

State of the Union

Isaiah 1-2

Michael Felkins

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

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This morning we embark on our journey through the book of Isaiah. My task is to introduce to you the book of Isaiah and cover the first two chapters. The prophet Isaiah, who wrote this book, is considered the prince of prophets. His prophetic ministry spanned about 60 years. He prophesied and wrote somewhere between 739 BC and 680 BC. His ministry was primarily to the southern kingdom of Judah. He prophesied during the reign of four kings of Judah: *Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah*. His fellow prophets in Judah were *Micah and Amos*. Also, at the same approximate time, *Hosea* was prophesying to the northern kingdom, Israel.

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah cover the threat of the Assyrian invasion. They concluded about 700 & 680 BC. The last section of Isaiah, chapters 40-66, deals with Judah's Babylonian captivity and return, which was from 586 BC to 510 BC. If you are doing the math, you realize that Isaiah was not alive when Judah went into Babylonian captivity in 586 BC, nor was he alive when they returned to Palestine some 70 years later, around 510 BC.

The issue that scholars debate is how did Isaiah write that last section of the book when he was not alive during that time. I will answer that question as we move through the book and especially as we get to Isaiah 40.

Literarily, the book of Isaiah is very complex and beautiful. Old Testament scholar Alec Motyer said of Isaiah's writing style:

The way he writes, his mastery of words, the rhythmic beauty of his Hebrew and, above all, the magnificent sweep of his messianic vision, taking in the glory of Jesus as God and King, the wonder and fullness of the salvation he accomplished, and the shining hope of his coming again . . . His book is as much the crown of the Old Testament as the Epistle to the Hebrews is of the New Testament—and for the same reason. Isaiah saw the coming King, Savior and Conqueror; [the book of] Hebrews knew him as Jesus.¹

If you have ever read Isaiah or if you have been reading it in preparation for this series, you realize Isaiah is some of the most beautiful Hebrew poetry in the Bible. However, you probably still found it a challenge to read and understand.

Here is the issue. We tend to think that when we read Isaiah that it will unfold in a logical and coherent way, somewhat like a sermon or a lecture does, but it does not. The Reformer, Martin Luther, once commented on the Prophets and their writing style and message:

The prophets have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them.²

This is probably truer of Isaiah than any of the other Old Testament prophets. This is true except for the historical section in chapters 36-39.

¹ Alec Motyer, *Isaiah By the Day: A New Devotional Translation*, 4.

² Luther, quoted by Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Luther was referring to the unsystematic way in which the Prophets mix up statements about contemporary Israel and about Christ (see *Lectures on the Minor Prophets II*, Luther's Works, 19).

When you read Isaiah's poetry, you may feel like you are going in circles. If that's your experience, then you get it because that is what he is doing. Hebrew poetry tends to unfold in circles or, as scholars call it—*chiasms* or a *chiastic structure*. In other words, it will begin with topic "A" then move to topic "B" and then to the main topic "C" and then it will circle back to topic "B" and finally conclude with topic "A" one more time.

Here's how to think of the book of Isaiah and how he wrote. Isaiah is like an old preacher getting to the end of his life and ministry, and he sits down and gathers all of the sermons he has ever preached. Then instead of putting them together in chronological order, he organizes them sort of by topic and prophetic issue.³

When Isaiah finished compiling his prophecies, he basically had one book with three volumes. Think of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which contains three books within one large book. You have the *Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*.

In the book of Isaiah, you have a *Preface* which is Isaiah 1-6. Then Book One is Isaiah 7-39: *The Book of the King*. Book Two is Isaiah 40-55: *The Book of the Servant*. Then Book Three is Isaiah 56-66: *The Book of the Conquering King*.

Within these three volumes are sections and chapters that contain their own literary styles and messages. By breaking Isaiah down into these smaller volumes and chapters, we can get our minds around the message Yahweh gave to us through him.

Reading Isaiah is like taking a shovel and digging into a mound of gold, only to discover priceless gems. It is like Bilbo Baggins in the *Hobbit* when he walked into Erebor and saw gold everywhere. Then with every step he took, he found gems and rubes. Finally, he found the Arkenstone, the heart of the mountain, which is like finding the greatest treasure of all—Jesus, the promised Messiah.

Bottom line: Isaiah may be difficult to read at times, but no other Hebrew prophet gives us such a clear and beautiful picture of the coming Messiah and His ministry to save sinners. Isaiah's prophecies prepare us for the coming King, and that is why he is the most quoted prophet in the New Testament.

