

Your Sins White as Snow: Isaiah 1

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I'm excited to be starting a new sermon series this morning, at the beginning of a new year. We spent the bulk of 2015 in the Old Testament book of Joshua. Then I preached a series on marriage, and then we finished out the year looking at the passages in the Gospels about Jesus' birth.

I want to go back to the Old Testament again now, to one of the major prophets. Isaiah. And I anticipate we'll be studying this book for at least the first few months of the year. We're not going to go verse-by-verse through the entire book, like I've done with Romans and Mark and other books. My plan in Isaiah is to get the big picture by studying particular passages throughout the book. We won't cover every verse. We won't cover every chapter. But we'll dig into enough passages along the way that we can gain a deeper appreciation for the things God was communicating through this man Isaiah, and what God is continuing to say to His people today through this powerful book.

When we hear the word prophet or prophecy, the first thing that may come to mind is predictions about the future. Foretelling things that are to come. And we certainly have that in the book of Isaiah. In chapter 7 we have the prophecy about the virgin birth. (7:14) And in chapter 9 we have those famous lines we read at Christmas time (9:6).

We also have in Isaiah the profound descriptions of the Suffering Servant (52:13 – 53:12). My plan for this sermon series is that we will arrive at those verses for Good Friday and Easter.

But the prophets were not merely foretelling things that would happen in the future. They were doing so to bring about reformation in the present. They were exhorting the people to repent of their sins and follow the Lord. They were rebuking the people for their idolatry and pleading with them to be faithful to their God. And there is much mercy conveyed as well. I think of Isaiah 55 which begins with such a gracious invitation.

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” (Isaiah 55:1, ESV)

So this is a book that is going to put before us the blazing holiness of Almighty God. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;

the whole earth is full of his glory!” (6:3) In light of His glory, our sin is completely exposed and condemned. And then there is the great mercy shown to sinful humanity, we who deserve God’s righteous punishment. There is mercy that comes through this Suffering Servant, the one born of a virgin, the One who is “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” who was “wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities.” We are called to turn from our sinful ways and trust in this merciful God.

All this and much, much more in the book of Isaiah, and I’m excited to delve into the depths of the riches of what God reveals of Himself in this great portion of His Word. I hope you will pray with me that God will use our study of Isaiah to humble us and revive us and give us a great passion for this Good News. I love the prayer for revival that comes in chapter 64.

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.” (Isaiah 64:1–4, ESV)

That’s a great prayer for us to begin with this morning.

The first thing we need to do is situate this book in biblical history. And I’ll admit to you that one of the things that I always struggle with when I’m reading the prophets is trying to remember at what time and to whom they are speaking. It’s hard for me to keep all this straight in my mind. We have the first several books of the Old Testament that are basically chronological. But when we come to the prophets, they’re not necessarily arranged chronologically. Rather, we have to understand their place in history in relation to the events recorded in Kings and Chronicles. The prophets were speaking at different times and places in the course of events recorded in those earlier books.

So let me refresh your memory, or maybe give you some of this material for the first time if you’re not familiar with the Old Testament. I’m going to start with some of the same outline I covered at the beginning of our Joshua study, about a year ago. We’ll go, very quickly, from creation to Joshua. And then we’ll go quickly from Joshua to Isaiah.

Eden

God created out of nothing. He miraculously breathed life into Adam and Eve, and He gave them a land—a very good land—where they could live and flourish. He gave them every good thing to enjoy. It was paradise. Things were not yet broken. So there was peace and tranquility, harmony and happiness. It was a wonderful place.

Exile

But then something really bad happened. Exile. Exile is when you get kicked out of your land. That's what happened to Adam and Eve. They disobeyed God. God had given them every good thing to enjoy, and had given them just one restriction. Don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It doesn't seem like that would be a problem when there are plenty of other trees to eat from. It's not like they were going hungry. Not at all! God had provided abundantly.

But the serpent, the Devil, came and tempted them and caused them to doubt God's goodness. And they both rebelled against God by eating from that tree which they were commanded not to eat from.

Because of their disobedience they had to leave that land of paradise. They were exiled from Eden. They were forced out of their peaceful, restful home into the harsh world which was now infected by sin.

But just a few chapters later we come to a hopeful scene as we read God's promise to Abraham.

Abraham

Abram, later called Abraham, was chosen by God to be the father of many nations. He didn't deserve this. It's a picture of God's sovereign grace. The Lord promised to bless Abraham and to give him a land. He promised to multiply Abraham's offspring and make him a great nation. And Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted it to Abraham as righteousness. Abraham had a son, Isaac. Isaac had a son, Jacob, whose name was later changed to Israel. And he had 12 sons.

