

The Lord Our Only Hope Isaiah 20:1-6

Our sermon text this morning is Isaiah chapter 20, the whole chapter, verses 1 to 6. Before the reading we'll pray. Please join me in prayer. Father in heaven, we do pray that you would speak to us now from your word. Please help me as I speak. Please help us all as we listen. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Isaiah chapter 20: ¹“In the year that the commander in chief, who was sent by Sargon the king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and fought against it and captured it—²at that time the LORD spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, ‘Go, and loose the sackcloth from your waist and take off your sandals from your feet,’ and he did so, walking naked and barefoot. ³Then the LORD said, ‘As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush, ⁴so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt. ⁵Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope and of Egypt their boast. ⁶And the inhabitants of this coastland will say in that day, ‘Behold, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?’” Amen.

To many people, it seems that the obvious way to do well in the world, and the obvious way for the church to do well in the world, and the obvious way for God's people to do well in the world, is to reach out to the world in some form of compromise, to reach out to the world in the way in which they want to be reached.

This compromise often starts off in the area of worship. Churches think to themselves, Christians think to themselves, “You know, if we just updated it. If we just made it the way people want it to be—get a band together, get some good lively music together, darken the room, have the lights in just the right places, create a mood.” So you end up with the fog machines and other nonsense.

And here's the thing: When you draw people in by compromising your worship to keep them there, you're going to have to compromise your message. The people who are drawn by such things as light shows and light music, pop music—call it what you want to call it, contemporary worship—the people who are drawn by things that are in themselves compromises, are only going to be drawn to messages that are also compromising. They're not going to come for a show and a dance, and then listen to solid hard preaching, solid hard exposition. They're not going to come and want to sit for a good solid long sermon, drawn from the Word of God and based upon Scripture, if the only reason they're coming is they want to be entertained.

Well, they want the talk to be entertaining, and they want the message to be light—like the music. They want to be told that God's not really that bothered by their sins; God's not really that upset. He's not really a God who's a God of judgment. He's not really a God who will take vengeance on the evildoer. He's really quite forgiving. After all, Jesus died on the cross, didn't He? Doesn't that tell us that God is really quite forgiving?

So what God really wants is for you to be happy, and He wants for you to have the things you want. And the emphasis becomes, not faith as the instrument or the means by which a believer lays hold of Jesus for justification, salvation, and eternal life; faith becomes the means by which you manipulate God into doing for you what you want God to do. Faith becomes the means by which you sort of move God.

There's nothing new under the sun. Let's set our chapter today in its time. The people of Judah have basically seen that empire called Assyria take Northern Israel captive, take the nation of Ephraim captive, and take the Philistines captive. They've seen Assyria expanding, expanding, expanding. Well the Assyrians haven't gotten to Egypt yet, and Egypt looks like a fairly big strong nation. It looks as though Egypt could put up something of a decent fight. And the people of Judah are tempted to think, "Perhaps an alliance with Egypt, perhaps an alliance with a strong nation to the south will help defend us from this strong nation to the north." And worldly wisdom comes into play. It's only natural.

You know, we as God's people are so often tempted to think of trying to achieve our ends by worldly means, and we're so often tempted to think that the things that we've been given as a church, the things that the Lord Jesus Christ has invested into His church—they're not really quite enough. They're not really quite sufficient for the job. We think, after all, the faithful are so few and the church seems so weak, and it seems to be making no difference in the world. You know, maybe we just need a bit more power from somewhere else—a little bit of worldly power to help the heavenly power.

And you see instances of this in Scripture. As you read your Bible, you see people constantly inclined to compromise, constantly inclined to just kind of help God on a little bit; just give Him a bit of a prod—push Him along the right direction; just show God the way it ought to be done. And the end thereof is always disaster. The end thereof is always the turning away. The end thereof is always the wrong way to go.

In our passage today, we have our prophet Isaiah in this time of trouble—Judah being a small city-state, surrounded by potential enemies, and looking at those potential enemies and wondering, "How can we survive? How can we live? How can good come of this?"—and not wanting to hear the word of the prophets, by the way. I mean, what had Isaiah already told them so far? He'd already told them, "Your sins have been weighed against you. You're going to be taken into captivity. God will discipline you. God will bring you down. God will destroy your pride. Babylon is coming, and you will be taken off to Babylon, and a remnant shall return. And then, of that remnant, there shall be a faithful remnant—a remnant of people who truly put their trust in God." So Isaiah has constantly been rebuking this nation, and now they hear that there is a bit of a rebellion fomenting.

