

## **A Vision of the LORD and His People! : Isaiah 1: 1-31**

**Introduction:** Overall, the book of Isaiah is a magisterial book about God and His purposes for His people. One current commentator declared “that Isaiah is one of the greatest religious and political figures of ancient Israel.”<sup>1</sup> For me, the enduring significance of this book called Isaiah is that Jesus quoted more often from Isaiah, Deuteronomy, and the Psalms than other books in Old Testament. The apostle Paul’s understanding of the ways of God, as seen in the book of Romans, reflects a thorough and broad understanding of the book of Isaiah. So both Jesus and Paul in their teaching reflect a careful appreciation and study of Isaiah.<sup>2</sup> Most modern Christians, including myself, do not. Except for selected passages, we neglect this book. Some readers neglect the book because it is perceived as being too rambling and too hard to understand. Perhaps some readers view the book as being too confrontational and too judgmental in both tone and subject matter. It focuses too much upon sin and God’s response to sin. Or perhaps some readers ignore the book because they just do not see the book as being relevant to Christians who are living busy lives in a modern technical world. Once any one of the above viewpoints is accepted by a potential reader of the book, it becomes very easy to dismiss the book as being not worth the effort needed in order to overcome the obstacles necessary to reap the timeless insights concerning God and His Ways. As for me, the value of promoting a careful study of this book is that you and I can and will come away with an enlarged Vision of God as He wants me to know Him. This includes being informed about what pleases Him, how to maintain and enjoy a healthy relationship to Him, and qualities that he delights in finding present in his sons and daughters who are called to represent and serve Him.

Last week, Mary gave the class an introduction and overview to the entire book. This week we begin a more detailed look at the book itself, focusing upon chapter one. Most commentators agree that chapter one introduces the whole book.<sup>3</sup> Chapter one introduces us to the main characters of the book: Isaiah, Judah and Jerusalem, and God. It more importantly tells us historical references, what the book is (a vision), who the book was intended for, and its subject matter. A careful reading of chapter one will reveal four main themes that will be developed more fully in this book. Two themes are fairly obvious. Two themes are not as obvious as the first two, but these themes once identified can be recognized as being major themes that are addressed throughout the book and are key to appreciating the book’s message. 1) God’s people have failed him. 2) God confronts and chastises his people for their wrong doing. 3) God intervenes to make things right for his people. 4) The nature and character of God is introduced to us!

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<sup>1</sup> R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, The New Century Bible Commentary, p.11

<sup>2</sup> Examine the references to the book of Isaiah in chapters 9 & 10.

<sup>3</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, sees chapter one as introducing C1-5 as well. Childs and Goldingay see chapter one particularly introducing chapters 1-12 as well the whole book.

Let us look briefly at an overview of chapter one. Let us see how it introduces us to the main message of the book and/or ideas that will be developed more fully in chapters to come.

**I. A disappointed Father's complaint concerning his rebellious children. (vs. 1-4)** The section presents the argument that God's children have failed him, how they failed him, and the root cause for their failure.

**II. God corrects His Children. (vs. 5-9)** God responds to Israel's failure by chastising Israel rather than blessing his rebellious children.

**III. God strongly condemns the people's acts of religious devotion** when not accompanied by the life that he expects his people to live. **(vs. 10-15)**

**IV. God desires and calls for true repentance** and righteous living from his people. **(vs. 16-20)** This section strongly offers God's forgiveness and pardon for any wrong done.

**V. A disappointed father grieves** over the unfaithfulness of his people. This section specifically, yet selectively, reveals the nature of their wrongdoing. **(vs. 21-26)**

**VI. A strong concluding affirmation by God. (vs. 27-31)** The chapter ends with a solemn promise underscoring two main themes so far presented: Those who persist in rebelling against him will be destroyed. Those who repent and who seek to be obedient will be redeemed.

