

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTER ONE

THE CALL TO HEAR

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, And they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. Why should ye be stricken any more? Ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment" (verses 1-6).

ABRUPTLY the voice of the Lord breaks in upon the ears of men who prided themselves upon their religiousness and trusted in their formal observance of the legal ritual, **"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider."** There is something sublime in the very simplicity of this challenge to obedience. Heaven and earth, ever subject to His will, are called to witness the base ingratitude of the Lord's people. The objects of His solicitous care from their childhood in Egypt to the moment then present, they had never, as an entire nation, given Him that loving obedience which was His due.

Individual faithfulness there ever was; but nationally, as later in the case of the Church viewed as a collective body, failure had come in almost at the very beginning and there had never been recovery. Ox and ass know their owner or their master's crib because of his care for them. May we not well challenge our hearts as to how far we really know our Owner? To what extent do we sanctify Christ as Lord? He is our Owner now. Other lords have had dominion over us, but by Him only will we now make mention of the ineffable Name.

- The kingdom of God for us is that of the Son of His love.
- To the Crucified we owe unswerving allegiance.

- Our Master's crib is the Word of God, a part of which we have now before us.

Do we really know it? Does hunger ever drive us to it; or, are we often found foolishly sniffing the desert air, following the wind like the wild ass, our backs on God's well-filled storehouse, vainly seeking a satisfactory portion in the world we have professed to judge?

Solemn questions these, not to be evaded or ignored, but faced in the presence of the Lord: lest a day come when, of us too He shall have to say, **"Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward"** (verse 4).

There is no breach of relationship suggested here. Judah was still owned of God, but her moral state was such as demanded discipline. Yet that discipline she had despised until it seemed to be useless to chasten her further. The sore seemed too deep to be healed; the whole head was sick and the heart faint. Everywhere the evidences of inward corruption were manifest. Soundness, there was none; nor had their hearts turned to Him that He who had smitten might bind them up in His grace and longsuffering.

"Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah. 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 you 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"
(verses 7-20).

Prophetically, Isaiah beholds the sad result of all this cold-hearted indifference to the message he brought. Their country was soon to be desolate and their fair cities were to be destroyed by conflagration. Strangers should dwell in their land and but a feeble remnant be left as a workman's hut in a vineyard or a keeper's lodge in a cucumber field.

The prophet speaks of things not seen as yet, in the present sense, for faith's eye can see all that God has declared as though already fulfilled. It is here he uses the words quoted by the Apostle Paul in Romans 9:29: **"Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah"** (verse 9).

That remnant alone could be owned of God. Because of it, He would not utterly cast off His people, and it will be observed that throughout the balance of the book, the remnant is ever given the place of the nation. The mass are already rejected - **"children in whom is no pleasure."**

In verses 10-20 it is this evil majority who are before God. No link of relationship does He acknowledge with them. They are in very deed as Sodom and Gomorrah, and as such He designates them and calls them to repentance. Rulers and people alike were evil; and in their unholy, unregenerate state, they could have no place before Him. For such as these to offer sacrifice was but to mock and insult His holiness. He found no delight in their offerings, nor could He complacently behold them treading His courts.

What a scathing rebuke have we here for any who would profess to draw near to God by sacramental observances while not born of His Spirit and broken before Him!

- Ritualism is an offence;
- Religious exercises, as they are called, are filthy in His sight, if there be no true recognition of guilt and the need of atonement whereby iniquity may be purged.

From all their solemn feasts and sacred seasons, the Lord turned away in disgust. He would hide His face and close His ears, for the proof of their defiled condition was in their hands.

What was needed? The application of the Word of God to heart and conscience, evidencing genuine faith in Him whose voice to man it is, resulting in purged ways and a clean life. **"Wash you, make you clean,"** He cries; **"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."**

Observe the order here. There is no promise of gospel blessing until the Word of God be bowed to. Nor is it making grace to wait on works, or salvation dependent on human effort or upon advancement in righteousness. But God has no blessing either for time or eternity for the man who persists in sin and refuses to judge himself in the light of His revealed Word. Where faith is truly present, contrition for sin will be manifest and amendment will follow inevitably.

It is to the self-judged, therefore, that the glorious Word comes in power; **"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"** (verse 18). No more blessed proclamation of full amnesty is found in all the Bible than in this lovely verse. It is the offer of full judicial cleansing for every repentant soul, no matter how grievous his record may have been. Well may Isaiah be called "the evangelical prophet." A wondrous gospel pervades all his pages, though warnings of judgment are ever before us.

