

A Tale of Two Cities

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service on the 18th of October 1998 The preacher is Paul Barker His sermon is entitled A Tale of Two Cities and is from Isaiah chapter 1 verse 22 through to chapter 2 verse 5 The passage open for this sermon and as I said at the beginning this is part of a series on this book of the prophet Isaiah Let's pray Our God we pray that you'll help us tonight to understand your word to hear you speaking and to respond with faithful obedience for Jesus' sake Amen It was the best of times

It was the worst of times So began or begins Charles Dickens' Tale of Two Cities But he wasn't the first to write a tale of two cities Two and a half thousand years before him Isaiah the prophet wrote his tale of two cities But the strange thing about Isaiah's tale of two cities is that it is really one city that is two cities It's not London and Paris but it's Jerusalem which is both cities Even today Jerusalem is in a sense two cities There's the old and the new There's the east and the west in a sense There's the Jewish city and the Arab city There's the clean city and the dirty city There's the reliable city and the very unreliable city the tourist city and the non-tourist city and so on But the distinction between the two cities of Jerusalem in Isaiah's day was none of those

His distinction was the faithless city and the faithful city And today's passage deals with both Beginning with the faithless city How the faithful city has become a whore He says Stunning words about God's own city Jerusalem She's become a whore That is an adulteress Somebody who sleeps around but not speaking here literally of somebody who goes off to the brothel or so on But rather spiritually Jerusalem meaning God's own people have gone after other gods They've had relationships with all sorts of gods and not restricted themselves to the one God the true living God of the Old Testament and the Bible They're committing spiritual adultery They've gone after the Canaanite gods the Baals and worshipped all of them and any other god they can find as well

Now it's bad enough for any Israelite town to do but this is Jerusalem This is the capital This is the place where God's temple is This is the place where God said His presence would dwell forever And this of all cities is a whore a faithless city It ought to be full of righteousness and justice but rather it is faithless She that was full of justice righteousness lodged in her but now murderers Murderers because when you give up on God you end up giving up on people as well If you exercise infidelity to God then what will follow will be infidelity to other people characterised here by the noun murderers But you see wherever love for God is lost then the basis for love for people is lost as well And in the end love for people goes

That's not what the modern humanists of our day and age tell us But in the end they're wrong Love for people only exists where there is an undergirding love for God where love for God goes where there is spiritual adultery and faithlessness then in the end you get injustice oppression even murder a lack of care for people And that's what Isaiah is lamenting here That's what these initial words are He's crying because of the state of his nation's capital just as Jesus cries over the same city 750 years later weeping for Jerusalem From adultery in verse 21 to adulteration in verse 22 the metaphor changes Your silver has become like dross your wine is mixed with water Not speaking about their literal silver coins or their wine that they drink but again using images of their faith

[5 : 16] Their faith that's meant to be pure like silver has become adulterated in his dross because they've worshipped other gods as well as their own Their wine spiritually speaking their faith that's meant to be pure wine it's been tainted with water and spoiled thereby He goes on to condemn the leaders in verse 23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves Corruption is there in the centre the heart the throne if you like of the nation and it's infiltrating down through every rank of society The description gets worse in verse 23 Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts Notice how graphic that description is of evil in the society It's not just that there are a few bribes floating around a few sort of backhanded gifts that are being paid for favours But everybody loves bribes They love they run after they pursue gifts

That's how keen they are to do evil Not just that they have bribes forced upon them or that they yield to temptation But rather they go pursuing them running after them desiring them with all their heart and attitude and mind That's how low this society has come But it gets worse They do not defend the orphan and the widow's cause does not come before them The very things that earlier in the chapter as we saw last week in verse 17 were charged for these people they fail to keep This is a devastating description of a faithless city God's own people remember full of corruption oppression lack of love in every way they don't care about anybody but themselves The reason they take bribes and gifts and don't defend the poor and landless is because they're just after for whatever they can gain Love of God is gone and so love of people goes as well

