

The Book of ISAIAH – Chapters 1-39

Catholic Scripture Study

Memory Verse: Isaiah 2:2-3

***It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.***

Week 2 – God's Judgment on Judah (1:10-31)

I. OVERVIEW (1:10-15)

The indictment of Israel and Judah continues.

Isaiah follows his opening charges by presenting two alternate ways of dealing with Israel's alienation from God, a wrong way and the right way.

The wrong way, the way of hypocritical ritual is described in 1:10–15; the right way, the way of repentance and changed living, is described in 1:16-17.

Finally the alternatives are summed up in 1:18-20. If we take the right way, we will enjoy blessing; if we take the wrong way, we will be destroyed.

A. Strong Prophetic Word

Our first full scale prophecy of judgment begins with the familiar words, **“Hear the word of the Lord,”** by which the prophet indicates that what follows is not just his own words, but divine proclamation.

The section ends with another conventional formula, **“For the mouth of the lord has spoken,”** which has the effect of underlining the final warning: **“But if you refuse and rebel you shall be devoured by the sword”** (v. 20).

The divine proclamation itself is in two parts:

- The first is a blistering attack on the whole sacrificial system of the temple (vs. 10-14), and
- The second an appeal for justice and obedience (vs. 16-20a).

The two parts are linked by the shocking verse 15 which describes the hands of worshippers, stretched out in prayer to God, as covered with blood.

B. Sodom and Gomorrah

Harsh words are used (v. 10). The people of Judah are identified with those of Sodom and Gomorrah, the epitome of sin and rejection of God.

Sodom and Gomorrah are symbols of gross immorality as well as destruction. **“Rulers of Sodom”** and **“people of Gomorrah”** remind us not only of the enormity of the Israel's crimes but also of their fate. The whole city (Jerusalem) has been contaminated by the crimes of its leaders and one judgment awaits them all as it did for “the Cities of the Plain” in Genesis 18-19.

II. HYPOCRITICAL WORSHIP (1:10-15)

Read: Isaiah 1:10-15

**[10] Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom!**

**Give ear to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!**

**[11] "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;**

**I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;**

**I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of he-goats.**

**[12] "When you come to appear before me,
who requires of you
this trampling of my courts?**

**[13] Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.**

**New moon and Sabbath and the calling of assemblies --
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.**

**[14] Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;**

**they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.**

**[15] When you spread forth your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.**

A. Corrupt Leaders of Judah (1:10)

Verse 10 begins with a command to hear the Lord speaking. The Word of the Lord is addressed to the leaders of Judah and its people who are equated with the **rulers of Sodom** and **people of Gomorrah**.

The previous section (v. 9) noted that a remnant would be spared - consequently the fate of Judah would not be as severe as that of Sodom.

- Nevertheless, with respect to sin, Jerusalem had become a spiritual Sodom and her inhabitants a people of Gomorrah.

B. Empty Rituals and Hypocrisy (1:11-14)

The sins of which they are accused are against acts of worship: the Temple rituals, sacrifice, incense, festivals and so on.

The chief types of sacrifice are enumerated:

- Communion sacrifice (v. 11a),
- Holocaust (v. 11b),
- Cereal offering (13a) and
- Incense (13b).

The festivals, from the weekly Sabbath to the monthly and annual feast celebrated in ancient Israel (vv 13-14), are also mentioned.

The accusation is not against acts of worship in themselves, for these are laid down in the book of Leviticus and therefore are right and proper.

What the prophet is attacking is the gap between worship and life, between Sunday and the rest of the week.

- What God desires is sincerity of heart, virtue, protection of the weak, not hypocritical worship and empty ritual.

Surrounded by pagan religions, it was very easy for the Israelites to slip back into the practice where ritual and careful attention to type and number of sacrifices (offerings), made it possible for people to feel, think, and do whatever they wished.

- The people worshipped God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him.

- They divorced doctrines and practice with disastrous results.
- Hence, their worship had become mere idolatry.

C. God Will not Listen to Hypocritical Prayers (Is 1:15)

Just as God will not accept hypocritical worship or sacrifices, in the same way prayer which lifts “bloody hands” to God – hands which have committed violent deeds - is revolting to him. He will not look at such a worshipper or listen to what he says.

It is not because prayer is displeasing in itself. What is displeasing is the **attitude** of the one praying.

- He wants to separate his religion from his life – in fact, to have God confirm him in his sin. But God will not do so.

