

Bible Overview 15 The Prophets - Judgement and Hope

Isaiah 1

Ever heard of a wine brick? During the prohibition in America when wine was outlawed bootleggers began to press grape concentrate into the form of bricks – which was quite legal, then on the labels they would print this warning, “Do not let this brick sit in a gallon of water for 21 days as it will ferment and become illegal wine.”

It is amazing, isn't it, the ingenuity that we have when it comes to breaking the law. And even God's people have proved ourselves to be just as determined when it comes to breaking God's laws. We will appear to be law abiding, we will appear to be Christians but then our hearts do their own thing and we rebel against our loving and gracious God. Sadly we see it in our churches and amongst our church leaders.

But, unfortunately, it is nothing new. 200 years after the reign of King David, God's people were mostly that by name only and certainly many of the kings paid no attention to God. They were perfect examples of hypocrites. So God sent the prophets like Isaiah.

By the lifetime of Isaiah the Promised Land had divided into two kingdoms; Israel, the northern kingdom had already been over run by Assyria, the global superpower of the day, now Isaiah warns his countrymen in the southern kingdom of Judah that a similar fate awaits them if they continue to ignore God.

Listen to how Isaiah chapter 1 verse 4 puts it, “Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.”

“Children given to corruption” - So, when children do wrong their parents have three options; they let it go and watch their children descend into even worse behaviour, they walk away and abandon their role as a parent leaving their children at the mercy of any and every influence around them, good, or more likely bad, or the third choice parents can make is to discipline their children.

Now let's be honest here, option 1 is most tempting – just roll with it, let it go, don't make life difficult for yourself. Option 2 is (in all honesty) occasionally very tempting, but deep down you know that that just isn't on and so reluctantly you go for option 3. But, let's be honest; if you are punishing your children because you enjoy punishing them then you are a bad parent, no one who is a kind parent actually likes disciplining their children, we only ever do it because we know that sometimes it is absolutely essential for the benefit of the child.

Likewise God is a loving Father God, so when he disciplines his people, his children, it is an expression of his love (as we saw a few weeks ago) – but why exactly does Isaiah 1 tell us God is angry?

Well, there are three main reasons;
First, God's people have turned their backs on their master, in verse 2 God speaks as a father, “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.” These are the children who have turned their backs on the Holy one of Israel.

Now, today is sea Sunday and even if you profess to knowing nothing about sailing you at least remember from books and films what you call it when the crew rebel against the captain – mutiny and mutiny is a very serious offence on the high seas, mutiny is the rebellion of the crew against the rightful authority of the captain and so usually (in the past) it ended in the execution or marooning of the mutineers.

And so when we hear of God's people having rebelled against their captain God, when we see that the children of God are mutineers then we can only fear the worst for them.

I wonder in our lives if we ever regard the scant regard we give to God's rightful authority as mutiny? I wonder if we think about the consequences we deserve to suffer as a result? Our mutinous actions rightly deserve punishment; death which is the wages of sin and abandonment -hell.

Secondly, God hates their religion. Sounds a little harsh, don't you think? Surely God loves religion, after all it was his idea, wasn't it? OK, let me ask you this – when you were at school, how many children took R.E; religious Education? And they all ended up as Bible believing Christians? Thought not. Religion and faith can be miles apart, because all religion requires at its basest level is that we go through the motions.

In an ideal world our religious acts should grow out of our heartfelt praise and worship towards our loving God – in other words, our faith, but when our hearts have mutinied against God then our religion can become like that which God condemns in Isaiah chapter 1. Listen to verses 13-15, God declares; “Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening.”

Now let's just run through that, God says that if our hearts are mutinous against him then:

He cannot bear our meetings and the very things we would offer him in praise are meaningless – even detestable!

Far from bringing God joy and pleasure with our worship, our hollow praise actually becomes a burden to him and then when we turn to God in prayer he looks away from us and closes his ears to us! Our worship in those times is pointless and counter productive.

So, perhaps this causes us to reassess how we approach worship, the attitude with which we come to church, or fellowship group, or even put on the latest worship CD or Songs of praise on TV. And when we call out to God are we expecting him to hear us because we believe that he is somehow obliged to respond or have we built up a lasting loving relationship with him through allowing him to be the captain of our lives so that he loves to hear from us?

Third, God hates the lives of the people he is speaking to in Isaiah 1. in Verse 23 God is scathing, "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."

How damning, but how familiar that sounds in a week where we have heard about newspapers paying policemen for information and where one of the biggest surprises has been that a government has taken on the might of a global news organisation instead of pandering to it out of fear. We shake our heads and tut and yet, have we done anything ourselves this week whilst the rest of the news has been screaming to us of an impending disaster in East Africa?

Have you found it easy it is to sit at home complaining about the price of diesel and the increasing cost of gas and electricity, not to mention the shopping bills and then, when you watch the news from Africa, almost switch off mentally and do nothing?

Are we defending the cause of the fatherless and the widow, or more concerned with clubcard points and “better than half price” deals from the supermarkets?

So perhaps, in some ways there aren't huge differences between us and the people of God in the days of the prophets, but God used the prophets to warn his people that they were in trouble, the prophets warned people of how far they had fallen away from God and then urged them to repent, to turn back to him. Listen to what God says through Isaiah in verses 16-20;

“Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. 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 as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

It is a wonderful invitation from God to rebels and mutineers alike to turn their lives around and follow their Lord and Captain once again.

So what was the result? Did God's people stop doing wrong? Did they defend the cause of the needy? Did they wash their scarlet sins clean in God's gracious mercy? No. And God kept his word, he disciplined his wayward children, it was exactly as we read in the last verses of chapter 1 – God used the experience to rid the land of the rebellious and the sinners, the selfish and the cruel and to purify his people. God's discipline was fulfilled as the great Babylonian empire (modern day Iraq) swept into invade what the Assyrian empire left behind.

It was a terrible wake-up call to God's people that they could not abandon God without there being consequences. Going back to sea Sunday – if you are sailing along and you decide to abandon your navigational aids and make it all up as you go along, then eventually there are going to be consequences – you are going to run aground and that's what happened in 586 BC when God's people were exiled to Babylon – God, it seemed, had left them high and dry.

It suddenly dawned on them what it was like to live without God, how terrible it was to be cut off from him. But it isn't all doom and gloom because the book of Isaiah is full of promises about God's plans for his people, how after he disciplines them he will send them a saviour.

In fact some of our best known Bible readings used at Christmas and Easter come from Isaiah speaking, as they do, of the hope that is to come in Jesus.

And those first four verses of chapter 2 lead us into that great hope because there we read of a time when (after the judgement of God) the nations will stream to the mountain of the Lord – the seemingly humble hill of Jerusalem will become the greatest of all mountains because it is here that Jesus will die for our sins and rise again making possible the new creation where swords are beaten into ploughshares because there is no more fighting or war (Rev 21).

So the important message here is that God does judge our sinful rebellious nature. When we mutiny against him there are consequences – we will face his righteous judgement and his holy justice – but God, in his love for us, will not abandon us, he will not leave us marooned. When we realise how meaningless and pointless life is without him he will rescue us – the prophets deliver not only a message of judgement, but also of hope.

And so we need to challenge ourselves; if God looked at our lives would he see a people in rebellion or who faithfully love him? Would he see us worshipping in Spirit and in truth, filled with love for him and one another, or following worthless religion? And would God see a people who express their faith through their actions or a selfish church only interested in itself?

These are the big challenges that the prophets throw out to us, how we will respond? We know that Jesus has brought us salvation, we know that Jesus will return to reign in majesty over a kingdom of eternal peace, but that give us no licence to sit back and cruise through our lives as God's people without serious thought for him or those in need.

Instead, let's follow the encouragement we find in the next verse after our reading; Isaiah 2:5; "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."