

The Mouth of the Lord has Spoken

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Date: 11 October 1998

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service on October the 11th 1998 The preacher is Paul Barker His sermon is entitled The Mouth of the Lord Has Spoken And is from Isaiah chapter 1 verses 1 to 20 Let's pray God we thank you that you spoke long ago to the prophet Isaiah We pray that through his words you will speak to us as well Those bittersweet words of your gospel Amen Have you ever felt embarrassed When you hear somebody else getting ticked off in public

You're in your home or backyard and you hear the parents next door Telling off their children for something they've done wrong Loudly so the whole neighbourhood can hear You sort of cringe a bit don't you I feel like that when I go to my sisters and my niece or nephews being naughty And my sister tells them off and gets very angry with them And I feel a bit embarrassed Imagine if it's you being told off Not in private but in public Anthony I told you to cycle home with your sister And not to leave her by herself Sorry You'd be a bit embarrassed wouldn't you The whole world knows the things that you've done wrong Your parents or whoever's telling you off Does so so the whole world hears Well in the Old Testament God's children which was the nation of Israel Or Judah as it was also called

They'd been naughty children Basically And in this chapter At least the beginning part of it God is telling them off In no uncertain terms And publicly So that not only their neighbours could hear But so that the whole universe could hear Indeed he says to them in verse 2 Hear oh heavens and listen oh earth He's actually calling the whole universe Everything that exists To listen to what his children have done wrong If you were Israel you'd be pretty embarrassed Everybody knows your faults and sins This family, God's family Is airing its dirty linen in public And Israel has been a very naughty boy It's a bit like a court scene really Listen oh heaven and earth Is calling two witnesses It's really saying listen everything That's the way Hebrews would say everything Heavens and earth Two opposites Put them together And you mean everything There is But it's also two things which act as witnesses Because in a court of law in the Old Testament You needed two witnesses in order to prove your case So in effect Heavens and earth are acting as the witnesses For God's accusation against his own children The nation of Israel or Judah God you see is both the judge But also the prosecutor And also the parent Of the one accused Hear oh heavens and listen oh earth For the Lord has spoken I reared children And brought them up That's the nation of Israel or Judah That he's speaking about They're my children It's not just any old nation But my very children But they have rebelled against me The parent child relationship you see

Doesn't just apply to Christians in the New Testament That we can call God our father But it applies to God's people in the Old Testament as well In a sense they could also have called their God father Though they don't actually do that so much In the old as they do in the new And the reason that God's people in the Old Testament Are his children Is not because he made them But because he redeemed them and saved them It's not everybody who can call God father It's not everybody who is God's child So don't think that the whole world are God's children Because he made them Only those whom he saves Or redeems are his children And in the Old Testament that's the nation of Israel In the New Testament it is those who place their faith in Jesus Christ And Israel This people of God in the Old Testament Has had this uniquely privileged relationship with God

[5 : 03] He's made them his children Not because of any good they've done But because he loves them And he promised things to them An inheritance to them as his children An inherited land Blessing Descendants And so on And he saved them in order to bring those promises about By bringing them out of the land of Egypt Putting them in the land under Joshua The first leader The one who conquered the land And then giving them various leaders over time Later on kings over time To be the leader of God's children nation In a particular place The land of Palestine But over that course of history These children of God have failed God And failed him badly Rebelled against

him Rejected his love and his grace There is no sin that is worse sin Than sin by a child of God Against that loving parent

And that is what Israel's sin Has been Just like teenagers Who go off the rails And reject their parents' love Here is teenage Israel Going off the rails Rejecting God's love for them Isaiah is speaking These words In about 750 to 700 BC The last part of the 8th century BC They've had kings over them For over 250 years At this point But their history under these kings Has been a bad one One of going astray And Israel ought to have known better Ignorance is no excuse for them There is no ignorance They know all they need to know from God In this uniquely privileged relationship Of being his children Isaiah goes on to mock them In verse 3 He says The ox knows its owner

And the donkey its master's voice You see Dumb animals know their master But you don't You've rejected your parent You are worse than a dumb Stupid cow or ass or donkey What a sarcastic way Of chastising God's own children Israel But Israel does not know My people do not understand You see For all the privilege That God had given his people They had rejected him In every point Verse 4 begins In our translation Ah sinful nation But literally it's Hey you It's a call for attention You imagine you're out On the school playground And suddenly your mother appears Saying Hey you You'd feel very embarrassed That's the effect of the words At the beginning of verse 4 Calling them to dramatic attention You Israel Sinful nation

