

The Faithful City?

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[0 : 00] We're starting a new series tonight on the book of Isaiah. And normally Isaiah is divided into three different parts. They call it the three books of Isaiah.

The first book is chapters one to 39. And it's typically called the book of the king and all the commentaries and all the scholars we're calling it the book of the king.

And in the morning we're looking at Mark, Mark one the past two weeks. And in Mark one, Mark says the beginning of the gospel, the good news of Jesus.

And he says like Isaiah said, and so as soon as you open up the gospel, Mark, the first gospel to be written, the very first verse says the beginning of the good news and here's what Isaiah said about it.

And Mark is saying there that Isaiah is actually the context of the story of Jesus. And so he's saying stop right here if you haven't read it yet and go back and read Isaiah and then come back again to the story of the gospel.

[1 : 03] And so we thought we would listen to Mark. And so we're in the morning we're looking at Mark and then in the evenings we're going back to Isaiah like Mark said. And here we are at Isaiah chapter one.

Isaiah one is a microcosm of the whole book of Isaiah. Really everything that's going to happen in Isaiah is right here. And Isaiah, many people will say is a microcosm of the story of all of history. And so in Isaiah one, you've got everything. You really got everything, the story of all of history. It's all here. And it's all through the idea of the city and particularly the city of Zion, the concept of the city of Zion.

And so we're going to see tonight the city lost, the city redeemed, the city judged and then the city redeemed. And then finally the question of can Zion be a faithful city?

So the city lost, the city judged, the city redeemed and then can she be the faithful city? Okay, so first the city lost. Verse one, Isaiah one verse one, it says, the vision of Isaiah, son of Amos.

[2 : 10] We don't know very much at all about this man. But he lives near Jerusalem and he saw a vision about Judah in Jerusalem and he saw it, it says in the days of these four kings from Uzziah down to Hezekiah.

Now that means that Isaiah had a vision from God at around 740 BC, 740 years before Jesus would be born and he carries on in this ministry, this prophecy all the way to about 688 BC.

So it's about a 52 year ministry somewhere in that ballpark. And it says he has a vision. It means that God spoke to him. In different ways and multiple ways, God wanted Isaiah to say something to the world, particularly we're told here to Judah and to Jerusalem.

What did God want Isaiah to say? Now, if you come to Isaiah, maybe you've read Isaiah or another prophet and you've come and you've said, what is Isaiah trying to say?

What is God saying in this vision through Isaiah? Maybe you've had a hard time figuring it out. It's important to be honest and say that Isaiah is not an easy read and it's highly poetic as you saw in our reading just a minute ago.

[3 : 27] It's got a lot of history behind it that you really do need to make sense of what's going on. It's got a lot of ancient metaphors that are not easy to figure out.

And so maybe you've come to it before and you've thought what Martin Luther thought when he read it. Do you know what Martin Luther said? He said, the prophets have a strange way of talking like people who instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next so that you cannot make heads or tails of them or see what they're getting on about.

So that's what Luther thought. And maybe you've read the prophets and kind of felt like that a little bit too. The reason is because for us modern readers, there is not a structure here that is obvious to

us.

It doesn't make sense the way it has been arranged. And it's not just a modern problem. It was a problem in the 1500s in these scholastic environments. He said, why is this not more structured? Why is it so poetic? Just say what you're trying to say. And sometimes we read the prophets and it feels a little bit like that. And so we do need a little history, a little context, and a little explanation to see what's going on.

[4 : 41] I don't want to spend a lot of time on the history so that we can get on with it tonight. So instead of going all the way back to Adam, we'll just go to Abraham.

In 90 seconds from Abraham forward, what's going on that makes Isaiah Isaiah? God said to Abraham, I am going to save the lost world through your family.

And he said, I'm going to do it through one family, but it's going to be about the whole world, not just your family. I'm using your family, but I'm going to save the world, the nations, everybody through you.

And Abraham's family becomes Israel. And God says, I'm going to save the world through Israel. And then at the center of Israel, we learn that this is ultimately going to be found.

Where is this going to happen? It's going to happen in a city. And that city we learned throughout the Old Testament is Jerusalem. God's going to save the world in the Old Testament through one place.