Empires in that day were no different to empires in our day. You take land, you tax the land. You take land, you get what you want from the place that you have invaded. And one of the cities of the nations of the Philistines, Ashdod, was fomenting a rebellion. If you look at chapter 20, verse 1, Ashdod was fighting against the king of Assyria. This was a rebellion. They'd already fallen, but decided they'd had enough of paying taxes into Assyria, enough of sending their resources to Assyria.

And it appears that they'd been in some kind of negotiations with the nation of Egypt. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, may well have been a Cushite at this moment. Remember there was a period of time in which the Cushites, or the Ethiopians, actually ruled over the nation of Egypt. And they'd been saying, "Look, we'll be the point of the spear. We'll stand up against Assyria. We'll start the battle. We'll get it going. You come along and help us, and we'll start to push the Assyrians back. We'll be your buffer zone against the kingdom of Assyria, if only you'll help us." And it would appear that Egypt was actually promising help in this battle. You know, I guess it's not that hard for kings to look at other kings and to realize, sooner or later, there's going to be war. Perhaps now is the time to start it.

But what actually happened? Well historically, what happened is that the king of that city lost the battle and tried to escape into Egypt. And the Pharaoh of Egypt, when he received him, realized that if he kept him, he would be at war with Assyria, so he put him in chains and shipped him back to Assyria. So it was an utterly humiliating defeat for the rebels. The thing in which they had trusted, the strength and the power of Egypt, had failed them completely and utterly.

So we have God's prophet Isaiah speaking in Jerusalem. Now if he's speaking in Jerusalem, you know first of all, he is speaking to God's people. Looking at verse 3: "Then the LORD said, 'As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush.'" Now I'm not so sure that he was stark naked. Look at verse 2: "at that time the LORD spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, 'Go, and loose the sackcloth from your waist and take off your sandals from your feet,' and he did so, walking naked and barefoot."

Now there's plenty of evidence to suggest that the ancient Jews of that day had outer garments and undergarments, much the same as we do. And there's plenty of reason to suspect that what God had said to Isaiah was, "Take off the outer garments. Walk around in your undergarments and no shoes."—probably a loin cloth, at the very least. He probably wasn't absolutely stark naked, but the word "naked" is used in the Bible to indicate just simply showing more than is considered right, or more than is considered normal.

If you consider back in the book of Second Samuel, when David brings back into Jerusalem the ark of the Lord, it says that David was wearing a linen ephod, and he danced before the ark of the Lord with all his might. And then what happened? He went back to his palace. And one of the princesses there, Michal, the daughter of former King Saul, mocked David for being uncovered before the people. What was she saying? She was saying that as he danced wearing this linen ephod that his legs were being uncovered by his own movements, and she spoke then of his "nakedness." He wasn't stark naked, he was wearing something, but he showed more skin than a man would normally show in a Jewish context, or in the context of Jewish society, and he was said to be "naked" by one of his wives.

So I don't think Isaiah was completely naked. I think that Isaiah was just far more undressed than he normally would have been. And it says he "walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush,"⁴ so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt."

So it's a word against Egypt, it's a word against Cush. This is the third chapter dealing with the subject of Cush. And in the end, it's a word to all the world, isn't it? Turning back into Isaiah chapter 18, it starts off speaking about the land of Cush. Isaiah chapter 18, verse 1: "Ah, land of whirring wings that is beyond the rivers of Cush." But then in verse 3 of Isaiah chapter 18, "All you inhabitants of the world, you who dwell on the earth, when a signal is raised on the mountains, look! When a trumpet is blown, hear!"

And so this word to Cush and to Egypt is a word to all the world, God warning all the world that to rely on the nations of the earth for your protection and your power is foolish. There's no protection from the will of God, there's no protection from the judgment of God. But as Isaiah is doing this in the very presence of the people of God, we have to understand that he's speaking a warning to the people of Judah. There is no help in Egypt. There is no protection in forming alliances with the nations round about you. You can trust only in one person—you can trust only in one thing. If you are the people of God, you trust in God, and God alone.