The nation that was called To be holy in the book of Exodus Is in fact a sinful nation People laden with iniquity Called to be a A holy treasured people of God Again in the book of Exodus But rather a people laden with iniquity Not just that occasionally infringe God's laws But overloaded with sins and iniquities They are offspring who do evil Again a term of privilege To be God's own offspring Something promised to Abraham and his descendants But not offspring to do righteousness And reflect God's goodness But offspring who do evil Children Again a term of privilege But ironically children who deal corruptly Who've forsaken the Lord Who've despised the Holy One of Israel Who are utterly estranged The relationship is broken Like a parent in our day and age Whose teenage child Has gone off They don't talk They don't communicate That's God

And teenage Israel Here The language Of that verse Suggests what their sins are They're idolaters They're worshipping other gods Not their own god It's as though they've gone off To find some other parent And they said We don't want you as our parent That's how insulting it is Some children Learn from their mistakes Some children Get punished once And they think I will never Be punished like that again I will make sure I never Do anything That warrants that punishment Sometimes Punishment Is Corrective It does change people It wards them off It deters them From doing wrong again But there are other children Who never learn Aren't there They just keep doing The same old things again They know the punishment That's coming for them They've experienced it Many times [10:06] And yet Stupidly Madly They keep on doing The same wrong That's what's happening Here for Israel As well They're facing God's punishment They've experienced Something of it But they're not learning From their mistakes And it's as if They're saying to God Can you give us More punishment That's how stupid Their position is Because every time They keep repeating The sins That they've been Doing and doing It's in effect Saying to God Please punish us more What a stupid Position that is That's what verse 5 Is saying Why do you seek Further beatings They've been beaten Chastised and punished Already But their action Means that they Deserve more Why do 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's no soundness in it But bruises and sores And bleeding wounds The end of the verse Says none of these Have been treated They're not being drained Or bound up Or softened with oil

There's no ease of pain Of punishment here at all They're just stupidly Coming back for more It's as if Isaiah Is saying to Judah Here You stupid boy Just like on dad's army When that young officer Keeps getting told By his uncle You stupid boy That's what's happening here They're so stupid That they keep Coming back for the same Sort of punishment Bruised and battered By their own sin Yet sinning more Now the reality The metaphor there Is of a person Who is suffering beatings But literally what's happening Is that the nation Is being desolated By invading armies Probably it's the Assyrian empire Of the 8th century And we know that In the 8th century The Assyrians Were the mighty world empire In the 730s They came almost To the doorstep of Judah In the 720s They defeated

The neighbouring people To the north The brother nation Of Judah And in 701 They actually Conquered all of Judah Apart from Jerusalem They almost prevailed Against Jerusalem And then they failed That's probably The sort of background That's here Your country lies desolate Verse 7 says Your cities are burned with fire Countries bad Cities bad There's nothing much left That is desolate In your very presence Aliens devour your land Not extraterrestrial aliens But meaning foreigners From other countries The Assyrians It is desolate As overthrown By foreigners And daughter Zion Is left That's the pride Of the nation The capital city The place where The temple was The jewel in the nation's crown So to speak But all it is Is like a booth In a vineyard A shelter In a cucumber field Like a besieged city When it was harvest time

In the ancient world Because some areas Of harvesting Were quite large The farmers The farmers would actually Go and erect A little booth Or tent Or shelter And they'd use it For the period Of the harvest So that they didn't Have to spend All their time Walking all the way Home each night And walking all the way Back It would save them Hours and hours Of travel So they'd go To the harvest field Set up their little booth There was just a little Lean to Very temporary Very flimsy That's what Jerusalem Is being compared with here It is nothing at all You think it's a great city A great citadel Great bastion of God Not at all It's a flimsy little booth Or tent Judah has been defeated To an inch of its life By these Assyrians Presumably If the Lord of hosts Had not left us A few survivors We would have been Like Sodom And become like Gomorrah It's saying there In verse 9 That it is only God Who saved the nation From total extinction

