

## The God and Gospel of Isaiah

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### 1. Introduction

Brian has been preaching out of Luke 6 on loving our enemies. He ended his message last week with some words that really grabbed me. He said that before we can be merciful and loving and kind to our enemies, “we need to be amazed at the mercy of God. We have to be astounded by who God is.” That, my brothers and sisters, is my fight each new day, to be amazed at the mercy of God and astounded by who God is. Oftentimes when I get up in the morning, I’m focused on how tired I feel or on how I don’t want to face my responsibilities today. I don’t normally wake up astounded by who God is and amazed at his mercy towards me.

It takes no faith at all for me to see my circumstances and respond by grumbling. Living by faith is different than that. Living by faith takes one look at my circumstances, but refuses to let that be the final word in my heart. Living by faith takes one look at my circumstances and then takes another longer look at the glorious God who has planned out those very circumstances ... and takes a look at the rich mercy that this glorious God has towards me because of Christ ... mercy that is mine even in my circumstances, especially in my circumstances.

Where does faith to endure hardship with joy rather than grumbling, where does that faith come from? I’m thinking of hardships like loving your enemy, chronically poor health, the ongoing pain of a difficult close relationship, financial struggles, loneliness, loss of a loved one. Faith that carries us through those kind of hardships with joy isn’t just mental assent kind of faith, right? This isn’t just “Of course I believe in God.” This isn’t the kind of faith that endures hardships with joy, right? How do you know that a shallow faith isn’t enough to carry you through deep hardships with joy? Because you’ve tried it and your heart was full of grumbling rather than contented joy. Real faith carries us to God when the swift current of everything around us is trying to carry us in another direction.

Where does this real faith come from? It comes from hearing the word of God. So when your hardships come, where do you look in the Bible, the word of God, to get your faith in God reignited? You want to turn to a passage or book of the bible that will re-astound you by who God is and will re-amaze you at his mercy toward you.

One of my favorite books to go to when my faith needs stimulated is the book of Isaiah. I find there a picture of a big God. I find there a realistic picture of my sinful nature. I find there a rightly scary picture of God’s judgment. I find there a hopeful picture of God’s mercy that calls to me to repentance. If you too need to have your hope in God reignited, then turn with me to the book of Isaiah. We’ll spend our time this morning looking at passages in this good book. Isaiah is about in the middle of your Bible. I promise that you will get more out of this message if you look at the passages in your Bible with me. So please open your Bible.

\* Pray

## 2. God is Big

Let's begin by looking to see what God is like in Isaiah. Turn with me to Isaiah chapter 45. Before we start reading in that chapter, let me tell you that Isaiah was a prophet of God. That means that God spoke through him to others. His messages from God were for the people of Israel and Judah, as well as the nations. Isaiah's prophecies were recorded in what we know as the Book of Isaiah.

\* Isaiah 45

With that background, please follow along as I start reading in chapter 45 v. 1.

Isaiah 45:1 <sup>1</sup> Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed:

Who is this Cyrus? He was ruler of the Medo-Persia empire in the 500's BC. That empire was east of the land of Israel, but eventually conquered many other nations, including Babylon. Babylon had already conquered the land of Israel, so when Cyrus conquered Babylon, he then became the ruler of Israel as well. Key question: what was behind Cyrus' climb to power over the nations around him? Was it his military mind? Was it his ability to make shrewd political alliances? He may have had both those skills, but those skills didn't originate from him. Whatever skills he possessed for conquering nations were gifts to him. Look again at v. 1 and following.

Isaiah 45:1-7 <sup>1</sup> Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: <sup>2</sup> "I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, <sup>3</sup> I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. <sup>4</sup> For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. <sup>5</sup> I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, <sup>6</sup> that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. <sup>7</sup> I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

God is speaking here. He's telling about himself and about what he will do. What do we learn about God here? Let's start with the fact that Cyrus was not a son of Abraham. He was not one of God's chosen people, the Jews. He was not even a worshiper of YHWH.

Yet our God anointed Cyrus to accomplish God's purposes. God is the creator of all men. They all belong to him. And God does what he wills with them.

