

God Denounces Wayward People But Promises Restoration

Isaiah 1:18-31

Isaiah 1:18-13 – *“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. ¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient you shall eat the good of the land; ²⁰ but if you refuse and rebel you shall be devoured by the sword,” for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. ²¹ How the faithful city has become a harlot! It was full of justice; righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers. ²² Your silver has become dross; your wine mixed with water. ²³ Your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves; everyone loves bribes and follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, nor does the cause of the widow come before them.”*

Background Notes

The time of Isaiah’s prophecy was approximately 700 BC. In our last Talk we discussed the fact that Isaiah’s ministry spanned the reigns of four kings of Judah. He had a long ministry, of about 40-50 years. So the date of 700 BC is just a general figure that will help us to remember the approximate time of Isaiah’s ministry.

By Isaiah’s time, the days of Israel’s glory under the reigns of the great kings David and Solomon were long past. Soon after Solomon’s reign, the United Kingdom of Israel was divided into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. The northern kingdom was called Israel, or sometimes Ephraim after its largest tribe, with Samaria as its capital city. The southern kingdom was called Judah after its major tribe, with Jerusalem as its capital.

Both kingdoms were guilty of the sins of idolatry and immorality. God allowed the northern kingdom and its capital Samaria to fall to the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC - during the time of Isaiah’s ministry. However, Isaiah lived in the southern kingdom of Judah and he continued to prophecy in Jerusalem after the northern kingdom had fallen.

Besides announcing the wonderful Messianic prophecies and predictions of future glory for Israel, Isaiah continued to denounce the sins of Judah. He also predicted the coming captivity of the Judah at the hands of the rising Babylonian Empire.

The Temple of the Lord was located in Jerusalem, but that would not protect the sinful people. That would not prevent God’s judgment of the nation and the total destruction of Jerusalem and the beautiful Temple built by Solomon. At this point there was only one hope for the corrupt nation. They had to stop in their tracks, listen to what God was saying through Isaiah and His prophets, and turn from their wicked ways before it was too late.

Did they stop and listen? No, they did not! Thus God allowed the Babylonian armies to sweep in and destroy Jerusalem and the Temple, and to take the people into captivity for 70 years. In the second half of chapter 1, Isaiah continued to announce God's indictment of Judah – an indictment that went unheeded by the people.

Doctrinal Points

1. God desires to reason with His people.

"Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord" (v18).

God's idea of "reasoning together" is not what we would automatically picture. God's idea was not that the people would sit down with God over a cup of coffee and see if they can come to terms of reconciliation. No way! God's idea of "reasoning" is more the idea of the "reasoning" that goes on in a court of law.

In essence, the Lord was saying to the people of Judah: "Listen to Me! You are guilty! Just look around you. Jerusalem was once a faithful city. There was justice and righteousness." (This would have been during David's reign and the early part of Solomon's reign.) "But now look at you. Morally you're a mess, like a prostitute (v21). Economically you're a failure (v22). When it comes to ethics, you are evil!" (v23)

"Your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves. Everyone loves bribes, and follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, nor does the cause of the widow come before them" (v23). "The orphans and widows are not cared for or assisted," said the Lord. "Everyone wants to be offered a bribe – everyone has his price. Your government is corrupt, even to the point of murder." Verse 15: *"Your hands are full of blood."*

"But there's still hope," said the Lord. "Even though your sins are like the indelible stains of scarlet and crimson, I can cleanse them. I can blot out your sins and give you a clean slate - like clean wool, white as snow! But you must turn from your wicked ways and obey Me. If you do, you will be blessed, but if you don't, you will be devoured by the sword (v20)."

We know the sad choice that the kingdom of Judah made. They were indeed devoured and taken hostage by the sword of the Babylonian army. And centuries later they were again devoured and scattered by the sword of Rome.

What about us? Verse 18 has an application for both believers and unbelievers. If you're still not a Christian, the Lord wants you to know that He can cleanse your heart from its sin. *"Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (v18).* Even if you think your sins are like an indelible stain that can never be washed away, the Lord can forgive your sins and make you clean because He died on the cross to pay for the penalty of your sin.