[5 : 40] One people, Jerusalem, all the nations are going to come there. And it's going to be a place of rest, a place of worship, a place of true Sabbath, a place where people are not hungry, a place where God lives.

Everything, if Eden, if Eden was paradise lost, Jerusalem will be paradise regained. And when David steps in and God says, this is all going to happen through this man's family, King David and his sons.

Even if his sons will be king of Zion, the great eternal city, when that happens, David names Jerusalem, Zion. And Zion becomes this word that means the hope of the nations, the place where everything will be fixed, where everything will be restored.

Zion is very literally the mountain upon which the temple in Jerusalem sits. It's the center in Jerusalem. Is it city? Now there we did it.

From Abraham all the way to Isaiah, what's happened is that the hope of the nations, Jerusalem, they've experienced 200 years of decline since David.

[6 : 49] Since David, Solomon, David's son and his sons, Solomon's sons, split the kingdom into two. So it was once a united kingdom, but Solomon's sons split it into two kingdoms and they didn't even have a referendum.

And there was the kingdom of the north Israel and now the kingdom of the south Judah, Jerusalem. And here's Isaiah. He's the prophet of the south, 740 BC.

Israel has lost their way in the north. What about Judah? What about Jerusalem? And that's where Isaiah's prophecy comes in here. Now Isaiah is the prophet of Judah, Jerusalem.

And it's important to know that Isaiah teaches us at the very beginning what a prophet really does. A lot of times we think about prophets as future tellers, predicting future events.

But that's not really the role of a prophet. The role of the prophet in the Old Testament is to be a lawyer. So prophets are covenant lawyers, they're to be really God's prosecutors to tell the people all about what God, the judge has said.

[7 : 58] And you can see that here in verse two. It says, here Isaiah is speaking on behalf of God, here, oh heavens and earth, for the Lord has spoken. And that's trial language.

Here all you, every creature in heaven and on earth, you are the witnesses to this trial that's about to take place. And this comes straight out of Deuteronomy 30.

Moses had done this too. Moses had said to Israel, before Israel, I call heaven and earth to witness against you. This is about to be a trial. We're starting a trial, a court case here.

And so what we read were the charges, the prosecutions charges against Jerusalem, against Judah. What is that? Well, the charge, the punishment is ultimately that Jerusalem deserves judgment.

That's what God is saying very clearly here. Now, the way that Isaiah says it is he uses two metaphors to explain it. And you'll probably have noticed them.

[9 : 00] One you'll have noticed very quickly, very easily. The first one, you can just look down at verses two, verses four. Middle of verse two, he says, children, I reared and brought up.

Verse four, he says, children who deal corruptly. The first way that God speaks to these people is he says, you are my children.

And actually, it's not the word children. You might have a little footnote in your Bible that says sons. It's very technically, it's very literally the word, sons I raised up and these sons have run away.

And so what God is saying here, the first thing he wants to say is, you are my son, but you've gone prodigal. You've run away from me. You are lost, your rebels.

And verse three, just what does he say about his son? He says verse three, you know, the donkey knows its master's trough, not crib, trough, but Israel doesn't know.

[9 : 58] And he's saying, my son is dumber than a donkey. A donkey knows it's where to find its master's trough. My sons don't know where to find, where to feed.

They're dumber than donkeys. He goes on verse five and six. What does that mean, God? Well, verse five and six, you've got a heart problem. Your whole head is sick.

Your heart is faint. From the top of your head down to the bottom of your feet, you've got sores, he says. And they're not, they've not been pressed out. You'll see it at the end of that verse, meaning the inside of you, your head and your heart is like an infected sore and the pus has not been squeezed out.

That's the way God puts it. That's how bad it is. He says that your heart is like an infected wound.

And move on. Verse eight, this is my favorite one.

This is where the ancient Near Eastern metaphors need some explanation. He says, you know, you people, you prodigal sons, you're like a lodge in a cucumber field.

[11 : 01] And does it get worse? Have you, has anybody ever said that to you? You're like a lodge in a cucumber field. What is he saying? He's saying in the harvest times in the ancient world, they would build little tents.