The title of our series is *In the Eye of the Storm*. This is what Isaiah does. He takes us through the storm of God's holy judgment into the hope, comfort, and renewal that comes from knowing the promised Messiah.

The main thrust of the book of Isaiah is: *God is the Holy One of Israel, the King, who saves sinners who trust His Holy Servant but judges sinners who do not.*

Every January, except for this year, the president gives a State of the Union address. In this address, "ideally," the president attempts to give an accurate depiction of where we are as a nation and cast vision for where we need to go. He identifies the problems and then tells the nation what we need to do to address those problems.

Isaiah 1-2 are kind of like a State of the Union Address. Isaiah gave an accurate depiction of the nation of the southern kingdom and its sins and warned about the coming punishment. But Isaiah does not leave them without hope. As he lays out Judah's sin and coming punishment, he calls them to think with God about their sin and take Him up on His offer to repent so they can be made righteous and avoid judgment.

Friends, if we don't know where we stand with God, then we will not know what we need to do in order to be in right relationship with Him. Isaiah's job and my job as we preach through this series is daunting. Pastor Eric and I will strive to bring us into God's presence and leave us there.⁴

The British Pastor, Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, said *that the chief end of preaching is to give men and women a sense of God and his presence.*⁵ If you have ever read a Lloyd-Jones sermon or heard one, then you know that, for the most part, it seems like he accomplished his goal in every sermon.

³ John Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, 11-12.

⁴ Ray Ortlund, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners, Preaching the Word Series*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, 15.

⁵ Ibid.

J. I. Packer said that Lloyd-Jones preached like Isaiah prophesied. Packer said:

His approach is habitually Isaiahhnic: having surveyed man's pretensions, his fancied greatness and adequacy, moral, religious, cultural, intellectual, [then] he punctures them, [therefore], humbling man and exposing his weakness, futility and sin, in order then to exalt God as the only Savior.⁶

Isaiah continually exalts the greatness of God and then punctures our inflated view of ourselves so that we are humbled before God. Isaiah calls us to have a correct view of our Holy God and repent of our sins in order to be in right relationship with Him.

I only have two points this morning.

1. Our Great Problem: We're unaware of our sin.
2. Our Great Need: Jesus' unmerited grace.

I. Our great problem is that we are unaware of our sin.

Even though we live in a modern world, we really are no different than the ancient Hebrews when it comes to our sin. Like them, we tend to be unaware of and blind to our sin. Scripture uses the physical conditions of being blind, deaf, mute, cripple, and dead to teach us that apart from Jesus, we are spiritually blind, deaf, mute, cripple, and dead in our sin. The problem spiritually is that we simply do not know we are in that condition.

Our situation is kind of like when the pandemic started. We did things to curb the spread because we didn't know what we didn't know about the virus. We didn't really understand how the virus spread, so we responded by shutting things down, social distancing, wearing masks, and eventually, some people got vaccinated. Currently, we may know when people get sick, but we are still clueless as to how to cure COVID.

We can be like that when it comes to sin. We will see the effects of our sin in our lives, but we can be clueless as to what exactly the cause of our sin may be and how to remedy it. We don't know what we don't know.

Isaiah 1:2-8 and 2:17-19 describes five miserable effects of Judah's sin on their lives. Sin had left them: *unnatural, unfaithful, unhealthy, unfulfilled, and undone.*

In Isaiah 1:2-3, we see the unnatural effects of sin:

² *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.
³ The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand."*

Yahweh illustrates the unnatural effects of their sin by saying they are like children who rebel against their parents and an ox or donkey that does not know its owners. The truth is that unless there is some wicked thing being done by parents, it is natural for their children to know, love, trust and obey them. Likewise, it is natural for an ox or a donkey to instinctively know their owners.

For example, Stacy and I were in California visiting our kids, Elliot and Alex, last week. They have a golden doodle puppy named Cali. She is eight months old. When we pulled up to their house, Cali went nuts, barking at us because she did not know us. However, when we got home, our dog Tex came out after not seeing us for a

⁶ J. I. Packer, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, Volume 11, 270.

week, and he was so excited. He was like a puppy playing with us. Animals know their owners and love them, and long to be with them. This is natural.

Friends, we were created to know and love God. This really is our natural condition. However, in the Garden of Eden, sin broke our created and natural condition. Now, unless Jesus changes our hearts, we are in the unnatural condition of being born separated from God. We do not naturally know and love Him. This is a serious problem that leads to all kinds of misery in our lives.

