

3. ISAIAH SERIES: Isaiah Looks Over His Shoulder

Isaiah 1:10-20

'Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it (Isaiah 1:10-20).'

In our previous study we saw how Isaiah demonstrated the mercy of God in the sparing of a remnant from the hands of the Assyrian invaders. How easily God could have dispensed with Jerusalem if He had so chosen, as He had with Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:1-29), leaving no survivors.

The people may have thought that they had been spared by God because they weren't too bad after all, but Isaiah is quick to point out that their survival has all to do with the mercy of God and nothing to do with their own merit. Indeed, they were not like Sodom and Gomorrah in that they were spared, but morally and spiritually they were the same as Sodom and Gomorrah.

NOTE INDIVIDUAL DISCOVERY QUESTION HERE: Why are the people of Judah likened to those of Sodom and Gomorrah in Isaiah 1:10? Is there any relevance in this designation to Australia today?

Verse 10: As the mouthpiece of God, Isaiah commands these spiritual rebels to hear what God says in His Law and then to act upon it (Jam 1:22). Both the leaders and those who are led are to hear what Isaiah says. These are not his words as such, but are the words of God and therefore they must be heard.

Jerusalem had not been spared because of her own merit, for Isaiah declares that the rulers and people of the city are spiritually the same as Sodom and Gomorrah (Rev 11:8).

Their wickedness now rivalled those cities that were destroyed by God.

Verse 11: Though spiritually these people were dead, they still continued in their religious exercises and presumed that because of this they were right in the sight of God. It is quite likely that they were following out the details of the sacrifices and rituals as outlined in the Law, but still these were of no value before God, for their hearts were far removed from Him (1 Sam 15:22; Jer 6:20; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-24). It is not that God objected to the use of sacrifices and the mode of worship, but the passage is referring to the lack of genuine and sincere worship, for the hearts of the people were far from submitting to God and His ways. The Lord makes it clear that He has had enough of their presumptuous formalism (Jer 7:22).

Verse 12: By entering the courts of the temple with their sacrifices and offerings under the guise of true worship, when they weren't really interested in God at all, they were in fact polluting the temple and offending God. Why was this the case? Because they did so without faith and with hearts far from God. For acceptable worship, one must be worshipping in accordance with the Lord's revealed will and that not just externally.

Who then has commanded such an empty method of worship? It was certainly not God! Therefore this was profanity by the people. In effect, all they were achieving was to wear out the floor of the temple, such was the futility of it all in the spiritual sense.

Verse 13: God says that He has had enough of their religion, wanting no more of this barren, formalistic worship. It is futile and of no value, being devoid of meaning. Because of this, the things which He would normally delight in (Gen 8:21), He finds to be an abomination.

The blending together of the assemblies that God has instituted with sin the Lord utterly detests. He wants no more of this perverted worship. It was so devoid of true substance, that this dead worship must cease immediately. The people were in fact wasting their time by this activity.

QUESTION: Does this mean that the people were to stop worshipping altogether? Explain why you have answered the way you have.

Verse 14: These days of 'worship' are no longer the Lord's, but belong to the people alone. They ceased being the Lord's ceremonies when the people departed from the Lord in their lives, rendering any religious ceremony futile. Therefore the Lord hates this barren and formal display, and will no longer suffer it.

Verse 15: The people even carry on with all the form in their prayers, yet they are empty of any real meaning, for they don't acknowledge God in their lives. All their formalistic prayers will be futile, for God will ignore these prayers offered by those who had shed much blood. The very hands that the people spread out before God in prayer, are the very

hands with which they sin. Because of the sinfulness of the people, God will now reject their prayers.

Verses 16,17: Instead of this sinful formalism, God commands the people to do something else. What He wants is not hypocrisy, but genuine repentance from their sins. Therefore He commands them to wash and make themselves clean (Ezek 36:25-27; Jam 4:8). They are to purify themselves from their sin and to live no longer in it. In short, they are to repent.

Verse 16 gives the negative side of repentance, that of ceasing and turning away from sin. Verse 17 then gives the positive side, that which is to be actively pursued, replacing the sinful way of life. Both these two aspects make up repentance.

Instead of pursuing evil, they must turn away from it, seeking after that which is pleasing to God. They must learn from God what He expects and then to do it. They must put right all sinful social injustice (Amos 5:24), in such ways as helping those that have been orphaned and widowed. This then is how the people are to fulfil the command given in Isaiah 1:10.

QUESTION: How can the hardened sinner do these things? Explain your answer.

Verse 18: The Lord now calls the people to Himself by way of a command, for the word in the original carries the imperative. He invites them to reason with Him about their sin and the way to be delivered from it. This is not an offer to come to some sort of compromise agreement with God concerning the charges He has brought against them, but rather the opportunity to acknowledge their sin to God and to hear how they can be cleansed from their sin.

Though their sins are currently red, they are able to become the purest white. In other words, they can be completely forgiven. They can become the opposite of what they currently are.

Verse 19: This forgiveness can only be given if they want it and obey the Lord. If they take heed to the Law and the Word of God, forgiveness will be found. They must therefore return to the Lord and if they do they will be able to continue to enjoy the land in which they live. Clearly the forgiveness of sin is implied in this verse (Deut 28).

Verse 20: If the people refuse to take heed to the Law and the Word of God, disregarding the Lord's offer of forgiveness and continue in their sins, then they will be destroyed by the sword of God's judgment. There is no doubt about this happening, for God has said it will happen. The warning has been clearly given.

INDIVIDUAL DISCOVERY

Why will Judah be ashamed of the Terebinth trees in 1:29,30?

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