III. TRUE WORSHIP (ISAIAH 1:16-20)

Now the prophet, having shown what God does not want, turns to what he does desire. God's demands are set out in eight statements in the passage that follows:

Read: 1:16-17

***[16] Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings***

from before my eyes;

cease to do evil,

[17] learn to do good;

seek justice,

correct oppression;

defend the fatherless,

plead for the widow.

A. Repentance – Cease to do Evil . . . (1:16)

Wash yourselves clean – a call to repentance; a call to that change of attitude which the NT calls “the baptism of repentance.” If there is to be a true service and worship of God, there must be a genuine repentance.

- An entire new manner of life is demanded.

Verse 16 contains four imperatives uttered with absolute authority: **wash, make yourselves clean, remove, cease.**

“Washing” here has a moral meaning, not a ritualistic one – they must be clean in God’s sight. Unless the people accept their own responsibility, God’s grace cannot be applied to them.

B. . . . Learn To Do Good (1:17)

After the negative exhortations of the preceding verse, Isaiah now gives five positive exhortations. The first lays the foundation or groundwork for all the others.

These commands are addressed to the state officials (Princes of Sodom), and to the people as individuals (people of Gomorrah).

A nation cannot repent unless the **individuals** who compose that nation repent. There can be no reformation in the church unless the members who compose the Church repent individually.

Learn to do good! In order to lead the sort of lives that God wants, we need to be properly instructed and taught. St. Basil comments: *“Since moral understanding is neither self-evident nor clear to all, we must learn to do good deeds through our study of sound doctrine.”*

As well as the need for sound doctrine, holiness of life requires the practice of virtue, day by day, consistently, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

IV. OBEDIENCE OR REBELLION (1:18-20)

A. Overview

Because religious ceremony tends to be man-centered and man-pleasing, to make God familiar, and to blur his moral demands, it is

a positive **threat** to the kind of relationship with God that Isaiah and the other prophets knew was possible.

On the other hand, when there exists a trusting and obedient relationship to a faithful, loving and moral God, then the rituals and ceremonies can be very helpful in symbolizing and deepening that relationship.

Read: Isaiah 1:18-20

***[18] "Come now, let us reason together,
says the LORD:***

***though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.***

***[19] If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;***

***[20] But if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."***

B. Come, Let us Reason Together (1:18)

"Come now . . . This is a command which cannot be evaded; it must be obeyed. God alone can lay down the conditions which must be followed. It is not the meeting of equals, but of God with His sinful people.

This passage suggests that in the light of Israel's sinful condition there is only one intelligent course of action – obedience and submission to God's will.

What God is asking the people to debate with Him (**reason together**) is the wisdom of the two alternatives that are left to them.

- Should they continue as they are and be destroyed, or
- Should they willingly obey God and be blessed?

C. Though your Sins Are Like Scarlet . . .

Forgiveness will be given as a result of a changed attitude and behavior rather than through hypocritical worship/ritual.

- God does not proclaim forgiveness to those who are unwilling to obey.

The assumption that prosperity and peace depend on obedience, while defeat is a result of disobedience, is basic to the prophet's teaching, and provides both an incentive to do good and an interpretation of history.

D. Blessing or Curse (1:19-20)

If you obey, you will be rewarded: if you rebel you will be punished (vs. 19-20).

After the announcement that there may be the forgiveness of sins, the Lord still places before the nation that choice between blessing and curse, a choice which had been set before it by Moses (Deut. 28).

V. APPLICATION

There is no question that we today are as guilty of trying to use religious behavior to manipulate God as any Israelite was.

How easy it is to think that when we go to Church regularly, read the Bible, pray, tithe, and don't abuse people, God somehow owes us something.

Moreover, how easy it is to think that when we have done all these things, God could hardly expect more from us. Look all the heathen around us who do not do any of these things.

God should be grateful to have such faithful servants as us, we think. Then when difficulties come to us, we are angry at God, accusing him of being unfair after all we have done for him.

But the point is this: God says that what we must show if we are to experience His favor is evidence of His life within us.

- Religious and cultic activity in the absence of a changed life is not such evidence.

VI. INFIDELITY AND INJUSTICE (1:21-23)

A. Overview

In this final section of his opening statement, Isaiah turns to discuss the present condition of the nation and what God's response will be.

He seems to be saying, "Yes, in theory, Israel could know forgiveness and healing (vs. 18-20); but, as a matter of fact, Israel's condition is so far gone that destruction cannot be averted."