Love of a God who is fair and just gone and so their love of fairness and justice in society gone Love of a God who is interested in human welfare gone and so their own concerns for human welfare and care for other people especially the poor and the landless gone take away love for God and love for people becomes fragile at best and cracked up and gone inevitably therefore what's God going to do therefore says the sovereign the Lord of hosts the mighty one of Israel terms of great power to describe God here I will pour out my wrath on my enemies and avenge myself on my foes normally when Israel would have heard those words they would have applauded they're God's people so when God says I'm going to pour out my wrath on my enemies yes because we are God's people but the irony and sarcasm is loaded in this verse because Israel

God's own people have become his enemies by carrying on evil sinful lives by cavorting with other gods they've placed themselves at enmity with God and when God says I'll pour out my wrath on my enemies he means his people Israel being addressed here by the prophet we ought always to bear in mind that when we continue to live lives of sin we place ourselves on God's opposition at enmity with him Paul said that in Romans 5 didn't he it's while we were enemies that Christ died for us that is a sinful people pursuing lives of sin and selfishness we are enemies of God sometimes people say today I love the sinner but hate the sin in the end I think that's a false dichotomy because the sinner is at enmity with God so long as they continue to pursue their sin and selfishness and evil

God says in verse 25 I will turn my hand against you I will smelt away your drosses with lye and remove all your alloy this is a description of the white hot furnace of God's wrath and judgment against sin and evil and all the dross and alloy the contamination it will be consumed in this fire removed taken away we might expect Isaiah to stop here what more could be said what more could happen but God's final end and purpose is never total destruction in every image that the Bible uses of that judgment day at the end there is always a division going on whether it's those to the left and those to the right or those who are sheep and those who are goats those will be sent to hell and those will be taken to heaven those will perish and those will live those will be destroyed and the remnant that will be saved there is a division down the heart of humanity on judgment day before

[11:10] God and in this metaphor that's being used here of the furnace of God's judgment there is also a division the dross the alloy the contamination the sin and evil it will be burned up in the cauldron of God's judgment but what is pure will be refined and preserved and kept even on that day even in that fire we might expect after the description of this faithless city that nothing can stand at all but surprisingly really inexplicably in the end there is something that stands verse 26 says and I will restore your judges as at the first and your counsellors as at the beginning going back to the days when the city was faithful in the dim distant past afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness the faithful city what an extraordinary promise that is that in the crucible of God's judgment this faithless city will be destroyed but rather than nothing left but ash there will be a purified faithful city of God the ferocious fire of

God's judgment has two effects you see it destroys and it purifies out of the crucible of judgment faithlessness is destroyed but faithfulness is preserved godlessness is burnt but godliness is purified dross is consumed but gold refined what then is the gold what then stands and survives this test of God's judgment can anything the bible says two things needed together not one or the other genuine faith one of Isaiah's dominant themes in the chapters that follow here is the need to have genuine faith in God it's a theme we'll see in the weeks and months ahead but one

Peter puts it like this that in face of God's judgment it is your faith which is more precious than gold being refined that will stand firm on the day of judgment genuine faith in God will endure all of God's fiery judgment be purified and stand firm and the thing that accompanies it and that's what's mentioned actually in this passage here the end of verse 27 those in her who repent will be saved goes together with faith if you exercise genuine faith in God then you repent of your sins and your evil by turning away from them faith and repentance two things together the opening words of Jesus own ministry repent and believe the gospel there it is repentance and faith put together and that's what stands here in the cauldron of God's judgment on judgment day but even for those who survive their survival through this judgment is not their own achievement it is

God's grace at work and that's seen at the beginning of verse 27 Zion a poetic name for Jerusalem shall be redeemed by justice when a slave in the ancient world was to be set free a price would be paid a redemption price to free the slave that's what's the image behind this that a redemption price will be paid to free people from the destruction of judgment so that they may be saved through judgment and in a few months we'll get to the part of Isaiah that tells us what price and how it is God who pays the price God himself not us or our friends but God himself through his suffering servant whom we know to be called Jesus Christ pays the redemption price that those who place their faith in him and repent of their sins will stand firm through this fiery judgment of God it is God himself you see who satisfies the demands of his own justice himself meeting up what we lack in meeting his standards but for those who do not repent who do not exercise genuine faith then verse 28 tells us that rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed destruction in the fire of God's judgment a tale of two cities the worst of times this faithless whore of a city but the best of times the city that rises up from the ashes of judgment as a faithful city full of righteousness and truth and peace faithlessness purged faithfulness purified