Turn back to Isaiah chapter 10. Now Isaiah chapter 10 is a chapter that includes judgment upon Assyria, that godless nation that is being used by God to bring down the nations around it. Move down in Isaiah chapter 10 to verse 20. There God speaks of the returning of the remnant of Israel: "²⁰In that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. ²¹A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. ²²For though your people Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness."

Notice that God, in dealing with the nations and dealing with Judah, is seeking and building up a remnant, a faithful remnant. And what do we know about the faithful remnant? They "will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth." They will trust only in God. They will trust only in the help of God. They will not put their trust in anything else. A remnant—a faithful, believing, remnant; a people who understand: "I trust in the Lord God. He is my deliverer. Babylon comes, Babylon will destroy my nation, I trust in the Lord God. He is my deliverer. If I live through this deportation, this captivity, I trust in the Lord God. He is my deliverer. If I'm killed in this captivity, if I'm killed in this invasion, I trust in the Lord God. He is my deliverer."

This remnant that God is seeking leans on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. They trust only in God. They don't trust in manipulations, they don't trust in worldly ideas, they don't trust in alliances. They trust only the Lord their God. So Isaiah's speaking to those people, that same group of people, and he's saying to them, "Trust only in the Lord." A prophet performs a sign. He goes naked and barefoot in the city. And he would have been speaking and preaching—there was the sign, there was the word—warning the people that you cannot trust in the world. You cannot trust in the things of the world.

What else can we draw from our text? Well I think basically we need to draw from it the lessons that come through to God's church for today—the lessons that come through to God's people today. God didn't put us in this world without power. He didn't put us in this world without the

means to be serving Him and to be involved in the building of His kingdom. He didn't put His church in the world without resources. We don't need to rely on the world for anything.

You know, it's very tempting for the church today to seek political power. It's very tempting for the church today to seek deliverance from various politicians. As I've said to you before, some politicians are better than others, and some politicians are most certainly better administrators than others, and they most certainly have higher principles than others, and they most certainly do not hate the church of God as compared to some who most clearly and obviously do hate the church of God.

There are certainly politicians better than others, and as Christians in a nation that is democratic, as Christians in a nation that has a political system that relies actually on people like us being active and involved, people like us expressing our opinion, people like us contacting our local members, etc., etc.—be involved. Do what you can do. Vote according to conscience, and vote according to righteousness. But you've got to understand, just because we can do those things in this nation, they're not our help. They're not our power. They're not going to bring in the revival that our nation so desperately needs.

I was actually just recently looking at the figures. In 1950, the church attendance rates in Australia, across the whole of the population, was 44%. By 1980, that was down to 24%. That's an enormous change, and it's even lower today—an enormous fall away, an enormous slide. The politics of our nation have been going on that whole time. And we've had politicians who have been favorable towards the church, and we've had politicians who have been unfavorable towards the church. They're not the solution.

What's the solution? The solution is a church dedicated to the word of God; a church united by true doctrine; a church of faithful believers serving the Lord in obedience. That's the only thing that can help in this mission we've been given in the world of preaching the gospel. Revival is what we desperately need, and revival doesn't come through a vote of Parliament. It doesn't come through legislation or the law. It doesn't come from the Supreme Court. It comes from the very throne room of heaven. It comes from the very presence of God. It comes by the power of the Holy Spirit. That kind of power comes only by and through the work of our God.

So by all means, don't withdraw from politics. My message is not, Circle the wagons. My message is not, Let's disappear off into some kind of commune or monastery, and close the evil of the world out. That's not going to work. Unfortunately, you and I aren't perfect, and as we perhaps enter into this idea of a closed monastery, we take some of the world in with us, don't we. Unfortunately, when we go into that place, we take the evil of our own hearts in there. Every time Christians have run off and tried to set up for themselves some kind of utopian state somewhere, they've always failed. It's always collapsed. Why? Because they're not realistic to start with. It just can't be done. It has to be a movement of the Spirit of God. It can't be done by worldly means. Don't be tempted by worldly talk. Don't be tempted by worldly teaching.