Egypt

Most of the rest of Genesis tells the story of Joseph, Israel's favored son. And this is the story that involves the transition to Egypt. Joseph was the one who received the coat of many colors

from his father. The other brothers hated Joseph because he was “the favored one.” They hated him so much they conspired to sell him into slavery. That’s how Joseph ended up in Egypt.

But then Joseph became second in command. He was eventually reunited with his brothers when they came to Egypt to get food during the famine. The family then moved to Egypt and settled in the land of Goshen. In the closing paragraph of Genesis, Joseph is on his deathbed, and he says to his brothers, *“I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”* (Genesis 50:24)

At this point they are not in the land, but they are anticipating a return to the land. But then begins the 400 year time of bondage, predicted back in Genesis 15. The book of Exodus opens with the sad news that a different king rose to power in Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he ordered that the Israelites, who were now great in number, should be treated as slaves. The people cried out to the Lord. They didn’t want to be in this land of slavery any longer. They longed for their own land, where they could be free.

Exodus

And then God sent Moses, and this brings us to the next chapter in the narrative—the Exodus. Moses is a Christ-figure here. He is the one God ordained to be a deliverer. Through the 10 plagues, culminating in the Passover, the Lord delivered His people from bondage in Egypt. The Lord used Moses to lead the people out of that land of slavery. They exited that land of chains. It was the exodus. They were now on their way to the Promised Land.

The Exodus is a pivotal event in the Pentateuch . . . in all of Scripture, really. God moved powerfully, miraculously, to free His people. We think of the parting of the Red Sea, and what a spectacular thing it must have been to witness that. For the Israelites to pass through on dry ground, and then to look back and see the waters collapse on Pharaoh’s men who were chasing them. What an amazing picture of miraculous deliverance.

It’s not only an historical event. It’s a spiritual portrait of salvation. That’s our story as well—all of us who are covered by the blood of the Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ. We were in bondage to sin, entrapped in the things of this world. But God brought us out of that. And the spiritual significance of what God has done in our lives is no less astounding than the parting of the Red Sea.

God has brought us out of Egypt to make us His own. We now belong to Him. We must follow Him and obey His orders. To do so is true freedom.

Wilderness

The next sad part of the story takes place in the wilderness. We read of God's people grumbling and complaining and even making a golden calf to worship as an idol. All this right on the heels of them witnessing God's supernatural deliverance. Their rebellion incited God's wrath against them. He wanted to destroy them. But Moses interceded for the people. He is like Christ in that way, diverting God's wrath from destroying the sinful people who deserve punishment.

Moses pleaded for their pardon, and the Lord responded with grace, but also consequences. He did not disinherit them, but He did punish the rebellious generation. This is the sadness of the wilderness wanderings. God was taking them to the Promised Land, but they refused to enter. They had seen the Lord's power with their own eyes, but they didn't believe Him in their hearts. They didn't trust His promises. And therefore they were not allowed to enter His rest (see Hebrews 3).

When we come to the book of Deuteronomy, the last book in the Pentateuch, the book right before Joshua, what we have is Moses' final sermons to the Israelites before they are to enter the Promised Land. The forty years have come to an end. That first generation has been wiped out (see Deuteronomy 2:15-16). And now Moses gives the people a final word before they proceed into Canaan and he is only allowed to look on.

One of the things Moses emphasizes is the undeserved favor of God upon them. He wants the people to realize that they do not deserve this Promised Land. They're not receiving this reward because of their goodness but because of God's grace.

Well, we've spent some time so far looking at 6 scenes that all relate to the theme of Promised Land. Adam and Eve were given a land of paradise: Eden. Because of their sin they were exiled from that land. The Lord promised a land to Abraham and his descendants. Those descendants ended up in Egypt, and were then made slaves in Egypt. But then God brought them out of Egypt in the Exodus. And after 40 years in the wilderness it was finally time to enter the Promised Land.

In the book of Joshua, then, which we spent much of last year studying, God brings His people into that Promised Land.

And He does so in a way that shows everyone who the powerhouse is. It's not Israel. It's the Lord. He keeps His promises and brings His people into the land He said He was going to give them.

That's Genesis to Joshua.

Joshua to Isaiah

Now let's briefly cover some of the storyline from Joshua to Isaiah. After Joshua comes the book of Judges, which is summarized by the last verse of that book which says, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." There is a cycle in Judges of 1) Sin / Turning away from the Lord, 2) God delivering them into the hands of their enemies, 3) they cry out for mercy, 4) God has mercy and sends a deliverer / judge. The short book of Ruth records events from that same period of time . . . when the judges ruled.

