

Before we start into Isaiah 1, I’d like you turn over to Isaiah 66.

Notice how it starts:

Heaven is my throne and the earth my footstool (v1).

This is the one to whom I will look – the who is humble – who trembles at my word (v2)

The repudiation of sacrifice for its own sake (v3)

The uproar of a city being overthrown when the LORD recompenses his enemies (v6)

Zion – the faithful city once more!!! (v7-11)

The LORD himself entering into judgment to purge his city (v15-23)
and restore his holy mountain Jerusalem.

I had a professor in seminary who thinks that the whole book of Isaiah is organized as a single chiasm!

While I wouldn’t quite go that far –

I would agree that it is a very well-organized book!

Chapters 1 and 66 share 28 Hebrew terms, the same images,

the picture of sinful Jerusalem becoming a City of Righteousness once more.

The redemption of Jerusalem is at the heart of Isaiah’s vision.

Indeed, one commentator says that “virtually all the major themes [in Isaiah] occur in summary form in the opening chapter.” (Harman, 26)

The book of Isaiah is about how “God is going to purify his people through judgment and restore them into a close covenant relationship with himself.

Jerusalem’s character will be so changed that she will be in the centre of God’s kingdom that will embrace Jews and Gentiles in one fold.” (Harman, 27)

In this way, truly we will be looking at “the Gospel according to Isaiah.”

Introduction: The Vision of Isaiah (v1)

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.

We will look more at historical context as we go through the book,

but Isaiah speaks of his prophecy during the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah

Uzziah died in 740 B.C., the year of Isaiah’s call as a prophet,

and Isaiah prophesied for around 40 years.

When Isaiah began to prophesy, Syria and Israel were the most significant threats to Judah,

but after Assyria destroyed Damascus in 732 and Samaria in 722,

Assyria became the main target.

But further in the east the neo-Babylonian empire was rising,

and Egypt was expanding from the south.

Judah would be caught in between three of the world’s greatest superpowers.

And Isaiah would counsel the kings of Judah to trust in Yahweh.
Yahweh is the great king who will deliver his people.

Isaiah's call is recounted in chapter 6,
but when he edited his prophecies,
he decided to show us *first* the context into which he was called.
Isaiah 1-5 forms a prelude, or introduction, setting forth the themes of the book.

There are no historical markers in these sections (unlike chapters 6-12).

There are three sections:

- The sin of Judah and its consequences (ch 1)
- This sin is in spite of Judah's election (chs 2-4)
- And this sin will result in judgment (ch 5)

Yahweh had established his people as his children (1:2),
the city that would bring blessing to the nations (2:2-4),
but instead they have become corrupt.

1. The Heavenly Court (v2-9)

Chapter 1 opens with a covenant lawsuit. (1:2-9)

In Deuteronomy 4 and Dt 32, Moses had called heaven and earth
to witness God's covenant with Israel.

Now Isaiah calls them to witness God's covenant lawsuit against his people.

Each of the first two sections of the chapter begin with the same word:

Shema – “hear”

a. The Witnesses: Heaven and Earth (v2a)

² *Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:*

I want you to think about this.

Why does God call heaven and earth as witnesses?

What are they doing here?

They are not just disinterested observers.

The creation itself *groans* as it waits – as it longs –
for the revelation of the sons of God.

Sure – that's Paul – but what do you see throughout chapter 1 of Isaiah:

“ox and donkey” (v3)

“your country lies desolate... foreigners devour your land (v7)

“The daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard... (v8)

The new moons...snow...wool...eat the good of the land...

silver, dross, lye, gardens, oaks... fire, tinder, spark...burn!

Creation is called to witness because the heavens and the earth are waiting – longing –
for the revelation of the sons of God!

And the sons of God have failed...

Now the court is convened.

“Hear, O heavens, and give ear O earth; for Yahweh has spoken”

b. The Accused: Israel, My Sons – Offspring of Evildoers(v2b-4)

Then the charge is leveled: Judah has rebelled against Yahweh:

*“Children^[a] have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.*

Israel is my son, my firstborn...
but my son is rebellious.

What was to be done to the rebellious son? (Dt 21:18-21)

The parents were to take the rebellious son to the city elders
and have him stoned to death.

By the second verse, you can see where Isaiah is going!

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

Israel is my son, my firstborn.
But Israel has failed.

Their guilt is exposed in verse 4, (read)

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.*

Rather than live as sons of God, they are the seed of evildoers.
They have despised the Holy One of Israel.
Isaiah calls Yahweh the Holy One 30 times
(2/3 of the instances in the OT)

It is one of his favorite names of God.