The second effect of sin is that sin causes us to be unfaithful to God. Look in v. 4:

*Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the Lord,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged.*

Yahweh uses seven strong words to describe Judah's sin that led to their unfaithfulness to Him: *sinful, iniquity, evildoers, corrupt, forsaken, despised, and estranged*.

Bottom line: Judah was disrespecting God. They were treating their holy God as something less than holy or honorable. To commit this kind of sin against God is an infinite evil because God is infinitely holy, infinitely honorable, infinitely good, and infinitely beautiful.

Yet, we do not think this way. Our problem is that we tend to think that big sins are sins like adultery, murder, terrorism, stealing, and the like. We think these are the sins that offend God the most, but in reality, these are not necessarily "big sins." These sins are serious issues, but they really are the effects of the bigger sin of forsaking and despising God. They are the effects of being unfaithful to God.

The third effect of sin is found in vv. 5-6. Here we learn how the effects of sin make us unhealthy or sick.

⁵ *Why will you still be struck down?
Why will you continue to rebel?
The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.*
⁶ *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.*

Verses 5-6 depict a person who is beaten up by sin from head to toe. They teach us that sin beats the living daylights out of us. It is as the old saying goes: *Sin will take you further than you want to go; make you pay more than you want to pay, and keep you longer than you want to stay.*

So, here is the deal when it comes to sin's unhealthy effects. It is not the physical illness that is the ultimate problem. Spiritual sickness is the ultimate problem.

The deception of sin is that we may be the picture of physical health, but on the inside, we are a bloody mess. We are spiritual corpses.

So, the prophet Isaiah looks at us in amazement and says:

*Why do you do these things? Do you have a death wish? Is it your aim to make yourself miserable? Haven't you accomplished that by now? Wouldn't you rather experience healing?*⁷

The fourth effect of sin is to be unfulfilled. Look in vv. 7-8:

*⁷ 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.
⁸ And the daughter of Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,
like a lodge in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city.*

Verse 7 might as well say, “*Your life lies desolate and burned with fire.*” That is what sin does. It always promises more than it can deliver. Sin never makes good on its promises, so we are left empty.

That is why Isaiah says we are like an empty shelter in a vineyard or a cucumber field. The imagery is of a booth that used to be occupied by a farmer who gave diligent attention to his field but then he stopped caring. Then the enemy came in and stripped the field bare, and finally, weeds took over the field. The final image is that of a city that had been under siege for a long time, and the invaders eventually stripped the city bare.

This is a picture of what our sin does to our hearts and lives. If we abandon the Lord, then sin will strip our lives bare and leave us empty and unfulfilled.

The final effect of sin is that it leaves us undone before our Holy God. Look in Isaiah 2:19:

*And people shall enter the caves of the rocks
and the holes in the ground,
from before the terror of the Lord,
and from the splendor of his majesty,
when he rises to terrify the earth.*

Isaiah tells us that we know something is not right between God and us, and that is why the very thought of standing before a Holy God makes us want to hide from the Lord. We are like Adam and Eve after they sinned in the Garden, and we run the other way when God begins to pursue us.

Not only do we want to run from God, but we also don't even want to be around those who follow Jesus, and we certainly do not want to gather with God's people at church. That is why when we leave sin unchecked in our lives, all of the sudden, we dread going to church for worship. We will begin to make excuses for why we cannot go to church. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, we will begin to find ways to hide from God.

So, we see that the effects of sin leave us feeling *unnatural, unfaithful to the Lord, unhealthy, unfulfilled, and undone before our Holy God. But here is the deal, the effects of sin are not really our ultimate problem.* They are really symptoms and the effects of sins that have found a place in our hearts. *What we really need to do is identify the sins that reside in our hearts and repent of them.*

Isaiah chapters 1 & 2 identify *three particular sins* that were the root causes of the effects of sin. It is these sin that God called Judah and calls us to repent.

1) First, the people practiced insincere worship. Look in vv. 10-14:

⁷ Ray Ortlund, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, 30.

¹⁰ *Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!
Give ear to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!*

¹¹ *“What to me is the multitude of your
sacrifices? says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs or of goats.*

¹² *“When you come to appear before me,
who has required of you this trampling of my courts?*

¹³ *Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.*

*New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations⁸ —
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly⁹.*

¹⁴ *Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates; they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.*

In other words, when the people gathered for corporate worship, they were not coming before God with sincere hearts, where they confessed and repented their sin. They went through the religious motions of confession and repentance, but they did not genuinely repent from the heart. They marked it off their religious “to-do” list, but ultimately, they did not confess and repented of their sin.