It's only because God preserved A few survivors That there was any Left at all Sodom and Gomorrah Were the archetypal Baddies of the Old Testament Evil cities In every way And they were destroyed By God This is saying That if God Had not stopped you Being beaten To within an inch Of your life You would have been Just like them So bad are your sins We know that In 701 When the Empress Sennacherib Of the Assyrians Was defeated By the angel of the Lord And returned back To Nineveh In defeat And Jerusalem Stood firm With King Hezekiah Within The Jews Boasted Of their greatness Isaiah is saying Here I think That something else Should have been Their response Not a boast That they prevailed Against the mighty Sennacherib But rather A fearfulness

[15:08] At heeding The warnings That God Had sent Against the nation They should have Seen God's mercy Not their own Ability But then In verse 10 Comes one of those Underhanded Punch lines In the Bible It looks as though In verse 9 Jerusalem is different To Sodom and Gomorrah But notice what Verse 10 Goes on to say Hear the word Of the Lord You rulers Of Sodom Listen to the Teaching of our God You people Of Gomorrah This is saying That God's Own leaders Of his people Are as bad As Sodom and Gomorrah Yes the city Stands But not because It's any better If you want to See how bad Sodom and Gomorrah Are read Genesis chapter 18 and 19 They were bad And Jerusalem Is just as bad But it doesn't

Fall Because God's Mercy Keeps it there That's all Notice also That it's the Rulers of the Nation that are Being singled Now not every Person is as Guilty Rulers Leaders are Always held More accountable By God Now often When people Do things Wrong One of the Things that They then Do Is to try And balance Their wrongdoing With extra Efforts of Doing good The unfaithful Husband Suddenly comes Home from work With bundles Of flowers And chocolates And tickets To the Theater And a Restaurant Booking And so on Why?

Well if it's A person Who's been Unfaithful It's guilt Isn't it? Provoking this Person to do Extra loving Acts is a Sort of way Of trying to Balance up Things in Their life They realise The wrongdoing They've done They don't Want to confess It And so maybe They try And balance It The person At work Who Perhaps Cheats On their Work Tries to Sort of Balance it In a way By working Extra long Hours Being the First to Volunteer For extra Jobs Or something Like that Or the Teenager Who steals From his Parents Or her Parents Who becomes More willing To do odd Jobs at Home A guilt That is Covered By extra Good acts Or acts Of piety The trouble Is that Those acts Deceive Other people And often They deceive The person Who's the Culprit As well Now it Seems to Me that Judah Is in That sort Of situation You see Judah This sinful Nation This nation As bad As Sodom And Gomorrah Is a Very Religious People They were Regular in All their Sacrifices And they Tended Temple Worship Punctiliously What to Me is the Multitude Of your Sacrifices Says the Lord in Verse 11 Multitude Of them See Not just The occasional One Very Regular Very Sacrificial And then In verse 12 When you Come to Appear Before me Who Ask this From your Hand That is They're They're Attending The temple To worship Not only At the Times Prescribed But at Extra

Times as Well They're Going to Church Four Times On Saturday Or Something Like That Moreover They bring Offerings In verse 13 And incense Something that's Not necessarily Required An extra Special act Of giving And offering To God And then In verse Again in Verse 13 New moon And sabbath

And calling Of convocation All these Important festivals That are That are Mentioned In verse 14 As well They keep Every festival Every little Festival That's there Not just The major Ones They do Them Religiously Carefully Dotting Every i And crossing Every t They pray Very piously In verse 15 When you Stretch out Your hands In prayer This is a Very religious People These are People doing Works of Religion Or piety Over and Above what The old Testament Prescribed These are People who Are always There in Church Or the Equivalent In Isaiah's Day But far From Applauding Their piety God's Assessment Is Devastating He says In verse 11 That he's Had enough Of their Sacrifices He takes No delight In them At all He cannot

[20 : 01] Endure Or bear Their solemn Assemblies At the end Of verse 13 You'd think These solemn Assemblies Would bring God great Joy but Not a bit Of it And then In verse 14 Regarding Their various Festivals He hates Them They're a Burden to God He's weary Of bearing Them There's the All powerful God Whose Tired Of bearing Their Festivals And what About their Prayers He hides His eyes And doesn't Listen This is the God who Commanded These things In the first Place Has he Changed His mind It's important To realise That God's Complaint Here is Not about Religious Practice He's not Saying oh Look I Made a Mistake With all Those laws I gave To Moses In the Earlier Part of The Old Testament Just Tear Those Pages Out You Don't Have To Make Any Sacrifice You Don't Have to Pray Don't Have to Go to The Temple Don't Have to Reserve

