

Their Hearts Are Far From Me

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[0 : 00] We are carrying on in a series on the first book of Isaiah. And tonight our assignment is Isaiah 29 to 31, that section. That is one section in Isaiah.

When you read the whole thing, we read just a segment of it. And Isaiah writes these prophecies here. Very likely the commentators mostly think that this is probably 703 BC.

Because he mentions a couple times if you read in the wider context that it's two years away from some great act of destruction. And so it's likely 703 BC because in 701 BC, a Sennacherib of Assyria is going to lay siege to Jerusalem.

And so it seems like he's prophesying that. We're going to read about the history of that siege just a little bit later in Isaiah. But here, he's not giving us the history of how this came about.

Instead he's doing what he's done for most of the first book of Isaiah. And that's giving diagnosis of the real problem. And the diagnosis of the real problem is the hearts of the people in Jerusalem.

[1 : 09] So he's saying that the heart of Jerusalem, and particularly the leaders, has brought this siege. And he's giving a very poetic verse here, a diagnosis of what's going on in the hearts of the people in Jerusalem.

Now, we get told exactly what that is in verse 13. This is the summary of the whole section, I think. He says, the people draw near with their mouth, but their hearts are far away from me.

So the people of Jerusalem are near to me in one way, but they're very far away in another way. At the same time. And so let's think about that together.

Let's look together tonight at the problem with our hearts that we're near in one way, but really far away. And then think about the solution that God proposes here in the verses that we read.

Alright, so first, the problem with our hearts. When you read across Isaiah, one of the things that some of the theologians have said in the past is that Jerusalem really stands in Isaiah and the prophets as a microcosm of all of humanity.

[2 : 20] That however Jerusalem goes, that's how humanity is going to go. You know, if Jerusalem gets destroyed, there's no hope. But if Jerusalem becomes Eden, then it becomes the hope of the nations.

All the nations will flow in. And that means that whenever Isaiah talks about the heart of Jerusalem, he's talking about the human heart, everybody's heart. It's a microcosm of all of our hearts, everybody who's ever lived.

And that means that you're going to see in just a second, I'm going to show you three problems that Isaiah talks about with the hearts of the people in Jerusalem. He focuses on one.

We'll do too quickly and then focus on one. But when we look at them, one of the things you can do, and you can do this through all of Isaiah is you can say, who am I? You know, if there's three problems of the heart in Jerusalem, who am I?

Because Jerusalem stands for everybody. All of us tend towards one of these directions. What we constantly learn here and in the New Testament is that God is near us.

[3 : 25] If you're not a Christian tonight, God is near you. And if you're a Christian tonight, God is near you. God is not far from anybody that in him we live and we move and we have our being.

He is close and it's us who wander and we go away. And that's exactly what was happening in Jerusalem that caused this mess. Now let me show you these three.

The first one is in verse 15. It says it's kind of a tricky translation, but it says, you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel or another way to say it.

You who hide what's going on deep in your heart, your counsel, you hide it from God. And you can see that that's what he means. Your deeds are in the dark. You say, who sees us? Who knows us?

Now he's saying here that there's a way of being far from God. And it was a way that was happening in Jerusalem where people were living life in such a way that they said, God doesn't see anything that I do.

[4 : 21] They said, my deeds are hidden from God. And I know that the counsel of my heart is hidden from God. God can't see. The lights are out. I can flick the light switch and it's all dark.

He can't see through it. He has an epistemological barrier. He's blind to what's going on in my life. And that means that Isaiah here is saying that in Jerusalem, in the city of God, they encountered the problem of deism.

That's sure people believed in a creator, but actually they didn't think that that creator was actually near them at all. That's deism. Deism is when you think, yeah, there probably is a creator, but he wound up the world.

Derek mentioned this this morning like a clockmaker. And then he left us all to ourselves. And he's saying that one of the problems in Jerusalem was deism. In the city of God, when God was so close to them in the temple, yet they were so far, they said, I don't think he's really interested in me, so I'm not interested in him.

And he's left us to run. He's left me to run my own life. Now this gets heightened. There's a progression here because eventually in verse 16, it says, you know, you turn things upside down.

