

WEEK 2  
ISAIAH 1  
JUDAH'S SINS

As Isaiah begins his book, we note that this vision is one that Isaiah sees—it is shown to him by God; it is not a vision that he constructs himself. As we mentioned last week, Isaiah's ministry, spanning about 61 years, was a sad one because God used it to further harden the hearts of most of those Isaiah spoke to.

As Isaiah starts his book, we must also understand that the events he prophesies about are already in motion. He accuses Judah of rebellion, but rebellion is nothing new to these people. He predicts that God will leave a remnant, but Judah is itself already a remnant of the nation of Israel. When the nation of Israel split after the coronation of Rehoboam, Judah is the faithful remnant; Jerusalem, the city that contains the Temple, is its center. Israel the nation has forsaken God. (Often the use of the word Israel may be a little confusing: it may mean the patriarch Jacob, renamed Israel by God in Gen. 32:28; the whole nation before the split; the new nation of Israel after the split; or God's covenant people after the split, now called Judah. Often we will have to be certain of the reference in order to understand the Scripture.)

In verse 2 Isaiah presents the charges against Judah as if he were in a courtroom, and he, the prosecutor for God. In Jewish law, conviction of a transgressor required two witnesses. Heaven and earth would be the only witnesses that could confirm Judah's sins. His call upon heaven and earth to be witnesses of these charges is also reminiscent of Deut 30:19 when God causes Moses to renew the covenant with the people of Israel at Moab:

“<sup>19</sup>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; <sup>20</sup>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.”

It also is the same formula used in the Song of Moses in Deut. 32:

<sup>1</sup> “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;  
And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.  
<sup>2</sup>Let my teaching drop as the rain,  
My speech distill as the dew,  
As raindrops on the tender herb,  
And as showers on the grass.  
<sup>3</sup>For I proclaim the name of the LORD:  
Ascribe greatness to our God.”

Note also that it was customary in Near Eastern treaties (covenants) to list witnesses at the end of the document.

In Isaiah 1:2 he calls the people “children,” meaning offspring of the father, rightful members of the family, not minors who lack understanding. Note also that the sin is rebellion, an active, willful choice of refusing to obey their rightful Lord and God. In

verse 3, unlike Judah, even the dumb animals recognize the master's rights over them and return to his stable; after all, he feeds them! Verse 4 lists the specifics of the indictments in such vivid ways that their guilt is obvious: they are a "sinful nation," "laden with iniquity," a "brood of evildoers," and "corrupters" who have "forsaken" and "provoked" the "the Holy One of Israel." This term, "the Holy One of Israel," is used almost exclusively by Isaiah, but he uses it often to point out the contrast between the people and their God.

In verses 5-8 Isaiah is so exasperated—which also shows that this is not a new occasion of sin—that he asks what good will it do to punish the people whose hearts and heads are sick and who are covered from their soles (a pun?) to their heads in rotting sores. He says that the land is desolate—without the means to support life, which to believers must mean without God--and full of intruders bent upon destruction. He likens Jerusalem, whom he refers to as the "daughter of Zion," to a deserted hut in a field left empty to rot and fall apart after the harvest.

Verses 9-10 hold out the promise of a remnant that will be preserved, but even in this little piece of comfort, he continues his indictment as he compares Judah to Sodom and Gomorrah, the two cities that were so wicked that God destroyed them completely. The only difference is that God does promise to keep a remnant of Judah.

Verses 11-15 point out more particulars of Judah's sins, and in doing so show how the true God of the Jews differs from the pagan idols. Idols are manipulated by sacrifices designed to appease them and win their favor. God is offended by such attempts to manipulate Him and calls the people's hypocritical attempts at worship "hateful."

In verses 16-17 God gives a two-pronged prescription for repentance: put away the evil and actively seek to do good by engaging in specific acts of kindness, such as rebuking oppressors and protecting the fatherless and the widows. Just turning away from sin is not enough: God requires active obedience of His people.

Verses 18-19 show us what real forgiveness is: All too often we think forgiveness is simply not pursuing revenge upon those who have hurt us, but God says that He will forgive and pour out his blessings on those He forgives. If God, who finds our sinful existence obnoxious, can forgive us to the point of pouring out blessings, what should be our response to those who offend us?

As he continues this duality of offering blessings and cursings to Judah, Isaiah again promises destruction upon the unfaithful. He points out the specifics of Judah's sins. She is in verse 21 a "harlot," one who is unfaithful to the one who loves and cherishes her and chases after others whom she wishes to be with in order to sin. As he continues in verses 22-25, Isaiah shows her sins in terms of impurities that need to be radically removed and then replaced with specific acts of obedience, again mentioning protecting the fatherless and the widowed. In what must have come as a shock and affront to the Judeans, as it does to us today, God has Isaiah name these sinners as his adversaries. Often we think of sin as being "naughty," or "mischievous," but Isaiah says that our sin makes us God's enemies whom He will destroy.

Lest anyone think that the process of repentance and purification will be cosmetic and relatively painless, in verses 26-27 Isaiah says that God will bring Judah back to His side using the judges of Israel's early days as He redeems the people. You will remember that the Jews objected to the discipline of the judges and asked that God give them a king

so that they could be like the rest of the nations. Redeem means to buy back, which implies that first those who are to be redeemed have had to suffer the pain and humiliation of being sold into slavery to other masters.

Should anyone still labor under the idea that they might be able to survive God's displeasure without repentance, Isaiah concludes this chapter by promising that God's destruction of the wicked will be accomplished with fire, which reminds us of the certain punishment in Hell of all unbelievers. It also brings to mind the judgment of Matthew 28 where God separates His people from the rest of the world as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats.

Are we any less guilty of attempting to manipulate God by promising to be good, have quiet times, give more money, pray, go to Sunday School or church, be nice to our despised relative, or stop some "little" sin such as cheating on our taxes, kicking the cat, beating our wives, or bad-mouthing the preacher? Is the charge of faithlessness aimed even more at us than it was at the people of Judah? Do we really think that our sins of commission are less offensive to "the Holy One of Israel?" Are our sins of omission any less heinous? Have I defended the fatherless and the widowed? Can I withstand the wrath of God any better than Isaiah's contemporaries? Am I part of the invisible church or do I, like so many, belong only in the visible church? Am I truly one of God's children, or am I just another sinner seeking fire insurance at a bargain price? Upon WHOM am I basing my trust???