

“His Hand is Stretched Out Still”

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Isaiah 9:8-10:4

*The Lord has sent a word against Jacob,
and it will fall on Israel;
9 and all the people will know,
Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria,
who say in pride and in arrogance of heart:
10 “The bricks have fallen,
but we will build with dressed stones;
the sycamores have been cut down,
but we will put cedars in their place.”
11 But the LORD raises the adversaries of Rezin against him,
and stirs up his enemies.
12 The Syrians on the east and the Philistines on the west
devour Israel with open mouth.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.*

*13 The people did not turn to him who struck them,
nor inquire of the LORD of hosts.
14 So the LORD cut off from Israel head and tail,
palm branch and reed in one day—
15 the elder and honored man is the head,
and the prophet who teaches lies is the tail;
16 for those who guide this people have been leading them astray,
and those who are guided by them are swallowed up.
17 Therefore the Lord does not rejoice over their young men,
and has no compassion on their fatherless and widows;
for everyone is godless and an evildoer,
and every mouth speaks folly.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.*

18 For wickedness burns like a fire;

*it consumes briars and thorns;
 it kindles the thickets of the forest,
 and they roll upward in a column of smoke.*
*19 Through the wrath of the LORD of hosts
 the land is scorched,
 and the people are like fuel for the fire;
 no one spares another.*
*20 They slice meat on the right, but are still hungry,
 and they devour on the left, but are not satisfied;
 each devours the flesh of his own arm,
 21 Manasseh devours Ephraim, and Ephraim devours Manasseh;
 together they are against Judah.*
*For all this his anger has not turned away,
 and his hand is stretched out still.*

*10 1 Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees,
 and the writers who keep writing oppression,
 2 to turn aside the needy from justice
 and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
 that widows may be their spoil,
 and that they may make the fatherless their prey!*
*3 What will you do on the day of punishment,
 in the ruin that will come from afar?
 To whom will you flee for help,
 and where will you leave your wealth?*
*4 Nothing remains but to crouch among the prisoners
 or fall among the slain.*
*For all this his anger has not turned away,
 and his hand is stretched out still.*

- Isaiah 9:8-10:4, ESV

A Stunning Refrain

Sometimes a songwriter will write a very shocking repeated refrain to grab people's attention and help make a song stick in the mind of the listener. Way back in 1994, Beck had a hit song with the disturbing refrain, "Cause I'm a loser, baby, so why don't you kill me?" Some

21 years later, in 2015, Justin Bieber had a hit song with a refrain that had one of the catchiest roasts in pop music: “*You should go and love yourself.*”

Now, I’m certainly not recommending these songs, and if I’ve gotten them stuck in your heads now, I do apologize. I hope you’ll be able to concentrate for the rest of this sermon. I raise these examples to make a point and help us see something about today’s passage:

First of all, we should know that most prophetic oracles that appear in poetic form in our Bibles, like this one, were likely originally sung by the prophet. In other words, it’s highly likely that today’s passage from Isaiah is a song. And as a song, the refrain, repeated four times, at the end of each verse, is quite chilling:

*For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.*

The four verses of this song describe terrible sins and horrific consequences, but the most chilling thought of all is that, despite all the sad and tragic consequences coming on God’s people for their terrible sin, God’s anger is not turned away, and His hand is stretched out still.

We need to make sure we don’t miss the main point of Isaiah’s sad song here. Isaiah was called to prophesy to the southern kingdom of Judah and the capital city of Jerusalem. Yet verses 8 and 9 make it clear that this song is directed against the northern kingdom of Israel, its largest tribe, Ephraim, and its capital city of Samaria. Why would Isaiah be ministering to southern Judah and singing about the anger of God and the disastrous judgment coming on northern Israel?

Well, Isaiah wants Judah and Jerusalem to see the sin of their big sister, Israel, and understand the wrath of God Israel is suffering so that Judah and Jerusalem might repent. It’s so much better to learn from the mistakes of others and the consequences they face than to insist stubbornly that we need to make our own identical errors and suffer our own consequences before we will learn. It’s almost as if Isaiah is saying to Judah, “Okay, we can do this easy way, or we can do this the hard way. And if you want to know what the hard way looks like, just look up north at what’s happening to your big sister, Israel.”

