

Isaiah - Talk 1

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Preacher: Rupert Evans

- [0 : 00] The reading is the first chapter of Isaiah and it can be found on page 683. 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. Our 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. Why will you still be struck down?
- Why will you continue to rebel? 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.
- [1 : 21] They are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil. 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. And the daughter of Zion is left, like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.
- If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah. 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 are 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.
- [2 : 27] 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.
- [3 : 24] 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.

How the faithful city has become a whore. She who was full of justice. Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross.

Your best wine mixed with water. 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.

Therefore the Lord declares, the Lord of hosts, the mighty one of Israel. I will get relief from my enemies and revenge myself on my foes. I will turn my hand against you, and will smelt away your dross as with lye, and remove all your alloy.

I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterwards, you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent by righteousness.

[4 : 36] But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. For they shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired, and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen.

For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water. And the strong shall become tinder, and his work a spark. And both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them.

Good morning everyone. Lovely to see you all. I think you'll find it a help to turn back to, oh gosh I've lost the page. Page 683. I think that's the correct page to Isaiah chapter 1.

There's an outline which church family members will have received by email. Oh I think it's coming up on the screen. And I think you'll find it a help to follow that as we go on. Let me lead us in a prayer as we begin.

The Apostle John tells us this in his gospel. He writes, We thank you so much our Heavenly Father for this wonderful book of Isaiah.

[5 : 59] And we thank you that it's a book that speaks of the Lord Jesus. And so we pray this morning that you would help us to learn more of him, and more about our need for him. Amen.

Amen. Well Charles Dickens' novel, A Tale of Two Cities, begins with some of the most famous opening lines in literature.

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. The two cities to which the book's title refers are of course London and Paris at the time of the French Revolution in the run-up to the Reign of Terror.

But less well known is the ending of the book. The book ends with one of the main characters, Sidney Carton's final words before he faces the guillotine, during which he says this of Paris.

I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss. And through long years to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation, that is atonement, for itself and wearing out.

[7 : 07] I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy, in that England which I shall see no more.

The whole speech is very moving. But in it, Carton is essentially comparing the Paris of his day, which had become a terrifying and violent abyss, with both a beautiful future city, which he believed would rise from it long years later, and also the prosperity of London, where his loved ones were safe.

A tale of two cities. Well, the book of Isaiah could also be described as a tale of two cities. Indeed, the ending of the book of Isaiah includes a picture in the penultimate chapter of a city in which all weeping and distress have been removed forever, a city of eternal peace and prosperity.

But this future city on which Isaiah pins his hopes is neither Paris nor London, but Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem to which he points forward.

And just as Sidney Carton foresaw a beautiful city rising from the present abyss of Paris which he witnessed, Isaiah compares this future heavenly city with the Jerusalem of his day and the days which followed.

[8 : 28] Days about which Isaiah could easily have echoed Carton's words, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth. A tale of two cities.

The best of times to come, the worst of times in the present, if you like. And we see both these two cities in Isaiah's opening chapter which we're looking at this morning.

So have a look with me at verse 21, first of all, for Isaiah's description of the Jerusalem of his day in the 8th century BC during the reigns of four different kings who are mentioned in the first verse of the chapter.

Using shocking language, Isaiah proclaims, verse 21, how the faithful city has become a hall. This city, Jerusalem, was supposed to be the city of God's dwelling, a place of purity devoted to him.

But it had prostituted itself to false gods. Rather than righteousness lodging in her, Isaiah goes on, murderers now dwelt there.

[9 : 34] It's a grim picture of a city in the abyss. But look on to the second half of verse 26, and the second city, Isaiah foresees.

Afterwards, in the future, you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city, he writes. In verse 21, the city was no longer faithful, righteousness no longer lodged in her.

But one day, she will be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city in the heavenly Jerusalem to which Isaiah looks ahead.

A tale of two cities. God's city, Jerusalem, being transformed from whoredom to holiness, from being a harlot to heaven itself, from prostitution to paradise.

And the rest of the book of Isaiah is really the story of how this city will be transformed, of how God will get a rebellious people into the eternal Jerusalem, of how, to use Sidney Carton's words, a beautiful city and a brilliant people will rise from this abyss.

[10 : 48] Now, Isaiah is undoubtedly a daunting book. The Penguin Classics edition of A Tale of Two Cities runs to 544 pages. And it may be we approach Isaiah in the way we would a long Dickens novel or similar.

Its length means it's more war and peace than an easy thriller for the beach. And its sheer size means we're often put off from reading it. But it's actually the most wonderful book, enormous in scope and rich in theology, pointing forward to the Lord Jesus.

