

How God deals with his people's sin

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

- [0 : 0 0] Well, we are going to turn to our Bibles now and to our reading for this morning. Bob is going to begin a series in Isaiah. So we're going to read this morning in Isaiah chapter 1. You'll find that, I think, in the Visitor's Church Bibles on page 566. Otherwise, you'll find it pretty much near the middle of your Bibles. A long book of Isaiah before Jeremiah after Song of Songs.
- And we're going to read together the whole of Isaiah chapter 1. So brace yourselves, because it is a bracing word.
- The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, the kings of Judah.
- Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken. Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.
- [1 : 0 6] The ox knows its master and the donkey its master's crib. But Israel does not know. My people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation. A people laden with iniquity.
- Offspring of evildoers. Children who deal corruptly. They have forsaken the Lord. They have despised the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. They are utterly estranged. Why will you still be struck down?
- Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot, even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds.
- They are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil. Your country lies desolate. Your cities are burned with fire. In your very presence, foreigners devour your land.
- It is desolate as overthrown by foreigners. And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.
- [2 : 1 4] If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom.
- Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah. What to me is the multitude of our sacrifices, says the Lord? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and of the fat of well-fed beasts.
- I do not delight in the blood of bulls or lambs or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who is required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings.
- Incense is an abomination to me. New moons and Sabbaths and the calling of convocations. I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates.
- They become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.
- [3 : 1 9] Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil.

Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct oppression. Bring justice to the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause. Come now.

Let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land. But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword.

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. How the faithful city has become a whore. She who was full of justice.

[4 : 19] Righteousness lodged in her. But now she murders. Now he's 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. Therefore, the Lord declares, the Lord of hosts, the mighty one of Israel.

I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes. I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.

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. But rebels and sinners shall be broken together as those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed.

[5 : 29] For they shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers and like a garden without water.

And the strong shall become tinder and his work a spark. And both of them shall burn together with none to quench them.

Amen. May God bless to us this His word. Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 566.

And we'll have a moment of prayer. Amen. And God our Father, we pray that you will take my words in all their weakness, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ Himself, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. I don't know if you've ever come across the Breton Sailors' Prayer.

[6 : 47] These sailors, setting out in their flimsy boats across the vast spaces of the Atlantic, used to pray, Lord, the sea is so big and my boat is so small.

That's exactly what I feel like on the brink of considering the prophet Isaiah. My boat is so small and the sea is so big. Some of us survived Jeremiah, and Jeremiah, by the way, is a longer book than Isaiah, so don't panic.

I'd like to have a look, please, at that sheet you should have on your chair, which I've called Finding Our Way in Isaiah, Finding Our Way Across This Great Ocean.

First of all, don't panic at the length of the book. It actually isn't all that long. If you read in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, The Message, I'm going to be referring to that later, it's only 138 pages.

We wouldn't normally regard that as a massive book. Also useful resource is the Isaiah by the Day, a new devotional translation by Alec Motier, the veteran expositor who has spent decades upon decades on the book of Isaiah, and he produced this recently.

[8 : 07] He uses a similar metaphor to the Breton sailor in his first commentary. He says, I feel like a very small mouse who has been given the privilege of nibbling endlessly at a very large and nourishing cheese.

Very briefly, and this will save a 20-minute lecture on history, I'll leave you to read this, but he ministers for over half a century, probably, in the reigns of these kings mentioned, Josiah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

It's very likely he lived on into the dreadful days of Manasseh, which you can read about in 2 Kings 21. Manasseh, who undid systematically all the good, all the reformation that his father, Hezekiah, had achieved.

And in these years, he very probably wrote chapters 40 to 66, which reflect on the situation. The exile. The northern kingdom went to Assyria, and he predicts the final exile of God's people to Babylon and their return.

Indeed, this series I'm calling Zion's Fall and Rise. Zion is going to fall, and then it's going to rise. His theme's God-centered book about holiness, uniqueness of Yahweh, Israel's God, and the apparent eclipse of David's house and the king who is to come, and Zion, of course, past, present, and future, and the structure.

[9 : 36] I don't need to read that through. I'll try to divide the book into five parts. It's also been said that I have no personal experience of this, that you can eat an elephant if you cut it into slices.

I've never tried that. But, so we're going to try and look at this book in slices, some of them large, some of them small. But what is chapter 1 about?

And I'm going to take verses 16 to 20, and in particular, verse 18, as the key to unlock this part of the book. Verse 18, Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. This is the big problem that spoiled everything then.

This is the big problem that spoils everything now. The problem of sin. And Isaiah uses many words for sin in this chapter.

[10 : 37] For example, if you look back at verse 4, a sinful nation, a sinning nation, a nation that keeps on sinning, these are the actual acts, the actual consequences of being sinful.