In contrast with the profanity and wickedness of Judah,
Yahweh is the Holy One.

But Isaiah marvels at Judah's rebellion,
and their experience of judgment in verses 5-6.

c. The Evidence: Continued Rebellion in the Face of Judgment (v5-6)

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.

In spite of God's warnings and threats,
why do you still rebel!?

He speaks of the diseased body politic

Their kings had tried everything to save the nation!

Indeed, that is why Judah is coming under judgment

because worldly wisdom cannot save the nation.

It's worth noting that the language of verses 5-6 will be taken up again in Isaiah 53.

He was struck down – sick – and bruised.

The suffering servant will bear the penalty of Israel.

b'. Desolate Daughter Zion (v7-8)

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.

In verses 7-8 the language shifts from that of the country to the city –
from Judah to Jerusalem –

and thus from the language of *sons* to the language of *daughter*.

It is traditional to translate “Bat-tzion” as the daughter *of* Zion,
but it would be better to say “daughter Zion.”
If Judah/Israel is the son of God; then Zion is the daughter/the bride.

Daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard – like a lodge in a cucumber field –
like a besieged city.

This is what happened in the days of Hezekiah –
when the armies of the Assyrians swept across the land,
conquering every city – every village – until Jerusalem alone was left standing!

That’s why Isaiah comments in verse 9:

a’. Commentary: Israel Has Become like Sodom and Gomorrah (v9)

⁹ *If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we should have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.*

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is important for understanding the story of Jerusalem.
In the days of Abraham – around 1500 years before the time of Isaiah –
so think of the ‘fall of the Roman empire’ – that long ago!

In the days of Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah had been two of the powerful cities
in the region around the Dead Sea – and the Jordan Valley.
Abraham’s nephew, Lot, had settled there.

But Sodom used its power in wicked ways.
We often think of their attempted homosexual gang rape –
but the prophets usually focus on Sodom’s injustice –
oppressing the poor – using their power to destroy the helpless.
God responded to Sodom’s wickedness by sending fire from heaven to destroy the cities.

There is a way in which Sodom stands as paradigmatic for this wicked evil age.
And Israel was supposed to be paradigmatic for the righteousness of the age to come.

But in Judges 19, the tribe of Benjamin proves to be every bit as wicked as Sodom.
And in the story of Judges 19, the Levite takes his concubine (who was from Bethlehem)
and they decide *not to stay* in Jerusalem – at that time a Jebusite city –
but instead to go to Gibeah –
where the story of Sodom is repeated.

Will Israel become like Sodom?
Will God have to destroy his own people?

In Judges 19, the answer is no.
The people of God hold Benjamin accountable –
and *Benjamin* is nearly destroyed!
(all but a remnant)...

But now in Isaiah, Jerusalem has become Sodom...

2. The Word of the LORD to Sodom (Judah) (v10-20)

¹⁰ *Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom!
Give ear to the teaching^[b] of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!*

The second section of chapter 1 also begins with “shema,” (hear)
but now it is the rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah that must listen.

Verses 11-20 set forth the basic religious problem in Judah:
They are no better than Sodom and Gomorrah!
The great sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was that sin had become an accepted lifestyle.
God will not accept the sacrifices of those who sin wantonly against him.

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.*

What was the point of the sacrifices?

Verses 11-15 are not saying that the sacrifices have no point,
rather they are saying that Judah has forgotten the point of the sacrifices.
Remember the order from Exodus/Leviticus?
God first redeemed his people from bondage in Egypt.
Then he made a covenant with them and called them to walk in his ways.
The sacrifices were given to cover the *unintentional* sins of the people.
In other words, the sacrifices assumed a faithful people
who desired to obey their God.

Judah’s offerings are an abomination because they are using the sacrifices
as a “get out of jail free” card.

And so Isaiah says “give ear to the torah of our God.” (10)
Torah does not simply mean “law,”
it includes the idea of teaching, instruction, and direction.

Isaiah calls the people to listen to God's teaching.
God does not care about the blood of bulls, lambs or goats.
All of the religious practices of Judah are entirely beside the point.

(read)

a. Worship without Justice Is Vain (v10-17)

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.*

Even their prayers will not come before him (verse 15),
because your hands are full of blood.

If you spend your whole week living selfishly –
and then try to make Sunday about God –
well, that's *exactly* what Isaiah says is vain!

This is a good example of how God deals with *groups* and not just individuals.
There were undoubtedly individual Israelites who were faithful.
But a few righteous individuals are not enough to save Jerusalem.

Think back to Abraham – how he asked God
“will you not spare the city for 10 righteous?”
And the LORD said that for ten righteous he would spare the city...