[5 : 26] And did you see in the middle of verse 16, eventually that person says, he did not make me. So he says, even in Jerusalem, eventually deism saying, sure, there's a creator, but he doesn't see what's going on in my life becomes, he didn't even make me.

In other words, deism becomes atheism. And that that was actually one of the problems. And the way he died, the way he diagnoses this, the reason this happens, did you see the language he said, you know, your deeds are hidden, you want, you don't want God to know what's going on in your heart or what you do in the dark.

And so you eventually just say, there is no God. You see, he says that atheism and deism are actually a moral problem. It's the problem where we say, I don't want there to be a law above me that can judge me or condemn me or tell me not to live like this or not to live like that.

And he says, that's actually a problem in the hearts of the people, even in Jerusalem. And the Bible calls this living in the upside down. That's what it says, verse 16. You turn things upside down, you're living in the upside down.

That's not a stranger things reference. That's Jerusalem. Let the reader understand. You live in the upside down. And that's, that's the world of deism or atheism will move on.

[6 : 42] But let me say here we have the reason I read the section we read is because there are many, many New Testament quotes here found in this little section. And one of them is right there. You probably noticed it.

You New Testament readers, shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Paul quotes this in Romans nine. Shall the potter, you know, eventually the person says, God didn't make me. He doesn't see me.

And eventually he didn't make me. And he says, that is like the potter saying to the clay. Sorry, the clay. I got it backwards tonight. The clay saying to the potter, you didn't make me.

I think it's a little abstract. I went to the grass market recently before my trip to the U.S. in February to buy some gifts for people. And one of the things I bought was some good Edinburgh pottery, these beautiful mugs.

And they were all ceramic, you know, let's, let's bring this into the 21st century a little bit. It's like that ceramic, this is the ridiculousness of it. It's the ceramic mug looking up at me and saying, there's no such thing as a potter.

[7 : 43] You know, the potter is a construct. The ceramic mug talks to me and says, you know, there's nothing that made me. I made myself. I'm a self made person. Now that's the illustration that Isaiah gives.

And he's saying that that's actually what we're doing when we say there is no God above me or no law given within me. It's a desire for a type of freedom and it's moral freedom. It's freedom from any constraint.

Now that's one way that our hearts are prone to wander. Maybe that's some of you tonight. But there's a second way and here's the more Christianized form of it. And it's flip over. You can see in chapter 30 at the very beginning, the second way he says, ah, stubborn children who carry out a

plan, but not mine.

And then he says, you've decided to go down to Egypt. Now here in the context, Sinakarib is coming. They know that. And he's saying that the Jerusalem leadership got together and decided we're going to go seek help from Egypt.

So they do. They go down to Egypt. They try to form a treaty with Egypt. And God says here, here's the second way your heart can be very far. The hearts of the people in Jerusalem, sure, you're religious.

[8 : 53] You know, you're a Christian. You're around. But when it comes to Monday and it's time to make a plan, your heart is far from the Lord.

You see, that's what he's saying. Yeah, you come to the temple on the Sabbath day, but when it came to a real issue strategy, war strategy, or how you're going to construct your schedule, or how you're going to live your life Monday to Saturday, you just went down to Egypt.

And he says that's living life on your own terms. He says not living life in the spirit. It's living autonomously. In other words, some authors recently have called this religious, but indifferent.

It's a form of practical atheism that we're religious and we're generally committed to the gospel.

We're generally committed to the life of the church, but when it comes to Monday, we forget about God. Now, God, this gets addressed really directly in the book of James, James 4.

James 4, 13 to 17. And James says, come now if you say today or tomorrow, we will go into such and such a place and we'll make a profit. You don't know what tomorrow is going to bring.

[9 : 56] And then he moves on and he says, you ought to say instead, if the Lord wills, we will go tomorrow and do this or that. But because you don't, you boast and you're boasting is evil.

Now, listen, what Isaiah and James are saying is that when we live our lives Monday to Saturday with complete God forgetfulness, we have no consciousness of God in our day to day lives.

He says that is boasting, living in pride and it's evil. And that's exactly the kind of wandering that Isaiah was talking about, even in Jerusalem where they were there and God's presence were there.

When it came to Monday and they were trying to make a business decision, they said, we're going back down to Egypt. And he says, that's not living in the spirit, that's living in the flesh. That's living life on your own terms, not walking in step with the spirit.

In other words, not having any consciousness of submitting your daily plans to God in prayer. That's what he's, that's, that's the simple thing that he's talking about here. It's literal.

[10 : 56] They went down to Egypt, but it's also metaphorical. You know, they went down to Egypt and he says, it says, if you've gone back to Egypt, I freed you, I freed you.

And in your weakness, I showed my strength. In my strength, your weakness was glorified and made much of, and yet now in your weakness, you're seeking strength in yourself. In Egypt, you're going back. It's like the Red Sea never happened.

You're saying you're choosing to go back into slavery. And you see, that's the second way. The first way is being far from God by saying, I don't think God can see me in my life. To the point where you might even say, He didn't even make me.

The second way is being generally a religious person, but then God really has nothing to do with your day to day. You don't have any consciousness. We don't have any consciousness of God in our Monday to Saturday life.

That's another way some of us meet. We may be prone to wandering from God. Now, here's the third way. And this is the most important one, the one that he focuses on.

[11 : 56] And it's back to the top of the passage, verse 13. He says, the people draw near with their mouth. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

And here he's talking about not atheism, not deism, not religious, but generally indifferent, but intensely religious people, the leadership.

So he's saying here that the real problem is that the Jerusalem leadership is intensely religious, but far away from God at the same time. That publicly, externally, they're very committed.

They're very committed to being known as religious people, but in their hearts, they're very distant.

And that means that he's defining what we mean by the word hypocrite. A hypocrite is simply when what we do on the outside, our religious public performance doesn't match what we believe on the inside.

There's a gap between our inside life and our outside life. And that's the condemnation he's giving here. It's another way that we, even as Christian people, are prone to wander.

[12:59] Now, we have real help here because Jesus quotes, here's another one, Jesus quotes Isaiah 29.13 in the Gospels. And he does that in Mark 7 or Matthew 15.

There's our parallel passages. And he gives us the official interpretation of what's going on in Isaiah 29. Jesus gets to tell us what it means. And here's what he says. He's talking to the Pharisees and they're questioning him and the disciples about their obedience to some of the laws that were customary in the first century Israel and Jerusalem.

And he says that Isaiah was right when he said of you, you leave the commandments of God and you simply hold to the traditions of men. So Jesus said that in the eighth century BC in Jerusalem and in the first century AD in Jerusalem, the issue was the exact same.

And he said it's like this, you leave the commandments of God and instead you hold fast to the traditions of men. And so he says that the problem is that you've rejected the command of God, the authority of God's command, and you've embraced human traditions.

Now, what does he mean? And we have to be very careful here because first what he does not mean is this, that traditions are bad and set against the Bible.

[14:18] So Jesus is not at all saying the Bible is good and tradition is bad. You know, here at St. C's we have lots of traditions and we like them.

We have the tradition of having worship on Sunday nights at half five and that's a tradition. And we have the tradition of having tea and coffee in the morning after worship and that's a tradition.

We even have the tradition more significantly in our denomination and here at St. Columbas of being Presbyterian. And in that thinking that a good way to run the church is through three different levels of government.

We have elders and then those elders come together and they form a Presbytery and then that Presbytery meets with other Presbyterians and we form a general assembly. Now, that's a tradition. There's no command in the Bible that says you've got to have three levels. There's no command that says this is exactly how to do it. Instead, we look at the Bible when we say this is wisdom, this is a tradition we've developed in wisdom.

[15:19] We think it's a good way to do it in the light of the Bible. So that means that Jesus is not pitting tradition against the authority of the Bible that you can never do that. You can never pit traditions against God's command.

Instead, what is he saying? He's saying this. To the proto Pharisees of the 8th century that Isaiah is talking to or the Phariseeism of the 1st century, he's saying that the problem was, the problem is whenever the human heart lets rules, traditions, commandments that people have created actually become the word of God to them.

So he's not saying tradition versus Bible. Instead, he's saying the problem is you flipped them and you've let traditions and rules, religious things, actually become the authority for your life instead of the word of God itself.

Now he builds on that and he's saying, and what that means is you've actually created and constructed a system of rules in Jerusalem where you've determined actually the right way you think.

The way you think you need to approach God or anybody might need to approach God. And the problem is not tradition versus Bible. It's something that's going on in the heart. And it's a situation where ultimately you're saying, I'm not sure that what God's laid out in the Bible is the right path.

[16:35] I need to create my own way. I need to have rules in place to mark out the right way to get to God. In other words, he's saying you're not living by grace. You're living by law.

That's the problem of Phariseeism. You've reversed it. The Bible says it's all about grace, but you make it all about law. You live on the traditions of men, not on the commandments of God that have actually come through in the Bible.

In other words, another way to say it would be this, for Phariseeism, Pharisees like me, like you, like all, we're prone to wander, religion becomes the God that we love.

Religion is the actual thing that we care about, not the God of religion, the God through which our religion seeks. Religion actually becomes our very God. Jesus gave a couple of examples in the passages here in the Gospels. They questioned him about the Sabbath.

And in the context, in that time, there were more than 200 rules written about how to treat the Sabbath day. You can pick up one stick on the Sabbath, but not a bundle.

[17 : 39] You can sew one stitch if you need to on the Sabbath, but not two stitches. You can walk this far on the Sabbath, but not that far, not the extra step.

These were the rules of the first century. And we know that our hearts are prone to wander in the same ways. He addressed one, you know, he said, this is living under the yoke of the law, not under the yoke of grace.

There's one even more he focuses on in that particular passage. One that may be a little new. He calls it the law of Corbin, Corbon in Hebrew. This is a Hebrew word that meant I dedicate to the Lord.

And he calls the Pharisees out for this and the Gospels. He said, what is this? What were they doing in this law? This law where you can just shout out, I dedicate this to the Lord. He said, well, he said, you've created a loophole.

And the situation was that the Bible says in the Ten Commandments, honor your father and your mother. And he says to the Pharisees, but many people when their father and mother are elderly and they come to them, you know, there's no social services and they need help.

[18 : 49] They need a place to live. They can't care for themselves perhaps any longer. And the Pharisees and others were saying, yeah, I do have an extra piece of property. I do have a house here next to my house, but I've declared it Corbin.

I've declared it to the Lord, a commandment we see in Leviticus, which means that it can't be used for anything because it's been dedicated to the Lord. It's like the firstborn, meaning I don't want anybody to live in this house.

And so I've dedicated it to the Lord. He said that that was happening. And he said, and so what you've done is you've taken a commandment of the Bible and you've twisted it into a commandment of men and you've done something particularly heinous.

You see, there's two ways that we wander towards Phariseeism and one, one is subtle. And it's when we transfer the relationship with God that we have in grace, giving God our hearts into a situation where we get to God by making rules.

But Jesus says it can get more heinous than that. It can become one where we devise ways of being so self-centered that people think of us as godly externally, but internally we're actually seeking our own selves.

[20 : 00] People publicly say, I've declared this to the Lord, but internally, oh boy, I know, I just don't want to share my property with anybody. And he says that that's Phariseeism. It's Phariseeism of the eighth century BC.

It's Phariseeism of the first century. And it's a way that we're prone to wander as well. What do you do about it? And Isaiah tells us also what we can do about it here.

And I'll rattle these off to you. Three things very quickly that he tells you to do tonight. First, he says, there has to come a point in your life where you say, am I going to submit to the Bible as the true authority in my life?

If you just back up one verse, two verses from what we started our reading, 2913, back to 2911, he says, the vision of all these things, all these oracles, has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed.

When men give it to the one who can read saying, read this, the man says, I can't read it. He's saying that their hearts in Jerusalem had wandered so far away that when they opened the Bible and somebody said, read this, they say, I can't read it.

[21 : 05] I can't see what it's saying. I can't understand it. He's saying that they had wandered so far away that they had lost the ability to see Scripture as their authority in life. And you see, whether it's atheism or deism or fair sayism, they're actually all this one of this really the same issue.

And it's saying, I'm not willing to submit myself to what God has written as a word. And here's a reason instead to give your life to God's word and to study it and to put your life underneath it. And it's because when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, what did he say? He said, man does not live by bread alone, but by the every word that comes from the mouth of God. Jesus Christ said, the word of God is my bread.

And that means that if you follow Jesus and Jesus says, the word of God is my bread, you've got to say the word of God is my bread. You know, you've got to say at some point I'm willing, in faith to say I'm willing to listen to the Scriptures and what they say.

There has to come a moment in your life where you come under that authority and maybe again, if you're prone to wander like me and you feel it, to leave the God that you love, there may need to be a moment where you say, I need to come back and submit myself to the word of God.

[22 : 22] Now, here's the second thing that he teaches us of what to do here is he says, secondly, look for God. Now look for God's foolishness. You submit yourself to the word of God, now you can look for God's foolishness.

Now, remember that this passage is quoted often in the New Testament, chapter 29 verse 14. Let me set the stage before I say this.

Remember 29, 13, you Pharisees, you come and you make yourself known religiously and publicly, yet in your heart you're far away.

You don't care, you're not interested in the things of God, you haven't given your heart to the Lord. That's the context of verse 13 and then look at the therefore in verse 14. Therefore, behold, I will do wonderful things with this people.

Now do you see that that doesn't make any sense? God says, your heart is so far away, therefore I'm going to do wonderful things with these Pharisees. That's what he says.

[23 : 25] And you see, if you keep going, this happens three or four times in this passage. Just scan your eyes across 15 and 16. 15 and 16 he says, he didn't make me, I'm an atheist.

I'm going to say in my heart that I'm a piece of pottery that has no potter. And then verse 17 to 22, in that day the death will hear the words of a book.

Verse 22, Jacob will not be ashamed anymore. It's Jacob that is the clay who is saying there is no potter. But then verse 22 says, but Jacob on that day, the Lord says, I'm going to save him and he won't be ashamed.

You see, look down again, one more last one at chapter 30 verse 18, the very last thing we read. If you just look, your Bible probably has a heading in chapter 30 that says, a rebellious people.

And it lists all the ways Israel was wandering away from God. And then verse 18, ignore the heading. Therefore, the Lord waits to be gracious to you. And therefore he exalts himself to show you mercy.

[24 : 34] And you see the answer. First, you submit yourself to the authority of the Bible and you realize that in the midst of wandering hearts, you're wondering heart, my wondering heart, whether you're you struggle with unbelief in the form of deism or atheism, or you say, I'm indifferent.

I know I'm indifferent. I come to Monday and I don't think about the Lord after Sunday, or you struggle with phariseism and creating your own path, your own bridge across the Exodus waters, you know, works.

Whatever it is, here's the answer. God says, my grace will triumph over your weakness. I'll come and save you whether you like it or not.

I'll come and do a wonderful thing in your midst, you Pharisee. You see, you've got to see the foolishness of God. And look, here's how the foolishness of God takes shape, the very last thing, and we'll close.

The third thing that God says, the final thing, is therefore, if you are prone to wander tonight, you need to do nothing. That's ultimately what he says. And you can see it here in the very end of the passage we read, chapter 30, verses 15 to 18.

[25 : 43] He says in 15, thus says the Lord, in returning and rest you'll be saved, in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.

The final thing he says to you tonight is do nothing. Now, where do we get that? He says in verse 15, in returning and rest, that word rest there is the word quiet or stillness.

And so he says it twice. In returning and stillness, you'll be saved. In stillness or being quiet, that'll be your strength. You see what he says?

He says, you need to stop and be still and be quiet and do nothing. If your heart is prone to wander, stop and do nothing.

And what he means by that is that this is an illusion, all the commentators say, to Exodus 14. And in Exodus 14, Israel was standing on the brink of the Red Sea.

[26 : 41] And they had Egypt, Pharaoh, at their backs, and they were trembling and afraid and angry. And they were saying to God, why did you bring us to this moment? Why did you do this to us?

And they were wandering very quickly from the Lord. And then this is what Moses says, fear not, stand firm, see the salvation of the Lord.

Today, the Lord will fight for you and you need only to be quiet. You see, you got to do nothing. You've got to be quiet.

You've got to see that the Lord fights for you. He saves you. Don't try to build a bridge across the Red Sea. That's fair as aism. The Lord will fight for you.