Isaiah speaks of nakedness. Isaiah himself is instructed to walk naked before the world. That's called "shame." If you searched through the Old Testament thematically, you find the concept of nakedness following sin. After mankind has fallen into sin, you find that the concept of

nakedness is to be associated with guilt, with the judgment of God, and with failure—with shame. Let's just have a look at that in a few different passages.

Turn back in the book of Isaiah to chapter 3. Here God speaks in judgment against His people. In verses 16 and 17, He speaks particularly in judgment against the women of Zion, the women of Jerusalem. He says they're haughty and they're proud. Let's read Isaiah chapter 3, starting at verse 16: ¹⁶“The LORD said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet, ¹⁷therefore the Lord will strike with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the LORD will lay bare their secret parts.”

He will uncover their secret parts. He will make them naked. People will gaze upon them. What's He saying there? He's saying He will shame them. He's saying His judgment will fall upon them. Their pride will be taken away from them.

Turn to Psalm 141 in your Bibles, a Psalm of David—David crying to the Lord for help; David crying to the Lord for strength. The help that he's seeking is, he wants the help of God to be righteous in the face of trial and testing. Let's have a look at verse 8: “But my eyes are toward you, O GOD, my Lord; in you I seek refuge; leave me not defenseless!” The word here in the ESV that's translated “defenseless” is “naked.” Leave me not naked; leave me not uncovered; leave me not without covering. What's he saying? He's saying that if the Lord leaves him naked, if the Lord leaves him uncovered, he will have no strength; he will have no power. God's judgment is against him, if that's what happens. He's begging the Lord for help.

And that's the picture that you get in the Old Testament, particularly concerning nakedness. It's the judgment of God. It's a shaming process. In the book of Genesis, when you read about the life of Joseph, think about the pictures you get in the life of Joseph with regards to clothing. When he was living with Jacob and his brothers, and he was his father's favored son, what was done? He was given a coat, which we've translated in our Bibles as one “of many colours.” We're not quite sure what it actually means, but he was given a special robe. He was clothed by his father, for he was favored.

What happened when his brothers turned against him? They stripped him naked. It says they took his coat. He was thrown in a pit, naked. His coat was torn, they shed some blood upon it, and sent it back to his father to prove that he was dead. He was naked. Then what happened? He was sent down to Egypt, into slavery. When he finally comes out of the jail, after all his testings and trials, what happens? We're told that the Pharaoh clothed him. He was dressed once again. Now I'm sure he wasn't naked all those years, but the point is that the blessings of God were coming upon him. He was being clothed. That's the picture that we need to be picking up on in the idea of nakedness.

Let's just follow this through in our New Testaments. Turn to Second Corinthians chapter 5. Paul here picks up on the idea of being naked, and he uses it in a different way. I don't think he uses it in a wrong way—obviously he's inspired by the Holy Spirit—but in using it in a different way, he's giving it a deeper and more important meaning. Second Corinthians 5, starting at verse 1:

“¹ For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God.” What’s he speaking of? He’s speaking of his body. The tent that is our earthly home is a metaphor for his body. “We have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling”—he’s saying that we’re longing for our resurrection body, we’re longing for that eternal life that we’re going to be granted, to live in the presence of God—“³ if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked.”

Now stop and think a little more deeply about what he is saying. He’s saying that in this tent in which we groan, we are, in a way, naked; but when we have put on our heavenly dwelling, we are, in a way, clothed. What is he saying? He’s saying that mankind, in our sin, is naked before God. He’s saying that we’re like babies. We’re naked before God. He knows us. He sees everything about us. And yet, if we are clothed in our resurrection life, we are clothed in our heavenly dwelling, we’re clothed in the sight of God. We’re covered.

“⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.” What’s he saying? Let’s speak a little more about that. He’s saying that in our current state, as sinners, we’re as though we were unclothed, but in the state of righteousness, justified in the sight of God, we are clothed. And he’s saying that in the resurrection state, we are fully clothed—in the eternal future resurrection state, it’s as though we are fully clothed.

