

Come Let Us Reason Together
Isaiah 1:1-20

Isaiah chapter 1. We'll be reading verses 1 to 20. Before the reading, we will pray. Please join me in prayer. Father in heaven, your word tells us that all flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand for ever. Speak to us, Father, from your word, we ask. May it be our food, may it be our life. Give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to obey. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

Isaiah, chapter 1, reading verses 1 to 20:

¹ 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.

² 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. ³ The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."

⁴ "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. ⁵ Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. ⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil.

⁷ "Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. ⁸ And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.

⁹ If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah. ¹⁰ Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹ "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. ¹² When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵ "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. ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

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. ¹⁹If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; ²⁰but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken?” Amen.

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Sometimes it’s been called “the Gospel of Isaiah”—the gospel in the Old Testament. Isaiah ministered around about the 700s B.C., probably around 300 years after the Davidic line was established in Jerusalem.

The prophet Isaiah is mentioned by name 22 times in the New Testament, and he’s alluded to many, many times in the New Testament. Consider, for example, Isaiah 66, which closes out with a vision of the new heavens and the new earth, and then consider how the book of Revelation finishes with John seeing, from a mountain, a vision of the new heavens and the new earth. Indeed, a new city where God dwells.

Isaiah ministered in the time of the ministry of four kings, possibly five. It appears he was a long-lived prophet. Mind you, rabbinic teaching is that the fifth king, Manasseh—who was one of the most evil kings of Judah that there was, according to Scripture—Manasseh, the rabbis say, killed him. In a hollow log, he was sawn in two. In Hebrews chapter 11, where it speaks of that hall of fame of faithful people, it doesn’t mention a name, but just says, “Some were sawn in two.” And commentators are fairly well in agreement that that is probably a reference to Isaiah himself. The teaching of the Jews was that Isaiah was sawn in two, inside a hollow log, by the King Manasseh.

His ministry, as I said, crossed over the reign of four kings: King Uzziah, or Azariah—he reigned 52 years. Second Kings chapter 15 tells us that he was a good king. But through pride, he was cursed and became a leper, we’re told in 2 Chronicles chapter 26. He’s the king that tried to make himself a priest, that entered into the temple of Lord, burning incense, and tried to usurp the ordained role of the priesthood in Old Testament Israel, and he was struck with leprosy.

Uzziah’s son Jotham, who reigned during the end of his reign and for 16 years after his death, was also a king who was known as one who did what was right in the sight of the Lord. We get that from Second Kings chapter 15.

Jotham’s son, Ahaz, was evil. Ahaz was born of northern kingdom lineage. Uzziah and Jotham, it appears, had tried to establish some kind of alliance with the split-off northern kingdom of Israel, where Ahab and Jezebel were king and queen; they had married their son Ahaz to a daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. He’s listed in Scripture as an evil man, a wicked king. He was the king who, visiting the capital of Assyria, saw an altar made to an idol, an altar made to one of the Assyrian gods, and he sent the plan for the copy of that altar to the high priest in his time, and instructed that altar be made in the temple courts. And from that time on, sacrifices were to be made on that altar, that copy of an idolatrous altar from Assyria, even in the temple of the Lord. We read about that in Second Kings chapter 16.

In the grace and the providence of God, Ahaz had a son named Hezekiah who came to the throne. Hezekiah goes down in biblical history as one of the great kings of the southern kingdom

of Judah—a son of David; a faithful king; one who did well. He was a faithful son of David, we find, in 2 Kings chapter 18.

Around about this time, during the reign of Hezekiah, the northern kingdom fell. It disappeared, basically. They were invaded by the nation of Assyria, they were taken off captive, the vast majority of the people. The northern kingdom was never re-established. And so Hezekiah was a king with pagan enemies at the doorstep. Judah was no longer so much a nation, it was a city-state, and it pretty much only had true sovereignty over Jerusalem and its immediate surrounding areas. It was, if you want to think of it this way, a pinprick of light in a region of darkness. These are the times that Isaiah ministered in.