And then iniquity, laden with iniquity. Iniquity is our sinful nature that makes us commit sin. The kind of twisted, interned nature that makes us sinners.

And then in verse, later in the verse, they have despised the Holy One. They have, and in verse 2, they have rebelled.

Rebellion is deliberate sins. Now the prayer book talks about sins in three ways. Negligence, weakness, and our own deliberate fault.

We're all familiar with that. Negligence. We're not disciplined enough and we slip into sins that we ought to avoid. Weakness. We want to avoid sin, but we're not strong enough.

[11 : 44] Do you remember how Paul wrestles with that in Romans 7? The evil that I don't want to do is what I do. And the good I want to do, I don't do it because I'm not strong enough.

And then rebellion, our own deliberate fault. We know we are sinning, but we persist in doing it. Isaiah identifies that as the problem, and it is still the problem.

See, without sin all would be well, wouldn't it? There'd be no need for a saviour, no need for holiness, no need for a Bible. We could just merrily go on on our way.

So that's why I'm calling today's sermon How God Deals With His People's Sin. There are two dead-end ways of dealing with sin, and we'll come across both of these as we go through the book.

One is legalism. Legalism, which makes us feel guilty, but does nothing to alleviate the guilt. It tells us what we're getting wrong. It tells us what's wrong about us, but it does nothing at all to alleviate the guilt.

[12 : 52] Condemnation, disapproval, but no help, no blessing. The other way is the way of liberalism. That seems very kind. Everything's swept under the carpet.

You know, the kind of, oh, we're all imperfect. We're not all what we ought to be. The trouble is that is cruel as well because nothing is dealt with.

Nothing is brought out into the open. Nothing is confronted. Nothing is faced. The bland, meaningless word fine covers us. Oh, I'm fine.

What kind of, what a mess and a morass of sinning and weaknesses that so often covers. So, how does God deal with his people's sins?

Isaiah is telling us three things happen when we sin and showing us how God deals with it. First of all, sin means a breakdown in relationships.

[13 : 47] This is verses two to nine. Isaiah summons us to a law court as Moses had done at the end of Deuteronomy. Remember, the prophets speak with the voice of Moses.

There's no authority in the Old Testament that bypasses or supersedes that of Moses. And like Moses, we are in the law court and the law court is the whole universe.

Heaven and earth is the jury and God is the judge. The whole of creation is summoned to God's court. Fallen humanity is an outrage in the world God has created.

First of all, our attitude is unnatural. Children have I reared, but they have rebelled against me. Sin is rebelling against the loving father, deliberately going our own way, trampling underfoot his laws.

And it's a breakdown of relationships. The ox knows its owner, verse three, and the donkey its master's crib. See, the first thing in the world happened, the first thing happened, not when Adam and Eve fell out with each other, but when they conspired together against God.

[14 : 59] And when the relationship with God goes bad, all other relationships go bad as well. And I think we can see that in society and in our own hearts. The relationship with God is the relationship that controls others, which of course is why legalism can never solve that.

Because legalism is concerned with rules, not with relationships. So, the animals know their place, says Isaiah, but we don't. We are sinning away our privileges.

My people do not understand. It's not just an emotional spasm. It's not just, oh, I feel guilty. That's awful. My people do not understand. And because of this, verse six, the whole of society has become a body which is the sole of the foot, even to the head, there is no soundness.

We are ill. We are diseased because we have turned away from the Lord. And the situation is desperate, verses seven and eight. Whether this is the Syrian invasion, which is talked about in chapter seven, or the more terrifying Syrian invasion talked about in chapters 37 and 38, is not the point.

The point is Zion, daughter of Zion. A beautiful phrase, the daughter of Zion. Or more exactly, daughter Zion. The Lord says, my daughter Zion.

[16 : 25] She's flimsy, a booth in a bin yard, a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. Is this Zion founded on the rock of ages, with salvation's walls surrounded?

You can smile at all your foes. But this is what happens when Zion turns away from a proper relationship with the Lord. Zion becomes self-sufficient.

We'll come back to that. And sin erodes relationships, both with the Lord and with each other. See, what Isaiah is saying, look, you've got it all wrong.

You are no longer in a loving relationship to the Lord, and because of this, your relationships with each other have broken up. The second way in which sin manifests itself, verses 10 to 20, is with an obsession with religion.

Now, Isaiah does not mince his words. Just imagine the anger of the people. Verse 10, Hear the words of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom. Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah.

[17 : 35] These people are judged as being on the same level as the city's God destroyed. That's why there's so much in Isaiah and the other prophets, the so-called oracles against the nations.

Israel is special in one sense, but in another sense, that being special depends on keeping open relationships with the Lord.

You see, religion is very often a way of hiding the reality of what's happening, because religion can and usually does, plays down grace, plays down relationships.