Friends, there is always the danger of good spiritual habits becoming insincere religious habits.

Here is what I mean. *Good spiritual habits and insincere religious habits look the same on the outside.* But in our hearts, they are miles apart.

So, we may gather to sing, read Scripture together, remember the gospel, take the Lord’s Supper and listen to a sermon; the question is: What is going on in our hearts? Are we genuinely worshipping, or have we checked out? Are we thinking about what we will do after church or how God pursues us in the worship service? Perhaps we even sit there in the service, and it looks like we are reading Scripture on our phones, but we are really playing the latest game or checking sports scores, or shopping on Amazon.

But here is the deal. We can be distracted in corporate worship by our phones or our thought life. When this happens, we often simply go through the motions. That is when the good spiritual habit of worship becomes an empty religious habit of insincere or empty worship.

Empty worship looks biblical on the outside but on the inside, where the Lord sees, God simply wants to cover his ears and not listen to our prayers. He wants to cover His eyes and not see what we do. *The empty “religious habit” of worship* makes the Lord want to say, “*Do I have to go to church today?*” Look in v. 15:

¹⁵ *When you spread out your hands [in worship],
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen; [because] your hands are full of blood.*

⁸ Corporate worship services.

⁹ Corporate worship services.

Verse 15 concludes by telling us why the LORD responds the way He does. He says, “*your hands are full of blood?*” This leads us to the second sin they were guilty of committing.

2) *They were practicing injustice.*

You see, the problem was not that they were sinners who came to worship but that they were not taking their sin seriously. This was what made their worship insincere and hypocritical.

What was the sin of which they were not confessing and repenting? Look in vv. 16-17:

¹⁶ *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice,
correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow’s cause.*

You see, these people were compounding sin upon sin. Their *worship was corrupt*, and their *lives were filled with the sin of injustice against others*.

In v. 16, Yahweh called them to turn from their sin. Then in v. 17, *He called them to turn to Him by bearing the fruit of repentance by seeking justice for the oppressed, the fatherless, and the widow. In other words, He called them to pursue justice for the marginalized, the weak, and the overlooked in their society.*

The problem was that Jews had life upside down. They thought that if you were marginalized and weak that God was punishing you. So, they thought that if God were treating you this way, then they would simply do the same. Yet, Yahweh was trying to teach them that He was not that way, nor should they treat others that way.

So, instead of oppressing others and stripping them of their dignity, He called them to be compassionate with the weak and marginalized. He called them to seek the good of the oppressed before they sought their own good. Instead of ignoring the plight of the fatherless and those who lived in need, they were to seek them out and do good to them. Instead of forgetting the widow who will not be able to support herself, they were to be compassionate and care for her. These actions were evidence of repentance.

You see, true repentance gets to the heart of the matter. True repentance digs deep into our hearts because it taps into our time, talent and treasure. Jesus taught us that we are to love the LORD with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love our neighbor in the same way we love ourselves. This kind of repentance is evidence of a changed heart. Is this you, or is your repentance shallow and cheap?

3) Lastly, this kind of repentance gets to the heart of our problem because it roots out the idolatry in our hearts. Which is the third and last sin Yahweh targets. Look in Isaiah 2:6-8:

⁶ *For you have rejected your people, the house of Jacob,
because . . . ⁷ Their land is filled with silver and gold,
and there is no end to their treasures;
their land is filled with horses,
and there is no end to their chariots.
⁸ Their land is filled with idols;
they bow down to the work of their hands,
to what their own fingers have made.*

Judah took pride in what their hands had produced. They had made themselves rich, and they worshipped at the altars of the product of their own hands. They worshipped themselves, their financial portfolios, and the material things they had accomplished. Sure, they carved out idols out of wood and stone and set them up in their houses, but those images were crude reflections of the things that were already in their hearts.

Think of it this way; if they had had smartphones back in that day, they would have done what we do. They would have taken pictures of those things and sat around looking at those pictures and worshipping the work of their hands. Then they would have pulled their phones and showed pictures of those things to everyone that would look at them. Does this sound familiar to you? It does to me.

I think the question we need to ask here is: How do you know when something becomes an idol? I mean, is pulling out your phone and showing someone a picture of your child or grandchild an idol? Honestly, it might be, and it might not be.

Think of it this way. Almost any good thing can become an idol or what we might call an ultimate thing in your life. Here is a simple test to see if something has become an idol.

When a good thing becomes an ultimate thing that you must have, it is an idol of the heart.

