

ISAIAH: **THE GLORY OF GOD IN A WORLD OF CHAOS**

Part 2: “God Confronts Us to Save Us”

Isaiah 1:1-4; 10-20

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Scripture Reading

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 has spoken: “Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged....Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. “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 red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 1:10–20, ESV).

Heavenly Father, you are holy and high and lifted up. You are our Creator and Maker. You are powerful and mighty. Yet you have loved us with unfathomable love. And you have loved us enough to speak word of correction and confrontation. This morning, may your Spirit give us humble hearts to hear such words, so that your truth would set us free. In the name of Jesus our Lord, we pray.

AMEN.

Introduction

Isaiah is a prophet, and the book that he is written is a prophetic book. But, unfortunately, the words “prophet” and “prophetic” are often misunderstood. In popular imagination, we envision a prophet as a type of wizard with a Gandalf-staff who is capable of seeing and predicting the future. And, admittedly, there are moments when the Old Testament prophets do foretell future events. However, I want you to know that an Old Testament prophet was not primarily a predictor of the future.

What then was a prophet? A prophet was like a divine ambassador. He was a representative sent by God to declare the words of the king of heaven. At times a prophet would give words of counsel and wisdom to the king of the nation. Sometimes the prophet would speak words of comfort. But oftentimes, God would send a prophet to speak words of correction and confrontation to his people for the ways they had broken covenant with God.

In this way, a prophetic word sounded a lot less like a horoscope being read by a wizard and a lot more like a receiving a scary demand letter from the attorney of a very powerful person, confronting you, and ordering you to cease and desist.

The words of the prophet Isaiah here in chapter 1 are divine words of confrontation. And indeed, God told Isaiah on the day that he was called into ministry that he would have to speak some very hard truth to God’s people.

Last week, we beheld the profound moment of Isaiah’s call (Isa 6:1-8). As he prays through his fears and mourns for his nation in the temple, Isaiah’s eyes are unveiled to see the glory and power of the majestic God who rules over all creation. Angels fly around the divine throne, worshipping with holy and eternal zeal. The foundations of the earth quake. Smoke envelops the atmosphere. Isaiah is overwhelmed with terror and awe. He feels utterly unworthy and undone before the glory of God. But an angel flies to the altar of heaven, and, with tongs, picks a burning coal to press to Isaiah’s mouth. At once, Isaiah is filled with cleansing and courage, so that when God asks the question of “Whom shall I send to speak my words to my people?” Isaiah says, “Here am I. Send me.”

Now that is an epic call to ministry. However, the rest chapter 6 gives us a good idea that Isaiah’s ministry will not be sunshine and rainbows. In fact, this is how God predicts Isaiah’s message will be received: *“And he said, ‘Go, and say to this people: Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed”* (Isa 6:9–10).

In other words, God says to Isaiah, “The good news is I am going to call you to the awesome privilege of speaking my words – the words of the Creator God who made all things. The bad news is *no one is going to want to hear what I have to say*. In fact, simply by saying my words, you will harden hearts, deafen ears, and close eyes to the

truth.”

This isn't the most encouraging call into ministry. Upfront the prophet knows that he will suffer rejection. Isaiah is commissioned to speak truth people do not want to hear; he is called to confront idols that people do not want to acknowledge.

But this confrontational message is not Isaiah's – it is God's. As 1:2 of our reading today says: “for the LORD has spoken.”¹

God's people did not want a God who would confront or challenge them in any way. And today, it is still a human tendency not to want a God who would confront or challenge us in any way. *We would prefer it if our God and those who speak his word would simply affirm what we already want to be true.* But make no mistake. *A god that is not allowed to confront or challenge you is not a real God. Rather, a god that is not allowed to confront you is a golden calf (cf. Ex 32); a god of your own making.*

This is where the words of a chapter like Isaiah 1 are so helpful and so relevant. They are like smelling salts that rouse us from spiritual slumber. God's living words are still a confrontation. But God's doesn't confront us to harm us or shame us. Rather, “God Confronts Us to Save Us.”

Exposition

As we walk through Isaiah 1, I would like to unfold three ways in which God confronts us: 1.) God Confronts our Lack of Self-Awareness, 2.) God Confronts our Lack of Sincerity, and 3.) God Confronts our Lack of Love.

1.) God Confronts our Lack of Self-Awareness.

We learn from Isaiah 1:1 that God gives Isaiah a “vision” (וִיזוֹן). Isaiah's words are thus a *new way of seeing; a new God-ward perspective on reality.*²

This is needed because the people of Judah an unrealistic appraisal of themselves.³ It is like the early part of *American Idol* auditions when people come into the competition thinking they are awesome, but in reality, they are terrible. Those un-self-aware contestants need unsugar-coated bluntness. So too, Judah needs the mirror of God's word to reveal the reality about themselves so that they can grasp the reality of God.