And over the next five weeks, we're going to try to begin to get a feel for the book and its main themes by looking at the introduction together, chapters one to five, and then at the first of the two great commissions that God gives Isaiah in the book, in chapter six.

And this morning, we're looking just at the first chapter, a chapter which really acts as an overture, introducing many of the main themes that are to come. It's a long chapter and we won't have time to cover every detail, but I want us to draw out the key themes under four main headings and then one main application at the end.

And we'll need to move quickly. So here's our first heading that's already on the screen, A Terrible Rebellion. A Terrible Rebellion. Like much Old Testament prophecy, Isaiah doesn't always write in the linear way we may be used to from parts of the New Testament.

[12 : 13] He introduces themes and then comes back to them and orders his content in cycles. So we'll inevitably need to dot around somewhat within chapter one to see each of its emphases.

And the general structure of this first chapter is that Isaiah begins in verses two to 20 by focusing on the nation. So see the reference to Israel in verse three, for example, if you just look down, or the sinful nation that's addressed at the start of verse four, or your country in verse seven.

And then from verse 21 onwards, he zooms in from the whole nation, divided as it was at this stage of Israel's history into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel and southern kingdom of Judah, to the city of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, and the place where God symbolically dwelt in the temple.

And we'll see the same themes can be found in each section. And God issues the same verdict to nation and city. Both Israel and Jerusalem are guilty of a terrible rebellion.

Have a look down with me first of all then at verses two to four. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken.

[13 : 36] 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.

Our 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. Strong language, isn't it? Israel, the nation God had chosen, who'd been set apart to serve him, had forsaken the Lord, and were estranged from him.

And Isaiah, or the Lord, uses two striking pictures here to drive the point home. He likens Israel's behaviour to that of an unruly child or a wild, stray animal.

Some of us here may know the pain of children who rebel. I know one set of Christian parents who lavish their son with material and spiritual privileges, but he caused them nothing but heartache.

[14 : 45] Time and again he got into trouble. Time and again he took them for granted. He even started to steal from them to fund his destructive habits. Perhaps there's no pain quite like that of a child you've nurtured turning their back on you.

And that's what Israel had done with her God. Turned her back on him. Rebelled against him. Despite all the material and spiritual privileges he lavished on her people in taking them from slavery in Egypt to a land of milk and honey and then dwelling uniquely among them as their God.

And just notice how total this rebellion was. Verse 4 They were a people laden with iniquity. This rebellion affected the whole people and they were infected with it.

They carried it around with them. Or look at the second half of verse 5. 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.

It's what's known as total depravity. Sin affects every part of our being. Every part of ourselves is corrupted by sin.

[16 : 01] So the whole head is sick, notice. Our minds so lauded by the enlightenment celebrated by the French Revolution of course are actually flawed and fallen.

Human reason is so often an expression of our rebellion against God. And then the whole heart is faint also. Our affections aren't to be trusted.

So often they despise what God loves and love what God despises. And our emotions too often lead us to do what we know to be contrary to God's word. And so it was with Old Testament Israel.

Those who remember were supposed to be God's people. Totally depraved. In total rebellion against him. And all this of course reminds us of the seriousness of sin.

God hates it. It's no small thing. Nor is our problem just a question of a few lapses that we fall into every now and then when we have a bad day. No, we're totally corrupt by nature living in opposition to a holy God.

[17:10] And notice the southern kingdom was no better than its northern counterparts. Have a look on to verse 21 once more where Isaiah zooms in to the city of Jerusalem. How the faithful city has become a haught.

She who was full of justice. Righteousness lodged in her but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water. 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. Again, the rebellion is total notice affecting the highest in the land, the princes who were supposed to reign like King David upholding God's law and the ordinary people.

Everyone loved bribes, we're told. In particular, rather than trusting God when in trouble, the rulers at this stage in Israel's history had made alliances with wicked foreign powers and the people worshipped foreign gods.

The oaks and the gardens in verse 29 probably refer to the shrines of the fertility gods of the surrounding nations. And there was no justice for the oppressed. The people neither treated God nor one another rightly.

[18:27] They were guilty of a terrible rebellion. And that terrible rebellion led on secondly, and we'll spend less time on this one, to a dreadful reckoning.

A dreadful reckoning. You see, we so easily kid ourselves into thinking sin doesn't really matter, particularly if we think of ourselves as God's people who already know his rescue.

But Isaiah shows us otherwise. Have a look at verse 7 to see the effects of Israel's rebellion. 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. In fact, so shocking were the people's rebellion and God's judgment that in verses 9 and 10 the Lord compares them to Sodom and Gomorrah, cities known for their gratuitous and deep wickedness which God had destroyed back in Genesis.