I think it's very important to realize what the prophet is saying here. He is not talking about idolatry here. There's plenty to say about that. Indeed, by the end of the chapter in verses 29 and 30, he's talking about fertility cults.

What he is talking about here is something far more subtle. People doing all the right things and congratulating themselves for doing all the right things and thinking that is all that matters.

[18 : 47] You see, all these things are God given. The offerings, the Sabbath, these are God given. Through Moses, God gave these and he appointed them as an institution for his people.

Keep in touch with him. He's not condemning them as such. What he is saying is they have become meaningless charades because they've been divorced from heart to devotion.

They've been divorced from real walking with God. Verse 13, bring no more vain offerings. Bring no more gifts of emptiness.

A legalistic concentration on externals. Legalism always concentrates on externals, doesn't it? You can tell how many meetings people attend.

You can tell what activities they're engaged in. You cannot tell what their walk with God is. And so, how are we going to apply this?

[19 : 49] What's Isaiah actually saying? Is he talking to liberals, to the liberal church and saying, oh, you mouth your creeds, you say the things but you don't really believe in them?

Is he talking to Catholics and saying, you spend all your time making sure you get your ritual right? You know, if I were to leave it at that, everyone would go away feeling happy, wouldn't they?

This doesn't apply to us. But you know, it does. And we've got to ask ourselves, not what is the prophet saying to other people? What's he saying to me?

What's he saying to you? Let's say we're going to be like the Sunday school teacher who told her children the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Remember, Jesus told that story of the Pharisee, the tax collector went up to the temple to pray.

The Pharisee said, Lord, I thank you. I'm not like other people. I offer the sacrifices. I do all the things that Isaiah mentions here. And the tax collector stammered out the words, Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

[21 : 03] And then she said, now, boys and girls, we're going to have a little prayer. And we're going to thank God we're not like the Pharisee. Isn't it so easy to be become a Pharisee?

You see, we read the Bible, we listen to sermons, these are good things. But is it ritual or reality?

We pray, but we ignore the sin in our own hearts. And isn't it so easy for bread and wine to pass from hand to hand without any real engagement with the Lord?

And that's why verses 16 to 20 are so important. Radical forgiveness that comes through obedience and repentance. Satan is never more successful than when he tempts us with good things.

Idolatry is a bad thing, an evil thing, and Isaiah will come on to that. but it's how are we regarding the means of grace as grace themselves?

[22 : 13] It's good to get into habits of Bible reading, is it not? We need to listen to teaching. We need to pray. But it's so, so easy for these to become complacent.

Yes, it's so easy. We can, we read the Bible, we say, well, I've read three chapters today, good, and took it off.

Well, it's not a sermon, so that's fine, and then immediately forget about it and turn to what really interests us. Sin is subtle. We need to be forgiven.

I mentioned Eugene Peterson. Let me read to you his paraphrase of these verses. Powerful. By the way, Eugene, if your Bible reading is going stale, give yourself a dose of Eugene Peterson from time to time.

He knows his stuff. He taught biblical languages for many, many years, as well as pastoring churches. This is what he says. This is translation of these verses. Quit your worship charades.

[23 : 18] I can't stand your trivial religious games. Monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings, meetings, meetings, meetings, meetings.

I can't stand one more. Meetings for this, meetings for that. I hate them. You've worn me out. I am sick of your religion, religion, religion.

While you go right on sinning. When you put on your next prayer performance, I'm looking the other way. That's powerful stuff. That is strong stuff. But we need to hear it, don't we?

I certainly need to hear it. I know the sinfulness and weakness of my own heart. I know it's negligence, weakness, and its own deliberate fault. Sometimes when we read in an unfamiliar translation like that, the point comes home more powerfully.

They are doing the right things. God wants them to do the right things, but it's got to be done in the right way. We all have mixed motives, don't we?

[24 : 22] Let's not delude ourselves. And Satan, if Satan can't stop us praying, then what will he do?

He wants to pervert prayer into a kind of unseemly interest in other people. He can't stop us reading the Bible. If he can't stop us reading the Bible, he wants us to be proud of reading the Bible, boasting about our biblical knowledge.

If he can't stop us listening to preaching, then he wants us to start doing what Paul identified in Corinth. He wants to make a list of gurus. I have Paul, I have Apollos, I have Peter, and so on.

Or if you're super spiritual, I have Christ. This is the real danger, doing the right things, but doing them with an unforgiven heart.

So, that's why it seems to me verse 18 is so important. Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord.

[25 : 24] Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become as wool. Never in this world will we be free from sin.

Never in this world will we be perfect. We cannot serve God perfectly, but by his grace we can serve him acceptably.

And once we imagine that what we are doing we've achieved by our own efforts, rather than by the grace of God, then we need to hear this word.