But the people of Judah do not know the true reality of their spiritual condition, and they do not know God: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, a people laden

¹ J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 50.

² Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 18.

³ “The people of Isaiah's day had an unrealistic appraisal of themselves, with little awareness of their own fatal salvations.” *Ibid.*, 21.

with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged” (Isa 1:3–4).

God is saying, “You think you know me, but you don’t know me; you think we’re good – we’re not. You think you’re good – you’re not.”⁴

But why is God so mad? As one Old Testament scholar has written, if we don’t know the context, we miss the nature of Isaiah’s message. It would be like listening to only one side of a phone call.⁵ So we have to understand the situation Isaiah speaking into.

At the time of Isaiah’s ministry, in Judah there was a strong sense of pride of being God’s people living in God’s country. However, Judah was living far beneath there call to be God’s faithful people. It was an increasingly anxious time during which the Kingdom of Judah was becoming weaker and weaker, and the Assyrian Empire to the north was becoming more and more powerful by the day [[show map of the Assyrian Empire](#)]. Instead of trusting in the Lord for wisdom and protection, Judah was entertaining the notion of making an alliance of compromise with the wicked and immoral empire of Assyria in order to have a sense of peace, security, and significance in an increasingly hostile and uncertain situation

Now this was a big no-no. God’s people were not permitted by the law of entering into covenants with other nations, because God did not want his people to be negatively influenced toward immorality and false gods. Judah was called to be faithful to their covenant with God and to be God’s distinct people. But instead of being distinct from the world, God’s people were making an alliance with the world. To this mentality God says, “You must not know I am the God who set slaves free and split the Red Sea!”

God’s word to Judah is God’s word to us: the power of the world will not save you. *To seek security and salvation in a kingdom of man instead of God isn’t just bad politics – it’s idolatry.*

This is why if you read through the long chapters of the long book of Isaiah, you will see most of the book is God foretelling the judgment that is to come on various nations. God, through Isaiah, is exposing of the failure and future downfall of all rival kingdoms, so that the hope of God’s people would be in God and not in any earthly kingdom.

There was a time when Assyria seemed invincible; now Assyria is gone. There was a time when the power of the Roman Caesar seemed unconquerable; now Nero is a popular

⁴ “The *earth* yields her fruits; the *sea* flows not beyond her settled boundaries; the sun, moon, and stars perform their courses; the *heavens*, too, revolve at stated periods; and all with wonderful accuracy, though they are destitute of reason and understanding. But man, endued with reason and understanding, in whose ears and in whose heart the voice of God frequently sounds, remains unmoved, like one bereft of his senses, and cannot bend the neck to submit to him.” John Calvin and William Pringle, [Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah](#), vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 39.

⁵ Gary V. Smith, [Isaiah 1–39](#), ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 25.

name for pit bulls. There was a time when Zeus seemed like a god above all other gods; now, his name is the brand of my beard wash.

Assyria is gone, but God's word endures. God's promise endures. God gives his people hope that will not disappoint.

But let us not be like the people of Judah Isaiah's day who said, "No, I'm good. I don't have idols. Other people might, but I don't." The book of Psalms says, *"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see... Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them" (Ps 115:4–5; 8)*. The scariest thing about idols is that they blind you to their very existence.

It is the mercy of God to bring us to conviction concerning our sin, our idols and our lack of self-awareness. To acknowledge and confront our sin is unpleasant, but it is a necessary step toward freedom. Conviction of sin is a gift from the Holy Spirit.

As Pastor Ray Ortlund has said so well: *"Conviction of sin is the violent sweetness of God opposing the sins lying comfortably undisturbed in our lives. Conviction of sin is the merciful God declaring war on the false peace we settle for. Conviction of sin is our escape from malaise to joy, from attending church to worship, from faking it to authenticity. Conviction of sin, with the forgiveness of Jesus pouring over our wounds, is life."*⁶

2.) God Confronts our Lack of Sincerity.

God continues his confrontation in verse 10: *"Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!" (Isa 1:10)*.

God's people are in such a state of immorality God calls them Sodom and Gomorrah, referring to infamously wicked cities that were destroyed by God's judgment in the book of Genesis (Gen 19).

This would have been outrageous and offensive to Isaiah's audience. They would have thought, "How dare he say something like this to us! We go to the temple! We believe in Scripture! We tell people to 'be blessed' instead of saying 'good-bye!'"

But Isaiah shows that God doesn't care about outward displays of religiosity. In fact, God very aware that it is possible to practice external tokens devotion while having a heart cold toward God and the things God cares about – and, hauntingly, it is possible to do this and not even know it.

