

The Arrogance of the Religious

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Date: 28 September 2025

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[0 : 00] So Isaiah chapter 29, do open your Bibles up. It would be good to have that open in front of you. It's page 713. 713. Well, over the last few weeks, Isaiah's words have been targeted to the nations around Israel.

We've looked at Babylon, at Egypt and at Tyre. And since the finger there was in some ways pointing outwards to those wicked nations out there, it's somehow easier to let those words bounce off, to say, oh, we're not like that anymore.

We're God's people. It's somehow difference. I wonder if you felt that. Sometimes easy to do that as well when we look at Old Testament passages and think, well, these words are nearly 3,000 years old.

How can they possibly have any relevance for us today? Well, they will do. And they do do.

Because today in Isaiah's sights are the people of Jerusalem.

The words of judgment and condemnation, as well as words of hope, are directed very much at God's people. Those who claim to know God, to worship him, who have God's law, as we've just read to us, who have the temple and the sacrifices, the festivals to shape their worship.

[1 : 21] So if you came this morning thinking, oh, well, this is going to be very straightforward. This will be about some more people out there. Think again. This is very much for us today as God's people. But as I said, it isn't all judgment and gloom. Far from it.

As we've seen throughout these other passages as well, God uses judgment to bring people to repentance so that they might find true hope and a relationship with him.

And that is here in abundance today. So let me give you a quick overview of the passage. And then we're going to delve more deeply into some of those words of challenge.

Actually, chapters 28 to 32 form one whole section as Isaiah brings God's challenge to God's ancient people. That word, first word of our passage, woe, appears five times in these chapters. And so like rather a terrible school report, it makes for rather tricky reading. See, although Judah, those two tribes of God's people now living and based around Jerusalem, although they had the Davidic king above them, although the temple was in their territory, although the sacrifices carried on year after year, season after season, they were nowhere near the people God wanted them to be.

[2 : 40] They had been attracted by the power, the wealth and wisdom of the nations. And they had turned from the worship of God to the worship of idols, from faith in God's saving power to making military alliances with the nations.

Oh, they kept the sacrifices going. The name that appears in the passage of Ariel isn't an ancient washing powder. As you'll see from the text at the bottom of the page, it means altar half.

It's supposed to symbolise the place where God's other sacrifices in the temple were made. And they held all these sacrifices at all the proper times of day, the right festivals at the right times of year.

And I have to say, if you'd have gone to see them, they would have been marvellous to behold. Would have been incredible to take part in those. But the reality was that it was all a sham. It was like a beautiful box with nothing inside.

It was empty religion with no reality of living faith. Verses 1 to 4 highlight that fact. And point very clearly to God's coming judgment upon the city.

[3 : 50] Something that would happen when Assyria comes and besieges Jerusalem. You can read about that in chapters 36 and 37. But although God would bring Assyria to the walls.

And the nation would be petrified and brought low by fear. On that occasion, God would not let them get any further. So verses 5 to 8 speak of God's miraculous rescue.

Imagine a city surrounded by a vast army. And you think there is no way we can fight our way out of this. When all of a sudden a message comes to the commander and the army retreats.

You've done nothing. Nothing at all. They'd gone like waking up after a terrible dream. You might have thought that such a rescue would bring the people to their senses.

Maybe send them to their knees in praise and worship. Surely God's great act of salvation would prompt a spiritual revival. Well sadly not.

[4 : 49] As you read these chapters there's a sense that instead of God's people turning to God. They patted themselves on the back. They said oh we're obviously stronger than we look.

Those alliances that we've been making with Egypt they've obviously paid off. We don't need to change in our relationships with God at all. But verses 9 to 12 sum up the state of people's hearts towards God.

See they have refused to read God's word and hear God's commands. And because they've refused that. They've turned away from it. God had given them what they wanted. He'd made them deaf.

And blind. Started with the majority of the prophets. Who sought a quick payday. Who only brought messages that the people would want to hear. It also left the seers the wise men with nothing sensible to say.

Not that the people were any better. Isaiah describes them in verses 11 and 12. As if God's word is there before them. But it's just too much effort to open it up.

[5 : 52] Oh no. It's got an elastic band around it. I can't look at it today. Or they're handing it over. Oh yes I am really interested. But I'll give it to someone who can't read. Because then I won't need to listen.

That's what they're like. So verse 13 brings God's verdict. These people come near to me with their mouth. They honour me with their lips. But their hearts are far from me.

Their worship of me is based merely on human rules. That they have been taught. Now if those words sound familiar. It's because Jesus uses them. Both in Matthew 15 and Mark chapter 7.