What can we see there? We can see a continuation and a discontinuation, can’t we? What do I mean by that—what’s the continuation? Well first of all, he’s saying that we’re not going to become something we are not. What we are is what we will be. We are people. We have a physical presence. God created matter, and God created mankind in this universe of matter to bear His image. What that tells us is that to have a body, the physical matter—to have a physical body is not in and of itself necessarily evil. The problem’s not the things of which we are made; the problem is what we have *done* with the things of which we are made. The problem is sin.

What he’s saying when he speaks of this concept of being further clothed is that you’re not going to be a non-physical entity in the resurrection. You are going to have a body. There’s going to be a continuation of life as you know it. But there’s also going to be a discontinuation. What’s the discontinuation? Life as you know it in this world is sinful. Life in the eternal state that Christians enjoy will be sinless. That’s the discontinuation.

And so we can look forward to a genuine life in the presence of God as people, and yet it’s not like this life, because it’s not impacted by sin. It’s not dragged down by sin. We will be clothed in the sight of God because we’re righteous. But now, because we’re sinners struggling with sin, it’s as though we’re naked. And Paul is picking up that idea from the Old Testament of nakedness and being clothed and he’s developing it into a more eschatological way of looking at it. Eternal life will be the state of being fully clothed.

You find similar thoughts in other references in the New Testament. Turn to Hebrews chapter 4. This is a chapter that brings us to the conclusion of a line of argument concerning the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and how wonderful He is, and how He's the fulfillment of all promises. Having spoken of God's rest, the Sabbath Rest that people can enter into through faith in Christ, we read from verse 11:

“¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” What's that disobedience? It's the disobedience of God's people, speaking in an Old Testament way of how the people did not enter into the Promised Land. “¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

So what's the author of Hebrews saying there? Nothing is hidden from God. All people are naked in the sight of God. He's saying that the word of God strips people naked. The word of God strips people back. It rips off the covering. And if it doesn't rip off the covering, well, that's not good. The word of God should rip off the covering that we have over our hearts, and expose our hearts to God—expose our very inmost being to God. “Living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

You see how that picture of naked is being used—it's saying that here, the word of God is making us, as it were, naked before God. My point is that this use by Isaiah of nakedness and the picture of nakedness is telling people—all the world, everybody—in the sight of God, you think you're covered. In the sight of God, you think you can hide. In the sight of God, you think you're shielded. You think you can get away with these things. You think you can get away with idolatry, you think you can get away with being dishonest, you think you can get away with half-hearted worship, you think you can get away with striking alliances with idolatrous nations, you think that you can get away with compromising the word of God.

And Isaiah's saying, “No! You're naked. You're like babies. What you are is known. Nothing is hidden. You're an open book before God, and what you are before God is what you will become, and because you think that you can hide yourself from the sight of God, you're going to be dragged out of this city, naked, imprisoned, and shamed.” I wonder if it was a popular message. I wonder if anyone wanted to hear that message. I wonder if it was the message that drew in the crowds. Somehow or other, I don't think so.

As I've said before, I'm sure Isaiah at least preached to a faithful remnant. But I wonder if that was a message that was even comfortable to the faithful remnant. I wonder if that was a message that was comfortable to those who were receiving the word of God with faith. Probably not. It's discomfoting to me. I find it discomfoting to preach it to you and to apply it to myself. I hope you're finding it discomfoting. If you're not, I'm afraid your heart is hardened. I'm afraid you've had no dealings with the Spirit of God. I'm afraid you don't truly know the Lord Jesus

Christ. You're a religious formalist, perhaps. You're taking things for granted that you ought not to take for granted. I wonder how they received his word.

Of course, there would have been the mockers. "He thinks he's a prophet. Why is he walking around in his underwear? Aww, he thinks he's a prophet. He's an idiot. Everybody knows that the way you conduct religion is with decency. The way you conduct religion is the way that priests do it." But he delivers that message.

What's the church doing in the world? What are we, in the sight of the world? What are we, the faithful remnant in the Lord Jesus Christ, meant to be doing in the sight of the world? Are we viewed as anything special? Are we seen as anyone to be honoured? Are we listened to? When was the last time a leader of this country actually consulted with a church leader as to whether or not he was doing the right thing? Not that you would find a church leader in this country today that you would probably want them to consult with—certainly not the high-profile people. Let's face it, the faithful preachers in Australia today have a very low profile, not because we want one, but because that's all we can get.