The people of Judah are just going through the motions of religion. Sure, they are observing festivals and offering burnt sacrifices and incense. But they have no passion for God. They are not worshipping Him with the affections of their hearts or with the

⁶ Ibid., 26.

holiness of their lives. They may be fooling themselves, but they are not fooling God.

Of this half-hearted worship, God says: *"Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them"* (Isa 1:14).

God is saying, "Do I have to go to church today? Your worship is unendurable to me. You say you love me, but your indifference to sin reveals what you really think of me."⁷

And if you think, well this is just the angry God of the Old Testament; God is much more kind in the New Testament, just take a look what Jesus had to say about *outward religiosity and inner hypocrisy*: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness"* (Mt 23:27–28).

God does not tolerate insincere worship. And he loves us so much that he will confront us over this issue so that we might worship him in spirit and in truth (cf. Jn 4:24).

3.) God Confronts our Lack of Love.

Continuing with this theme of Isaiah comparing the people of Judah to Sodom, it is worthwhile to understand how the prophets understood the sin of Sodom. In other words, what was it about Sodom that earned them the famous judgment of fire and brimstone?

You might get the idea in Genesis that it was merely sexual immorality and sin, and I think that was certainly part of it. But the Bible shows there was something more happening in these two infamously sinful cities. This is from the prophet Ezekiel: *"Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it"* (Eze 16:49–50).

In other words, the sin of Sodom was widespread *lack of justice* and *lack of love* for the *poor*.

Isaiah is picking up on this theme when he calls his people to a repentance wherein they are to display sacrificial love to their neighbor: *"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause"* (Isa 1:16–17).

In today's climate, I feel simply saying what Isaiah says is now a controversial and potentially polarizing issue. If Isaiah wrote these words today on a social media

⁷ Ortlund, 36.

platform, I fear he would be labeled a Marxist by some Christians. But the inspired, authoritative word of God calls us to love the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. It is not optional.

This needs to influence the way we see our call as Christians and the way we see our call as a church. And to emphasize acts of love for the down-trodden in no way is to say we should have less gospel in our mission. At Redeemer, we believe in both declaring and displaying the gospel. It's our mission, and it's not an either-or issue for us. *Tangible love without clear truth and clear truth without tangible love are both equally sub-biblical forms of Christian mission for the body of Christ.*

This is why we support missions like the Refugee Language Project so that we can support the many often-disconnected and disenfranchised refugees in our Amarillo community. This is why we support Crisis Aid, who rescues women from the sex industry, houses them, trains them with hireable skills, and disciples them in the gospel. This is why we support church planting initiatives among the poorest of the poor through Acts 29 and Christian Relief Fund. This is why we unapologetically stand for and support the right to life for unborn. This is why we want to be a voice in our community for the healing of racial division.

The oppressed still exist, and God's people are called to stand in the gap. We are to bear witness to the kingdom of heaven by how we live and how we love *now* on earth.

Conclusion

God confronts his people and calls them to repentance. But there is also a beautiful promise of redemption in this text. Look at verse 18: *"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 red like crimson, they shall become like wool" (Isa 1:18).*

As one commentator says: "'Though your sins are like scarlet' assumes that Judah's sinfulness is an irrefutable fact; there is nothing to argue about. [But] God does not have an agenda to end the relationship with punishment."⁸

God has confronted us to show the utter impossibility of any salvation in and of ourselves. God is showing us that, in order to be saved, we must step out of the way. It is God who will remove our sins and restore our righteousness. God intends to do what we could never do. And through Jesus, he has! Jesus is the Messiah who saved us when we could not save ourselves. He exchanged our punishment for his reward: *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).*

God confronts sinners because God still saves sinners. Our sin is great; our Savior is greater.

⁸ Smith, 109–110.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, by the grace of the Spirit, may we not be hardened to the words of God. May God's words awaken us to healthy conviction. May we be a people who worship with sincerity. May we be a people who display our love for God in the way that we love the weakest among us. May we be a people who receive the grace of Christ who saved us, when we could have never saved ourselves.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1) Read Isaiah 1:1-20. God is confronting his people in this passage. Summarize in your own words the things that God is correcting his people for.
- 2) *At the time of Isaiah's ministry, the people of Judah were looking to alliances with foreign nations for salvation instead of God. Instead of being distinct from the world, they were compromising with the world. What are those things, or who are those people, that you depend on more than Jesus to provide the meaning and purpose and security and significance you long for?*
- 3) *Isaiah 1:11-15 exposes how easy it is to go through the motions of religious ritual with insincere hearts. How can we stoke a genuine love for God in our hearts?*
- 4) *What are the opportunities available to you to do good, seek justice, and correct oppression (Isaiah 1:17)?*

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