As he condemns the religious leaders. For behaving in exactly the same way. It's the same kind of judgment. That the risen Christ brings to the churches.

In Revelation 2 and 3. Churches that were busy and active. That looked the part. But where their love for God was absent. Their worship empty.

[6 : 47] Their ideals and lives compromised. What a terribly sad state of affairs. But wonderfully. God is not done with his people.

Verses 14 to 27. Talk about God's purifying work amongst his people. Verses 18 and 19. Take us to the point. The change that takes place in the hearts.

And the minds of those who are willing to humble themselves. In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll. And out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.

Once more the humble will rejoice. The needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. God is going to act. The people's hearts will turn back to him again.

The light of Israel will not fade out. Revival would come. The people would be changed. Right down at the end of the chapter. The arrogant would be confounded. The wicked would be removed.

[7 : 46] Until God's people become holy as he is holy. Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding. Those who complain will accept instruction.

What a change takes place in God's people. Over the course of this chapter. Judgment but rescue. Willful rebellion. And the work of astonishing grace.

And transformation. Those are the themes Isaiah lays out for us. As you sit here this morning. Who are you most like do you think?

If you're honest are you most like the description of God's people at the beginning of that chapter? Going through the motions. Going through the motions. With a faith but it is very dry. Or like the people at the end.

Eager to hear God's word. And be humble before him. Desperate that God would restore us and change us. Will it help us think through those?

[8 : 47] I think there are five images here that might be helpful for us to think about that Isaiah gives. And I've given a name to each one.

I don't think I've picked anyone's name here by the way. I've tried to avoid that anyway. Little caricatures about what is going on with God's. Going wrong with God's people.

Here they are. We've got traditional Trudy. We've got lazy Leonard. We've got eyes closed Edward. We've got rebellious Ray. And two-faced Tara. Don't think I've used any of your names have I? I think I'm okay. Wonder as you listen to these. Who are you most like? Are there aspects of different ones that you think. You know what if I'm honest that's me. I'm a bit like that.

Well our response to God's word is always the important thing. What will it be? Will we stay as we are? Keep our ears closed? And our hearts harder? Will we humble ourselves?

[9 : 46] And receive God's transforming grace? That's where we'll end. With that invitation. Well traditional Trudy. She's the first character. Isaiah is speaking about her in verse one.

She loves being in the temple. Today we would say she loves being in church. She is fanatical about the festivals and the traditions. Making sure that everything is done in the same way every year.

Because that's what's really important. Now there's nothing wrong with tradition of course. We all enjoy different styles of worship and music. It's why we have such a variety of different styles across the parish.

That traditions can be helpful in preserving and protecting our faith. In a few minutes we'll say one of the creeds together. 1700 years this year that the Nicene Creed was composed.

Helping us to stand in that long tradition of Christians and not wander from the truth. But if our faith rests far more on the traditions and habits of the church.

[10 : 47] Rather than on the truth of the gospel with a living relationship with Jesus. Then it is a very shallow faith. See festivals and traditions happen out there.

We go and watch them. We observe them. Maybe we take part in them a little bit. They feed our emotions. But they don't have any impact in here. Not really. Not really.

Of course that isn't limited to any one style of worship is it? Traditional Trudy has a cousin. She's called Groovy Grace. She prefers exuberant worship with loud guitar led contemporary praise.

Where every hand is raised and every eye is closed. But the temptation for her is that she can fall into the same trap.

Enjoy the moment. Enjoy the emotional thrill. But keep God at arm's length. I don't want to be changed. I'm just here for the buzz. But it doesn't come out in this passage.

[11 : 47] But it does elsewhere in Isaiah's book. But there is also a sense of huge obligation that the traditional Trudy's held on to. An obligation that they were putting God under.

See they believed that if they went to the temple. That if they celebrated in the proper way. If they did all the right sacrifices that God would owe them. That their family would be protected.

Their country blessed. Their finances improved. Their health would never fade. As long as they did the right thing in church. Then everything else would work.

It's a trap many. Sadly many Christians fall into. Because it's what many churches preach. It isn't what the Bible says. That is pagan ideology. Trying to buy at God's blessing.

Put him under an obligation to us. But true worship seeks to praise and worship God. Simply because he is worthy of our praise. And true faith seeks to obey God.

[12 : 51] Because he is worthy of our obedience. Can't be confined to our Sunday worship. In whatever form it is. It must break out and transform our lives. Or else our faith is just a performance.

And nothing more. Traditional Trudy was in deep trouble. Because her faith never went any further. Than keeping up the traditions. And celebrating the festivals.