The basic message of Isaiah's prophecy, if you just want to take it at its surface-level meaning, the basic message of his prophecy is this: The people of Judah have sinned against the Lord God and broken covenant. They will be punished; they will be taken off into captivity by a nation called Babylon; after a period of time, the remnant will return to the city of Jerusalem, and it will be rebuilt. That's the surface level of it. That is, as I said, the shallow reading of his prophecies.

We know from the New Testament, and we know from the way the apostles used the book of Isaiah, that there is so much more in it than just that shallow reading. Yes, God judged the nation. Yes, they were taken off into captivity. Yes, a remnant did return. Yes, Jerusalem was rebuilt. But the apostles taught that so much of the book of Isaiah was fulfilled in the work and the person of Jesus Christ. All of the apostles quoted from Isaiah. All the apostles applied prophecies from Isaiah to Jesus.

Isaiah itself is, I would say, the most important bridge from the New Testament into the Old Testament, teaching us the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ, teaching us that He indeed was Yahweh incarnate. The gospel of John really cannot be understood in any other light than the light that comes from the prophecies of Isaiah.

For example, in John chapter 8, verse 24. Just turn there very quickly. We'll start reading at verse 23—this is Jesus speaking to the Jews: “²³ He said to them, ‘You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. ²⁴ I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.’”

“That I am he”—that's a direct quotation of the prophet Isaiah. And the one who says, “I am he” in the book of Isaiah is Yahweh. I—I am he. Jesus said, “Unless you believe that I am he.” The context in which that's said, if you don't realize it, was an escalating argument. Jesus was speaking condemnatory words of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and they were speaking condemnatory words of Himself.

And if you look down a little further, He gets even more confrontational, even bolder. Start reading at John 8:36: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

“³⁹ They answered him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹ You are doing the works your father did.’ They said to him, ‘We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.’ ⁴² Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.’”

Now jump down to verse 52. “⁵² The Jews said to him, ‘Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, “If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.” ⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?’ ⁵⁴ Jesus answered, ‘If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, “He is our God.” ⁵⁵ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.’ ⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’” I am.

The whole context of the argument actually only makes sense in the light that we get from the book of Isaiah, and Jesus saying to them, Unless you believe that I am He. And I can tell you, that in the literal text, in the Greek text, that’s actually what He said. Unless you believe that I am He. The whole context of that argument, and the thing that Jesus said there at the end of verse 58—“I am”—we understand that from the book of Isaiah, because in the Greek He used the word “ego”, I Me. And in the book of Isaiah, the Lord Yahweh, the Lord God Himself, constantly says of Himself, I am. Ego, I me, in the Greek translation of the book of Isaiah, the Septuagint. I am.

And so the book of Isaiah becomes very, very important. As I said, it brings light to us. It starts off with a word of condemnation and the call of salvation. It’s a theme that is constantly picked up in the book of Isaiah.

Basically, Isaiah says, Two things are inevitable. Two things will happen; two things must happen. The two inevitable things are: God will judge evil; God will bring the wickedness of he wicked down upon their own heads. And, God’s people will be saved. They’re the two inevitable things that just keep coming again and again. Condemnation and salvation.

You could say many things appear in the book of Isaiah—the theme of the Servant, who is Israel, who is the Son of David, who is Yahweh Himself. Now to the Jew reading the writings of Isaiah before the coming of Christ, I’m sure that this was very confusing. But to us, who have the New Testament and the teachings of the apostles, we see all of this reconciled in one person—the

Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the true Israel, God incarnate, the one true Saviour. And we get all of that out of the book of Isaiah. It's our bridge, as I said, from the New back to the Old.

Let's get to our text then, starting at verse 1: "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." Well, we've already spoken of these things. Good kings, bad kings. Isaiah seemed to have access to the royal family. It seemed that he was able to walk in and out of the house of Hezekiah. It seemed that he was able to arrange to meet Ahaz whenever he needed to.

