

“How the Adulterous City is Redeemed”

Isaiah 1:21-31

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

- 21 How the faithful city
has become a whore,
she who was full of justice!
Righteousness lodged in her,
but now murderers.*
- 22 Your silver has become dross,
your best wine mixed with water.*
- 23 Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not bring justice to the fatherless,
and the widow's cause does not come to them.*
- 24 Therefore the Lord declares,
the LORD of hosts,
the Mighty One of Israel:
“Ah, I will get relief from 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.*
- 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.”*
- 27 Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.*
- 28 But rebels and sinners shall be broken together,
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.*
- 29 For they shall be ashamed of the oaks
that you desired;
and you shall blush for the gardens
that 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 tinder,
and his work a spark,
and both of them shall burn together,
with none to quench them.*

- Isaiah 1:21-31, ESV

How Bad Can We Be, Really?

What keeps people from responding to the Good News of salvation in Jesus and trusting in Him? Truthfully, many people have never really heard or understood the true Gospel message. Studies have shown that most professing Christians, even most faithful church-attending Christians embrace some version of self-salvation by good works. They believe that good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell, so you should go to church and be a Christian so you can be a good person and pass the test and get into heaven. Of course, no one is perfect, so God forgives our failings (because that's His job) and basically grades us on a curve – As long as we call ourselves Christians, go to church occasionally, basically obey the law, and we aren't as bad as Adolf Hitler or Jeffrey Dahmer, we'll probably get it. In the meantime, Jesus helps us feel good about ourselves and following Him helps us to live a happier, better-adjusted life.

One researcher, Christian Smith, termed the average American Christian's faith "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." Now that's a lot of big words, but it means this:

1. Moralistic: Be a good person. Jesus was a good person and He set an example for us to follow, so love your neighbors – or at least, be nice to people – and you'll be okay. Just as yourself, "What Would Jesus Do?" Answer: He would be nice, and you should be nice, too.
2. Therapeutic: Trust in Jesus to help you overcome your fears, anxieties, and generally live a happy life. Jesus is your counselor and comforter. He likes you and thinks you're wonderful, and He wants you to like yourself and think you're wonderful, too.
3. Deism: God sees you and cares about you, but He's probably not super involved in your life. He's watching, from a distance, and cheering you on. And if you ever need someone to talk to or sympathize, He's there for you. You can do it!

There's just one small problem with this system of thinking: It's completely unbiblical and the very opposite of the Biblical Gospel.

How can people hear the Bible, read the Bible, sing the Bible, and still believe this utterly unbiblical false Gospel? Because really hearing the true Gospel requires that we understand and confess two things:

1. We are not in control. God is.
2. We are not basically good people - like, at all.

I'm thinking this is a huge reason why most Christians have such a hard time reading the Bible. They're expecting a self-help book that will affirm their self-esteem while inspiring them to make something of themselves. They're confused by a book that is all about God, who He is, what He has done, and what He requires of people.

Only those who know they need redemption will be interested in the Good News of the Redeemer. Only those who know they are lost and without hope will be ready to hear the Good News of the Savior who seeks and saves the lost. So, the Bible spends quite a bit of time explaining and showing how bad we are so that we will turn from self-reliance and self-righteousness to God and His glorious Gospel.

I. What Was Good Has Gone Rotten, vv. 21-23

One of the things that helps us understand the Bible is knowing that people don't really change. The people of Israel in Isaiah's day were not fundamentally different from professing believers today. Yes, their culture was different, but their hearts were largely the same. We saw last week that God's people really thought that by coming to church and worshiping God, they were appeasing God and showing what good people they were. But God was actually disgusted by their worship because they thought they could buy Him off by going through the motions and doing all the right things without really repenting and believing. And so, God had some harsh words for them. He called them Sodom and Gomorrah.

Here today, we pick up in verse 21 and God is calling His once-faithful and holy city, Jerusalem, a harlot, a whore. God loves His people too much to let us sit in a self-satisfied complacency where we are blind to our deep need for Him!

Jerusalem was once better:

*“she who was full of justice!
Righteousness lodged in her”*

This is most likely a reference back to the years of the united kingdom under David and Solomon. Neither David nor Solomon were perfect men; both had major sinful shortcomings. However, they did sincerely worship God and establish God-honoring worship in Jerusalem. They also cared about justice and established faithful judges who would judge with equity and without partiality. Future kings were often compared to David, who was upheld as a model – though far from perfect.

