

## **“A Sick Nation”**

**Isaiah 1**

**November 11, 2007**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

I can still remember the photograph. It was taken about ten years ago on a mission trip our church took to Peru. At one of the places we visited, we were honored with a brief ceremony of thanks. During the ceremony, I was asked as pastor of our church to sign some ceremonial document. As I bent over to do so, someone captured the moment on film. The orientation of the picture was such that about 20 percent of the resulting photograph featured the top of my head. I didn't see the picture until our return to Birmingham. My first thought upon viewing it was, "Who is the bald-headed guy in the middle of the picture?" A second or two later, the ugly truth dawned on me. I was seeing myself from an angle not usually available to me, and I didn't like what I was seeing.

God sent his prophets to Israel for a similar work. They were God's spokesmen who saw things from above, an angle not otherwise available to the nation. But since the prophets spoke for God, their angle was the most accurate one. But Israel did not like what it saw from the angle of the prophets. The nation looked to be in much worse shape from that view. As Isaiah said in this passage, **“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”** (v. 5-6). The prophets didn't couch things in diplomatic, softer tones, in order to help the message go down more smoothly. They were handling the word of God, and it is never a good idea to help God out by saying things differently than he directs. The best policy is to be as faithful as one can be to what God says.

As a general rule, the message of Isaiah, and that of all the prophets, was not well-received. As is typical with human nature, the common response is to shoot the messenger. So prophets were disliked at the least, and executed at the worst. As Jesus summarized it, **“Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town”** (Matt. 23:34). Things have not changed a great deal. We would also prefer prophets who bring a message of “I'm okay, you're okay.” Biblical prophets expose things we would like to keep in the dark. Notice how Isaiah begins his prophesy in a courtroom setting, calling the heavens and the earth to be witnesses. In a court of law, all is brought to the light of day. That's what this prophet will do. This issue isn't whether or not we like the message. Instead, the matter of greatest importance is the accuracy of the diagnosis of our condition. We can have confidence that Isaiah's diagnosis is accurate because he is speaking prophetically. In his words **“the Lord has spoken.”** His message will be essentially that the nation of Judah is far worse off than they know, but that God's mercy is far greater than they can dream. Let's

look now at chapter one as Isaiah speaks to Judah about the symptoms of their sickness and then of God's cure for this sickness.

## I. The Religious Symptoms

As indicated in verse 1, Isaiah served through the reign of three different kings of Judah, a period over fifty years. His ministry began in the year king Uzziah died (around 740 B.C.), and concluded during the reign of Hezekiah, who served until 687 B.C. Judah, you will remember, was the name of the southern kingdom that resulted when the kingdom divided after Solomon's reign. Two of these three kings, Jotham and Hezekiah, are described in 2 Kings as good kings who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. Hezekiah, at least during the first half of his reign, was the most godly king since the great King David. But there was a rottenness at the core of Judah's national life. Isaiah says the nation is like children of privilege who have rebelled against their upbringing (v. 2). The sickness of the nation is complete. **"From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it"** (v. 6).

In light of this bleak description, it is surprising to read that Judah's religious life was flourishing. We would expect from Isaiah's description of the nation's woes in the first 9 verses of the chapter that only a handful of people were going to church, praying, singing in the choir and giving. What we read instead is that religion was very popular. The worship services were packed, prayer and giving was at a high level. But something was not right about it all. The God who had commanded animal sacrifices as part of proper worship, even calling such sacrifices the "food of God" elsewhere, says here that he is fed up with these sacrifices. **"I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts"** (v. 11). God doesn't like the big crowds entering his house for worship. He grows resentful of the large numbers, viewing their presence as the **"trampling of my courts"** (v. 12). You know something is not right when God says he hates church, and that's exactly what he says here. **"Your new moon and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them"** (v. 14). God makes a promise to them regarding prayer, but it's not the promise we expect. **"When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen"** (v. 15).

The most striking thing about the religious life of Judah is some name-calling God engages in. In verse 10, he addresses Judah like this. **"Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!** Sodom and Gomorrah were infamous for the extent of their evil. They were cities full of violence, sexual perversion and injustice, so much so that God judged them immediately and completely with fire from heaven. How dare Isaiah suggest that Judah, with its bustling and vigorous religious life, is like those godless cities! But that's exactly what he is saying. Actually, Isaiah is not saying that—God is. Judah deserves the complete judgment visited upon Sodom

and Gomorrah. It was only the Lord's mercy that left them a few survivors (v. 9). This is the word of the Lord.

Why would God liken the vigorous religious life of Judah to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? He must see some similarity between the sin of immoral Sodom and that of religious Judah. Both have led to violence and injustice. God says to Judah that **“your hands are full of blood”** (v. 15) and that they need to learn to seek justice and to correct oppression (v. 17). But the similarity between Judah's sin and Sodom's runs deeper than that. Immoral evil and religious evil may look very different on the outside, but on the inside they stem from the same root. Neither immorality nor religion wants to have anything to do with God. It's easy to see that with immorality, since the immoral person seeks satisfaction by going his own way instead of God's way. He pays no attention to God's rules, believing instead that true happiness comes from following a path where one does only what he wants to do. But how can we say that religious evil wants nothing to do with God? Isn't religion a God-obsessed approach to life? It is, but the critical point to see is that religion brings God into life in a limited role. This religious view of God sees him as something like the generous grandfather who likes to slip \$100 bills to his grandchildren when they come to see him. If truth be told, the grandchildren really don't like to go see their grandfather. They would much prefer hanging out with their own friends. But they like his cash, so they pretend to like his presence in order to get his cash. That is the heart of religious evil.