**I. First Words of the Vision (1-4)** The first four verses of this chapter focus upon Judah's wrong doing. The vision that is presented in these first four verses is one in which the case is made that Israel (Judah) has wronged God. They have failed Him. As a people called to be his treasured possession and servants (Deuteronomy) they have been unfaithful to him. Four times in this chapter God's people are declared to be rebels or being rebellious.<sup>4</sup> Goldingay<sup>5</sup> remarks that this is a relational word. The opposite state of rebellion is to be loyal, committed, and or to be faithful. Verses 3-4 mention the twofold way that God's people then were unfaithful. First, they did not maintain their commitment to Him personally. The text tells us that they were guilty of "forsaking or abandoning God. "They turned their backs on Him." "They spurned or rejected him" This probably is a reference to turning to trusting idols and worshiping false gods. Secondly, they were guilty of wrong doing by not following his instructions on living as the people of God. Isaiah states this in a very general way in

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter 1: 2, 5, 20, 28.

<sup>5</sup> John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, New International Biblical Commentary, p. 34

verse two. “*A sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, children given to corruption.*” They have missed the mark. (Sin) They have not done what they were supposed to do or be as a people. They have not done what the LORD instructed and commanded them not to do. When? How? Where? Isaiah does not explain to us the specific wrongs yet. But he will. Yet, being God’s special people, they were responsible to know how to live a life pleasing to God. This is the point of the second half of verses two and three. God instructed His people from the beginning through Moses that His people were to be holy. “*This is how he raised and brought them up.* God’s complaint: **They have forgotten who they are and who God is!** “*Israel does not know, my people do not understand.*” For Israel, this meant the knowledge that God had revealed and given them concerning Himself, they had forgotten. Israel was also guilty of not knowing and living the way they should live. This implicitly is **the root cause of their rebellion.**

**II. God corrects His children. (vs. 5-9)** God responds to Israel’s failure by chastising her, rather than blessing her, for her rebellion against Him. This second section conveys three significant ideas that must be grasped by us. 1) God does not ignore His people’s sin. The adversity, hardships, and being defeated by her enemies are seen as evidence of God’s displeasure directed against Israel by God for her rebellion. 2) In spite of all the pain that Israel (Judah) had experienced, God was being merciful to her. That means she was not getting what she deserved. God could have destroyed her as he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. 3) The main thrust of the passage is to get Judah to wake up and see the true state of her situation and her rebellion against God. This is intended to get Israel **to cease her rebellion and turn back to Him.**

**III. God strongly condemns the people’s acts of religious devotion. (10-15)**

This third section is closely connected to the previous two sections. It builds upon the argument presented by God in the first section where the LORD accused the people of being guilty of forsaking and turning their backs on him. Oswalt rightly comments that a possible way of appreciating this section is that Isaiah is “addressing an unrecorded response to the previous argument by God”<sup>6</sup> which accused them of forsaking him. Thus their unreported objection would be something like, “What do you mean that we have deserted you? What do you mean that we have been unfaithful? Look ***at how we have been faithful!*** We faithfully observe all the festivals, such as Passover and even Pentecost. We have not neglected to observe the Sabbath or to present to all the required offerings and sacrifices. We have even been faithful in coming to the temple, or to pray as you have commanded. So how are we deemed “unfaithful”? To this unstated objection, God, through Isaiah, directs a blistering reply. The reply particularly focuses upon the religious and political leaders

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<sup>6</sup> Oswalt, p.95

of his day. Try to capture the cumulative effect of God's wholesale rejection of the people's perceived acts of devotion and commitment to God.

“ I have no pleasure in ... your incense is detestable to me ... I cannot bear you evil assemblies ... my soul hates them ... They have become a burden to me ... I am weary of bearing them ... and when you put out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you ... I will not listen to them. Why does God deliver this awfully devastating reply? Was Israel not being sincere in what she was doing by these acts of devotion? Was Israel meaningfully engaging her heart in these activities as well? Did she sing enthusiastically? Yes, Yes, and Yes! So what was God's problem with her acts of devotion (the prayers, the assemblies) toward Him? Simply, all these acts were **contaminated and corrupted** by how she was living. This is indicated by vs. 13, where instead of commenting upon their *holy or sacred assemblies*, these assemblies are so tainted by their evil deeds that God refers to them ***as being evil***. (vs. 13) Furthermore, the concluding verse adds a concrete instance of their evil deeds, by God commenting on why He does not listen to their prayers “*since their hands are full of blood.*” (vs. 15) This is seen as a reference to a violent crime where the blood of a victim has been shed, possibly murder.<sup>7</sup> Verse 15 then transitions nicely into the fourth subunit of the chapter, which focuses upon ***what God really wants from his children***.