Yet even the flawed and only relative righteousness and justice of David and Solomon's days was far superior to the situation that dominated Jerusalem and Judah in Isaiah's day. For the city is now described as a harlot, a prostitute, an unfaithful bride and the sin that has corrupted the people of God is severe –

*Righteousness lodged in her,
but now murderers.
Your silver has become dross,
your best wine mixed with water.
Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not bring justice to the fatherless,
and the widow's cause does not come to them. – vv. 21-23, ESV*

There is a wanton disregard for human life and for justice. That which should bring value and refreshment to the people of God – their silver and their best wine have become nothing but dross and diluted with water. Lots of people have speculated as to what the silver and the strong wine could represent, but as usual in Scripture, the surrounding verses give a good explanation. We know that righteousness and justice are what has been lost and corrupted: the princes who should be modeling and enforcing righteousness are instead the companions of thieves, while the judges who should be teaching and upholding the Law and justice are instead loving bribes and not bringing justice to the fatherless and the widow.

There's an order and a flow to the corruption described in chapter 1: First, our hearts grow cold toward God and so we do not worship God rightly, and, then, once we neglect the love and right worship of the Lord, that overflows in our lives in a neglect of public righteousness and true justice. If we fail to love God, we will not love our neighbors. And

for religiously observant people, often the sign that we're not truly loving God is that we aren't loving our neighbors.

God often used the treatment of the fatherless and the widow as the standard by which He measured the faithfulness of His people. God identifies Himself as "Father of the fatherless and the protector of widows" in Psalm 68:5. James summarizes true religion in this way: "*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*" We may often fool ourselves and others into thinking that we truly love God because we keep up appearances in worship, but the Lord sees our hearts and calls us to examine the rest of our lives to see whether we are really loving Him as evidenced by loving others.

II. What God's Justice Requires, vv. 24-25

God will not just sit back and watch murderers take over His holy city and watch His holy justice be corrupted so that bribes buy justice and widows and orphans are left vulnerable to be oppressed and exploited. God's justice moves Him to act:

*²⁴ Therefore the Lord declares,
the LORD of hosts,
the Mighty One of Israel:
"Ah, I will get relief from 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.*

Isaiah uses one of the strongest titles of God found anywhere in his book in verse 24: the Lord (Adonai – Master, Ruler, Sovereign One) declares, He who is the LORD of hosts (LORD Sabaoth, as we sing in "A Mighty Fortress"), YaHWeH of the Armies of Heaven, the Mighty One of Israel. In this amazing title, God's sovereign rule over His people. His eternal unchanging self-sufficiency, His command over all the angels of heaven, and His Almighty Power are all emphasized, which means that we'd better sit up and pay attention to what God is saying here.

And we'd better, because God declares

*“I will get relief from 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.”*

There’s no hesitation, no maybe, no wishful thinking or probable speculation, God declares what He is going to do, and His sovereignty and power assure us that He will do what He says He will do.

And what will God do? He will get relief for His just and holy wrath and He will avenge Himself. He calls His people who are engaging in this half-hearted worship and this public unrighteousness and injustice His enemies and His foes. Alec Motyer says of this verse: “Any facile statement that God always hates the sin but loves the sinner needs to be countered by Isaiah’s insistence that those who transgress are “*my enemies*” and “*my foes*.”

Psalm 7:11-12 says:

*God is a righteous judge,
and a God who feels indignation every day.
If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword;
he has bent and readied his bow*

Now that might not fit nicely on a bumper sticker or a t-shirt, but it is true, and it is what God’s holiness and justice demands and requires and what God has determined to do.

But God doesn’t just have a plan for just wrath and vengeance. He also has a plan to purify His people. He had said that their silver had become dross, but now He says, “I . . . *will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.*” That means He is going to purify all the garbage and make His people holy and pure again. And this truth at the end of verse 26 sets up the good news of verses 26-27.

III. How God’s Grace Will Restore and Redeem, vv. 26-27

*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.”*

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

Verse 26 tells what God will do for His holy city, for His people, and then verse 27 tells how He will do it. The harlot city will be so purified that it will once again be the faithful city; it will be a city of righteousness.

Now, here's where we need to stop and realize that we are Zion. We are the holy city. That's what Scripture tells us. The church of Jesus Christ, the gathered assembly of His people, is today the City of God, the Holy Jerusalem, and even the Living Temple of God. So, what God is here promising to do for the holy city, He is promising to do for us.