But now, as God looks at Jerusalem, there are not “ten righteous.”

And so Yahweh calls his people wash yourselves and make yourselves clean. (16)
How can they do that?
Isn't that what the sacrifices were for?

Leviticus regularly refers to the sacrifices as for “cleansing.”
Isaiah is telling the people to cleanse themselves
by availing themselves of the regular means of grace.
But first they must *repent* of their sins.
But repentance requires them to turn decisively away from their old life.

The imperatives come forth staccato in verses 16-17:

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.

If you would bring a meaningful sacrifice before the Lord,
then repent of your sins!
Because repentance demands a change of action.

It’s not enough to “cease to do evil” –
you also have to “learn to do good.”

When you are repenting of the evil that you have done,
you need to *replace* the evil with good.
If you just say “I’m sorry” – and then go back and do the same thing all over again –
that’s not repentance!

And repentance – for the people of God – means more than just “me” saying I’m sorry.
We have to admit *our* fault.
We’re not just a bunch of individuals each with our own problems.
We are a people.
And our problems are *shared*.
It’s the intersection between *sin* and *misery*.

Yes, we have a sin problem – we do things that are wrong before God.
But the fall did not just bring mankind into an estate of *sin*.

The fall brought mankind into *an* estate of *sin and misery*.
Other people sin against us – and it hurts.
And there are all sorts of bad things that happen to us – and it hurts!
Disease, famine, warfare, disasters –
sure, sometimes there are particular sins that lead to these –

but usually, it's just a mess!

We tend not to like the idea of corporate guilt –
because we don't like the idea of suffering for what someone else did –
but really:

every German suffered because of Hitler –
not just the Germans who agreed with Hitler!
Every Israelite suffered because of decisions made by their kings.
Every child has suffered because of decisions made by their parents.

And all too often, we have then gone on and repeated the pattern –
“we and our fathers have sinned...”

What next?

b. Eat or Be Eaten! (v18-20)

¹⁸ “Come now, let us reason^[c] 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.*

The term translated “reason together” is a term used in court –
it carries the idea of engaging in a lawsuit.

Let us engage in a disputation!
Let us work through the issues carefully.

Your sin is a problem –
but it can be dealt with!
God gives hope to the one who wants to repent!

But those who wash and come (verses 16 and 18),
must now be willing and obedient. (19-20)

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 eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

Do you want to eat the good of the land?
Then be willing to repent!
And be obedient – *do* what God says!

Because if you refuse and rebel,
then you will be eaten by the sword.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

This brings us full circle back to verse 2 –

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the LORD has spoken...

The last section of chapter 1 then focuses more upon ‘Daughter Zion.’

3. The (Un)Faithful City Redeemed (v21-31)

a. The LORD’s Solution to the Faithless City (v21-26)

Having spoken of Judah and its people,

verses 21-31 then turns to Zion, the city of David.

This also has two parts.

Verses 21-26 form a chiasm,

speaking of the collapse and restoration of the faithful city.

1) The Faithful City Has Become a Whore (v21)

*²¹ How the faithful city
has become a whore,^[d]
she who was full of justice!
Righteousness lodged in her,
but now murderers.*

The faithful city has become a whore. (21a)

The marriage metaphor will be a common theme in Isaiah.

But the faithful bride has turned away from her husband.

Isaiah mourns that Jerusalem was once full of justice,

but now she is the abode of murderers. (21b)

2) The Silver Has Become Dross (v22)

*²² Your silver has become dross,
your best wine mixed with water.*

The silver is not merely tarnished, it has actually lost its entire value.

Likewise, ordinary table wine would be mixed with water—but not the best wine!

That was to be reserved for feasting—

but once mixed with water, its character is ruined.

In the same way:

3) Your Princes Are Rebels Who Do Not Bring Justice (v23)

*²³ Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe*

and runs after gifts.
They do not bring justice to the fatherless,
and the widow's cause does not come to them.

Coming to the heart of the chiasm,
Isaiah says that their princes are the leaders of the rebellion (23).
They do not bring justice to the fatherless, but take bribes.
They run after *gifts*.
How often are we like this?
How often do *we* run after gifts –
do we ever seek after “likes” on Facebook?

How easy it is to seek the praise of one another –
rather than the praise of our heavenly Father!

How do you seek the praise of God?
Love him!
And love those who are made in his image!
James says that pure religion is this: to visit widows and orphans in their affliction,
and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27)

But because Israel has *not* done this,
the LORD himself will:

3') So the LORD Will Avenge Himself on His Foes (v24)

²⁴ *Therefore the Lord declares,*
the LORD of hosts,
the Mighty One of Israel:
“Ah, I will get relief from my enemies
and avenge myself on my foes.