Cleansed and forgiven, the delivered soul is then called to tread the path of obedience and subjection to the One who has justified from all things. Dispensationally, it may be remarked, justification had to await the revelation of the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, announced in New Testament times only; but, actually, every soul in every age who heard the Word in faith was cleared of every charge.

The obedience here indicated was of a decidedly legal character as befitting the age of law and the reward in keeping. **“If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land.”** But in this age of grace there is a land, unknown to sight but seen and enjoyed by faith, of whose goodly fruits each subject soul eats in abundance through the Spirit’s gracious ministry. On the other hand, where the Word of life and blessing is refused and a rebellious spirit is manifested, in place of one of contrition and brokenness, the sword, whether as here of a human enemy or as more clearly made known in the New Testament, of divine judgment, must devour the gainsayer, **“for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”** This whole section is deeply instructive and should be carefully weighed in the light of eternity, by every soul to whom it comes, **“For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.”**

Another section begins with verse 21 and goes on to the end of the chapter. It has in view Jerusalem, once the faithful city, now corrupt and adulterous: in itself, the exemplification of all the evils that afflicted the land. In dirge-like measure the prophet bewails its fallen estate; but the Spirit of grace distinguishes a remnant still and so he sings of mercy and of judgment.

“How is the faithful city become an harlot? it was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers. Thy silver is become dross, thy wine mixed with water: thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them. Therefore saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts, the mighty One of Israel, Ah, I will ease me of mine adversaries, and avenge me of mine enemies: and I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and take away all thy tin: and I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning: afterward thou shalt be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and her converts with righteousness. And the destruction of the transgressors and of the sinners shall be together, and they that forsake the Lord shall be consumed. For they shall be ashamed of the oaks which ye have desired, and ye shall be confounded for the gardens that ye have chosen. For ye shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth, and as a garden that hath no water. And the strong shall be as tow, and the maker of it as a spark, and they shall both burn together, and none shall quench them” (verses 21-31).

The city in whose devotedness the Lord had once found such delight, which once bore the name of the holy, had become an harlot, following after other lovers who could not save. Once full of discretion and the home of righteousness, it had become a lodging-place for men of blood. In place of silver, speaking of atonement (cf. Exodus 30:11-16), was the dross of complacent self-sufficiency; and the wine of joy was diluted with the foul water of earth’s broken cisterns (verses 21, 22).

The leaders of the people, who should have set an example of subjection to the Word of God, were rebellious and bribe-lovers. Righteous judgment was forgotten in the base desire for gain. Because of all this, the Lord Himself would awake to judgment, and pour out His vengeance upon those who, posing as His friends, were in reality at enmity with Him. But unmixed judgment it could not be, for they were His covenant people still. He would correct in measure.

His discipline would have the effect of removing the unjust and unholy, purging the nation from its dross and sin, from all that was base and displeasing to God, after which He would restore their judges as at the first and their counselors as of old. Then, redeemed with judgment, Zion shall be called once more The city of righteousness, The faithful city (verses 25-27).

This will be their final blessing as other Scriptures show us, after the long years of their dispersion and the bitterness of the last great tribulation have come to an end.

Their sufferings must go on until the unrepentant transgressors and willful sinners shall be utterly destroyed, and those that remain - a weak but faithful remnant - shall loathe themselves for their past sins and be ashamed of the many false gods who have allured them, as a nation, away from the God of their fathers. Beautifully, we see this spirit exemplified in three ninth chapters of our Bible: namely, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel; all remnant books, where faithful men judge their people's sin as their own sin, but from it turn with abhorrence, to seek the Lord with all their hearts. All who do not repent shall be consumed together by the fierce anger of the Lord as a withered oak, a waterless garden, and as tow to which the Lord shall apply the spark.

Nor have the words of this section a voice for the Jew alone. They are also “**written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the ages have arrived**.” The failure of the professing Church has been even greater than that of Jerusalem, because of the greater light against which we have sinned. Soon must the Holy and the True, disgusted with such corruption, vomit out of His mouth all that is unreal and opposed to His Word.

But He stands knocking at the door, and whenever there is reality and a heart for Himself, He will come in and sup there in hallowed, blest communion, though the doom of guilty Christendom is so near.

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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