That means that, for us, we need to sit up, pay attention, and take the sobering warning of these verses to heart. We need to check our own hearts and lives for the patterns of sin highlighted here, so that, by God’s grace, we might repent and be forgiven and cleansed.

I. His Hand is Stretched Out Against Foolish Arrogance

The first verses of Isaiah’s sad song highlight God’s just and holy anger against the arrogance of Israel, which has been disciplined by the Lord but is responding with stubborn self-confidence:

*The Lord has sent a word against Jacob,
and it will fall on Israel;
9 and all the people will know,
Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria,
who say in pride and in arrogance of heart:
10 “The bricks have fallen,
but we will build with dressed stones;
the sycamores have been cut down,
but we will put cedars in their place.”
11 But the LORD raises the adversaries of Rezin against him,
and stirs up his enemies.
12 The Syrians on the east and the Philistines on the west
devour Israel with open mouth.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.*

In 733 BC, the Assyrian Empire swept down and devastated the northern kingdom of Israel, leaving only the large tribe of Ephraim intact. This conquest was a judgment from God and a call to repent, but instead of humbling themselves, Israel arrogantly boasted of how they would rebuild with better materials.

When I read of Israel boasting, “We will build with dressed stones,” I think of the great construction projects carried out by King Herod the Great in Jerusalem around the time of Jesus’ birth, some 730 years after this passage. Herod’s construction projects included a massive expansion of the Temple Mound and Temple complex and the desert fortress of

Masada. Archaeologists can tell exactly what Herod built because of the way the border of the stones is trimmed; they are beautifully dressed stones.

And so, after a long time of suffering humiliation and poverty, Jerusalem and Judah were able to see beautiful construction with dressed stones. But what did it cost them? Herod was a wicked man, a paranoid and egotistical ruler who corrupted the priests in Jerusalem and who even ordered the slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem in order to try to get rid of the promised Messiah. Sometimes our arrogance and our determination to exalt ourselves blinds us to how we're compromising with the world. Because we believe that we are right and we deserve to have what we think we're entitled to, we're blind to God's correction and the subtle (or not-so-subtle) compromises we make to get what we want.

Pride is the root sin, and so it makes sense that God would address this sin issue first here. When we act in pride, we are putting ourselves in the place of God and telling Him that we can run our own lives better than He can. While we might never say that out loud in those exact words, we are guilty of thinking this way when we grumble or complain or when we proclaim what we're going to do and how we're going to make it happen.

James 4:13-16 says: *“Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.”* We would probably not think to label such thinking and such talk as “evil,” but that's exactly what the Lord calls it. Evil. And He calls us to live in humility rather than in such evil pride.

Where does pride rear its ugly head in your life? How have you responded to hardships in your life? Have you received them as correction from the Lord? Have you humbled yourself and sought His will and His grace for your life?

II. His Hand is Stretched Out Against Rich & Poor

In verse two of this song, the LORD tells who His hand is stretched out in anger against –

*13 The people did not turn to him who struck them,
nor inquire of the LORD of hosts.*

*14 So the LORD cut off from Israel head and tail,
palm branch and reed in one day—*

*15 the elder and honored man is the head,
and the prophet who teaches lies is the tail;*

*16 for those who guide this people have been leading them astray,
and those who are guided by them are swallowed up.*

*17 Therefore the Lord does not rejoice over their young men,
and has no compassion on their fatherless and widows;
for everyone is godless and an evildoer,
and every mouth speaks folly.*

*For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.*

- Isaiah 9:13-17, ESV

The LORD is angry with all levels of society in Israel. The leaders have led the people poorly, but the people have also asked to be led poorly. Philosopher Joseph de Maistre said, “Every nation gets the government it deserves.” And there’s some real truth to that statement.

Isaiah pictures the leaders of Israel – the elder and honored man – as the head of the nation, and then the prophet who teaches lies as the tail. But what is the body? The people. The leaders lead and the prophets who are supposed to speak truth in the name of the LORD are lying because their being led, telling people what they want to hear. So, everyone is guilty, from head to tail.