It looked good. But it was dead. Then we get to Lazy Leonard. Lazy Leonard is the focus of verses 9 to 12. Just like the first of our two characters.

Lazy Leonard is almost certainly faithful. In church attendance. And as long as the sermon isn't too long. He'll nod and thank the vicar at the door. For a lovely service.

But as for seeking God during the week. As for studying God's word himself. Or taking note of what was said on a Sunday. Well the Bible stays shut.

[13 : 49] From weekend to weekend. There might be copies at home. But unless they're a crossword answer. They'll never be opened up. It's just too much effort.

To reach it and read it. It's too hard to understand it. Let alone think about it. See Leonard doesn't really believe that God speaks today. And he's pretty convinced that if he did.

He probably wouldn't want to listen. Anyway. Lazy Leonard has God's word in front of him. But he doesn't want to reason. Lazy Leonard has a brother.

He's called Eyes Closed Edwards. He's a seeker after truth. Or at least that's what he claims. And he would love to sit and discuss theology. Until the cows come home.

But like the people St Paul speaks of in 1 Timothy 1. It's just a controversy that he loves. We met someone like that on the streets. On Friday lunchtime. See God has done marvellous things.

[14:50] They've happened in Isaiah's lifetime. The Assyrian army surrounded the city. And then disappeared. Like a dream. Eyes Closed Edward has seen all this.

He's seen God's marvellous deeds. But they don't mean anything. It's just like nonsense to him. God has revealed himself in great power.

And yet most of Judah. Like Eyes Closed Edward. Didn't acknowledge God's grace. You see to do that would have compromised his position. And no doubt changed his life. That's the last thing Edward wants.

He wants a faith where God is out there somewhere. Not active today. That reading from John chapter 11. Is the start of the account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

It's an amazing miracle Jesus does. Lazarus is in the tomb for four days. Jesus calls him out and he comes out. And you would have thought wouldn't you. That as Jesus reveals his glory and power.

[15:52] Everyone would see it and go. Jesus we want to follow you. And some do. But what do the religious do? They plot to kill Jesus. You can read that at the end of the chapter.

They've got their eyes closed. Eyes Closed Edwards. Well in some ways the first few characters are relatively passive in their response to God.

They just say no. They might still be living relatively model. Moral lives. Religious looking lives. Upright characters. But the last two were the mask flips completely.

First of all we get to rebellious Ray. Isaiah turns to him in verses 15 and 16. He may still be part of the religious establishment. Maybe he serves on various committees.

He's got his fingers in different pies. But behind the scenes he is working very much against God. And against God's purposes.

[16:54] The next few chapters seem to suggest that the deals done in secret may be about the alliances with Egypt. But throughout Israel's history.

Throughout the history of the church. These challenges have come from within. The great council of Nicaea. Called 1700 years ago. Was called because a charismatic young priest called Arius.

Had been spreading a false teaching. That Jesus was not God. And he was really good at it. Really good at that work. So the Nicene Creed gathered people together.

And said no this is wrong. This is what we believe. But the battles about what is true faith have continued. They continue in the church today.

But rebellious rays are never done. Rebellious rays are never done. Like a pot calling out the potter. They reject God's authority. They doubt his power and wisdom.

[17:53] And they seek to turn the order of things upside down. It might seem wise. But there is no true wisdom here. Only a spirit of rebellion. Two-faced Tara competes our set of caricatures.

On a Sunday she is singing lustily. Maybe serving willingly. She's dressed up in her Sunday best. And boy does she look the part. But it's all a sham. It's all a sham.

She's in church. Like some of those American politicians from time to time. Just to get a veneer of respectability. Because through the week she is anything but godly. Verses 20 to 21 explain some of her actions.

She has an eye for evil. She is ruthless and immoral. She lies easily. She has no care for truth or justice. She might cover that all up by saying. Oh no I'm just a hard-nosed business woman.

Doing what I need to do to get on in life. But the truth is her gods are power and money. She only do what is right in God's eyes if it meets up with her own self-interests.

[18:58] She's got a cloak of religion around her shoulders. But thoughts of living for God's glory and seeking to serve others never enter her mind. Traditional Trudy.

Lazy Leonard. Eyes closed Edward. Rebellious Ray. And two-faced Tara. Five caricatures of people who are deeply embedded in Jerusalem's religious scene.

But whose arrogance shows itself in their attitude to worship. Their reluctance to seek God or believe his word or to live it out. Their actions ultimately show that they think they know better than God does.

It's the arrogance of the religious. What traits and behaviours that they have shown are there in your life I wonder.