Any Festivals He's not Saying that At all He's not Saying that Those things Were a Failure Either For the Person For the Person Sacrifices In the Old Testament Their Sins Were For For No God's Complaint Is that Religion That is Associated But with Sin Is Devoid Of Value Worse Than That It is An Abomination To God The Problem You See Is Israel's Iniquity That's What The end Of verse Thirteen Says I cannot Endure Solemn Assemblies With Iniquity It's Too Much For Him Too Rich They Don't Mix Like Oil And Water End Of Verse Fifteen The same Sort Of Things I Won't Listen To Your Prayers Because The Hands That You Stretch Out To Pray To Me Are Hands Covered In Blood And It Is Not The Blood Of Sacrifices That They're Making It Is The Blood Of Violent Living Metaphorically Speaking Don't Deceive Yourselves Therefore Songs And Sins Don't Mix Prayer And Pride Don't Mix Church And Cheating Don't Mix And So On Any Act Of Religious Piety By A Christian Person In Order To Somehow Cover Up An Act Of Wrong Doing Or In A Hypocritical Way Associated With Lives Of Ongoing Sin Is An Abomination To God You May As Well Not Be Here You May As Well Not Pray You May As Well Not Read Your Bible Because God Will Not Heed What You Do At All Very Strong Words But They Apply In Both Testaments Old And New God Takes No Pleasure In Any Act Of Christian Worship That Is Offered By Somebody Who Continues To Live In Unrepentant Sin If You're A Person Who Finds Your Prayers Never Being Answered Why May That May That Could It Be That There Is Something About Your Life That Caused God To Block His Ears One Of My Darren One Of Onlyrió To Really como Game a story of extraordinary, unbelievable and greedy wealth early this century in America by a family.

And this man's got all this wealth and he goes to all these measures to protect his wealth. Stupid measures really. It's a fantastical sort of story. But at the end of it all, when all his wealth is coming unstuck, he climbs the mountain at the edge of his property and silhouetted against the evening sky, the person who narrates the story, sees him raise his fist and shout out in complaint to God.

[24 : 25] That's a person who is living a life of pride and greed and wealth and no relationship with God. And at the end of it his prayer is not answered.

It's a fairly dramatic sort of story. But it may be a warning for us as well to think carefully about our lives not to think that our acts of Christian worship are somehow going to outweigh our bad doing. They never will in God's scale of affairs. All the religion in the world cannot make up for any of our iniquity.

one of my favourite TV programs is the bill. Just recently on the bill there was a criminal who'd been up there for several times a young man and he got off supervision order nothing really and the injustice that was felt by the police by the victim's parents was quite palpable and we feel the same don't we when we see somebody getting off with injustice when a court declares walk free on a technicality or something like that we feel it's not right when the guilty are not punished but that's

exactly what happens here in God's court in Isaiah chapter 1 God's called his witnesses he's arraigned the accused he's explained to them what they've done wrong he's shown how stupid their behaviour has been he's shown that their own attempts to cover up their guilt have been absolutely futile and now comes the time for the sentencing and God's words

God the judge's words are wash yourselves make yourselves clean remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes cease to do evil learn to do good seek justice rescue the oppressed defend the orphan and plead for the widow this is a call to change to repent and that's often what a judge does when they give somebody a supervision order or let them off and say but next time it'll be worse they say now's your chance to reform your life in effect they're saying to repent notice what repentance is here often we think repentance is just sort of saying sorry to God repentance is much deeper than that repentance is about cleansing ourselves being washed and made clean about being new people notice the steps that are involved to do that one is to remove the dirt of your evil doing in the middle of verse 16 take it away put it aside walk away from it and then at the end of verse 16 the second thing is to cease to do it remove yourself from it take yourself away from whatever is wrongdoing and stop doing it change your practice don't get dirty again and then the third step at the beginning of verse 17 is learn to do good that is not just a putting off but a putting on as well and notice what it says it says learn to do good you see doing good does not come naturally to human beings our natural inclination is often to tend to do wrong to be selfish and proud and conceited and so on not to think of others and think of God learn to do good it involves the mind as well as the action it's something that takes effort it doesn't come naturally it's something that we need to practice to become habitual doers of good some examples are given seek justice rescue the oppressed defend the orphan and plead for the widow to look after poor people within the community and so on that's what it's saying repentance you see is not saying sorry but it's about changing the way of life now to this point we might still feel a bit aggrieved if we're an observer in this court