And then we come to the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. And this is the historical context we need to grasp in order to understand where Isaiah fits in the biblical narrative. Israel's first king was Saul, and then David, and then Solomon. Under each of those first 3 kings, the kingdom remained united. This was the united monarchy (Saul, David, Solomon).

A Divided Kingdom

But after Solomon, the monarchy divided into a northern kingdom (Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah). You can read about that in 1 Kings 12. Solomon's son Rehoboam reigned over Judah, but Jeroboam was made king over the northern tribes – Israel. It was a very sad division. It was like a civil war that never had a resolution. The two kingdoms continued on, each with separate kings. The northern kingdom of Israel had all bad kings. The southern kingdom of Judah had mostly bad kings, but also had a handful of God-honoring kings. There is much sin, much straying, much idolatry, much compromise, and much sadness in these stories. And that's where the prophets come in, because they were the voice of God chastising the people and the kings for the ways they were straying from the Lord.

And this also brings us back to the theme of exile. I used that term to describe Adam and Eve being kicked out of the good land of Eden. Well, the people of Israel (to the north) and then the people of Judah (to the south), would also be kicked out of the good land that God had given them. In the book of Joshua we saw the excitement of the people entering the Promised Land. In the

book of Isaiah we're at a point in history when their place in the Promised Land was being threatened.

Now, Isaiah was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah. He doesn't say much about himself at all, but we can gather that he was a husband and father and resided in Jerusalem. As far as the timeframe of his ministry, we have a clear indication of that in verse 1. He was prophesying in the days of Uzziah (also called Azariah, in case this wasn't confusing enough—and yes there will be a quiz), Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Isaiah's ministry spanned at least 40 years, from about 740 – 700 B.C. And during the course of Isaiah's ministry in Judah, at the same time, to the north of them, the northern kingdom of Israel was defeated by the Assyrian Empire (that happened in 722 B.C.). This might be a little bit like if ISIS attacked Canada and was successful in taking control of Canada. You can imagine the kind of insecurity we would feel, just to the south of that turmoil. Well, those were the times Isaiah lived in. That was the political climate of his day. He was in Jerusalem, speaking to the people of Judah, while just to the north the other half of the kingdom was being carried off into exile by the Assyrians.

Well that's more than enough background for today. In our last few minutes let's observe a few things from this first chapter of Isaiah. What I want us to see here, and what I want us to see throughout this great book, is the simple Gospel message that God saves sinners.

I loved reading this week in Ray Ortlund's commentary on Isaiah, a quote from J. I. Packer which Ortlund used as a summary of the message of Isaiah.

“God saves sinners. God—the triune Jehovah, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power and love to achieve the salvation of a chosen people, the Father electing, the Son fulfilling the Father's will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of the Father and Son by renewing. Saves—does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory: plans, achieves and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies. Sinners—men as God finds them, guilty, vile, helpless, powerless, blind, unable to lift a finger to do God's will or better their spiritual lot. God saves sinners. . . . Sinners do not save themselves in any sense at all, but salvation, first to last, whole and entire, past, present and future, is of the Lord, to whom be glory forever, amen!”

This is the message of Isaiah, like it's the message of the whole Bible. We are sinners in desperate need of a Savior. And the true and living God of the Bible is a God who mercifully saves sinners like us.

Here are 4 headings for us to consider briefly in thinking about the Gospel message in Isaiah 1.

God's Holiness

Notice in verse 4 that the Lord is referred to as "the Holy One of Israel." The Lord God Almighty is a Holy God. In chapter 6 Isaiah, himself, will be overwhelmed and completely undone when he has an up close and personal glimpse of God's holiness.

Understand friends that the God of the Bible, the One living and true God, is an infinitely holy God. That means He is separated from sin. He cannot wink at sin. His righteous character compels Him to punish sin and put sin far out of His presence. He is not casual about sin. He will not tolerate it.

Therefore when we rebel against Him, that is no small thing. It's not something He takes lightly. And that's the next thing for us to consider here.

Our Rebellion

See in that same verse where God is called "the Holy One of Israel," it speaks of the sinful nation laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, dealing corruptly (the prophet, speaking on behalf of the Lord, doesn't mince words, does he!), and it's this sinful nation that has forsaken and despised "the Holy One of Israel," and they are utterly estranged. The next verse asks, "Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel?"