Or little booths, little houses, and somebody would protect the harvest, the cucumber harvest, whatever it may be, fruit. Somebody would literally live in the field to watch out for people coming and stealing.

But when the harvest was over, they would leave the booth because there's nothing to steal anymore. And the booth would just deteriorate. It would become dilapidated. And you see, he says right after that, you're a besieged city.

You're a lodge in a cucumber field, meaning you were once beautiful. You were the great city, the city of Zion. And now you're desolate. Your beauty is gone.

You're like an old lodge that's tipping over in the midst of the cucumber field. And the very last thing, nine and 10. He says, you are Sodom, you are Gomorrah.

[12 : 01] Your princes are the princes of Sodom and Gomorrah. And anytime, if you've read the Old Testament, you know, if you get called Sodom and Gomorrah, that means you're as bad as it gets.

That's the pinnacle insult in the Old Testament. Now the second metaphor, which would have jumped out to you a little bit more just because of the way it's said is verse 21.

He says, my children, they are prodigal sons. But verse 21 and following, the faithful city has become a whore. So the second metaphor he uses is the idea that the city is an adulterous wife.

And so you see what he's saying, he's saying, I'm your father and you are my sons. He's talking to men and women in both metaphors. He's saying, you men and you women, you are my sons who have run away from home.

You men and you women, you city, you are a prostitute. You've run away from your husband. And so God says, I'm your father and I'm your husband.

[12 : 59] And in both instances, you've left me. You've chased after other gods. And it's important to say here that the reason that he uses this metaphor of the city and the language of prostitute is because anytime in the ancient world in Hebrew that someone talks to a group of people that are going to use the language sons, they're going to use the masculine every time.

But anytime anyone speaks and talks about a city, it's always feminine. And so the reason that the metaphors go that way is because the words are very literally masculine and feminine words.

The city is always called a she. And so in verse eight, you can see that he calls the city, he calls the people the daughters of Zion. Literally Zion, Jerusalem is a mother.

She's a she and the daughters of Zion are all the people, men and women. And he says, the daughters of Zion, men and women, they've all run away from me. They've all given themselves over to idols.

And so God is saying in this court case, the city is lost. The hope of the nations, Zion, she's lost. She's gone forever. Now before we move on, and this is our longer point, we'll be brief after this, just two things.

[14 : 15] Here's exactly why. What exactly have they done? And God through Isaiah tells us specifically, now listen, this is what he says here, our principles for all time.

And these are the specific charges that he's laid. And you can see it in verse 10 to 15, if you just cast your eyes over it. He says, what to me is the multitude of your sacrifices in the temple? But pinnacally it's in verse 13, at the very end he says, I cannot endure iniquity and worship assemblies. And you see that what he's saying?

He's saying this is why you're going to be judged. Because you're all religion with no repentance. He says, you know, you come to me in public acts of worship, but it's all pretense, it's all performance.

There's no repentance in your hearts. And what he's saying here is he's not saying that, listen carefully, he's not saying I'm coming and judging you because I expected you to be sinless.

[15 : 24] I expected you to come to the temple and come to worship and be sinless, not at all. Not at all. He's saying instead, you come and you perform. The issue you see is honesty.

He's saying if you would have just come to worship me and been honest about who you were, sinners. You say, I've been so far from God all week this week and God says, don't come into my presence and perform and act like you're something different.

Don't come into my presence and know that you're a sinner and I will see your worship and it will be sweet to me. But he says, instead you come under pretense of performance.

And in the New Testament, Jesus teaches us the same thing. He says, he looks out, John the Baptist Jesus, and looks at, and says to be a Pharisee, Phariseism, to be a viper is to be publicly religious to perform, but yet not honest about who you are on the inside.

It's intentional deception when you come to worship. And so listen, you see the language here. He's saying an unwillingness to be honest before God about who you really are when you come into the worship space.

[16 : 32] God says, I hate it. That's the language he uses. And he says, it's like a burden. He says, you come to worship and you put a burden on my back with the fact that you're trying to lie about who you really are.

And so that's the first reason. You see, that means that religion, when religion in a culture becomes public performance, religion actually has the power to destroy a society.

Now the second thing that he charges them for here is exactly what he means in verse 13 by you mix worship with iniquity. Well, what iniquity are you talking about?