The Lord will take you across the waters. You can't save yourself. You've got to be quiet and stop fighting and let the Lord, let the salvation that he has brought be your salvation. That's the answer to our wandering hearts is what Isaiah gives us here.

[27 : 40] How? How does he do it? And here's the last quote from the old to the new. I didn't give you the New Testament quote here. Back to 2914.

He says, I'm going to do wonderful things for this people, despite this people, with wonder upon wonder and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish. Now that's also quoted in the New Testament. And it's quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1.

He quotes this verse and Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 says, God, remember when God said in Isaiah, the wisdom of the wise is going to perish. I'm going to take what the Pharisees and Jerusalem think is wisdom.

I'm going to flip it upside down. I'm going to do what they call foolishness and make it the true wisdom, the plan. And what was he talking about there? He was talking about the cross.

You see, right here in Isaiah 2914, Isaiah is prophesying about the cross. He says, in the midst of their wandering hearts, I'm going to do a wonderful thing for them, whether they like it or not. I'm going to do something so wonderful that they're going to think it's foolishness.

[28 : 43] And he's talking there about the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul not only calls the cross foolish in 1 Corinthians 1, he says, the way of faith is foolish. He says, oh, I mean, our, our Pharisee of hearts want to say, what is wisdom?

What's wisdom? Wisdom is I've got to build a bridge across the Red Sea with my good works. I need to, I need to do this and do this and do this. If I'm going to be saved, that seems like wisdom to me. But God says, no, I'm going to give you the way of faith.

And that seems like foolishness, but that's wisdom. You see, the cross leads to the way of faith.

Nothing, be still and embrace fully the way of faith. And that's the wisdom of God.

That's the wonderful thing that God has done. You know, Jesus Christ, we'll close with this. Jesus Christ, when he was on the mount of transfiguration, Moses and Elijah showed up, the two great prophets of the Old Testament.

And they sat on either side of him and they, they talked with him. And we're told a little bit about their conversation. It said in Luke 9 verse 30 that they spoke with Jesus about his quote, departure.

[29 : 47] Elijah and Moses talked to Jesus Christ and they had a conversation about his departure. And that's the, very literally in the New Testament, the Greek word Exodus.

You see, they talked to him just before his death about his Exodus. The reason tonight that you can cross the Red Sea from Egypt to the Promised Land, from death to life, is because Jesus Christ endured the Exodus.

And it was different for him. You know, you can cross through the waters unscathed because he drowned. You can, you can cross, you can leave Egypt tonight and reject your wandering heart and embrace his grace because he's the Passover lamb who was slain.

He experienced the ultimate wrath of the Exodus so you could have it. And that means tonight that the simple message of Isaiah 29 to 31 is, give your heart to the Lord, stand upon the foundation of grace, don't seek formal compliance with rules.

Not at all, live the life of grace. And truly the last word, remember that they crossed the Red Sea and then they got to Sinai. It wasn't the other way around.

[31 : 01] You know, God didn't say, follow the Ten Commandments and then I'll bring you across. Instead, he brought them across and then he said, now, what did he say? I brought you across on the wings of eagles. Now follow me.

You know, if you embrace and grow in the grace of Jesus, if you lean in more and more into the grace of Jesus, then you realize that following him is no longer about rule compliance.

It's just life. It's just joy. It's just what gives you peace. True religion is becoming more and more familiar with the grace of Jesus Christ.

And so if you're struggling with a wandering heart tonight, right now as we pray, give your heart to the Lord. Let's do that. Father, we ask now that you would take our wandering hearts.

We, each of us in here, struggle with deism and atheism and phariseism and religious but indifferent. And it's never been different than that.

[32 : 05] Lord, we give thanks that you've shown us that the people of Jerusalem in the eighth century, this was their problem. And tonight we cast our wandering hearts before you and ask that you would show us your grace and help us to live life standing on the firm foundation that you brought us through the waters that we didn't build bridges.

And so we ask, Lord, that you would again restore us this evening to a life of faith. So Lord, I pray for someone in here tonight, for several in here tonight, that you may be working in their lives.

Lord, we ask for that and we ask, Father, that you would give the gift of the life of faith tonight, the foolishness of faith. And we just ask for that, Lord, by the Spirit, in Christ's name. Amen.