I wonder whether you've hugged a tree lately it's a bit of a quantum leap I know from the judgment but that's where Isaiah goes have you hugged a tree lately some people say it's a very therapeutic thing to do it's a very new age type thing to do you know to get back to nature to feel the rhythm and the vibes of nature and gods of nature sort of at work by hugging trees I think you get a bit dirty and it's a bit uncomfortable to hug a tree but anyway those who go around hugging trees trying to return to mother earth and that sort of thing are practicing foolhardiness in the end and they'll find their pursuit dissatisfying in ancient Canaan that Isaiah lived in people love trees I don't know whether they hugged them but they're certainly very keen on worshipping them especially big green trees because big green trees were signs of fertility it was signs of their

[18:12] God's presence providing trees and water obviously to keep the trees alive and so on it looked as though God was at work in great ways and so they'd come and there was plantations of trees as sort of holy sanctuaries it seems in ancient Israel and Canaan but it's folly because to leave the God who created the trees and worship the trees themselves is stupid and for those who practice it they will be they'll reap the reward of shame and disgrace and disappointment so verse 29 says for you shall be ashamed of the oaks in which you delighted and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen and the outcome of those who go around hugging or worshipping trees you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers not an oak who's green and strong and provides shelter and shade but an oak whose leaf withers like a garden without water dead trees ripe for fire ready for judgment this condemnation of this practice has a bigger picture in mind any idolatry that is any worship of something other than the real

God in the end brings death not life sin you see yields the opposite of what it promises it promises life and satisfaction and joy and fulfillment but it delivers none of that it is dead choose the garden to worship and you find no water but choose the one who planted the garden the creator of the garden and there are streams of living water flowing to bring you life you see idolatry makes the idolater like a withered tree dying and dead but by contrast the old testament tells us the one who delights in the law of the lord is like a tree planted by water that is alive and thriving psalm 1 because false religion idolatry has no external reality to nourish it and sustain it and in the end it dies so beware any religion that this world offers you that promises you life and joy and fulfillment and meaning and satisfaction other than the religion of the bible worshipping the living god because any other religion will lead you in the end to death not life worship the creation rather than creator and you end up in death not life for it is the only the creator god of the world who is the source of life false religion has no external reality to provide life for it but the worship of the god of the bible finds life as there is water and nourishment from him and his word this is a call to right worship not to the worship of anything you choose but to the worship of the god of the bible the passage we're looking at today finishes with the second city the faithful city a glorious vision of the faithful city in chapter 2 verses 2 to 4

Jerusalem is on a hill and if you go to Jerusalem you go up to it one because it's on the top of a high mountain ridge 2400 feet above sea level which is high for southern Israel but even where it is it's on a little hill so it's fairly safe from ancient enemies but ironically it's not on the highest hill it's on a hill but it's surrounded by higher hills if you go up the mount of olives right next to it you look down on Jerusalem close at hand before you this description here of the faithful city rearranges the geography a bit in days to come the mountain of the Lord's house that's Jerusalem shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills what's this talking about all the nations shall stream to it the imagery is of a river flowing the nations like a river flowing into it but if

Jerusalem's the highest hill this is a river going backwards because it's flowing uphill you see this is a picture of the faithful city that is like a magnet that is attracting people from every nation not just the Jews but from any and every nation of the world and drawing them up into the highest mountain the place of God's own presence Jerusalem Zion as it is sometimes called in the Old Testament many peoples shall come and say not just many peoples of one nation but many people groups shall come and say come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord those words I think paraphrase some of the old Psalms of the Old Testament where the Jews would say to each other come let's go up to the mountain of the Lord but this is now all the nations of the world saying to each other come let's go up to the mountain of the Lord to God's own presence to the house of the God of Jacob because it is the God of the Old Testament the God of the New Testament and the Bible who is the one God of the world there's only one effective

God this one and this is all the nations recognising that and coming to him and to his place Jerusalem in worship at the end of time the movement of verse 2 and the first half of verse 3 is drawing the nations in and up to Jerusalem and when they get there the second half of verse 3 says that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths that is they're not coming for a tourist trip it's not a sightseeing trip here to see the sights of ancient Jerusalem but rather it's to come under his word and law to be taught by him to live his ways but then not to stay there either but then the movement changes and goes out for out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem you see the pictures of people of nations flocking in like a magnet attracted to the magnet of Jerusalem learning God's ways living by God's ways and then flowing out of Zion out of