And then Isaiah tells them, you can see it in verse 15, verse 23. Especially, he says, everyone loves a bribe. Your princes are thieves.

Everyone runs after gifts. He calls them earlier murders. Then he says, and here's the pinnacle. They don't bring justice to the fatherless and the widows calls does not come to their mind.

[17 : 38] Now, listen, God saying you come to worship and you're not honest about who you are. It's all performance. And then you go out into the world and here's the way you live. And listen, this is God saying this.

He says, you do not love vulnerable people. You do not seek justice in the land. You don't care for the child that doesn't have a home.

And that's why you're being judged. And then you come into worship and pretend like you do. And he says, your injustice is the reason. And this is no metaphor.

God really does love vulnerable people. And he calls his people to love vulnerable people. And this is the ultimate reason.

He's not expecting Israel, Jerusalem, I should say, to be sinless, not at all. What he's saying here is that for 200 years, I've tolerated this from you.

[18 : 34] And you were an orphan in Egypt. You were a widow in Egypt without a husband. And I came to you and I saved you and you experienced grace.

And now you're graceless. I brought you out of the land to bring you to this place to worship in the holy city and everything's fake. Everything's fake. It's all a performance.

And you don't have grace for anyone, even though you've received it. Now, secondly briefly, we'll run through the last three. So he says, you're going to be judged. You will be judged.

You can see, this is how you know it's a court case. If you look down at verse 24, he says, the Lord declares, he's about to give. The judge is about to give the judgment. And the judgment is, I'm going to turn my hand against you.

I'm going to get relief from my enemy. He's saying, you have now become my enemy. Now, I want to say that God's justice here is going to bring judgment.

[19 : 33] And God's judgment is going to mean throughout the rest of this first 39 chapters, as we'll see, that the kingdom of Assyria is going to come and going to be God's instrument of judgment.

There's not more about that in the future. But as modern people, we read about this, and it's really hard for us. It's really hard for us to read passages like this and hear God say things like this, that he's going to consume and quench the small little flame that is Jerusalem.

Judgment passages are really hard and difficult for us modern people. And even when we look at this, we say, well, look, I do remember what we just said, that the reason God is coming is he says, because you don't care for the vulnerable.

You murder those who are easy to murder. You don't give the widow and the orphan who are homeless a home. And so as modern people, we look at that on the one hand and say, I love justice for vulnerable people.

Yes. But on the other hand, we come to the Bible and we say, but I don't like the God who judges in the Old Testament. Why do we cry? Let me say two things very quickly. Why do we cry for justice for the vulnerable in the modern West?

[20 : 44] And without too much time to defend it, let me say the reason that we feel that way, the reason that the modern Western person, every single one of us wants to identify the oppressor and the victim is precisely because of Christianity.

Christianity has taught us to do that. And it's been well established in the literature over and over again. What God says here about justice, justice for vulnerable people is not a trademark of ancient and modern certain cultures.

It does not exist outside of this document. And when you come to the Greco-Roman Empire, we in the modern West did not learn to love vulnerable people and give rights to all, a fair court case to all.

We didn't learn it from the Roman Empire, not at all. We learned it from the Bible. We learned it from the Bible. It comes to us from Christianity. And yet at the same time, we look and say, how modern that God would say, love for the Wurfen and the widow, justice against the oppressor, how modern.

And yet we come as modern people in this culture at the same time. And we say, yet I cannot take it when I read in the Old Testament about a God of judgment. And Charles Taylor, the great Catholic Canadian philosopher, he tried to address this dilemma that we experienced, this feeling that we have.

[21 : 59] And this is what he said. On the one hand, Western people have a lot of hot indignation against injustices. We identify oppressors and victims, and we want judgment for the oppressor.

And he says, why? Because Christianity taught us that. Charles Taylor says that. But then he says, but here's the problem. Here's the problem. Here's why we struggle, nevertheless, with the God of judgment in the Bible, God of justice in the Bible.

Because he says, we cry out justice, and we think that evil is always outside of us. See, in the modern world we've learned, we say, we cry justice.

We want justice for the victim, judgment for the oppressor. Yet, he says, we always locate the evil, the oppressor, far away from us. And you see, in other words, he's saying there's a nagging in every single one of our hearts when we read the Bible.