If you're a believer, there may be some things in your life that need to be removed because they are keeping you from enjoying fellowship with the Lord. Confess your sins, and the Lord will cleanse you and restore you to fellowship with Him. 1 John 1:9 says, *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* God desires to reason with His people.

2. God desires to restore His people.

Isaiah 1:24-31 – *"Therefore the Lord says, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I will rid Myself of My adversaries, and take vengeance on My enemies. ²⁵ I will turn My hand against you, and thoroughly purge away your dross, and take away all your alloy. ²⁶ I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city."*

²⁷ Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and her penitents with righteousness. ²⁸ The destruction of transgressors and of sinners shall be together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. ²⁹ For they shall be ashamed of the terebinth trees which you have desired; and you shall be embarrassed because of the gardens which you have chosen. ³⁰ For you shall be as a terebinth whose leaf fades, and as a garden that has no water. ³¹ The strong shall be as tinder, and the work of it as a spark. Both will burn together, and no one shall quench them.

In these verses there is a promise of future restoration - but the restoration would only come after judgment. *"I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city."*

What time was Isaiah talking about here? We believe this predicted time is yet in the future, because Jerusalem has never been restored morally and spiritually the way this prophecy indicates. We believe that this promise of moral and spiritual restoration of Israel will only be fulfilled when the Lord returns and sets up His earthly kingdom, with Jerusalem as His capital city.

Before that restoration can take place, however, there will be a time of judgment. Israel will have to go through the smelting process of the crucible, so her dross can be removed. *"I will turn My hand against you, and thoroughly purge away your dross, and take away all your alloy" (v25).*

All those who refused to repent, those who continue to forsake the Lord, will be taken away: *"Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and her penitents with righteousness. The destruction of transgressors and of sinners shall be together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed" (v27-28).*

Israel must be brought to the point where she will be ashamed of her former idolatry and the immorality that she practiced in the oak groves and gardens of the land: *"For they shall be ashamed of the terebinth trees that you have desired. And you shall be embarrassed because of the gardens that you have chosen. For you shall be as a terebinth whose leaf*

fades, and as a garden that has no water” (v29-30). The groves where they idolatrously worshiped will fade and die, the gardens of their immoralities will wither, and no longer be desirable.

When would this predicted judgment take place? It certainly began when God allowed the Assyrians and Babylonians to conquer Israel and Judah. It continued on through the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. This judgment will culminate in the Tribulation period of the End Times, before the Lord returns in judgment, and to set up His earthly kingdom (known as the Millennium). Jeremiah 30:7 described this Tribulation period as “the Time of Jacob’s [Israel’s] Trouble.”

All this judgment will lead to the cleansing and spiritual restoration of God’s people Israel. Remember - this passage of Scripture is not speaking of the Church! It’s speaking of Israel, the nation of Jewish people who will return to the Lord. Although these warnings certainly have an application for the Church and the wayward Christian, when it is interpreted properly in its in **context**, it is **a promise to the nation of Israel**. God desires to restore His people.

Practical Application

Always do your background studies!

Do you remember the little “wordless book” with colored pages from your Sunday school days? Remember singing the song and turning the different-colored pages? The first few lines are: “My heart was black with sin [turn to the black page], until the Savior came in. His precious blood I know [turn to the red page] has washed me white as snow [turn to the white page]...”

I remember someone using Isaiah 1:18 to explain the Wordless Book to me. They said that the scarlet in the verse represented the blood of Christ - but they were wrong! That was **bad hermeneutics**! From our background studies we learn that in those times, “scarlet” and “crimson” were dyes whose stains could never be washed out. So the scarlet or crimson in this verse do **not** represent the blood of Christ - they represent the **indelible stain of sin**!

It’s impossible for us to wash away the stain of our sin through our own efforts. Only God can completely remove that stain, when we put our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior.

So let’s be good interpreters of Scripture. **Always do your background studies!**