So, sin is a destruction of relationships. Sin is an obsession with religion. And thirdly, in verses 21 to 31, sin is a collapse of a caring and compassionate society.

Emphasis here, once again, on how the faithful city has become a whore. Daughter Zion, the bride of the Lamb, has become Babylon.

[26 : 31] The picture that culminates in the book of Revelation, the prostitute Babylon and Zion, the bride of the Lamb. And like ruined silver or wine which has gone off, she becomes nauseating.

All sin leads to self-centeredness. And you can see how they do not bring justice to the fatherless, verse 23. The widow's cause does not come before them.

You can see how this is happening. If I am the center of my universe, then I'm not really going to be concerned with other people, am I? Except in so far as it will help me and advantage me.

I used to wonder why the tenth commandment says you shall not covet. That seems so inward and that is just the exact point.

Think of the other commandments. Stealing, adultery, murder. These are visible or at least become visible. But you know coveting is something that can eat us up inside and nobody except the Lord would ever know.

[27 : 40] That's why I think Paul says in Romans 7, if the law had not said do not covet, I would not have understood what sin was. I used to think any commandment could have been substituted.

That's not the point. The point is all these others are obvious and open. They can be seen by others. And therefore, sin leads us to coveting to me-centeredness.

No number but one. No pronoun but me. No family but my family. No church but my church. Me, me, me.

That's what sin leads to. A total lack of concern for others. Now, you'll notice the tone here is more lament than judgment.

The prophets are continually using different types of oracle, different types of poem, and the tone here is of lament. How a faithful city has become a whore.

[28 : 42] The Lord is breaking his heart over his people's departure from him. Proud and complacent city like the church in Laodicea in Revelation who care for status, who care for position, utter contempt for the powerless.

Remember, the fatherless and the widow throughout scripture are symbols of the utterly powerless and helpless, those whom society has turned its back on.

anger. And therefore there will be judgment and there will be blessing. Verse 24, the Lord declares, the Lord of hosts, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself and my foes.

And then verse 25, I will turn my hand against you. Now, hand is personal. Some theologians try to water this down by saying the anger of God is something impersonal, like touching a live wire.

If you touch a live wire, you are destroyed. What they fail to realize is that the live wire is just as much a picture as the hand. And it's a terrifying picture.

[29 : 54] C.S. Lewis pointed this out long ago when he said, what advantage do we gain by substituting the picture of a live wire for the picture of outraged majesty?

Outraged majesty can forgive. A live wire cannot. The hand that destroys is also the hand that saves.

When we start talking about impersonal forces, when we start talking about kind of juggernaut that's going to grind us all down, then there is absolutely no hope. There is absolutely no gospel.

That is why the gospel must talk about judgment as well as mercy. If we simply think of God as mercy, that will soon become God is nice and allows us to do all that we want, make sure the children have a good time.

But there needs to be repentance. And now in verse 29 and 30, he's introducing a subject he's going to develop at greater length, idolatry.

[31 : 00] Almost certainly, this refers to fertility cults, the oaks you desired. In other words, tree worship essentially, which is very often a type of worship in the ancient world, trees with their fertility and virility and so on.

And what will happen? Verse 31, both of them shall burn together. If we worship idols, everything will be burned up.

This is not exactly what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3, saved, saved as one escaping through the flames, the works burned up.

So you see, Isaiah is saying sin is dreadful, sin is serious. It can't be dealt with by rules and regulations, and it certainly can't be dealt with by sweeping under the carpet.

But there is a way back to God from the dark paths of sin. Verse 18 again, though your sins are like scarlet and crimson, they're totally visible, not to us, but to the Lord.

[32 : 09] And how is this going to happen? And Isaiah here introduces another subject that's going to be hugely important. Verse 26, and I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning.

Afterwards, you'll be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. How is he going to do this? He's going to do this by essentially the return of David.

It becomes increasingly personal. The great king David, who in spite of all his failures and flaws, established the kingdom, he is going to come again, and a greater than he is going to come.

We're all very familiar to the passages in chapter 7 about Emmanuel, and the child who is born, and the son given, the government will be on his shoulders. How is God going to deal with the sins of his people?

He is going to deal with the sins of his people, whether they are sins of relationship, sins of religion, or sins of lack of compassion. He's going to deal with that by bringing a new servant.

[33 : 18] I'm going to read about him much later in chapter 53, the one who takes our sins and our iniquities. He's not going to, he's not simply going to condemn as legalism does.

He's certainly not going to sweep it under the carpet as liberalism does. He's going to bring in a new order, the city of righteousness, the city where real sin is forgiven by a real savior.

And that is the message, I believe, of Isaiah 1. Let's pray. And Father, as we think and reflect on the message of the prophets, we pray for the forgiveness of our sin.

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worldly magnify your holy name through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.