When a good thing becomes a thing that you find ultimate meaning, identity, and satisfaction in it, then it has become an idol in your heart. When good things like money, possessions, friends, family, and work become ways to find our identity and meaning in life, then beware because an idol may be getting a foothold in your heart. You see, idolatry does not begin when you find that perfect job or purchase that perfect car or purchase the house of your dreams or find that perfect relationship or whatever. You can lack these things but simply live to acquire them, which is idolatry. Ultimately idolatry is an issue of the heart. It is when a good thing supplants the place of the Lord in your heart. Idolatry is when some possession or desire for some possession now possesses you. This leads us to our second and final point.

II. Our greatest need is Jesus' unmerited grace.

In order to practice real repentance, we need a work of grace in our hearts, and Yahweh will provide that work. We find this work of grace and hope of change woven throughout Isaiah 1 & 2.

Look in Isaiah 1:9. With this one verse, we get a feel for what the work of grace that Yahweh must do for us in order for us to make it as a child of God and as a church.

*If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors,
we should have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.*

Ray Ortlund Jr. sums the impact of this verse up well when he says:

It's a miracle that the church survives at all. But not because God is weak. He is the omnipotent "LORD of hosts." The church survives because God saves sinners. He sees what we would become, left to ourselves, and in mercy, he stretches out his hand and says, "I will not let you go." That is why the evil inside every one of us doesn't explode with its actual power, to our destruction (Romans 9:29). Apart from God's preserving grace, we would relive the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. We are what they were. We deserve what they got. That's what God says. And the only reason we're still here is his overruling mercy saving us from ourselves.¹⁰

Isaiah tells us that the only reason we are still here is that Yahweh, by His amazing grace, has laid hold of us and will not let us go. He has preserved us and saved us.

Then in another act of grace, in Isaiah 1:18-20, we see that Yahweh called His people to come to Him and think through their situation with Him. Look in vv. 18-20:

¹⁸ *"Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;*

¹⁰ Ibid, 30-31.

*though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
²⁰ but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

Yahweh is ready to give us the undeserving grace and mercy of Jesus. What He does is call us to think through our lives with Him. He calls us to turn from our hypocritical worship to genuine worship, where He provides the grace for our ability to repent of our sin and fill our worship with meaning and sincerity. He wants to give us the grace to practice justice and mercy with people. He wants to free us from our idolatry by giving us Himself as our greatest Treasure.

Then in v. 19, He tells us that if we listen to Him that we will flourish and thrive in life but, as v. 20 says, if we do not, then we will be judged.

It is a simple response on our part. God's appeal to us is not unreasonable. He is not demanding that we be perfect or sinless. All he wants is for us to listen to Him and accept His offer of grace.

Later in Isaiah 1, He promises that if we will trust Him that He will do the work of repentance in our hearts for us. He will do what we cannot do by sending the Refiner's Fire to burn away the corruption of sin and make us righteous. However, if we will not repent and continue in our *insincere worship, injustice, and idolatry*, then the fire will become the *Destroyer's Fire*, and we will be consumed.

Finally, in Isaiah 2:2-3, we learn that Yahweh continues to hold our grace to us. Look at what He says:

*² It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
³ and many peoples shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

There seems to be a play on words in the original Hebrew in v. 2 when Isaiah says, "*in the latter days.*" This can also be translated "*in the end of the days.*" Isaiah may want us to look back to Genesis 1:1, where it says the Hebrew word "*beresit*" is translated "*in the beginning.*" And here, the Hebrew word is "*bahrit*," "*in the end of days.*"

Isaiah is trying to help us understand from beginning to end that salvation is of the LORD. We must come to the Mountain of God.

Friends, Jesus is the Mountain of God. He is the One who will draw the nations to Himself. His drawing power is so strong that it will defy gravity because they will flow uphill to worship Him.

They will look up to a miserable hill called Calvary where, on that high place, the Lamb of God paid for our sin of insincere worship, injustice and idolatry. We must look up to Calvary, where Jesus took our destroying fire

of God saved for them upon Himself. By His death, He paid for our sins and purchased our ability to repent and trust Him as our Savior.

Friend, have you looked to Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Won't you go to the hill of Calvary where Jesus was slain for you on the cross? Call to Him today while there is still time, and you will be saved from the penalty of your sin and saved to eternal life with God.

Brother and sister in Christ, learn to live a life of repentance. Continually turn from sin and to Jesus. Strive for sincere worship, practice justice, and flee idolatry.