Yahweh of hosts speaks (or perhaps Yahweh who is hosts),
The mighty one of Israel will destroy his enemies.
God himself is the king who will avenge himself on his foes.

The only problem is that *Israel* is now Sodom –
and therefore, God’s vengeance will come upon his own people!

2') I Will Smelt Away Your Dross (v25)

²⁵ *I will turn my hand against you*
and will smelt away your dross as with lye
and remove all your alloy.

We’re back to the theme of verse 22 –

God will remove the dross and restore the silver (25).
There is still silver among God's people –
and God himself will see to it that all the dross is purged from the silver.

God will restore the purity of his people!

1') The City Shall Be Called Faithful (v26)

²⁶ *And 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."*

And then verse 26 steps back to the theme of verse 21b.
God will restore just judges in his earthly city.
"Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city." (26b)

The whole structure of the chiasm draws attention to its center:
God is the righteous king who will restore justice to his city.
Conspicuously absent in this account is the Davidic king.
Notice that princes, judges and counselors are mentioned.
But not the king.
Isaiah is prophesying during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah.
These are the sons of David who are supposed to be establishing justice.

Isaiah is setting up the central theme of chapters 1-37,
the great king who will bring justice.
At various times the great king will be God or the son of David,
but here the son of David is notably missing.
The city of David has fallen into rebellion and faithlessness
because the son of David is not doing his job.

Only the LORD of Hosts will reestablish justice in Zion.
Verses 27-31 then bring this theme to its conclusion:

b. Zion Redeemed by Justice (v27-31)

²⁷ *Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.*
²⁸ *But rebels and sinners shall be broken together,
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.*

God will indeed redeem his people.
That is consistent with justice.
But justice also demand that rebels and sinners be destroyed.
Isaiah has already spoken of the ethical sin of Judah.
They have not done justice to the poor.

But now he speaks of their religious sin as well.
They have worshiped idols.

*29 For they^{le} shall be ashamed of the oaks
that you desired;
and you shall blush for the gardens
that you have chosen.*

*30 For you shall be like an oak
whose leaf withers,
and like a garden without water.*

*31 And the strong shall become tinder,
and his work a spark,
and both of them shall burn together,
with none to quench them.*

Israel has become the wicked – which the blows away (Psalm 1) –
that will not stand in the judgment.

Those who worship sacred trees and gardens shall burn together with their gods.
But the source of the fire is not outside of them.
False religion is inherently self-destructive.
They are their own tinder and spark.

Idolaters shall be destroyed.

We need a great King.
We need a king who will reestablish justice and faithfulness.
We have that King in Jesus.
And he is the one who has brought justice and faithfulness to his city.

So how are we bringing justice to the fatherless?
How are we pleading the widow's cause?

After all, if we are a part of the faithful city, citizens of the heavenly Zion,
then this is supposed to be us.

James certainly thought so.

“If anyone thinks that he is religious and does not bridle his tongue
but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this:
to visit orphans and widows in their affliction,

and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (1:26-27)

And James isn't talking about just making a social call either.

“to visit” echoes the language of how God has visited us.

What are we doing for the widows and orphans of our community?

Perhaps in our day we should call them the single mothers

and the children whose fathers ran out on them.
We have a home school academy – which is a great service for home schoolers –
but how does it serve the orphans – the poor – the single parents?

You don't need to live in my neighborhood to have opportunity
to bring justice to those who are helpless.
Just keep your eyes open!
Get to know your neighbors!
Keep your eyes open at work – and in other settings –
for those who need someone to intercede for them!

Isaiah warns us what will happen if we forget our calling.
“Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence foreigners devour your land.” (1:7)
Hasn't this happened to the church in this land?
We did not care for the widows and orphans in the 19th century,
and so we got the 20th century.
I often think of Stephen Colwell – a ruling elder in Philadelphia in the 1850s.
He saw that evangelical orthodoxy and caring for the poor would stand or fall together.
But nobody listened.

And today, when it has come to pass that “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,”
–how many churches have completely abandoned either orthodoxy or justice.

I'm not talking about some liberal political agenda to get the government more involved!
I'm talking about visiting widows and orphans–
helping that single mom with childcare so that she can provide for her family.
You can talk about all the wrong and sinful things that people did
to get themselves into the mess that they are in,
but we are called to help those who are in the mess.

Our American Zion is a desolate heap of ruins.
What is the point of all your worship services?
Why do you bother pretending to worship me,
when you ignore all that I've told you to do?
Isaiah holds worship and diaconal ministry together.
The one who would worship God must love his neighbor.
What is so hard about that?

Let us ask God for mercy.