Yes, I know people deserve to be punished. But not me. And when you read the Bible, and you read about the God of judgment, if he's real, if the God of justice is real, maybe he sees what's on my inside.

[23 : 08] And if that's true, if God sees inside me, maybe I have to say that I deserve what the oppressor deserves. And you see, what the Bible does is it cuts through.

There really are victims in this world. There really are. There are people who are sinned against more than they sin against other people. And there really are oppressors in this world, people who sin against others more than they're sinned against.

But actually what the Bible does is it says we have to cut through that and say that the oppressor lies in every single one of our hearts. That every single one of us deserves judgment.

That we're all oppressors and victims. That we've all been sinned against and that we've all sinned against others. At the same time, you see the Bible diagonalizes. It cuts through what the culture wants to separate.

And so the reason we cry for justice in the modern world is precisely because of Christianity, but at the same time, Isaiah comes and says, this is us. This is every single one of us.

[24 : 08] Now before we move on, let me just mention this. When you read about God's judgment here in this passage, verse nine is a great example. It says, if the Lord of Hosts had not let a few of us survive, we would be Sodom and Gomorrah.

You see what it's saying? It's saying that God for 200 years tolerated the injustices that were going on. And Israel, Judah, Jerusalem deserve to be Sodom and Gomorrah.

They deserve to be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah. But he says, except for God's mercy, that He has let a few of us remain. We would have been that.

Now that's just a small glimpse that what's going on here actually is God saying nobody ever gets what they deserve. No one.

Every moment that we ever draw breath in this life, it's mercy, not judgment. It's not what we really deserve. And he said, we deserve, Judah deserves to be Sodom and Gomorrah, but God has said, I will not give it to you all the way.

[25 : 12] This will be had, but not yet, not completely, not in you. And that means that just like Jesus looked out on Jerusalem many 700 years later and said, if you would just come, Zion, I want you, if you would just repent and come to me, God the Father looks out at Jerusalem 700 years before and says, you deserve to be judged, but I'm not going to give it to you.

That's actually what's happening here. And the ultimate example of that is third and we'll have to stop here. The city redeemed, the city redeemed, the city redeemed, there's a tension here between verse 25 and verse 26.

Just look at this with me as we close. God says in verse 25 and 26, I will turn my hand against you and I'll smelt away your dross as with the lie and I will remove your alloy.

Now, when God says, let me show you what this judgment is going to look like, it's a smelting metaphor. He says your judgment will be that I will smelt you.

I will burn away your dross. Now I'm not going to pretend for two sentences that I know anything about smelting, but smelting, you know about smelting.

[26 : 30] Smelting is where you burn away impurities from precious metals so that you have the center, the true piece of metal that you really desire.

And here he says, look, I'm going to judge you and that judgment will be that I'm going to smelt you. And you understand what he's saying? He's saying that is not annihilation. He says I will smelt you. I will burn away the impurity, the evil that is caked on your outside and inside I will find the precious metal.

Now, look, here's the tension. Even his judgments are merciful, but look what he says in verse 26, and I will restore your judges.

Now that word there for judge, I will restore your judges. That is the Hebrew word. I want to give you the Hebrew word because it's so important.

It's the word shofet and it's the title of another book of the Bible. And that book of the Bible is judges.

[27 : 31] Judges. What is a judge in the book of judges? It is not a courtroom judge. It's not a man in a black gown with a white wig, not at all. What's a judge in the Bible?

It is one who comes in the midst of Israel, Jerusalem's oppression, and saves Jerusalem and redeems Jerusalem and establishes Jerusalem as the hope of the nations.

You see, the judge in the Old Testament is also translated as the redeemer. And what he's saying here is that I'm going to judge you for your injustice.

You've trampled on the vulnerable. You've murdered those who are easy to murder. You've left children without homes. You were meant to be the hope of the nations.

And I'm not going to kill you forever. I'm going to wipe away your evil and I'm going to set a true judge in the center of the city of Zion. And that true judge will be exactly what a shofet is, a redeemer king.