And we need to see that we need it, or we'll slip right back into the good old Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and miss the glory of the Gospel, the Good News of our salvation. I look at what many Christian people share on social media, and it seems to me that we're often very busy trying to convince ourselves and others that we are the good guys. We are the ones who are in the right, on the right side, doing what is good and just. But that's what the people of Jerusalem in Isaiah's day thought, too. There's no one more blind to his own sin than the man who thinks he is righteous.

We are the ones with blood on our hands who need to be cleansed. We are the ones who have failed to love God and love our neighbors, whose silver has become dross. We have preached ourselves as the good people and our team as the righteous ones and have kept people from seeing the glory of Christ our Redeemer. The world sees through our tissue-paper masquerade of self-righteousness, but what they're not seeing is the redeeming and purifying power of the grace of God.

So, when God makes a promise to purify His people and make them the faithful city and a city of righteousness, He is making that promise to us. Notice that it's not something we do, but it is something He will do. And how will He do it?

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

The justice and righteousness that are so glaringly missing from our lives and our communities God will Himself provide. Jesus' perfect, sinless life provides the righteousness, and His cursed death on the cross provides the justice. And this is how God satisfies His just wrath and avenges Himself – He does it by giving His Son who gives His life on the cross in our place, to bear our sin and take the wrath and curse of God which our

sins deserve. Jesus drinks the cup of God's wrath to the bottom, draining it dry. This was no small feat; it filled Jesus with such dread that He pleaded with His Father three times if the cup could pass from Him, but He willingly submitted Himself to His Father's will and not His own human nature's desire to escape such vengeance – even though the struggle to submit caused Him such agony that He sweat drops of blood. Still, in love for you and me, He submitted. He was the object of God's just and holy wrath; God got satisfaction in His Son.

Righteousness was fulfilled in the life of Jesus, and justice was satisfied in His death. And for whom did God provide this righteousness and justice? It is "*those in her who repent*" who are redeemed. In other words, God provides this justice and righteousness for all those whom He would call to saving faith and true repentance, which are gifts of God's grace.

Sadly, there are many in Zion, in the holy city, who do not repent. Many scoff at the provision of redemption through the justice and righteousness Jesus accomplished for us. They think they can make it on their own. And for them, the final verses of Isaiah I are a sobering warning.

IV. What Judgment Will Come, vv. 28-31

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

*29 For they shall be ashamed of the oaks
that you desired;
and you shall blush for the gardens
that 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 tinder,
and his work a spark,
and both of them shall burn together,
with none to quench them.*

"*The oaks that you desired*" is a reference to the pagan idolatry being pursued by many of God's people. So, these verses are telling us that there are those among God's people,

those called by His name and registered in His city, who continue to rebel and forsake the Lord.

Yes, we are all sinners, and none of us has any righteousness of our own. But if we despise the redemption purchased by Christ in His life, death, and resurrection and spurn His grace, if we insist on our self-righteousness and we go astray after idols again and again, still desiring the delightful oaks of our cultural idolatry, we need to be soberly warned.

And lest you think this is just a harsh Old Testament thing, the warning is given in Hebrews 10:26-31:

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (ESV)

That's very strong language. There are people who have received the knowledge of the truth of the redemption secured by the Son of God, by the blood of His covenant, and who have gone on sinning deliberately – This doesn't mean the normal struggles against sin that all Christians have, but it means living as if Jesus did not purify us by His blood. It is to "trample underfoot the Son of God" and to profane His blood by denying Him, refusing to honor Him and follow Him, turning back from following Him, rejecting Him.

Isaiah warns:

*you shall be like an oak
whose leaf withers,
and like a garden without water.
31 And the strong shall become tinder,
and his work a spark,
and both of them shall burn together,
with none to quench them.*

This is a sobering warning of eternal judgment in unquenchable fire. I believe it is directed against people like Bart Ehrman, who was raised and educated in evangelical Christianity but who denies the faith and publicly seeks to undermine Christianity. It is directed against people like Josh Harris and others who have “deconstructed” their faith and rejected the Son of God who is, in fact, the only Savior for sinners. They think they’re not really sinners and don’t need salvation and won’t face judgment. But they’re wrong. Eternally and tragically wrong.

So, what about you?

Jesus has secured redemption for all those who repent. For all who turn from self-righteousness, self-reliance, self-justification, self-rule and seek Him, call upon Him, and trust in Him alone for salvation. Is that you? God calls you to repent and trust in Christ, and God by His grace provides you with the gifts of repentance and faith. So, will you turn and trust Him today?

And if you have, does it show in your life by how you love God and love your neighbor, worshiping from the heart and caring for the least and lowest around you?