People are shunning us, people are turning away, people don't want to hear this message of nakedness in the sight of God, people don't want to hear this message of the conviction of sin. People don't want to be told that the things that they're relying upon, the things that they're trusting in, will fail them and that they can't hide from the judgment of God; that they can't form a worldly alliance and push back the judgment of God; that just because you change a few laws, it doesn't mean that what you're doing is right.

No one wants to hear that message. They don't want to hear it at all. But that's the message that the church has been charged with. That's what we've been told to do. We've been told to go out into the world, commanding the world, warning the world, teaching the world—we've been told that we must speak prophetically. Are we prophets? No. Am I Isaiah? No. Am I Jeremiah? No. Ezekiel? No, nor any other prophet. I haven't been given a vision of the throne room of God. I've told you the truth—I haven't been given any such commission.

What's my commissioning? My commissioning is the sending of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the way He was sent, and the way He sent out His apostles, and the way the apostles sent out their appointed leaders. And what was that sending? The sending was, "Go out into the world with the word of God. Go out into the world with the message of God. Go out into the world with the message of the gospel." What's the gospel? It's actually a command.

Turn to Acts chapter 20. What's the scene? Paul, in this part of the book of Acts, is on his way back to Jerusalem where he's going to be taken captive, he's going to be imprisoned. The Jews are going to accuse him, and he's going to end up before the Roman authorities. On the way back, he is in a place called Miletus, and there he meets with the elders of the church in Ephesus. I want you to hear how Paul speaks here. Verse 17:

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: 'You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and

with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.’

“²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.””

Now I just want you to move back to Acts chapter 20, verse 21: “testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. What’s going on there? What’s he saying? You see, God has commandments for His church. What does He say? “Believe and repent.” That’s His commandment towards us as Christians, and that believing and that repenting are always in an ongoing and present tense. There’s never a moment in your life where you say, “I have believed.” It’s, “I am believing.” If you think because you said years ago that you believed, that that’s it, you’re safe—No. Are you believing now?

Christian faith is believing in an ongoing and present sense, and in an ongoing and present tense. We should always be believing. It’s the same with repentance. We imagine sometimes, I’m afraid, that we think repentance happens once. That’s what Martin Luther realized when he nailed the ninety-five theses to the church door. One of them was that the Christian life is a life of repentance—constantly being convicted, constantly coming to repentance.

Here’s the thing. What God commands for His church, God commands for the world. The thing that God expects His church to be and to do, God expects everybody in the world to be and to do. The whole world is actually in disobedience and rebellion. The command goes out to the world: Believe, repent. Repent, believe. The sin that finally God will judge, the sin that will destroy the sinners of this world, is the sin of unbelief and disobedience—unbelief and disobedience.

That sin of unbelief and disobedience has many different fruits—all forms of idolatry, all forms of ungodliness, all forms of evil, all forms of sexual perversity. They're all the fruit of unbelief and disobedience. The sin that finally draws down the judgment of God will be unbelief and disobedience. Am I sure of that? I'm absolutely certain of that. Turn back in the book of Acts to chapter 17. Now we're looking in Paul's sermon in Athens. We'll start reading at verse 29—Paul is coming to the end of his sermon to the philosophers in Athens:

“²⁹ ‘Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he’—who’s that? God—‘now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’”

Who was Paul speaking to? Was he speaking to the church at this moment, in this sermon? Was he speaking to a gathering of believers or unbelievers, Christians or pagans? He was speaking to pagan unbelievers—idolaters. Remember, this is the sermon where he begins, “I see that you are very religious. You’ve got idols everywhere. You’ve even got an idol ‘To the unknown god.’”

What is his message to them? “Please, please consider Jesus. Please, please be nicer. If you could just find it within your heart to be good. Please.” What’s his message? Commanding men everywhere to *repent!* “But now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” His message is a command. This preaching of the gospel is going out as a command. It’s not going out as a request. It’s not going out as an as finely-placed and as-nice-a discussion as you could possibly have. It’s going out with boldness here—commanding all people everywhere to what? To repent! A command—not a request, not a suggestion, but a command: Repent!