This is our sinful condition as human beings, apart from the saving grace of God. We are rebels by nature. We resist His loving guidance. We turn our back on His glory and grace. We dig in our heels in resistance against His good commands. That is who we are, left to ourselves.

And another thing we need to recognize about this sinful condition is that there can be quite a bit of subtlety to it. This rebellion comes in many different flavors. It manifests itself in various ways. So don't stereotype what this might look like. Lest you only envision outright, obnoxious disobedience, flagrant immorality . . . Look at what God says He doesn't like in verse 11. It's their worship. They are still coming before Him and offering sacrifices. But He doesn't like it. Why? Because of their

rebellion. There might still be plenty of religious behavior going on, plenty of outward conformity to certain commands of God. But if that rebellious heart has not been humbled and redirected, then the formalities of worship are like rubbish to God. It makes Him sick to His stomach.

It's like Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees in Mark 7 where He calls them hypocrites and then quotes from Isaiah 29. *“And he said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’’ (Mark 7:6–7, ESV)*

Rebellion can take many forms. And one notorious way that it manifests itself is in religious lip-service. Honoring God with your lips while your heart is far from Him. The Lord is saying in Isaiah 1, I don't like it. I do not delight in these outward gestures of worship when I know that in your heart you are rebelling against me.

And another thing we need to know about our rebellion is that it deserves severe punishment. We deserve utter destruction.

Look at verse 9.

Do you remember what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah? That's back in Genesis 19. We talked about this a few weeks ago in Sunday School when we were talking about homosexuality. Homosexual activity wasn't the only sin that was prevalent in Sodom and Gomorrah. It was one of them, but there was immorality of many kinds that plagued those cities. And because of their rebellion, God destroyed them. He rained fire out of heaven to burn them up. It's a scary scene.

But that's what we need to realize about our sin. Except for God's grace to save us, that's the same fate we deserve. We deserve to be burned up like Sodom and Gomorrah.

But do you see the grace in Isaiah 1:9. The emphasis is not mainly on the judgment, but being spared from that judgment. The emphasis is on the remnant that is saved, those who survive the destruction, by God's grace.

God's Grace

And that's the third point. God's grace. God's forgiveness. Look at the beautiful description of this in verse 18.

That is very good news, friends! The sin that covers us and stains us. The sins that are so apparent. We're caught red-handed. The Lord sees our corruption. But then, by His grace, by the death of His own beloved Son—that Suffering Servant—He covers our crimson stains. He covers them over like snow.

Yesterday there were a bunch of kids at our house and it was so nice outside that they went out and were running around in the back yard, on the soggy ground. And several of them ended up muddy. But when the snow falls, like I anticipate it will at some point this winter, when we get several inches of snow that stays on the ground for days on end, there will be no thought of mud. The kids will run around in the backyard, jump on the ground, make snow angels, go down the hill on sleds, and when they come inside there won't be a trace of dirt or mud on them. The snow will cover all of that so completely.

I love snow. I don't like driving in it. But I really like looking at it. And I love this picture in verse 18 of our scarlet sins becoming as white as snow. This is the forgiveness we have through Jesus Christ. Trust in Him who shed His blood on our behalf. He became like scarlet and crimson as the blood flowed from His tortured body. He took that punishment upon Himself in order to forgive our sins, to make our sins white as snow.

Our Response

Finally, we must consider the response that is commanded here. The response involves turning. It involves repentance. It involves change. It involves forsaking certain things that maybe have been treasured and private sins. And in the place of those things, pursuing goodness and justice and obedience.

Faith is not mentioned explicitly in these verses, but that is the other side of this coin. When God causes a person to be born again, there is a distaste for sin and a desire for holiness. That doesn't mean we become perfect. But there is a yearning for change. And the strong exhortations of these verses should spur us on in seeking that change.

Read vv. 16-17 So there's personal reformation that spills over in good deeds toward others, including a concern for helping those in need, those who are oppressed.

And then verses 19-20 make the choice very clear. There are 2 directions one might take. On the one hand, there is humble willingness to receive God's gracious forgiveness and follow Him in obedience. And that will come with everlasting rewards. On

the other hand, there is stubborn refusal to accept His forgiveness, there is ongoing rebellion, and that will be met with punishment, destruction.

Which road are you going to take? I pray that God will use the messages of this great prophet Isaiah to force you to a breaking point. I pray that this will create a crisis of commitment in your soul, that you would realize you cannot serve two masters. You cannot give lip-service to God while still cherishing your idols.

You must humble yourself before this Holy God. Admit your sin. Acknowledge your weakness. Show Him your scarlet sins, and ask Him to make them white as snow. He can do that, through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ.