

TEXT

Isaiah 1:10–20 (ESV)

10 Hear the word of Yahweh,
you rulers of **Sodom**¹!

Give ear to the **teaching**² of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

11 “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says Yahweh;

I have had enough³ 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**⁴,
who has required of you
this **trampling**⁵ of my courts?

13 Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination⁶ to me.

New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly⁷.

14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;

they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.

15 When you **spread out your hands**⁸,

I will hide my eyes from you;

even though you make many prayers,

I will not listen;

your hands are full of blood.

16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;

remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;

cease to do evil,

17 learn to do good;

seek justice,

correct oppression⁹;

bring justice¹⁰ to the fatherless,

plead the widow’s cause.

18 “Come now, let us reason together, says Yahweh:

though your sins are like scarlet,

they shall be as white as snow;

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.”

CONTEXT

Introduction (1:1-5:30)

Israel’s present condition summed up (1:2-31)

One nation under judgment of God (1:2-9)

With religious hypocrisy (1:10-20)

Oppression and injustice for all (1:21-31)

Contrasting Israel Present vs. Israel Future (2:1-4:6)

A Harvest of Wild Grapes (5:1-30)

Isaiah’s Call (6:1-13)

¹ The analogy of v.9 becomes a direct address

² Lit. “law”, or “rebuke”

³ Lit. “I am full” NET: “They have piled food on his table that he doesn’t want.”

⁴ Or “enter my presence”

⁵ By both people and animals

⁶ an object which is loathsome and abhorrent, detestable

⁷ Lit. “sin and assembly” – i.e. wickedness with religious duty

⁸ As in prayer

⁹ Could either mean “rebuke the oppressor” or “give happiness to the oppressed”

¹⁰ Or “judge”, “defend”

INTRODUCTION

A new section begins in verse 10, and appears to be a new oracle. It is linked to verse 9 by the common reference of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, the focus has shifted and we are no longer looking at the result of God's judgment but the attitudes and actions that led to it in the first place. While vv2-9 very clearly appear to be situated at the height of Sennacherib's invasion in 701BC, the timing of this section up until the end of chapter 5 seems very different.

There are several indications that the setting for these chapters is during the reign of King Uzziah and prior to Isaiah's commission in chapter 6¹¹. Consider the description of Uzziah's reign in 2 Chronicles 26. Of note:

- The assumption of peace without apparent impending foes. Prior to 740, there wasn't really a threat facing Judah. The promised judgment from a surrounding nation is anonymous and without any clear indication of where it would come from. Whereas later, the threats (first Israel/Syria, and subsequently Assyria) were well-known and Isaiah named them explicitly.
- Prosperity (2:7):
 - Lavish courts with festivals and sacrifices.
 - Compare with Amos 5:21-24 which stems from the same time period
 - Plantations and mansions, jewelry, and partying
- Military power – cf. The horses and chariots described in chapter 2. Uzziah was known for his military build-up
- Agricultural program (cp. 2 Chron. 26:10 w/ the abundance of agricultural knowledge in Isaiah, which would make sense if Isaiah was brought up in Uzziah's court)
- Possible earthquake reference in 5:25 (cf. Amos 1:1, Zech. 14:4-5)
- Other factors:
 - The temple references (missing elsewhere)
 - Lack of concern with Davidic kingship (which became a pressing issue after Uzziah's death)
 - Only two calls for present repentance (1:16-20 and 2:5), beyond that it is assumed judgment and then repentance of the future remnant.

These verses make it clear that the remedy to Judah's guilt will not be found in the sacrificial cult – cf. Jer. 7:2-11, but only in repentance and obedience. Oswalt: "Religious ceremony tends to put God in the past, to become magical, to be man-centered and man-pleasing, to make God familiar and to blur his moral demands... On the other hand, when there exists a trusting and obedient relationship to a present, moral Sovereign, then the ceremonies can be very helpful in symbolizing that relationship." Cf. Mal. 3:1-4 and Psalm 51:16-19

V10-15 WICKEDNESS WITH RELIGIOUS DUTY

"Hear the word of Yahweh, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says Yahweh; 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. "When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have 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; your hands are full of blood."

- Having compared their national calamity to being nearly as bad as Sodom and Gomorrah, this section now goes so far as to make the connection explicit – not only is their judgment comparable, but so is their guilt! This comparison is picked up elsewhere in the Bible, such as Revelation 11:8.
- V.11-15 are a sustained tirade against religious worship while maintaining a lifestyle of disobedience and idolatry.
- Not only are the sacrifices, sabbaths, feasts, and assemblies of no value to them, but the LORD actively detests them from bringing divine blessing – they actually heap guilt on top of guilt. The theme repeats throughout:
 - "I am full" (v11)
 - "I have no pleasure" (v11)

¹¹ Milgrom, Jacob. "Did Isaiah Prophecy during the Reign of Uzziah?" *Vetus Testamentum* 14, no. 2 (1964): 164-82. Accessed March 8, 2020. doi:10.2307/1516379.

- “stop bringing” (v13)
 - “detestable” (v13)
 - “I cannot bear” (v13)
 - “I hate with all my being” (v14)
 - “They have become a burden” (v14)
 - “I am weary of them” (v14)
 - The Lord says, “I have no pleasure” or “I have no delight” in the blood of bulls, or lambs, or goats. Isaiah will later use this same language to describe a sacrifice that did please him
 - Isaiah 53:10
 - Some have tried to argue based on these and similar verses that the prophets were opposed to the cultic rituals prescribed in the Pentateuch and that they advocated a religion of the heart instead. What’s in view here, however, and consistently so throughout the Old Testament, is an opposition to any pretense of worship that is not also accompanied by faith and obedience.
 - Isaiah 66:2-4
 - 1 Sam 15:20-23
 - Psa 40:6
 - Malachi 1:10
 - **Prov. 21:27**
 - Motyer: “The law was given so that those who were already the Lord’s people by redemption might know how to behave on ways acceptable to him who redeemed them. The cultus was given so that those who were committed to the life of obedience might remain in the Lord’s presence notwithstanding their failures and have recourse to mercy and forgiveness for their lapses from obedience.”
 - Outside this context of a commitment to repentance and obedience, there was no utility in the practices and it becomes identical to idolatry – a magical, manipulative way to have God come to their aid.
 - The whole design of these practices was to allow the people to appear before him, but we see in v12 that Yahweh sees it as a mere trampling.
 - Incense offered in this context is called an “abomination” – the same word used to describe adultery, homosexuality, and idolatry elsewhere in the OT.
 - Lev. 18:22; 20:13
 - Deut. 17:1-4; 24:4
- Even though we don’t have the strong cultic rituals that accompanied Israel’s worship, we do have our own forms of religious service. More generally, any tendency to make a spiritual habit an end in itself, losing the life change and desire for God, must be guarded against. This is religion without shunning sin and pursuing holiness.
- This type of heartless worship was condemned in Isaiah’s day, and likewise in Jesus’ day was the thing that he most strongly opposed (cf. Mark 7:1-23; Matt. 15:1-20; Rev 3:16). What is it that makes this particular sin so dangerous and severely rebuked?
 - Are there prayers that God refuses to hear?
 - V15 – The prayers offered up by the hypocrite are ignored. Yahweh says, “I am not listening.” The only prayer that he will hear from this person is a prayer of genuine repentance.
 - Micah 3:4
 - 1 Samuel 8:18
 - Proverbs 15:8
- This is as much a NT reality, as 1 Peter 3:7 makes clear.
- He says, “your hands are full of blood” – literally, their hands are full of the blood of sacrificial animals, but Yahweh’s complaint is that they are full of the blood of those whom they have oppressed. The Hebrew word for “consecrate” and to “be consecrated” is “fill their hands” or “to have ones hands full.” In this case, they are lifting up their hands as if to be consecrated, but they’re already full of blood.

V16-17 THE CALL TO REPENTANCE

“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.”

- How are the people to “wash” and make themselves clean? The language is ceremonial but immediately following the condemnation of empty ceremony.
- This passage is one of only two calls pre-exile calls for repentance in the whole book of Isaiah, the other is in Chapter 2.
- Repentance for Israel is not going to be feeling sorry for their sin but involves specific actions that they’re called to take. The expectation is a society functioning as the law of Moses envisioned.
 - Jeremiah 22:3
 - James 1:27; 4:8 – the NT sees the same concern for righteousness
 - Psalm 34:14
 - Micah 6:8
 - Amos 5:14-15
 - Zephaniah 2:3
- The pattern of repentance looks like this:
 - Stop – Abandon the old life
 - Learn – Develop a new mind
 - Seek – Set new priorities and objectives aligned to the Lord’s will
- This call to repentance sheds light on the guilt they bear – their hands are “full of blood” because of the oppression of the weak and needy (cf. v21-23). The first thing we usually point to as signs of a depraved society are usually loose morals, a loss of traditional values. However, those are frequently late stage issues. The Bible consistently points to two things driving the coming judgment – idolatry and oppression. Consider Ezekiel’s indictment against Sodom – Ezek. 16:49
- This call to repentance is very reminiscent of John the Baptist’s charge in the wilderness. He accuses them of guilt, and in response they ask, “What shall we do?” His answer is specific and practical to various stations in life (Luke 3:7-14). Consider also Zaccheus in Luke 19:5-10.
- We cannot assume we will recognize our sin immediately, due to its deception. We can easily deceive ourselves and overlook sin.
- The specific things that Isaiah calls out:
 - Seek justice, correct oppression, please the cause of the fatherless and widows – orphans and widows are a catchword in the Bible and represent all of the helpless and needy.
 - Correct oppression – may be better translated as “put right the oppressor” and if so, you see here both sides of a corrupt society needing fixed. The oppressed need relief and the oppressor needs correction.

V18-20 CONSIDER YOUR OPTIONS

““Come now, let us reason together, says Yahweh: 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 Yahweh has spoken.””

- Now, having called them to repentance, the Lord presents them with the choices. The way to understand “Come now, let us reason together” is like a lawyer saying “here are your options” and laying out a formal choice:
 - Repent and be blessed
 - Continue in rebellion and be cursed

As bad as the situation has become (e.g. “Sodom”), the LORD still holds out the possibility of forgiveness. (cf. Isa 55:6-7)
- The picture is one of the most well-known from the Bible – though they are as scarlet or crimson, they shall be white like snow or wool. Completely cleansed, completely forgiven. This is what God offers should they return to him.
- Consider the parallel in Matt. 7:24-27
- Isaiah leaves unspoken here how the transformation from crimson to scarlet will come about in the event they repent. This is fleshed out later in the book.