**IV. God desires and calls for true repentance** and righteous living from his people. (vs. 16-20) This section **strongly offers God's forgiveness** and pardon for any wrong done. What does God really want from his people? In one word: Repentance! These five verses spell out the twofold nature of what that word implies. On one hand it implies a turning away from sin. On the other hand it refers to the action of turning toward God and doing what pleases Him. This twofold aspect is stated in verse 16: “Wash and make yourselves clean.” This is a metaphor for what is stated immediately following this statement as “Take your evil deeds out of my sight.” signifying a call by God to stop doing what is wrong. On the other hand repentance involves positively doing what is right.” How simple! Isaiah then gives one concrete way learning to do good expresses itself in life which involves “seek *justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the cause of the widow.*” This is going to be a major emphasis by Isaiah that he will further expound upon. This call for doing what is right is immediately followed by an incredible offer of pardon and forgiveness. “Come now, let us reason together, though your sins are scarlet, they shall be whiter than snow.” No sin is declared unforgiveable. Yet, failure to repent can have disastrous consequences: “if you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best of

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<sup>7</sup> R.E. Clements, p. 33, but Goldingay sees the image more broadly. Goldingay, p. 37, sees the needs of the weak in society have been ignored so that they lose their land and thus their means of providing for themselves. Therefore, some do not have food to eat and some die.

the land.” (vs. 19) This implies a promise of receiving God’s blessing. But look at verse 20, the concluding verse of this section that spells out the consequences of the failure of not taking God seriously and not repenting. “but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” God is patient. God is a forgiving God. But evil and rebellion, God will not ignore. God will judge and put an end to injustice, evil, and make things right. This section forcefully informs us concerning what God wants from his people.

**V. A disappointed father grieves** over the unfaithfulness of his children. God specifically yet selectively reveals the nature of their wrong doing, **(vs. 21-26)** and what He as their lord and master will do in response to their unfaithfulness.

**A. Israel has become unfaithful.** Israel has become corrupted and perverted. God once again accuses her of being unfaithful to Him. In this section, rather than say again that she has become a rebellious child, Isaiah accuses Israel **of being an unfaithful wife**. Isaiah accuses her of being guilty of adultery, yet this time using an even stronger term: she is a harlot or prostitute. This section once again declares that (Israel), both people and the leaders, are considered guilty by God of being unfaithful to Him. This image of being unfaithful is reinforced by two lesser supporting pictures that highlight the idea of something pure being corrupted. Israel is like silver which is not just corrupted by impurities or dross, but has become dross or “the scum of silver”. Israel has become corrupted like fine premium wine being diluted with water. To this general description, Isaiah adds specifics of the nature of her corruption: Israel as a nation stands guilty before God for not promoting what is fair, just, and what deemed to be right among members. Some members of Israel take advantage of other members who are not strong – **the widows and orphans**. Verse 23 particularly seems to stress that the leaders and judges are especially guilty of practicing injustice and not doing what was expected. “*Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case does not come before them.*” What I find fascinating is that of all the wrongs that Israel is guilty of having done, the wrongdoing of not caring for and defending those who cannot defend themselves is singled out this time by Isaiah. This is significant. It is not Israel’s only sin.<sup>8</sup> Yet the specific selection of addressing the issue of injustice and lack of righteousness indicates that the manifestation of these two wrongs by God’s people is very important to God.