However, God's final purpose is not destruction. His final purpose is blessing achieved through purification.

Read: Isaiah 1:21-23

***[21] How the faithful city
has become a harlot,
she that was full of justice!
Righteousness lodged in her,
but now murderers.***

***[22] Your silver has become dross,
your wine mixed with water.***

***[23] Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.***

***Every one loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.***

***They do not defend the fatherless,
and the widow's cause does not come to them.***

A. Jerusalem

In verses 21-23 the prophet laments over the tragic state of Jerusalem, which becomes here a representative of the nation as a whole.

The lament is then followed by a salvation oracle vs. 24-26 in which the Lord of Hosts, the Mighty One of Israel, promises to intervene.

The city will pass through another difficult time, like the one described earlier in vs. 7-9, but on this occasion the result will be a new, reformed Jerusalem, a **“city of righteousness”** as in the old days.

B. A Harlot

How the faithful city has become a harlot!

How . . . The word expresses both complaint and amazement. How it is possible that the faithful city could become what she now is, a harlot?

This city that had once been a symbol of justice and righteousness, as in the Golden Age of David and Solomon, had fallen from grace; what had once been as pure and clear as silver was turned into **dross** (scum thrown off from metals in melting, waste matter).

Harlot . . . Like the harlot, Jerusalem, which once was faithful, no longer has faithfulness. Her infidelity is basically one of the heart and can express itself in various ways, such as idolatry, injustice, oppression and greed.

Israel has deserted the Lord, her husband, and has prostituted herself with other lovers, the pagan gods.

Jerusalem once possessed something desirable, represented by silver and choice wine (v. 22). A great change, however, has come over the city; the silver and choice wines are gone, and in their place are dross and wine mixed with water.

Since the corruption of a nation generally begins with its rulers, Isaiah singles these out for denunciation. The nation has prostituted itself with all the foreign gods and the leadership (**princes**) has become corrupt.

VII. COMING JUDGMENT AND PURIFICATION (1:24-26)

A. Overview

The lament (vs. 21-23) is then followed by joyful news (vs. 24-26), in which the Lord proclaims that the period of purification will be followed by the restoration of Jerusalem.

Purification is the main idea here: **“I . . . will smelt away your dross as with lye”** (v. 25) – a metaphor that makes it perfectly clear that what the Lord seeks is not the sinners ruin, but his conversion and rehabilitation.

- *“He does not punish in order to destroy; rather, he teaches in order to restore”* (St. Basil).

Read: Isaiah 1:24-25

**[24] Therefore the Lord says,
the LORD of hosts,
the Mighty One of Israel:
“Ah, I will vent my wrath on my enemies,
and avenge myself on my foes.
[25] I will turn my hand against you
and will smelt away your dross as with lye
and remove all your alloy.**

B. Announcement of Judgment (vs. 24-25)

I will vent my wrath on my enemies . . .

It is not the enemies of Israel who will feel the heat of God's wrath, but it is Israel herself, who has become His enemy.

Did Israel feel that they were under a special dispensation from God as his particular children?

Isaiah stands up to say that God's children are those who do his will, whoever they may be, while those who rebel against him are his enemies, even though it is His beloved Israel.

It is apparent that God's people considered themselves in a position of privilege. God had chosen them and promised to bless them. Indeed, he had blessed them. They had risen from a nation of slaves to become one of the significant empires in the ancient world.

- They had God's law, God's temple, God's city, God's land.

God had a special commitment to protect them from any and all their enemies. How it must have stung when Isaiah said that they were not God's favorites but his enemies, on whom He would be avenged.

I . . . will smelt away your dross as with lye . . .

This **dross** is the unjust rulers and leaders and their sinful practices as well as the general hypocrisy and sinfulness of the people themselves. These must be subjected to a thorough and drastic judgment in order that the city herself may continue in existence.

Refining silver is a radical process, and the refining which must take place if the nation is to be saved is also radical. Those whom the Lord loves he chastens.

- The process of purification cannot be wrought by man but by God alone.
- If sinners are to be saved, they must be cleansed and purged.

C. Restoration

The Prophet Isaiah looks forward to a time when God's people, having passed through the fires, will relate to him, and thus to one another, as they ought.

Read: Isaiah 1:26

[26] And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city."

D. The Faithful City

The charges which the Lord has raised are leveled primarily against the judges and counselors, who by their perfidy and lack of justice had corrupted the nation.