I was reading in 2 Chronicles earlier this week, and I came across the story of God's gift of wisdom to King Solomon. As soon as Solomon became king, God appeared to him with an amazing offer. **“Ask what I shall give you”** (2 Chron. 1:7). As you know, Solomon asked for wisdom in order to govern well God's people. God responded with these words. **“Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked possessions, wealth, honor, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked long life, but have asked wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may govern my people over whom I have made you king, wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. I will also give you riches, possessions, and honor, such as none of the kings had who were before you, and none after you shall have the like”** (1:11-12). Religious evil reads that and says to God, “I want wisdom too.” But it's a dishonest request, because what it really wants is the wealth, honor and long life that it sees as coming to those who will keep the rules, including asking for the right thing in prayer. But do you see that the heart remains unchanged? Unlike Solomon, this person doesn't want wisdom. The desire is for the wealth, honor and long life. This person doesn't really want God—he wants God's stuff. This is the heart of religious evil, of which Judah was filled.

## II. The Social Symptoms

Since religious evil leaves the heart unaddressed, it can't produce any real love for others. That leads to social evils, which the prophet condemned

repeatedly. The word justice appears five times in this chapter, and it's usually brought up so that Isaiah can condemn their lack of it.

The social ills Isaiah describes result from the spiritual ills of the nation. There is no chance for lasting social change without a spiritual heart change. To word it differently, we will respond to people in the same way we respond to God. People who run over God to get their way will do the same with people. And those who attempt to use and manipulate God will do the same with people. Notice verse 23, where Isaiah describes the social problems present in Judah. **“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.”** Other people exist for their benefit. So if the other person has something that is wanted, like money, this person will be solicitous and attentive to their needs, as long as they pay. They love bribes and run after gifts. But if the other person has nothing to offer, such as is the case with orphans and widows, then their needs are completely ignored. That is exactly the way God is treated by those guilty of the kind of religious sin Isaiah just spoke of. If the worshiper thinks he has something to offer, then he will go through the motions of giving God what he thinks God wants in order to get what he, the worshiper, wants. But if he judges that there is no benefit to be gained from God, then God is ignored. People are treated the way God is treated. It follows, then, that if the social problems are to be solved and people are to be loved, then we must learn to love God. That brings us to our next point.

### III. The Divine Cure

The photograph has now been taken of the tops of our heads, and the evidence is indisputable. We may not like what the picture shows, but there is simply no arguing with its depiction. **“The whole head is sick.”** What is to be done? As devastating as Isaiah’s case against Judah might be, the solution he points to is breathtaking. There is every reason for hope because God has made an offer of mercy. We find it in verses 16-18, and it is describing the categories familiar to us in the words repentance and faith. When Isaiah says, **“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes”** (v. 16), he is speaking of repentance. He doesn’t mean to suggest that we are able to cleanse ourselves from sin, for that is impossible. Rather, we are to turn from these strategies we have employed, whether the strategies employ the religious evil or the immoral evil. We are to turn from those and turn to God.

The last verse of the chapter has really caught my attention this week, and it helps us understand something about repentance. **“And the strong shall become tinder, and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them”** (v. 31). In case you don’t know this word, *tinder* refers to the small, dry sticks that will ignite quickly into a flame. It’s the ancient version of gasoline. If you put a spark to gasoline, it will quickly erupt into a fire.

This verse tells us that we are to repent of trusting in our strengths. The work produced by the strong who trust in their strength instead of trusting in God will burn up in judgment. Someone asked me a very good question several weeks ago. To reword the question in my own words, he was asking how this command to repent of trusting in our own strengths and resting on Christ instead is not demotivating in the work we do each day. This verse helps answer that question. Notice that not all hard work is virtuous. There is a kind of hard work that will burn up in judgment, together with the person doing the hard work. It is the work done in self-dependence. The problem is not the work itself, but the heart motivation behind the work. For example, suppose that we have two salesmen who both work hard making their contacts and serving the needs of past and potential customers. Both have good sales numbers and are financially rewarded as a result. But their heart motives are different. The first salesman tells himself that he simply must do well so that others will think well of him. He gets very anxious when he's not making sales because it makes him feel like a worthless failure, and he simply cannot deal with that feeling. The second salesman works hard too, but for a different reason. The pressure has been removed from him because he has a deep sense that God is going to take care of him. He is motivated more out of gratitude for this and is freed up to serve his customers, honestly desiring to help them. The first one works hard out of emptiness, while the second out of fullness. This night and day difference is the difference between true Christianity and every fake version of Christianity. What should you do if you conclude that your hard work has been fueled by the emptiness of trying to prove something? Repent of your dependence on your strength and receive the fullness offered in Christ.

God invites us through Isaiah to come before him and hear God's thought process. God says that even though your sins may have stained you like blood stains a white shirt, completely beyond your ability to cleanse the spot, there is hope. God is able to do the unexpected. He is able to make you as that which is naturally white, like snow and like wool. In Jesus there is cleansing. That is God's answer to our sickness. Our greatest need is not for a better self-image, a better wardrobe, a better job, house or health. Our greatest need is what God offers to us in the cleansing blood of Jesus.

### **CONCLUSION:**

The words of our offertory provide a fitting summary of Isaiah 1. *Come, ye weary, heavy laden, bruised and broken by the fall; if you tarry 'til you're better, you will never come at all. Not the righteous, not the righteous; sinners Jesus came to call. Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream; all the fitness He requireth is to feel your need of Him.*