David had a household prophet. His name was Nathan—remember, Nathan the seer. It would appear that the line of David had prophets on hand, at almost the whole time of the reign of the sons of David in the southern kingdom. Some of the rabbinic teaching is that Isaiah was a cousin of the king. He came from the royal line but was not the child of an eldest son. It may or may not be true. It can't be proven, but that would in a way explain his familiarity with kings, the fact that he seemed to have constant access to whoever was reigning at that time.

Let's continue. Verses 2, 3 and 4 form, if you like, a stanza. It's the opening accusation: "2 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. 3 The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.'"

This calling of creation to bear witness is echoed in other parts of Scripture. We read Psalm 50—almost exactly the same themes and ideas. Psalm 50, the psalm where God calls upon creation and He points out to His people that He owns all this. Creation is mine! All the universe, the heavens, the animals, the blood—it's all mine. If I were hungry, would you be feeding me? And He accuses them of hypocrisy, empty worship.

When God calls the heavens and the earth to give ear, He's actually repeating something that was said through Moses, if you want to turn back with me to Deuteronomy chapter 31. Reading from verse 28 through Deuteronomy 32:1, Moses speaking: "'28 Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears and call heaven and earth to witness against them. 29 For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you. And in the days to come evil will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands.' 30 Then Moses spoke the words of this song until they were finished, in the ears of all the assembly of Israel: 1 'Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.'" God, through Moses, calling heaven and earth to witness His words of warning, His accusations against a rebellious people.

We took a New Testament reading from Romans chapter 8, and what did we hear there? That all of creation groans under the burden of corruption. Humanity. All of creation groans under the burden of our corruption. And here, all of creation, heavens and earth, are called to bear witness against sin, groaning, perhaps, groaning under the burden of it, bear witness against sin.

And Isaiah uses the phrase near the end of verse 4 of chapter 1: They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. The Holy One of Israel—are you familiar with the title? It’s used 29 times by the prophet Isaiah.

Let’s turn to the gospel of Mark, chapter 1. We’ll start reading at verse 21: “²¹ And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴ ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.’” The Holy One.

As I said, Isaiah calls Yahweh “the Holy One of Israel” 29 times. In John chapter 6, verse 69, once again, Jesus is called “the Holy One.” So it actually becomes a Messianic title. The seeds of those things that Isaiah is going to tell us later on in the book are being sown here. The Holy One of Israel.

I want you to see that the people are called four things, four collective nouns in Isaiah 1, verse 4: A nation, and a people, and an offspring, and children, just at the start of verse 4. Sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly.

But notice with the four collective nouns, which were calling them the people of God, there are four accusations, four words that describe their character: They’re sinful; they’re laden with iniquity; they’re evildoers; they’re corrupt. That’s a nice little bit of symmetry there. A nation, a people, an offspring, children. Sinful, iniquitous, evil, and corrupt. That’s God describing His own people; God describing His covenant nation.

Now we’ll look at verse 5 and 6: “⁵ Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. ⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil.”

What God is saying to these people is, “Can’t you see? Can’t you see that you are under my discipline? Don’t you understand that I, as a Father, am disciplining you? Don’t you understand that all of these things come from my hand? Don’t you understand that I require repentance from you?” He’s basically saying that there’s nothing but bruises, from the tip of their head to the tip of their toe—there’s nothing but a sea of bruises, cuts, and scrapes. And He’s saying, “You’re getting this from me.” You’re getting this from me.

Now Isaiah here sows another seed that will come to light later in the book. I want you to look at the words: smitten, sickness, and bruises. “The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds. They are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil.” In the background there is the word “smitten,” I should say—struck down, faint.

Who remembers the Servant’s Song? Turn to Isaiah chapter 53, just reading verse 4 and 5: “⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten

by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”

Smitten, sickness, bruises, poured out upon whom? The servant, Jesus. Keep reading: Verse 7: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent.”

You see, Isaiah here at the start in chapter 1 shows us how the judgments of God are being poured out upon God’s people. They have no intercessor. No one stands between them and God. Their sins are drawing down upon their own heads the wrath of God. You see that one comes who stands between the people and God. And the wrath of God, the punishment due for their sins, falls upon that one’s head.

As I said, Isaiah is starting to set up his themes. Now was he conscious of doing this while he wrote? I wouldn’t say that. He probably wasn’t. He’s writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He’s being carried along by the Spirit of God. This is what the Holy Spirit sows into the word of God. It’s there for us to find, with His help.

Let’s keep reading—verses 7, 8, and 9. A picture of desolation, a picture of destruction. “⁷ Your country lies desolate.” And he gives a couple of word pictures, verse 8: “Like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.” What are the pictures there? Well, in times of harvest, the farmers would build a temporary shelter in the fields, to be there the whole time, to stay there overnight, to keep marauding birds and animals away from the crop. The picture, for example, of a lodge in a cucumber field.

Now if you’ve grown any of the vines like cucumber or zucchini, what happens the moment the first frost falls upon them? You know, you’ve got these beautiful, luscious green plants. A field of them would just look verdant. One frost? Brown, gray, dead, all on the ground. And left in the middle is that abandoned lodge or booth, looking like it’s lost—abandoned. That’s God’s picture of His people. The fact that He has left them abandoned should tell them that the judgments of God are upon them.

There’s another verse that I want you to see. Turn this time to the book of Exodus, chapter 34. Moses delivering the law to the people and speaking to them of their need to attend the feasts in Jerusalem. We’ll start reading at verse 21:

“²¹ Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest. ²² You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year’s end. ²³ Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God, the God of Israel. ²⁴ For I will cast out nations before you and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land, when you go up to appear before the Lord your God three times in the year.”

What’s that promise there? I mean, think. “No one shall covet your land, when you go up to appear before the Lord your God three times in the year.” The promise is that when the towns

empty out—because everybody’s headed to Jerusalem for their feasts, for the sacrifices, for the worship of the living God—the promise is that no enemy will take their land while they’re absent. No enemy will come near to them. They will worship safely. Their worship will be protected by the living God.

What’s happened to the nation of Judah, back in Isaiah chapter 1? Foreigners devour your land, it is desolate, overthrown by foreigners. The protection’s gone. The Lord is allowing people to come into what was the kingdom and to strip it bare. The promises have gone. Why? Because the covenant has been broken. Think of Psalm 23: Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. It’s not happening. It’s not happening. They’re not enjoying the protection of the Lord, but O goodness me, they’re still a religious people. They’re still having sacrifices and feasts, and still calling upon the name of the Lord, and claiming to be God’s own people. But God is not claiming them for His own people. He’s in the process of rejecting them.

Start looking now at verse 9: “⁹ If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.” A few survivors, or a remnant—what does that mean? Faithful people. He’s saying if the Lord had not left us faithful people, we would already have been destroyed. A few survivors—a remnant.

Think of what happened in Sodom and Gomorrah. Think of the story of Abraham negotiating, praying with God—If you find this many people in the town, so many righteous people who fear God—will you destroy it? No, I wouldn’t. If I found that many, it would be protected. He didn’t find that number, did He? He didn’t find the necessary number. I mean, we know that God knew that in the providence of God. That’s not the point. The point is that what Isaiah is saying is that because there is a faithful remnant in the city, we are not being destroyed as Sodom and Gomorrah.

Well, my friends, there’s got to be something there said to us today, this day, here, in our town, in our place. There’s a faithful remnant. We think, we feel, that we’re doing nothing and no good. That’s the way it feels. That’s what the Devil wants us to think, that’s the way he wants us to feel—like we are useless, like we’re wasting our time, and like we are insignificant.