They, therefore, must be removed, and in their stead perfect justice introduced. After justice has been restored then the city may be called ***faithful***. When there are just rulers in the city, then she may be called a ***city of righteousness***.

VIII. THE FATE OF THE WICKED (I: 27-31)

A. Overview

This segment concludes the brief introduction to the book. It notes that the reality of hope which stems from God's good intentions towards us cannot blot out another, grimmer reality: continued arrogant rebellion against God will result in destruction.

The prophet seems to be attempting to avoid any possible misunderstanding of his message: "Let no one presume upon God's grace."

At the same time there's a note of hope even in these searing words. The note of hope is for those who have been crushed by the mighty. The mighty will perish, their judgment is sure.

Read: Isaiah 1:27-31

***[27] Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.***

***[28] But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together,
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.***

***[29] For you shall be ashamed of the oaks
in which you delighted;
and you shall blush for the gardens
which you have chosen.***

***[30] For you shall be like an oak
whose leaf withers,
and like a garden without water.***

***[31] And the strong shall become tow,
and his work a spark,
and both of them shall burn together,
with none to quench them.***

B. Zion/Jerusalem

Zion . . . Originally Zion was the name of a hill near Jerusalem, but came to be applied to the entire city of Jerusalem as well. It thus serves as a synonym for Jerusalem throughout Isaiah.

Zion was also the name of the place on which the Temple of God was erected.

Despite her punishment, Zion will be redeemed. She will not be cast off. Her chosenness and her beauty are not passing; they are constant as a gift from God. It is the desolation and destruction which are passing.

Redeemed . . . Through God's justice and righteousness and the just and righteous behavior of Zion, Jerusalem and her converts

will be redeemed. The purpose of this promise is to comfort those who repent.

The rebels and sinners who refuse to repent, that is, refuse God's grace to change, will be destroyed.

C. Idol Worship

Previously in this chapter we have heard of murder, dishonesty and depression. Now, in vs. 29-31 we come across a different kind of rebellion and disobedience: **you shall be ashamed of the oaks . . . you shall blush for the gardens . . .** Here it is the worship of wooden idols or trees.

These verses make it plain that it was the worship of idols to which "rebellion" and "forsaking God" (v. 28) referred.

This means that it is not possible to forsake the Lord and to turn to nothing else. One leaves a commitment to Him only for commitment to other gods.

As Jesus pointed out: *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other"* (Matt 6:24).

- The suggestion that one can abandon God and thus be free is as much a lie today as it was in Eden.

To leave the God who made the trees in order to worship the trees is the height of folly. To put one's trust in creation is to have that trust betrayed, to be *ashamed* and *disgraced*. (This is the regular meaning of "to be ashamed" in Scripture).

Like a garden without water . . . Creation is not the source of life, it has no creative power in itself. Thus those who depend upon the creation are doomed to wither and dry up. Choose the garden and there is no water, but choose the **One** who made the garden and there are streams of living water.

Not only can the oak tree be used to suggest the whole range of idolatry and its finally destructive results (***an oak whose leaf withers***), but it can also stand for those who are proud, dominating, and apparently self-sufficient, like a great tree.

However, Isaiah says that the mighty of the earth will one day be stripped bare. Then it will be seen that they are not mighty at all. They are merely *tow*, the chaff from flax, good for nothing but burning. In making themselves apparently self-sufficient, they have cut themselves off from the only source of life.

IX. APPLICATION

So what should our attitude be in all of this?

For almost 200 years Christendom has been a dominant force in the West, especially in America. Now we see the Church increasingly marginalized as a force to change society, even losing its ability to maintain its own identity.

What should our attitude be?

Surely Isaiah would say that we ought not to be trying to increase our power and influence. Nor should we be wringing our hands and crying, "All is lost."

Rather, we should each be looking *inward* at our own lives and *outward* at a lost and broken world, confident God does not intend to harm us but aware that He demands purity, selflessness, and love in all our relationships.

We should of course, live courageously and selflessly, knowing that the Church will survive. Furthermore, we should not be discouraged when difficulties come. Whether we deserve them or not, God's good purpose is not to destroy us but to purify us.

But neither dare we live in false confidence. The Scriptural adage that **“the soul that sins will die”** is still true. We should allow the Holy Spirit to purify us and then lose ourselves in service to others.

Preparation for Week 3

God's Blessing and Judgment