And we can imagine how much that comparison would have stung, can't we? It would be like Isaiah walking into a respectable middle-class church today and addressing the congregation as if it were a brothel or crack house in God's eyes.

[19:41] But Israel deserved the same fate as those ancient cities. And Isaiah prophesies the same dreadful reckoning for Judah and Jerusalem also.

Look on to verse 24 this time, sorry for this dotting around. Verse 24 Because the faithful city has become a hall, therefore the Lord declares, the Lord of hosts, the mighty one of Israel, ah, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself and my foes.

I will turn my hand against you. God would judge his people in just vengeance. That couple I mentioned earlier whose son rebelled against them eventually reported their son to the police.

Their patience ran out. They couldn't allow his wrong and destructive behaviour to continue unchecked. There had to be a reckoning. And so it would be for Israel and Jerusalem.

The patience of a just God cannot continue forever. And much of Isaiah looks forward to those reckonings and the judgment that would come to Israel and later Judah at the hands of the two superpowers of the day.

[20 : 59] Chapters 6 to 35 focus on the Assyrian threat and the judgment God brought on Israel through Assyria during Isaiah's lifetime. And chapters 40 to 66 focus on deliverance from the Babylonian superpower who would seize Jerusalem about a century after Isaiah's death and drive Judah into exile.

And if you read the second half of Two Kings where Isaiah's ministry is mentioned, you can see that this dreadful reckoning he promised came true and it was truly horrific.

And of course again, this all teaches us that we must take sin seriously. It leads to a dreadful reckoning. God will judge rebellion and being outwardly members of his people will count for nothing on that day.

So a terrible rebellion and a dreadful reckoning. But thirdly, Isaiah chapter 1 tells of a futile religion.

A futile religion. Seems the people of Isaiah's day thought they could get away with sin because of their religiosity. They thought they could buy God off or appease him by going through the outward motions of religion.

[22 : 15] But Isaiah shows us such attempts were utterly futile. Let's read from verse 11 to see God's verdict on Israel's religion. Verse 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.

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 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. God catalogues Israel's religion, her sacrifices and festivals and offerings and he hates all of it.

[23 : 20] They're an abomination to him. Again, the language is strong, isn't it? But Isaiah wants us to understand that the answer to our rebellious hearts can never be religious habits.

Imagine the husband and father who neglects his family. He never thanks his wife for doing all the chores at home which he never lifts a finger to help with. He cheats on her and loses his temper and beats her when dinner is late.

He ignores the children but shouts at them when they interrupt him watching TV. And then at Christmas he thinks if he just splashes the cash for one day and buys his wife an expensive necklace and carries on paying the children's school fees, his bad behaviour won't matter.

His gifts will make up for it. But of course they fall on deaf ears because all his wife and children want is for this man to love them and have a relationship with them.

Now we need to be careful with applying passages like this because we're not Old Testament Israel. But for those of us here who are Christian believers we are God's people. The church is described as the Israel of God in the New Testament.

[24 : 32] And we must never fall into the trap of thinking that God will be satisfied with our acts of religion. That our church going on a Sunday or attendance of growth group midweek or our prayers or helping at Sunday club or taking communion later this morning for that matter can atone for our sins if we're ignoring God the rest of the week.

God wants us to love him and have a relationship with him. He is the Holy One of Israel and our religion is actually deeply offensive to him and hypocritical if we persist in rebellion during the rest of our lives.

I wonder where we need to remember that this morning where have we started to rely on our religion and think it's enough to satisfy God. Well so far Isaiah has been pretty gloomy hasn't he?

And certainly the emphasis of chapter 1 is gloomy. But here and throughout the book there is also great hope amidst the clouds because what Israel's religion could never do God promises to do for Israel.

So fourthly Isaiah speaks of a glorious restoration a glorious restoration. Once again we see this in both sections of the chapter.

[25 : 50] Let's begin this time with what the Lord says about Jerusalem. So have a look down with me at verse 26 towards the end of the chapter. The Lord promises and I will restore your judges as at the first and your counsellors as at the beginning.

Afterwards you shall be called the city of righteousness the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed by justice and those in her who repent by righteousness. Isaiah speaks of a wonderful restoration of godly leadership in Jerusalem.

of the restoration of righteousness of a city that will be faithful rather than unfaithful like the prostitute she'd become. We'll learn more about this future city next week when we come to chapter 2.

But the question is how can this transformation happen? How can this city be redeemed by justice as Isaiah puts it when all she deserves is judgment? How can this possibly happen fairly?

Well we have to wait until later in the book for detailed answers as Isaiah describes the suffering servant who would take upon himself the sins of the people. But we get a hint of the answer in the other note of hope in chapter 1 back in verse 18.

[27 : 09] So let's turn there 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.