**B. God will make things right.** Israel will once again become the faithful city – the righteous city – the people that God called to be His holy people. “Afterwards you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City.” (vs. 26) Whether or not the people respond and repent in order to make things right before God, Isaiah confronts Israel with the declaration that God will make Israel – represented by Zion – to be the faithful

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<sup>8</sup> Isaiah will identify other sins in chapters to come. The reference to oaks and gardens in vs. 29 is a reference to idolatry.

people that he called her to be. **She will be and become righteous.** How? God will make it happen! He will purge away her impurities. He will restore her to her original calling to be a righteous people here represented and called “The city of righteousness.” She will become the faithful city, both faithful to God and faithful to her calling to be a city or **a people full of justice and righteousness.** God will make it happen. Isaiah does not tell us how God will do this. The emphasis that Isaiah confronts his people is that God will accomplish his plan and purpose to make Israel – his people – faithful to their calling. What assurance does Isaiah provide in order to guarantee this? Simply that the LORD declares it! Now pay attention to what Isaiah declares and the supporting words to underscore their significance.” *Therefore the Lord, the **LORD Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel declares...***”

**C. The Awareness of Who God is should engender respect and submission to Him.** The **LORD** is grieved and disappointed that His people – Zion – have failed Him. The City and the people that she represents who were called and set apart to be his holy people living a life of righteousness and justice before the nations *have failed Him in their calling.* Zion has become faithless and unfaithful. God will, however, make things right! The **guarantee and assurance** that this ideal will happen is simply God’s Himself! God promises that it will happen. This is so simple and profound at the same time. But it is true. Let us take a close and careful look at vs. 24 again. “therefore the ***Lord, the LORD Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel,*** declares: I will get relief ... I avenge ... I will turn my hand ... I will restore...” Please note two things first. God will make it happen. God is the one who makes the promise and provides the guarantee/assurance that it will happen. What exactly is the basis of the guarantee? **Who He is!** This is the simple, yet crucial fact supporting the entire argument. Everything stands or falls on this statement. Verse 24 is the pivotal verse of this whole section. So let us take a closer look at how Isaiah focuses upon the **LORD**, the one who makes the claim and provides the guarantee that Israel will become the City of Righteousness that He called her to be! The pertinent question is then “What is the meaning and significance of Isaiah’s use of these three titles together to refer to God? Three sub points to make and to conclude this chapter. 1) Usage 2) Meaning 3) Application.

1) **Usage.** This is the only place in this long introduction to the book where Isaiah refers to God using three titles together. Previously he has identified Israel’s God using the special name by which God had revealed Himself to Israel: Yahweh or the **LORD**. Five times Isaiah uses the name **LORD** to refer or to address Israel prior to verse 24 in this chapter.<sup>9</sup> Previously in this chapter, Isaiah has referred to God using the title The Holy One of Israel which will become the distinctive way that Isaiah refers to God and the title the **LORD Almighty**, one of the titles that he uses here in verse 24 “the **LORD**

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<sup>9</sup> See verses 2,4, 11, 18, 20, and 28 in chapter one. All these verses refer to God as the **LORD**.

Almighty” or Yahweh of hosts. The use of the three titles together draws attention to both what he has to say and who He is.

2) **Meaning.** There is meaning in these names. The first title lord is not **LORD**, which designates God to be Israel’s sovereign king. He is their Boss. The **LORD** their God is Israel’s master, they belong to Him. The second title “the LORD Almighty” suggests the incredible resources at his control and his command. Nothing can happen, unless He allows it. No one, no power, not other sovereign can check or stop Him from making His plans happen. The third title the Mighty One of Israel refers to God’s Omnipotence. “The God of Israel is never in a position of wanting to do something and not being able to do it.”<sup>10</sup> Each title is meaningful. But the combined effect according to Oswalt is “to stress **God’s complete mastery and total dominance over everything.**”<sup>11</sup>

3) **Application:** The effect of referring to their God using three impressive titles draws attention to both the one making the message and what he (God) has to say. They underscore both the authority of their God to make things happen, but also the titles underscore the need by His people to take His words his instructions seriously and treat God and his words **with respect.** This chapter along with the rest of the book sends a clear and strong message **that an awareness of Who God is** will correct the human tendency to treat the LORD with contempt.

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<sup>10</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, Israel’s faith, p. 64, Intervarsity Press, 2006

<sup>11</sup> Oswalt, p.106