[25 : 44] Jerusalem back into the world to teach the world God's ways and the effect of that in verse 4 is that God shall judge between the nations shall arbitrate for many peoples they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks that is destroying all the armaments of war and making them into things of peaceful agriculture nations shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war anymore that's an extraordinary picture of world peace and unity isn't it far greater than anything the United Nations has ever delivered in the last 50 years what's it really about firstly it tells us that any hope of world peace does not come through noble prizes or negotiations done in Washington DC world peace comes when God is central world peace comes when people put up their own claims and submit to God's word when they recognise that in God alone are all their needs satisfied that they do not therefore need to compete with each other or take from each other when God is recognised as the one who provides all our needs then and then alone can there be world peace that's the picture that's here very different from those politicians of our own day and age world peace without God is a futile quest but more than that it's not just telling us how to get world peace this is a picture of the fulfilment of every promise of the Old

Testament there are three key places in the Old Testament where God makes promises to Abraham near the beginning of the Bible and the key of that promise is that the world will be blessed through Abraham's descendants and here it's happening isn't it the world is being blessed all the nations of the world streaming to Jerusalem that's the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham the second great statement of God was to Moses some hundreds of years later at Mount Sinai there he gave his law and what's happening here but God's law is being found effectual in people's lives not only of Jews but of the world it's the fulfilment of the statements to Moses as well as Abraham and the third great promise that God made in the Old Testament is to David that Jerusalem will be God's city forever there would his presence be found and here of course is a picture of Jerusalem all the promises of the Old Testament are being found fulfilled in this description here in these verses

I think one of the functions of these verses for Isaiah's readers and listeners is to say that despite your sin God's promises still stand God's cannot be thwarted by your faithlessness but his faithfulness will prevail this is what the Old Testament is heading towards the Old Testament is see it's not just a book for the Jews it's a book for the world as the New Testament makes clear but a key question about this is when is this being fulfilled there are those around the world who will tell you that this picture along with others in the Bible is being fulfilled in the last 50 years by the formation of the state of modern Israel and Jerusalem being recaptured by Jews today I think at best that is inconsequential it is not being fulfilled in modern

Israel this is not a picture that's going to be literally fulfilled in the land of Palestine that you can fly to on El Al Airlines it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ because when Jesus came to earth he made it clear that every promise of the Bible of the Old Testament was fulfilled in him he is the one through whom world blessing will come he is the one who is the goal of the law given to Moses he is the Davidic descendant God on earth the one who replaces the temple as the means of God's presence on earth and we find it in a person not a building or a place but moreover the New Testament tells us that it's no longer Jerusalem that matters the city on earth it is Jesus himself in the end who is the new Jerusalem and the writer to the Hebrews says you've come to

Jesus he says it in the same terms as saying you've come to the real Jerusalem it's Jesus who is the real Jerusalem he is the one where God meets the earth where God's presence dwells forever where we can gather at Jesus the temple and meet with God so this is not being fulfilled in modern Israel it's not a political fulfillment it's a fulfillment in Jesus Christ and you see this is a picture of us we have a nations who are flocking up this great hill to Jesus because he is the one who's been lifted up higher than any other as this promise predicted and when we have come to Jesus from whatever language or background or race that we come from we are fulfilling what is promised here and our commission then is to go out from Jesus in a sense to the world and make disciples as verse 5 goes on to tell us to walk in the light that others may be attracted to

[31 : 46] Jesus Christ you see it's not the place that matters it's the person all the things about place in the Old Testament are subsumed by the person Jesus Christ he is the fulfillment of this picture he is the faithful city and we are members of that city by grace in him placing our faith in him and repenting of our sins but let's not just sit back and enjoy let's not just sit back and wait for this to be totally fulfilled the command of verse 5 applies to us come let us walk in the light of the Lord let us make sure our lives are lives of faithfulness walking in God's light according to his law that we may be lights that are beacons to attract the world to the Lord Jesus Christ

Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Thank you.