

"God's Charge to a Rebellious Nation"
Isaiah 1:1-2:22
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Perhaps we all remember some version of Churchill's quote, "Those that fail to learn from history, are doomed to repeat it." The history we delve into in the book of Isaiah has significance for us today because it shows the erosion of nations that turn their back on God and only pay Him lip service ("One nation under God") while really relying on man to meet all their needs.

As Isaiah recounts God's dealing with mankind, we're going to encounter some names of places or countries that we're not familiar with. They can mean very little to us, but to Isaiah's readers, they were as familiar as Los Angeles, Orange County, or San Diego is to us. We're meant to learn that God knows the thoughts and intents of men's heart and that He will discharge His justice at the appropriate time.

Remember last week we talked about the Divided Kingdom – ten tribes to the north called Israel and two tribes in the south called Judah.

As we open up our study of Isaiah, we're told that he was God's messenger through the reigns for four kings in Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Let me give you just a brief glimpse of the times under these kings.

Uzziah, the 5th of 8 "good kings", was an able ruler. Assyria was still as weak nation, so Judah's only rival was Israel to the north. King Uzziah built walls and towers, had a large standing army, and a port for commerce on the Red Sea. He increased inland trade and was successful in war with the Philistines. With this material progress the Temple revenues grew, but so did greed and oppression.

Uzziah himself was loyal to the Lord, but he did not enforce godliness on his people and most of the religion in Judah was hollow and ritualistic at best. Toward the end of his reign, Judah's time of blessing ran out. A strong king took the throne of Assyria and began to muster an army for conquest. When Uzziah died in 740 B.C., King Tiglath-Pileser (TIG-lath-PIE-leser) of Assyria was about to march south.

For the last ten years of Uzziah's reign he was quarantined with leprosy. His son Jotham was the real ruler. Like his father, Jotham, was personally faithful to the Lord and considered the 6th "good king," but he let his people worship other gods and flaunt the Lord's moral standards. He was more concerned with his own greatness than ethics. Even as TIG-lath-PIE-leser was conquering kingdoms north of Israel, Jotham was trying to prolong the prosperity in Judah by financing dozens of building projects. Evidently, he dismissed the warnings he received from the young prophet Isaiah. Still, Isaiah's

social rank (remember he was of an aristocratic family), the people's traditional respect for a prophet, and the Lord's protection kept Isaiah from outright persecution.

Ahaz, an evil king in God's sight, succeeded his father, Jotham, at a crucial time of decision. The kings of Syria and Israel were joining forces to resist the coming Assyrian onslaught and they threatened to invade Judah unless Ahaz agreed to join them. Ahaz didn't know whether he should be more afraid of Assyria or his nearer neighbors of Israel and Syria. Isaiah warned Ahaz not to seek help from Assyria, but he was ignored; however, Ahaz cried out to Tiglath-Pileser who obliged by sacking and deporting Gaza, Syria and most of Israel by 732 B.C. For the favor, however, Tiglath-Pileser extracted a huge tribute from Judah and summoned Ahaz to come pledge his loyalty.

On the way to Assyria, Ahaz saw an altar in Damascus that he liked (he fancied himself an art connoisseur), so he had plans drawn and sent to Jerusalem. There he set up the new altar in the Lord's Temple and on it sacrificed to the Syrian gods. The old altar of the Lord was moved aside and instead he used divination (the Assyrian's custom of studying the entrails of sacrificial victims) for divine guidance. Eventually, he closed the Temple and authorized full-scale idolatry – setting up altars at every street corner in Jerusalem. He even burned some of his own sons in child sacrifice as we're told in 2 Kings 16:1-20 & 2 Chronicles 28:1-27.

When Ahaz died, the 7th "good king" Hezekiah came to the throne. He had a different character from his father. He had a healthy respect for both the Lord and the prophet Isaiah. He began by trying to stamp out idolatry in Judah. He ordered the temple reopened and cleansed of pagan objects. He banned idolatry and ordered pagan sites destroyed. He even invited the tiny remnant left in Israel to join Judah in a Passover celebration. But the new Assyrian king, Sargon, besieged Israel's capital of Samaria and finished the deportation of its people replacing them with conquered pagans from elsewhere. So, Israel was obliterated and Judah escaped only by paying more harsh tribute.