[29 : 02] Israel's done all this and they're just being told to walk away and try and do better next time that doesn't seem fair really but now comes the real surprise the real surprise is in verse 18 come now says God let us argue it out it doesn't mean let us argue because we're on different sides of the debate here it's let's reason this out together let's negotiate a price when I've been to Jerusalem inevitably the traders in the little streets of the old city will be very aggressive in trying to get you to buy their wares which are usually not worth anything much at all and so they come out with one of those Arab headscarves for example hello you buy my headscarf special price for you my friends 68 shekel 68 shekel see good quality good quality I shake my head you do not buy an Arab headscarf in Jerusalem for 68 shekels 65 shekels because you're my special friend 50 no 55 50 no 45 40 down down the price goes three shekels for this

Arab headdress that was as far as he would go I actually bought one for three shekels that's all they're worth in fact they're worth less than that they'll never trade themselves out of business but you always feel that you're being cheated somehow you always feel that somehow you've got the worst end of the deal in the end the whole negotiation process seems to think you're getting a great bargain because you're his extra special friend in the world but once you've made the deal you think hmm I think I'd have got this cheaper somewhere else that's the sort of thing that's being said here by God come on let's negotiate a price my special friend but there's no hidden cost here there's no deception in the price that God offers because what he offers is free no strings attached free though your sins are like scarlet they shall be like snow though they are red like crimson they shall become like wool better than any homo advertisement this gets all rid of all the red and it's perfect white after the wash in God's court the people of God were waiting for the sentence guilty they knew they were guilty their sins had been paraded in public for everybody to see there was no excuse and no defence and when we stand before

God's heavenly court we will be in a similar predicament I expect our own sins will be paraded before us by God and we will know that we're guilty we will know that we have no defence and we will be waiting or could be waiting for the sentence of guilty as hell but the extraordinary thing here is that that's not what God says he says though your sins are like scarlet yes though you are as guilty as hell they shall be white as snow they'll be taken away you're acquitted I declare you to be innocent in this court if I watch this on the bill I'd be outraged at the injustice it's not fair that somebody who's done all that Judah has done for centuries can walk free forgiven sins wiped out and that's what God does if we don't feel the sense of outrage or injustice then we've missed the

point of what God is saying not only to

Judah but to us as well because these are the sweetest words God ever utters before his heavenly throne to guilty sinners you are declared innocent acquitted walk free and that my friends is a very special offer for you God's special friends it's free you don't even have to pay a half a shekel it's free how can it be that a holy God can say this to Judah doesn't it look as though he's distorting his own sense of justice isn't God being immoral in saying this isn't he being unfair Isaiah will go on to show and the Bible goes on to show in even greater detail how God can do this how God the holy judge the prosecutor the one from whom we expect a sentence of guilty and his judgment for eternity the one who is nonetheless

Judah's parent and our heavenly father who himself feels the enormous anguish of any parent when their teenage child runs away or goes astray from this God the same holy God who sets the standards comes the same God who meets them for us a God who meets our own deficiencies who pays our own fines who endures the sentence that ought to be ours and that's the gospel that's the Christian gospel and it's here in Isaiah 750 years before Jesus was ever born it's not new in Jesus here it is the overture to this book centuries before the Savior was ever born in Bethlehem comes this ringing overture the bitter sweet gospel the judgment against sin but put aside by

[35 : 30] God's extraordinary almost inexplicable mercy your sins are like scarlet but they shall become as white as snow God can do it because he himself carries the sins the failures the evils the iniquities he's the holy God who bears his own people's sins later in Isaiah when we get to chapter 53 which will be about Easter next year I hope we'll find that though these people here we're told in verse 6 facing bruises and sores and bleeding wounds they'll be bound up by God himself who dies in their place though these people here practiced iniquity that iniquity is carried by God's own servant to death though God delights not in Judah's sacrifices here there is one sacrifice in which he does delight same word is used of the servant sacrifice of his own life in chapter 53 again of Isaiah

Isaiah is a book of the gospel it's the pinnacle of the Old Testament in many respects it's the most quoted book in the New Testament and this is the overture to the book it sounds out in clear terms the theology the themes of the book Judah God's own people his own children whom he's raised and nurtured are as guilty as hell and yet acquitted by free grace and it's the holy God himself who satisfies the demands of justice who in the end will pay the penalty himself allowing his people his children then and now to walk free their sins though being like scarlet made white as snow but so you