[28 : 34] Will Zion be the hope of the nation? The nations, will it have a true king? Will it have a shofet, a judge, a redeemer? And Isaiah here in the midst of this pronouncement of judgment says, yes, that the city will ultimately be redeemed.

Now, oh boy, as we close, verse 27, he says, I will establish justice. I will satisfy the justice that is owed.

And there's a shadowy connection and it's found in verse six. Now in verse six, remember the infected wounds?

He says, you know, Israel, Judah, Jerusalem, human being, your heart is like an infected wound. The language that he uses here, he says, the soul of the foot to the top of the head, there is no soundness in you.

You're an infected wound. You have bruises and sores. You've got raw wounds. Isaiah in one other place is going to talk in the same way, using the same Hebrew verbiage.

[29 : 41] One other place, it's going to be, it's coming. It's going to be not till next year that we'll get to it. But it's Isaiah 53. And if you look down, you'll see the word sores there is the word that the old authorized version, as many of us remember, translated stripes.

He says, you know, your insides are like stripes, wounds. And the stripe, the reason the King James translated this word stripes, not sores, is because it very literally is a word for a wound created by being beaten.

And Isaiah 53, it's going to say this again. It's going to say that there will be a judge, a shofette, a servant, and he will suffer to the point that he will bear the stripes that reflect your inner stripes, that he will be beaten with the whip.

Especially because your heart looks exactly like that. And by his stripes, you will be healed by his stripes. The city will be redeemed. Justice will be had, but not yet, not in you.

We're waiting for the suffering servant. And so for the rest of Isaiah, just to tell you where we're going in this series, Israel is going to be Judah. I should keep saying it.

[31 : 01] Judah is going to be judged and she's going to be cut off like a tree and there's just going to be a stump left, but then Isaiah starts to say things like this. From that little stump, Zion, there's going to be a little branch, a twig that grows.

And that branch is called the Nazar, N-A-Z-A-R. That's what Isaiah says. And then you flip over to the Gospels and Mark says, and he, Jesus Christ, was called the Nazarene, the Nazar, the branch. He says, look for the branch. And then Mark says, here's the branch. Look for the king. And then the Gospels come and say, here's the king. How about John 12? John says, city of Zion, look for the king who will ride in, mounted on a donkey.

And later in Isaiah 7, it'll say, Isaiah 9, it'll say, for unto us, look for a child that will be born by a virgin. And then it'll say, and look for the one who will be beaten by the whip and by his stripes. You will be healed. He will be crushed. Now listen, we've got to say this as we close. This is simple. And if you've been in the church any time, you've heard this and you know it, but it has to be said as you begin to study Isaiah.

[32 : 23] No matter how late you think Isaiah was written, Isaiah was written centuries before Jesus Christ was ever born. And Isaiah said, the one who will restore the true city of Eden, he will be a king in David's lineage.

He will be the branch, the Nazarene. He will be the one born of a virgin. He will be the one who will be beaten by the whip. He will be naked when he goes to the cross to die for you.

Isaiah said every one of those things. And so let me say tonight, if you're struggling with the God of judgment, let me put you on the spot before you the God of prophecy and say every single one of the things that Isaiah said about this man became true in Jesus Christ.

And there's really no getting around that. You have to go through it. And so it's the challenge tonight to say, is this man really the Messiah of God who was prophesied about seven centuries before he ever came into the world?

And for that reason, Mark 1, 1, the beginning of the good news, go backward and read Isaiah. He really is the man who was spoken of in Isaiah 1, 6, B.

[33 : 41] And that's an invitation tonight as we step into a new week to repent and to believe and to follow him. All right, let's pray together and ask that God would do that for us.

And so Lord, we ask tonight that you would give us hearts to see the hope of the city. And that city is not physical Jerusalem. It is Jesus, the King of Zion.

And so we long for the Zion that he's building. And we pray tonight that by the fact of this great prophecy, we would see the truth that in him, in him, the story became real.

And so Lord, give us faith, give us hearts and eyes to see. And in that, give us repentance, the kind of repentance we prayed about earlier, that it wouldn't just be that we're sorry, that we feel shame, but that we would say, I want to follow Jesus.

And so we ask for that as we step into our Monday. And we pray for that in Jesus' name. Amen.