God promises a day when Israel's scarlet stained sins will be washed away and be as white as snow or a sheep's wool. Imagine a bride on her wedding day.

She's a bit nervous before the service begins and her bridesmaids suggest she has a cocktail to settle any anxiety. So she orders a large bloody Mary from the hotel bar where she's staying.

But calamity strikes. She knocks over her whole drink and her snow white wedding dress is now indelibly stained blood red with copious amounts of tomato juice.

She's in no fit state to meet her bridegroom her pure white dress ruined by the stain. And that was a picture of Israel when it came to her bridegroom the holy God who had betrothed himself to her.

[28 : 18] And it's a picture of us also. We're not fit to meet God. We're defiled by sin's stain. We have nothing to offer God.

No religion can possibly fix the problem. It's what we'll acknowledge when we take communion later. But God promises to remove the stain to make us as pure white as a muddy field that's been covered with thick fresh snow on a winter's morning.

dazzlingly pure. And as we'll remember when we take bread and wine in a few minutes and as Isaiah foretells later in his prophecy God removes the stain of our sin through the crimson blood of his son whose perfection is given to us in turn.

If you know A Tale of Two Cities you'll know why Sidney Carton suffered the guillotine at the end of the novel. Carton loved a woman named Lucy. But Lucy chose instead to marry another man named Charles Darnay.

Years later Darnay is arrested in Paris as an emigrated aristocrat and is sentenced to death. But Carton still loves Lucy and so the night before his death in an act of remarkable sacrifice he disguises himself as Darnay swaps places with him in prison and dies his death while Darnay is smuggled back to England and goes free.

[29 : 45] It's a glorious picture of what Jesus did for us in his love swapping places with us and dying our death in an act of remarkable sacrifice that we might go free and enjoy not England but the restored Jerusalem the glorious heavenly city to which he calls us.

So Isaiah introduces to us many of his key themes in this opening chapter. Israel and Judah are guilty of a terrible rebellion for which there will be a dreadful reckoning. Religion is futile in dealing with the problem.

It only incurs greater contempt from God. But Isaiah looks ahead also to a glorious restoration made possible through Israel's and our sins becoming as white as snow as we're redeemed by justice.

The justice Isaiah later reveals to come through the Lord Jesus God's suffering servant. But as we close this morning what's the take home message for us from this chapter?

Well again we need to be careful as we're neither Israel nor Judah. But did you notice in verse 2 that Isaiah addresses his book not simply to the Old Testament people of God but to the whole of creation.

[31 : 00] Hear O heavens and give ear O earth for the Lord has spoken. This is a message for the whole earth for all creation in fact and that includes you and me.

It's a message addressed to us. You see we too who identify as God's people if we're Christians so often rebel against the God who made us and if we persist in doing so if we show ourselves to have turned our backs on the Holy One of Israel we'll face a dreadful reckoning for which our outward religion will prove futile.

So how wonderful to know this morning that a glorious restoration awaits. But notice from this chapter that this restoration isn't automatic.

This cleansing requires a response. First there must be a necessary repentance. That's a big application for us a necessary repentance.

Take a look with me at verses 16 and 17. Isaiah tells Israel 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.

[32 : 25] Israel was to turn from her sin. The cleansing of verse 18 follows the contrition and correction expressed in verses 16 and 17.

We'll look on one final time to verse 27. Zion shall be redeemed by justice and those in her who repent by righteousness.

Redemption requires repentance. And if we don't repent however much we may identify with God's people however outwardly religious we may be we can expect only God's judgment as the last few verses of the chapter show.

So there's a necessary repentance if we wish to know God's forgiveness and restoration. And the message of Isaiah chapter 1 is that that repentance is urgent and vital.

Cease to do evil learn to do good Isaiah tells us. And the Lord's Supper to which we're about to come is a great opportunity to examine ourselves and identify areas in our lives where we perhaps made a truce with sin where we're currently unrepentant where maybe we're harbouring bitterness or lust or anger or envy or selfish ambition or greed or materialism or whatever it may be.

[33 : 47] And this morning to repent as we remember and refresh the precious cleansing Jesus offers and of which Isaiah foretold. Shall I lead us in prayer?

Cease to do evil learn to do good. Our Heavenly Father we acknowledge this morning that we are those guilty of a terrible rebellion who deserve a dreadful reckoning.

And so how we thank you for the glorious restoration which has been made possible through the blood of the Lord Jesus. We thank you that although our sins are like scarlet they have been made as white as snow because of the death of the Lord Jesus.

And we pray therefore this morning that you would fill us with joy and gratitude again as we remember what Jesus has done for us and that you would move us to repent that we would cease to do evil and learn to do good.

And we ask it for Jesus' namesake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34 : 58] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.