Remember that the book of Isaiah is beginning at a time when idolatry was rampant in the land. Normally we'd expect Isaiah to begin with his call to be a prophet, but that doesn't come until chapter 6. Instead, he leads up to it in chapters 1-5 showing us God's charge against the nation in a courtroom type atmosphere and giving us a glimpse of the future blessing to come under the Messiah in the Millennial Kingdom.

Invoking heaven and earth as His witnesses, the Lord announced His judgment on the nation. In spite of all God's blessings upon His people, in spite of the special privileges He had given them, these children rebelled against Him. They are worse, far worse, than the ox and the ass, two domestic animals that are noted for their stupidity and their stubbornness. Their sin was not a passing thing; it was a habitual state.

God lamented, "They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel."

Because of sin and rebellion, they abandoned the Lord – becoming like a body that is sick from head to toe with open sores unbandaged and disgusting. The Lord even compared them to Sodom and Gomorrah, cities He destroyed by raining sulfur in judgment on their wickedness and sin. Yet God acknowledged there is a remnant in vs. 9 - "Unless the Lord Almighty has left us some survivors . . ." – a picture of God's grace.

One of the real benefits of Old Testament study is to give us renewed appreciation for God's long-suffering with disobedient mankind, and to recognize that, while we read about judgment after judgment, it is always tempered with ample warnings and infusion of God's grace to an undeserving people.

Judah may have been offering the sacrifices required by the Mosaic Law, but they were ritualistic and done without repentance. They were hypocrites: the hands they held out in prayer were blood stained. Should God even listen to those prayers? They cared nothing for orphans and widows. Do you know what the New Testament says about that concern of God? James 1:27, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Is God the same yesterday, today and tomorrow? Vs. 16 admonishes, "Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!"

We see the grieving heart of God the Father in these opening verses of Isaiah. Are any of you familiar with rebellious children? Perhaps you were that rebellious child. Children in that frame of mind can only see the restrictions . . . the "don'ts" . . . they desire to "be free to do my own thing." And with patient reservation parents often let them go their own way for awhile . . . hoping they'll learn to appreciate what they had at home. Isn't it funny that it takes us so long to realize that restrictions are really for our own good. Having to answer to someone, whether it be an earthly parent or our Heavenly Father, gives us purpose and accountability. The prodigal son in Luke 15 eventually came to his senses and went home to his father. Maybe some of you are still waiting for your prodigal . . . maybe some of you have yet to make the return home. Earthly parents are not perfect – sometimes the prodigal strays beyond the reach of the parent to ever again effect discipline that will restore a sense of repentance. The Lord, however, loving Father that He is, has warned of the consequences for disobedience and He has the power of chastisement – all with the aim of restoration.

Our memory verse, Isaiah 1:18, becomes in effect a plea to "settle out of court" from the One who can and will execute discipline. "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best of the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." For the word of the Lord has spoken.

There's something fundamental about old Dr. J. Vernon McGee – you know his preaching – “where the rubber meets the road.” His old commentary on Isaiah chapter one says, “Pandora’s Box of troubles was opened for America back at the turn of the 20th century when professing Christians deserted the mid-week service, and then after WWI deserted the Sunday night service, and before long, there was no difference between the deacon’s language and that of the local bartender. Indeed,” he goes on to say, “when the depression first began the *Wall Street Journal* offered a brief editorial that said, ‘What America needs today is not Government controls, industrial expansion, or a bumper corn crop; America needs to return to the day when grandpa took the team out of the field in the early afternoon on Wednesday in order to hitch them to the old spring wagon into which grandma put all the children after she washed their faces shining clean; and they drove off to prayer meeting in the little white church at the crossroads underneath the oak trees, where everyone believed the Bible, trusted Christ, and loved one another.’”

Bygone days, a simpler time . . . and here we stand a quarter way into another century so far removed from that time described by McGee in technology and social change. But if God were to take our nation to court today would the charges be the same? Is much of what we do ritualistic religion? Are we teaching from someone’s book or from the Bible? Are widows and orphans our main concern? Is there an idol in some form or another on every corner that pulls our attention away from God, or in every hand that “must have” the latest technology? Where is our focus? “Come, let us reason together . . .” is still God’s plea. Today is the day of salvation and forgiveness.

Judah, the prisoner in the box, had been found guilty. Instead of the purity of silver, she had become dross, the waste material. God would smelt that away in a Babylonian, not Assyrian, captivity yet to come.