Now if the command’s going out to everyone to repent, what’s the judgment of God going to be when they don’t repent? “You didn’t obey. You were disobedient to the word. You did not heed what I told you. You did not repent and you did not believe.” Now you know, you can get into that finely tuned technical theological argument: “Oh, but you know, they’re unbelievers, and they can’t believe unless they’re given the life of the Spirit of God.” That’s no escape. It’s not as though they’re ignorant in their evil. It’s not as though they don’t know that they’re doing wrong. By the power of the Spirit of God, of course they know that they’re doing wrong. God’s Holy Spirit comes into the world to do what? Convict of sin.

Let’s turn to the gospel of John, chapter 16. This is Jesus speaking to the disciples, and He’s speaking to them once again of the sending of the Holy Spirit. He’s going to send the Holy Spirit into the world through the church, through the ministry of the gospel. Let’s hear what Jesus says, John chapter 16, starting at verse 1: “¹‘I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. ² They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. ³ And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. ⁴ But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.’

“‘I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵ But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’” ⁶ But because I

have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. ¹² I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” We’ll stop there.

What’s happening here? Who’s coming? Who’s coming to the church, who’s coming to the disciples, and from them, through the church, into the world? The Holy Spirit—the Spirit of God. He’s the one who comes. He’s the one who’s coming. And what’s He going to do? “Convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” He’s going to convict the world “concerning sin, because they do not believe in me.” And it really doesn’t matter what they’re attitude is, it doesn’t matter if they’re mocking, it doesn’t matter if they’re refusing to acknowledge in any way that this is the truth, it’s everyone who hears the word of God.

Understand, my friends, we’re just people. In a way, when we speak the word of God, we’re like a postman sticking a letter into a letter box. We’re just the means of delivery. Don’t worry about the fact that you see no sign in that person that they’re accepting what you say to be the word of God, because what’s the promise of Jesus here? The promise of Jesus is that this word that we speak, these words that we get from the Scripture and that we speak from God, are being used by the Holy Spirit to do what? To convict the world of sin. They will be convicted.

You say, “But hang on, they might not repent.” No, they might not. They might be convicted and then be hardened in their sin, hearing the truth of what is said, rejecting the conviction, being hardened in their sin, and drawing down upon themselves the judgment of God. Remember in Romans chapter 1, that discourse about sin and how sin leads to hardening of heart, and how you get handed over—people who will not acknowledge God in heaven and will not be thankful. First of all they turn to idols, and then after turning to idols, they turn to sexual uncleanness and perversion—you end up with people practicing homosexuality. Go back to the start of that discussion. It doesn’t say these things happen because they did not know who God was. It said these things happen because they *did know* who God was, and *refused* to acknowledge the truth.

They refused to acknowledge the truth of the things that were being said to them, by what? Well, to start with, as we’ve said before, creation preaches the glory of God. The heavens declare the glory of God. The sky above proclaims His handiwork. Anyone who looks upon this creation and cannot give glory to God as Creator has already hardened his heart. The gospel goes forth as the command everywhere to all men, “Repent! Repent, and put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Turn from your sins, put your faith in Christ, beg forgiveness from God.”

And this gospel goes forth with and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Everyone who hears those words, everyone who hears that message, is being testified to by the Holy Spirit of God. If they refuse to submit to that conviction, their heart is being hardened in sin. The Holy Spirit comes to convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.

The world hates the church. The world hates faithful Christians. The world hates the word of God. In our society now, we're seeing more and more people come to power, and what does it seem that their agenda is? What does it seem that their aim is? It's to break down every kind of authority structure, and every kind of ordained life, or pattern that God has set in place.

You would think, I would think, and it seems most obvious to me that you have for the family, a father, a mother, and children. And then you have an extended family round about, that nuclear family. It would seem obvious, wouldn't it, you need a father and a mother to get children, and the best way to raise children is that that same father and mother raise their own children. And we're being governed by people who hate even that thought. They can't even stand the thought that a family is a man, a woman, and their children. They want to destroy the family.