In 2 Timothy 4:3, Paul warns “*the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.*” It is terrible that teachers abound who are willing to tell people what they want to hear, who will gladly manipulate the Word of God to appease the passions of the masses. But it’s also terrible that the masses seek out such teachers.

We can all be tempted to only listen to those people who agree with us, who tell us that we’re right and that we’re good and that the problems in the world and in our lives are caused by other people. This strokes our ego and makes us feel better about ourselves, but

it also deafens us to the voice of God's Word. If we only listen to those who agree with us, we are really just listening to ourselves and passing it off as the Word of God. And that's evil. We need to let God's Word speak to us plainly and clearly, and we need to submit to His truth.

III. His Hand is Stretched Out Against Self-Destructive Wickedness

In verse 3 of this song, the Lord then turns His attention against the self-destructive wickedness of His people-

*18 For wickedness burns like a fire;
it consumes briars and thorns;
it kindles the thickets of the forest,
and they roll upward in a column of smoke.*

*19 Through the wrath of the LORD of hosts
the land is scorched,
and the people are like fuel for the fire;
no one spares another.*

*20 They slice meat on the right, but are still hungry,
and they devour on the left, but are not satisfied;
each devours the flesh of his own arm,*

*21 Manasseh devours Ephraim, and Ephraim devours Manasseh;
together they are against Judah.*

*For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.*

- Isaiah 9:18-21, ESV

God declares that “*wickedness burns like a fire.*” Our sin brings destruction to ourselves and to others. God brings judgment against our sin in His wrath in order to wake us up and call us to repentance, but so often we just double-down on our sinful selfishness. As our sin harms us and those around us, we just continue and stubbornly refuse to repent.

Romans I wraps up its case for why the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness by saying:

“since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” – Romans 1:28-32, ESV

This is the world we live in, and we need to acknowledge that the same dark rebellion lives in our own hearts by nature, too. Only the grace of God brought us out of this futile, rebellious, and self-destructive way of thinking and living.

IV. His Hand is Stretched Out Against Wicked Laws

And the fourth area that is highlighted as a cause for God's unrelenting wrath against Israel is the wickedness of their laws, the injustice of their justice system –

*¹Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees,
and the writers who keep writing oppression,
²to turn aside the needy from justice
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be their spoil,
and that they may make the fatherless their prey!
³What will you do on the day of punishment,
in the ruin that will come from afar?
To whom will you flee for help,
and where will you leave your wealth?
⁴Nothing remains but to crouch among the prisoners
or fall among the slain.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still. – Isaiah 10:1-4, ESV*

When we have different rules and different systems available to the rich who can afford the lawyers who know how to manipulate the system, when we put into law as right and good that which God declares to be sinful and destructive, this deserves and provokes the wrath of God.

When Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead, no amount of money will be able to bribe the Judge, no political connections will manipulate the system of His perfect justice. He sees with pure and holy eyes and judges with perfect justice. No one will escape.

V. His Hand Stretched Out to Redeem – Our Only Hope!

So, we see clearly in these four verses of this sobering song that God's justice is continually stirred up against patterns of sin that are deeply engrained in the world – pride, weak leadership, selfish people, self-destructive wickedness, unjust laws. These things are all common to humanity, and we see the disastrous effects of them in society and in our own lives all the time. And God is angry – justly and rightly angry – with these things. They harm His creation. They mar His image in people, who should reflect His character but instead reflect selfishness and foolishness.

Psalm 7:11-12 tells us:

*God is a righteous judge,
and a God who feels indignation every day.
If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword;
he has bent and readied his bow; (ESV)*

Or, as the refrain here in Isaiah says:

*For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.*

This is a heavy message and a sobering reality, Where is our hope? The truth is that we cannot really change our own hearts or be good enough to appease God's wrath.

In the end, the only solution to the stretched out hand of God's anger is the stretched out hand of God's love.

What can turn away the anger of God? Only the willing sacrifice of God Himself – God the Son – on the cross in our place. When Jesus stretched out His arms and died for us, He

too the wrath of God on Himself. The anger of God was turned away from us and was poured out on His Son.

Romans 5:6-9 says:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. (ESV)

Turn to the outstretched arms of the Savior today. He has paid the price for your sins and has taken away the wrath of God that you deserve. Trust in Him.