The very fact that there is a faithful remnant is witness and testimony to the fact that God has other plans. If He did not leave us here, if He did not leave us and other faithful Christians in this town, we could assume that God was setting it aside for destruction. But, no. We’re here. We’re here with the word of God upon our lips. We’re here with the Spirit of the Lord within our hearts. We’re here to serve God and to be a faithful witness. We are preserving this town. It might not feel like it. You might not feel like you’re a great intercessor. Don’t worry about the way you feel. I’m telling you what Scripture says. Scripture says we are—it says that we are fulfilling the purposes of God in our place and in our time.

Read on in verse 10. We’ll have a look at verses 10 through 15: “¹⁰ Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” Oh, my. Isn’t that confrontational? That’s not sugar-coating the medicine. God’s people. Who’s He speaking to? The priesthood, the royal family, the nobles, the House of Judah. You people of Sodom, rulers of Sodom, people of Gomorrah. You’re only alive because God left the faithful

remnant among you. The only reason you're alive is because He left a faithful remnant among you! Hear what I'm saying.

And then we get His attack upon false worship. Hypocrisy: “¹¹ 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.” Down to verse 13 : “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.”

You see what that's saying? I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. He's saying, You're having a church service. You think you're worshipping me, and I look upon you and all I see is sin and evil and wickedness. I see a people not transformed. I see a people of hypocrisy, taking my name in vain.

I said earlier, it was amazing I found that as I prepared this, it actually did suit Christmas day. You know, you like to think Christmas is a good day, and I know why we think that. We're celebrating the incarnation of Jesus Christ. That's good. But how many people turn up to church today, and not at any other time of the year? How many people just turn up to pay lip service to one called Jesus Christ? “Oh, yeah—Hey, Jesus, we acknowledge you. Lay the blessings upon us. Sweet. Now let's get out and have a beer.”

I'll tell you what God thinks of Christmas day celebrations among the faithless. I'll tell you exactly what He thinks of the faithless practice of celebrating Christmas, or Easter, or any other religious convocation. I'll tell you exactly what He thinks. I know exactly what He thinks. The reason I know exactly what He thinks is I've got it here in front of me in black and white. I've got it here in writing. I've got it here in words. Here's what He says: “Incense is an abomination to me. I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. They have become a burden to me; and 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.”

I'm not actually militantly against the celebration of Christmas. But here's what God thinks of this empty, shallow, cultural, supposed religion that's based on Christianity, where once a year you say, “Happy Christmas”, and somehow or other you think that in doing that, you're serving God. He hates it! It's an abomination. It disgusts Him. It utterly disgusts Him.

I mean, what's the commandment? You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind, and with all of your strength. And these people turn up on December the 25th—“Hello, Jesus. Hello. It was really nice of you to come to earth. I think you're really nice. Bye.” Sing a few nice songs. That's the good that it's doing our nation. That's the good that it's doing men.

We've got no visitors here this morning. I'm not surprised. They don't want to hear the truth. All right, they're turning up to these places that are called “churches”, these supposedly solemn assemblies where supposed teachers of the Word of God stand before them. They turn up at these places and say, “Hello, Jesus,” you know, “Happy Christmas.” And that person who stands in front of them, that's supposedly speaking a word from God, says, “It's okay. You've got

nothing to worry about. God is very happy with you. It's nice that you came on Christmas day. Go out and be blessed.”

The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, as Jeremiah says. Empty blessings from empty-hearted men and women, pretending to be ministers of the gospel. Laying the curses of God upon the people that they claim to bless. Servants of wickedness. False prophets. Blind leading the blind. Wolves in sheep's clothing. The Scripture's filled with metaphors and descriptions of such people and such supposed worship.

And that's what this nation is filled with. They turn up on Christmas day, and then they fill in the census saying, Ah, they're Christian. They're not Christian. They know they're not Christian. We know that nominal cultural Christianity is not Christian. Yes, yes, I would rather they said they were Christian than that they were Muslim. Of course I would. We all would. But my friends, we've got to call a spade a spade.

The sinner, the unrepentant sinner who's going to hell that says they are Christian because they turn up on December the 25th is going to end up in the same hell as the unrepentant sinner who says they're a Muslim, and the unrepentant sinner who says that they're a Buddhist, and the unrepentant sinner who says that they're an occultist, and the unrepentant sinner who says that they're a Hindu. They all end up under the same judgment of God in the same hell.

And we've got the Word of God right here in front of us, telling us that for a fact! Telling us that for a fact, an undeniable fact. They do not glorify God. Worship is not worship unless it is worship that comes from a true, living faith. Unless it comes from somebody who truly is known by God, and knows their God, and loves Him.

It's not worship to turn up on December the 25th. It's not even worship to turn up on any particular Sunday, if it's not in the heart, if it's not true love for God, if you've not been called to worship through and by the power of the Holy Spirit, and if you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ. What did He say? I am He? Unless you believe that He is the one, the Savior, God incarnate, you actually are not worshipping.

Cultural Christianity is the curse of a Christian nation. It's the curse of a Christian nation. And Australia has gone from—at the end of the 1800s—it's gone from basically being a Christian nation to today, where I would be very surprised if we were 5% Christian. In all honesty, I would be very surprised.

There's a lot of jumping up and down, and a lot of talking about Jesus, but I don't see a whole lot of repentance, and I don't see a whole lot of heart-filled worship, and I don't see a whole lot of people who are prepared to follow Christ, whatever the cost, to serve their God in faithfulness and humility and love.

We shouldn't be calling ourselves a Christian nation. We shouldn't even be very excited that there's this movement going on where people are sort of rebelling against the political correct brigade and saying, “Happy Christmas—Christmas.”

Look, yeah, I understand. You know, in a way, in a way, it's kind of a good thing. But let's be honest. Let's be honest. It means nothing if it's not associated with the preaching of the true gospel. If it's not associated with the preaching of *sin*—the bad news. The bad news. You know, tonight we're going to start in the gospel of John. We're going to hear about the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. That's Christmassy, isn't it? This is why. This is why the Word became flesh. This is why Christ came. This is why God gave His only begotten Son. This is why! Because people choose evil rather than God. Because people love what is wrong, not what is right, and they want the false comfort of a shallow, millimeter-deep, pseudo-Christian religion. They want just enough, so that they can pretend they've fulfilled their obligations. And they can pretend that they are God's people. Wickedness.

Verse 15: “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.” Your hands are full of blood. You see there the reversing of the Aaronic blessing from Numbers chapter 5? “The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you.” God says, No. No blessing, no keeping. My face is not towards you. My eyes are turned from you. I cannot look. My face is not towards you. My eyes are not upon you. I will not hear your prayers. Your religion is actually drawing down my judgment, because it is false and hypocritical. And God cannot live with such hypocrisy. He hates it. He hates it.

Verse 16: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.” Wash yourselves. Wash yourselves, it says. What's the call there? What's being said? What's happening here? We'll look at this a bit more, but I just want to read you from the book of Acts, the teaching of the Apostle Paul when he's speaking, defending the gospel. Acts 22:16: “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” Be baptized. Wash away your sins, calling on his name.

One thing about those words, on the very surface, notice that baptism is very, very, very carefully and very closely associated with repentance and faith. There's no mention here of baptizing someone who doesn't know that they're being baptized, and is not practicing faith, and is not called to repentance. Those who ought to be baptized and to wash away their sins are to be repenting, calling upon His name. This is a Baptist church. We're Reformed Baptists, but this is a baptist church.

But there's that language, “Wash yourselves.” You see, what God does to you, God must do through you. You know, we're not passive receptors. God is the prime mover. God is the one who acts through His people. God is the source of our power, the source of the living heart, the regenerate heart that wants to obey. And God by His Spirit is providing the power and the will and the desire to obey. But you've got to obey.

You know, there's a bit too much “be still and know that I am God” being preached; just a little bit too much. There is a time to be still and know that He is God. There is a time when you must surrender things into the hand of God. Of course there is. But your Christian life is not a life of “be still and know that I am God”, from one day to the next. Wash yourselves! It's the

calling to repent. Cease to evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

Here's the thing—here's the thing: A person who does not love the Lord their God is a person who does not love their neighbour. It's that simple. This city, this town, this country, is filled with preaching about loving your neighbor, and not a word about loving the Lord your God. It's filled with preaching about doing good unto others, and how Christianity is the religion of the social conscience—Do good to everybody. And if you do good, you've got nothing to fear.

Well, I'll tell you what that kind of religion produces. It produces lazy, flabby people who pretend they're Christians. It produces soft-talking nice boys who are good for nothing. It produces effeminate Christianity that has no spine, no backbone, no power.

Love God with your heart. Love God. Serve God. Obey God. Desire the presence and the glory of God, and you will learn to love your neighbour. It will come. You will learn to love your neighbour as yourself. But hypocritical worship cannot produce the love of neighbour that God desires. It just can't. They might do some good works. Maybe they run a soup kitchen somewhere. Good. Maybe they supply blankets to the homeless. Good. Good. It's good. But leave someone going to hell. They're still going to end up in hell, and you're going to end up there with them. If you don't call them back from the ditch, if you're just a blind person leading other persons into the ditch, you're all ending up in the same hell. Empty religion. God hates it.

And now we come to the gospel. Verses 18, 19, and 20: ¹⁸“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord.” Don't mistake this for a gentle call, because it's not. This is actual legal talk. “Come now, let us reason together says the Lord” is actually a call to the court. It's a call to come back, to come before witnesses. Remember how Isaiah started, calling upon the heavens and the earth to bear witness? Well we've picked up that theme again. Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. It's a little irony. It's ironic in a way. Who's going to reason with God?

You know, when you were converted, what was the negotiation? “Dear God, I will do this if you will do that. Dear God, I want to go this far, if you will come that far. Dear God, I'm this bad, and this good, so it would be nice if you overlooked this bad, and accentuated this good, and added your little bit of help to my little bit of goodness, and things will go well.” There was no bargaining, was there? It wasn't this reasoning together.

Here's the reasoning: God spoke. And God said, “You are a sinner who cannot save yourself. You are a sinner who cannot save yourself. Repent. Hear my command. Repent. Beg my forgiveness. Beg my forgiveness.” That was God reasoning with us. That was God's dealings with us. That was God's grace and mercy. Repent! Receive me as your God, acknowledging that there is nothing about you that earns my blessing. There is nothing about yourself that I should desire. “Should every human being upon this planet Earth go to hell, I would still be God in heaven, and glorious, and holy, and true, and perfect, and righteous.” That's God's reasoning.

And you've got no choice but to join people like Isaiah and Job and Peter, and say—well, what did they say? What did Isaiah say? “Woe is me, I am undone. I dwell in the midst of a sinful people. I am a man of sinful lips.” Or Job: “I repent in sackcloth and ashes. I have spoken of

things of which I did not know.” Or Peter, when he took the miraculous catch of fish: “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a wicked person.”

That’s God reasoning with you, God telling you the way it is and the way it will be, and here’s the gift of life—When He gives the gift of life, you hear Him telling you, and you obey. You respond. Life comes and you beg forgiveness, and you repent, and you turn your back upon your sins and your sinful nature. Because here’s the problem—we’re not just talking about actions, are we? We’re not just talking about the few things that you do wrong. We’re talking about what’s in here, and in here. We’re talking about the person—the very core of our being.

We’re not just talking about sins, we’re talking about sinners. And we’re not sinners because we’ve sinned. We sin because we’re sinners. Evil. Evil to the core. Wicked. Not one shred of goodness within us. Desperately needing the help of God, the salvation of God, the cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

“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.” Cleansing. Washing. Sins removed as far from us as the east is from the west, as it says in Psalm 103. I’m glad they didn’t say the north from the south, because you know that there’s a dot. You look on any map, there’s a dot on this planet that says North Pole, and there’s a dot on the planet that says South Pole. And there’s a set distance between north and south.

Here’s the thing. When it comes to east and west, it just keeps going. There’s no east point, and there’s no west point. There’s no easternmost point on the map, and there’s no westernmost point on the map. And so when God says He removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west, He’s saying He puts an eternity, an infinity, between us and our sins. White as snow like wool. White as a newly shorn lamb. They’re the pictures that an agricultural people understands. Stains washed away. Cleansed.

“¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.” Blessing. Blessing. The good of the land comes to the repentant, those who heed the words of God’s accusation and mourn. The Sermon on the Mount—Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness.

Who are these people? They’re the people who, when they hear the prophet speak of sinfulness, they know that he’s speaking of them, and it cuts them to the heart. They’re the ones who feel the pain of God’s rejection. They’re the ones who know that they have been separated from God, and justly so. But they’re made willing. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land. Here’s the thing. Here’s the goodness of God. Here’s the generosity of our glorious God. Here’s the most amazing thing: Having forgiven our sins, He pours out His blessings upon us. He treats us as though we had never sinned. He treats us as though we were His son. “You shall eat the good of the land.”

Verse 20: “but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Blessings, judgment; salvation, condemnation. That’s where we’re going to close.

I just want you to think about the fact that there you have a sword and the mouth of the Lord drawn together. “You shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Think of the pictures we get given in the New Testament of Jesus. Revelation, chapter 19, verse 15. The sword coming from the mouth of the Savior, which is His word, with which He will judge the nations. The word of God. A sharpened two-edged sword, from Hebrews chapter 4; or the word of God which is a double-edged sword that pierces through armour, in Ephesians chapter 6.

God’s word cutting like a knife. It’s the sharpest thing there is. It’s the most divisive thing there is. We’re not preaching unity with the world. We’re not. We’re not preaching one great blessed brotherhood of humanity. We’re not. We’re preaching division, be cut off, be divided. We’re preaching one great blessed kingdom of God, filled with the people of God. That’s the unity of the Gospel, and there is no other.

And we don’t really actually have any fellowship with churches filled with false teachers that don’t preach the gospel today. We don’t have any unity with them. And the name of Jesus may well be upon their lips, but my friends, the mouth of the Lord has spoken. And they will be eaten by the sword. They will be consumed in judgment, lest they repent.

And I’m very sorry to say, but those who turn up on Christmas day to hear the false gospel of false comfort, and how God is this lovey, fluffy old man who doesn’t really care about anything that you’ve done wrong, and because you say that you like Jesus, that’s all you’ve got to worry about. Don’t worry about anything else. Don’t trouble yourself with worship, or doctrine, or service. Don’t worry yourself with carrying a cross. Don’t worry yourself with any of that stuff. They, too, will be eaten by the sword.

“For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Here comes a question: What do you want to eat? What do you want to eat? Do you want to eat the good of God’s land, the good of God’s new creation, the good of God’s word? Do you want to eat the good stuff that God supplies? Do you want to feast? Feast on Christmas day? Do you want to eat the good stuff? Yes. Or do you want to be eaten? Do you want to be consumed? Do you want the sword of the Lord to fall, to cut you off, to divide, to destroy, to cut you away from the kingdom of God?

My friends, Isaiah is telling us in this passage that we are a sinful people, and that we need the grace of God—that we must be a repentant and humble people. We must be willing and obedient this Christmas day, and every other day of the year—every other day of the year. Let’s close in prayer.

Father in heaven, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the blessings that you have poured out upon your people, that we may eat the good of your heavenly land. And Father, I pray that many, many would be called to repentance and faith, and that they would indeed be washed, that they would be white as snow, though even today their sins be as scarlet. All of these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, your only begotten Son. In His name, Amen.