Not only do they want to destroy the family, they want to try and destroy all distinctions between male and female. They're not doing it for any scientific reason. The science is absolutely confirmed. You're born male or female. You can't change the cells in your body. You can't change the DNA you've been given. It doesn't matter what you do to the outer layer, you are what you are—man or woman, full stop. They're not doing it for any scientific reason. They're not doing it because there's any benefit to all of mankind.

How many children are happier because they've been raised in a broken and fragmented family? How many children are happier because their family falls apart? I've only got to look to my own family, and can tell you, you're not happy as your family falls apart around you. You're not happy at all. I was grown up and had moved out of the house when my mum and dad finally broke up, and it still broke my heart, even though I had seen them for years and years be self-destructive and crazy.

There's no happiness coming from a broken family. There's no benefit to it. And yet we have people who are utterly determined to destroy all of these structures that God built into our society. Why? Why are they determined to do these things? They hate God. They hate the truth. They hate the word of God. They hate the authority and the power of God. They hate the fact that in the end, they know—they know they will answer to God.

Understand something—all their denial is pretending. It's extremely determined pretending. As a child, you may have imagined that by sticking your fingers in your ears and closing your eyes, you're somehow not responsible for doing what your parents are telling you to do. You know, you step around the corner, or you step behind the door and you shut the door—you know your mother's about to tell you to do something you don't want to hear or you don't want to do. You're hoping that somehow or other, that's going to remove from you the responsibility for disobeying your parents. What are you doing? You're pretending.

The very reason your eyes were closed and your ears were blocked was that you were being disobedient because of your own desires. The whole world is disobedient because of its own desires. And that disobedience is pretending. They're building layer upon layer of pretending. And we're supposed to accept that their pretending is reality, and then we have to pretend that

their pretending is true, and then we have to pretend that we're happy with their pretending, and then we have to pretend that they're not doing anything wrong.

That's their desire for all the world. Everyone must agree with them, and everyone must agree with everything they do, and no one can possibly disagree with them, because to disagree with them is just, "oh, so hurtful! Disagree with us and you're offending us, and we might just run off and commit suicide." Once again—pretending. The spoilt child holds its breath. I see stupid parents whose kid gets angry, loses his or her temper, this spoilt little child, and holds its breath to get its way. That's really very easily solved. God created us with a rear part, a padded part, and I'm telling you, I've never seen a child yet that when you slap that padded part, he could hold his breath. They draw in a great big breath, and then they go, "Wahhhh, wahhhh!" But they're not holding their breath any longer, are they? And they didn't get their way.

It's so childish and so foolish and so stupid, the things that the world is doing. And they're naked in the sight of God. Remember Isaiah's word, Isaiah's sign, this sign that he lived out in the sight of all people. They're naked in the sight of God. You're hiding nothing from God. He sees into the very depths of your heart. And that nakedness that God sees is going to become reality for all who will not do what? For all who will not repent. On that judgment day, you're going to either be clothed or unclothed. You're either going to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ or unclothed.

You see, as Christians, we believe in justification by faith alone. What's justification? It's to be declared righteous in the sight of God. For those who are justified, for those who have been declared righteous in the sight of God, that judgment day is simply a confirmation before all of creation that the things that you know now and that have been declared by God in His word—that you as the servant of God are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. You're clothed. To those who do not have that righteousness, to those who are not justified through faith towards Christ and repentance towards God, on the judgment day they appear before God as naked, and naked will be their state. Now I'm not saying "naked" as in "unclothed." They can appear before God in a three-piece suit. It will make no difference. Their unrighteousness, their wickedness, their evil nature will be naked before God and all of creation, and naked before God and all of creation, they will be sent off to the place of eternal punishment.

That's Isaiah's message. Nakedness. You can be naked, or you can be clothed. And if you're naked, you'll be dragged off a captive, naked. Or you can be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Let's close in prayer.

Father in heaven, I do thank you for your word. I do thank you for the things that you speak to us from your word. I do indeed thank you that we, as your justified saints, can stand before you confident that we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, that we stand before you not naked in our sins, but blessed and covered in the beautiful garments of the Lord Jesus Christ and His righteousness. I pray, Father, that you would help us to preach this message to the nations, that you would help us as a church to be your servants. I ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.