet whose ministry spanned the reign of four kings over the southern kingdom of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. This was a period when Judah increasingly forsook the living and true God for the worship of pagan idols. God judged Judah's sin by raising up the pagan world empires which became a perilous threat to the kingdom of Judah. The first of these was the Assyrian empire, and this was the threat to Judah during the life and ministry of Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied the future rise of the second world empire, the Babylonian empire. Isaiah prophesied that Babylon would one day conquer the kingdom of Judah and remove them from their God given land and disperse them throughout their world empire in a time of national exile. This would be God's judgment upon Judah for her idolatry and her moral perversion. Isaiah also prophesied God's mercy upon Judah. God's people would not lose their identity in exile and would one day return to the land which God had promised to their forefather Abraham.

In our passage for today, Isaiah gives a summary of his message of judgment against idolatrous Judah. In the midst of this dark message of judgment, we find also the silver lining of mercy

and a message of hope. We will consider these nine verses under three headings: **the charge**, **the chastisement** and **the compassion**.

Let us begin by looking at **the charge**. Isaiah's job as a prophet was to discomfort the comfortable; that is, to make those who are comfortable with their sinful ways aware of the foolish stupidity of their sinful rebellion against the living and true God. He wanted to arouse sinful Judah from her moral slumber by explaining the shocking audacity and serious consequences of her sinful ways.

Isaiah began his case against Judah by calling all of creation as witnesses. The prophet cried out, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth!" Isaiah personified the heavens and the earth and called to their attention Judah's sin because all of creation is affected by the sins of humanity. When God first brought the heavens and earth into existence, they existed as a chaotic mass without form and void of all life. Over a six day period, God brought order to creation, transforming it into an orderly cosmos capable of sustaining life, and then populated it with an abundant variety of life. When Adam and Eve first sinned, a curse descended upon the whole creation. The thorn and the thistle invaded paradise, and the creation slipped back somewhat into the danger and disorder of chaos. Thus the whole of creation has an interest in the sin of humanity, and the creation groans in anticipation for that coming day of full salvation at Christ's return when the curse will be lifted from it. Isaiah summoned all of creation to pay attention to his case against Judah and his description of the impending judgment which

would affect not only the people of Judah but also the land which they inhabited.

By calling all creation as a witness, Isaiah was following the ancient example of Moses who had called all of creation as a witness that God was putting before Israel both blessing and curse, both life and death, based on whether they would submit to God's law or rebel against it.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

- 15 "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil,
- 16 "in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess.
- 17 "But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them,
- 18 "I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess.
- 19 "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live;
- 20 "that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

Isaiah called all creation as witnesses, and then he began God's case against Judah with these words: "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me." Isaiah stated here the contrast between God's goodness and Judah's ingratitude. God had been good to Israel by adopting them as His own special people. God had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, constituted them as a nation at Mt. Sinai and given them His holy law, brought them safely through the wilderness, and then given them a land flowing with milk and honey. God had entered into covenant with them, had dwelt among them through the Shekinah glory in the Holy of Holies, had entrusted to them the glorious temple worship, and through oracles and prophecies had promised the Coming One who would fulfill all the types and promises beyond all possible expectations. God had not left Judah in the dark ignorance of paganism. God had not abandoned Judah in bondage to the perverse moral traditions of the nations. God had been good and gracious to Judah, and with greater privilege comes greater responsibility.

The Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon once commented on God's goodness to him in giving him Christian parents. He said,

Or, might [God] not, if He had pleased have given me some profligate to have been my parent, from whose lips I might have early heard fearful, filthy, and obscene language? Might He not have placed me where I should have had a drunken father, who would have immured me in a very dungeon of ignorance, and brought me up in the chains of crime? Was it not God's Providence that I had so

happy a lot, that both my parents were His children, and endeavored to train me up in the fear of the Lord?

Now having Christian parents doesn't guarantee that a person is going to continue in the Christian life or go to heaven, but it is a gift from God and a great blessing. And that is the way it is with being an outward member of God's covenant people. Being a member of God's covenant people is a great blessing, and we should respond to this blessing by seeking to meet the obligations of the covenant, which are faith, repentance and obedience. If we instead rebel against God and His covenant, then our sin is laced with ingratitude and compounded with squandered opportunity, and great is our sin indeed. We are not just rebels; we are rebellious sons rebelling against a loving and gracious Father.

The prophet contrasted the sinful folly of Israel with the basic common sense of the ox and the donkey. The ox and the donkey are considered to be somewhat stupid animals, and they certainly don't have mental abilities anywhere near the reasoning powers of humanity. One never goes up to an ox or donkey and says, "Would you like to play a game of chess?" Yet even the lowly ox and donkey understand that their owner feeds them, and they respond with a basic loyalty. The ox and donkey do not bite the hand that feeds them. Yet Israel, in their idolatrous rebellion against God, lacked this basic common sense possessed even by lowly animals.

The prophet cried out, "Heavens and earth, come hear my case against Judah." The prophet cried out, "Ox and donkey, come

give your testimony.” And then in verse four the prophet gave his sevenfold indictment against the people of Judah.

The prophet’s accusation began with four studies in contrasts. The prophet chose four nouns which summarize the grace and privilege which God had given Israel. These four nouns are nation, people, seed and sons. God had said to their father Abraham, “I will be your God and the God of your seed”. God has instructed Moses to say to Pharaoh, “Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, let my son go that he may serve Me.” At Mount Sinai, God had said to Israel, “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” And Moses had proclaimed to them,

Deuteronomy 7:6

6 For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth.

These four nouns -- nation, people, seed and sons -- summarized God’s gracious goodness to Israel. Isaiah used modifiers with these four nouns to show the foolish contradiction of Israel’s ingratitude and rebellion. Judah had become a sinful nation, a people burdened down with iniquities, a seed consisting of evildoers, and sons who are corrupters. What a sad study in contrasts and contradictions and in failed expectations.

Isaiah then finished his sevenfold indictment with three statements explaining how Israel’s sin was an affront to Holy

God. Their rebellion was a disrespectful turning of their back to God, a rejection of all God's goodness and blessing. They had despised and forsaken God, treating Him as trash, treating Him with contempt because God condemns the perversities and iniquities which they had embraced. They had provoked God to righteous anger and holy indignation against themselves.

We have looked at Isaiah's charge against sinful Judah. The mention of God's holy anger brings us to the next point, which is **the chastisement**. Whom a father loves, he chastens. When a child disobeys his parents and becomes rebellious, the loving father doesn't just look the other way. He takes out the rod and administers discipline:

Proverbs 13:24

24 He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly.

This chastening is not an end in itself; it has a purpose and is a means to an end. Its purpose is to cause the child to see the error of his ways and to repent and reform. God, as a loving Father, had been chastening Judah, yet Judah had neither repented nor reformed. Judah was behaving as an incorrigible child. The incorrigible child does not respond to correction and stubbornly continues in his rebellious ways.

The prophet pictured Judah as one who has been struck with the metaphorical rod of correction again and again and again. This illustration pictures the absolute folly of Judah's refusal to respond to God's chastisement with repentance. The

metaphorical recipient is covered with bruises and wounds. He stubbornly refuses medical treatment. The wounds have not been cleansed or bandaged or anointed with ointment. The discipline has become purposeless. What is the use in this discipline when a person absorbs blow after blow and yet continues in his rebellious ways? It is wasted on the incorrigible criminal who, according to the law of Moses for ancient Israel, deserved the greater punishment of execution.

Isaiah then described more literally the chastisement which God had been meting out upon sinful Judah. God had raised up Assyria as the rod of His anger and had used that nation to punish the kingdom of Judah. Assyria, which was known for the cruelty of its war tactics, had invaded Judah. Assyria had used the scorched earth policy of a total warfare which wars not only against a nation's army but also against its entire civilian population. Their invasion had turned the land flowing with milk and honey into a desolate wilderness. At the height of the Assyrian threat, Jerusalem with her stone walls was the only haven from the invading hordes. The city under siege was reduced to being like an isolated hut placed in the middle of a vegetable garden to give the gardener some relief from the sun in the heat of the day.

We have looked at the charge and the chastisement. Let's now look at our third point, **the compassion**. I pointed out earlier that the punishment under the law of Moses for the incorrigible criminal was death, and Judah had become incorrigible in her rebellion. God in His mercy would spare Judah from the punishment of national death. Even though Judah deserved

judgment as much as had Sodom and Gomorrah, God would not punish Judah as He had punished Sodom and Gomorrah. God had rained fire and brimstone upon those two cities, and there had been no survivors to continue their cultural existence. God will punish Judah, but there will be survivors to continue the nation. And among the survivors, there would be a faithful remnant who would remain true to God and continue God's covenant people. There are always within God's covenant people the 8000 who do not bow the knee to Baal and the little flock which hears and follows the voice of the Good Shepherd. Even in the times of greatest apostasy, there is by God's grace always the faithful remnant.

God would eventually punish Judah with national exile. This did not occur under the Assyrians. Good King Hezekiah intervened with a reign of righteousness, and the punishment of exile was postponed until the time of the next world empire, the Babylonians. Normally when a nation's population was forcibly removed from their native land and scattered among the other nations of a pagan empire, that nation did die as a nation. Its people were assimilated into other nations and lost their cultural and religious identity. This did not occur to Israel in exile because among the survivors, there were a faithful remnant who remained faithful to God in the midst of the idolatrous pagan nations. They were in the belly of the beast, but the beast could not digest and assimilate them. The beast would eventually vomit them up, even as the great fish vomited up Jonah on dry ground. A remnant would return to the land God had given to Abraham.

We need to pray that we in this age will be a part of this continuing faithful remnant. The church is new covenant Israel. The end of the ages has come upon us, and Jesus has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. In this age, we have greater blessings than Israel of old ever imagined. Jesus once said to His disciples, “many prophets and kings have desired to see what you see, and have not seen it, and to hear what you hear, and have not heard it.” The book of Hebrews begins with these words,

Hebrews 1:1-2

- 1 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,
- 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; ...

Yet even in this age of greater blessings, there continue to be rebellious sons. Pray that we will not be among their number. Pray that we will keep our focus upon Jesus and His saving work because we do not have the strength within ourselves to resist rebellion and to resist conformity to this world and to remain faithful to God and His covenant. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. As Jonah cried out in the belly of the great fish, “Salvation is of the Lord.”

Let me close with a warning given to us by Peter:

2 Peter 2:20-22

- 20 For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.
- 21 For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them.
- 22 But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."

May God do more than wash us temporarily from the mire of sinful living. May He transform us inwardly and permanently into a new creation in Christ Jesus and write God's law upon our hearts and give us a love for living the holy, obedient life after the example of Jesus our Lord.