Hebrews 10:31 says, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” If anyone was listening to Isaiah with an open heart, do you think they’d be terrified by the knowledge that God was going to seriously deal with a stiff-necked and disobedient nation? Could they not remember from their own Scriptures 40 years of desert wandering among other chastisements from God over the years? The remnant must have been heart-broken even while agreeing with God the punishment was deserved. Scriptures, thankfully, give hope.

Hal Linsey once said, “We can live forty days without food, eight days without water, four minutes without air, but only a few seconds without hope.” Through Isaiah’s pen, God gave Israel hope for the future that lasts to this day.

“Then (vs. 26 of the NASV says) I will restore your judges as in days of old.” This marks a transition, viewing the future messianic age when God’s people have

indeed repented and returned to Him in righteousness. Then He will bless the nation; Jerusalem will be called the faithful city and will be ashamed of her past idolatry.

Like much of the prophetic writings in the Bible some of it deals with the immediate future and some with the future of the messianic kingdom – a time when Christ shall rule on earth again from Jerusalem for a period of a thousand years. If you were with us in our study of prophecy and the book of Revelation, you know that God foretells of a day of wrath, a tribulation period to precede the millennial kingdom.

Perhaps here is a good time to refresh our memory about the term “last days” as it concerns prophecy.

The last days of Israel needs to be distinguished from the last days of the church. The last days of the church pertain to the time of spiritual apostasy as we read about in 1 Timothy 4:1-2 and 2 Timothy 3:1-7. “Terrible times when people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power.”

The last days of Israel, however, relates to the Great Tribulation immediately preceding the establishing of the Millennial Kingdom. We’ll have more of a chance to talk about this as our study goes on this year, but God has a wonderful plan for the future. Jerusalem will be both the political and spiritual headquarters in those days when God’s truth is transmitted from Jerusalem. The entire earth will experience peace when weapons of warfare will be used for peaceful purposes . . . swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

But before future blessing can come, the nation must deal with their present sin. Chapter 2:6-8 – superstitions from the East, the Philistine practice of divination, wealth, armies, idols – people bowing down to what they have made with their hands.

The Lord, the judge, has no choice – rebellion brings judgment. The proud and lofty and all that is exalted will be humbled. Everything will be brought low. As they say, “you can run, but you can’t hide.” Flee to the mountains, caves, rocks . . . nothing will save you. Especially, as Isaiah says in 2:22, “Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?” That would be true when Babylon would come to conquer, and it will be true when the Day of the Lord’s wrath is poured out in the judgments of the tribulation and Second Coming of the Lord Jesus.

Karl Menninger, wrote a book many years ago titled *Whatever Became of Sin* and in it he tells this story.

"On a sunny day in September, 1972, a stern-faced, plainly dressed man could be seen standing still on a street corner in the busy Chicago Loop. As pedestrians hurried by on their way to lunch or business, he would solemnly lift his arm . . . his right arm, and pointing to the person nearest him, intone loudly the single word, 'GUILTY!'

"Then, without any change of expression, he would resume his stiff stance for a few moments before repeating the gesture. Then, again, the inexorable raising of his arm, the pointing of the finger, and the solemn pronouncing, 'GUILTY!' to another passerby.

"The effect of this strange pantomime on the passing strangers was extraordinary, almost eerie," writes Menninger. "They would stare back at him, hesitate, look away, look at each other, and then again at him; then hurriedly continue on their way.

"One man, turning to another who was my informant, exclaimed: 'How did he know? How did he know?'"

God knows, and has told us in His Word, that we are all guilty of sin. Most people don't even need a finger pointing "guilty" at them to know in their hearts it's true. What they don't know is that full pardon and forgiveness is available through God's grace because His Son, Jesus, already paid for that sin in God's sight through His shed blood on the cross. The good news is that "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1)

The simpler time that Dr. J. Vernon McGee wrote of reminds us of our roots, but sin was there too at the turn of the last century; sin was there in Judah; sin was there in the Garden of Eden. It has to be acknowledged and dealt with . . . and if we don't do it, God will do it for us. So, judgment or pardon? Repent or perish? "Come let us reason together . . ." Man cannot save you, only the Son of Man . . . the Son of God . . . the Lord Jesus Christ can. Hear His plea . . . hear His call.

Let's pray.

People make up a nation, and if individuals reject You and Your Word, the nation is in trouble. Revive our hearts, strengthen our resolve to be accountable for upholding Your truths and values in our individual lives and communities. Draw our nation back to You, forgive our multitude of sins, and let Your will be done. In Jesus' name. Amen.