What is God going to do for Cyrus? God is going to subdue nations, make them submit to Cyrus. There is poetic language in the passage. The belt of a king would hold his sword. To loose his belt would be to disarm him. In v. 2 God says that he will go before Cyrus and level the exalted places. God will go in front of Cyrus and bring down high defensive towers that protect cities and kingdoms. The language is graphic: imagine breaking a door of bronze in pieces. Bronze is a strong metal. What kind of power breaks a door like that in pieces? God's mighty power!

God doesn't do anything without motive. He never just throws his power around just because he can. He governs the universe according to justice and righteousness. At the end of time, all will marvel at how God put everything together for good. So here with Cyrus, why does God say he will do these things? First in v. 3, God says that he is doing them "that you may know that it is I, YHWH, the God of Israel, who call you by name." Then in v. 6, "that people may know" ... which people? People "from the rising of the sun and from the west" ... that is, people from east to west ... all the peoples of the earth ... that they may know what? "that there is none besides me; I am YHWH, and there is no other."

When God does mighty works around us, he intends for us to marvel at him. When you hear thunder that shakes the house ... When you see a just born baby and marvel that that new creature came from 2 cells that merged and now is 6 lbs of precious breathing, crying, sucking ... When you look back on 50 years of marriage and you know how many times you hurt and sinned against each other and marvel that you are still together, loving each other more purely than on your wedding day ... When you see godless rulers on the world stage and the church of Jesus beat down and marvel that for 2000 years God has kept his bride alive and thriving, saving generation after generation, the gates of hell have not prevailed over his church ... When you see mighty works of God like these, let that remind you that God has no equal. He alone is God and there is none beside him. God wanted Cyrus to know this and he wanted the peoples around him to know this and he wanted us who read this account today to know that God alone is YHWH and there is none like him. Why else is this written down and preserved these thousands of years? So that you and your children may know how BIG is this God. Be astounded, friends!

\* Isaiah 46

Now turn the page for another look at God's authority and might. Follow along as I read starting with Isaiah 46:8.

Isaiah 46:8–11 <sup>8</sup> "Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, <sup>9</sup> remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, <sup>10</sup> declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' <sup>11</sup> calling a bird of prey from the

east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.

Who is God talking to here? He calls them “you transgressors” in v. 8, you sinners, you who disregard my law and disregard me. He commands them to remember something, to bring it back into their mind.

We choose how to spend our think time. What does the man who loves to golf think about? He spends hours thinking about the new clubs he hopes to get for Christmas and about that winter golf vacation in Florida. Why? Because he wants to think about these things, these things bring him great pleasure. The high school girl is fascinated by a particular boy she knows. What does she love to think about? That boy! She brings to her mind, over and over again, what his smile looks like, his eyes, his voice. Thinking about him brings her great pleasure. Some prize golf and others prize boyfriends, but the prize that brings the greatest pleasure is our great God.

And God knows this. In the end, he’s the only prize that delivers its promised reward. Golf and boyfriends and money and sex and food and popularity all let you down. So to neglect God and chase after those is to lose all pleasure in the end. We are easily duped and fall for the cheap thrills, but God never is. He sees better than we do what will last and that the reward from prizing golf and boyfriends is small compared to the reward from prizing God. So with love for us, he says, “Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old.”

What are these former things of old that he commands us to remember? They are the record of God’s mighty and just deeds in times past. Where do we find that record? In the Scriptures, especially the OT. It is a large book containing an abundant record of God’s good works. When we see his works, we see his character. When we learn to admire his works, we’ll admire the worker behind them. Learning to admire God’s works does not come naturally. G. K. Chesterton wrote, “The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder.” So, my friends, cultivate your sense of wonder as you go about your life ... and look for the God of all wonders. Don’t neglect seeking his wonders in the Old Testament.

And what should we admire about God? He tells us in this passage. We should marvel that he declares the end of affairs from their beginnings. He not only declares what will happen before it begins, but he brings about his purpose in those happenings. To say it another way, God not only knows what will happen, but he always produces the outcome he desires. Do you hear him? “I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.” “I am God and there is none like me.”

#### \* Summary

In summary, what is God like in Isaiah? He’s big, massive. God speaks with authority. God knows all things, present and future, visible and hidden. Nothing escapes his notice. God accomplishes all his purposes. Nothing escapes his plan.

How then should people like us respond to this big God? With worship, for he is more excellent than any other; he alone is God. With trust, for his works demonstrate that he is good and able. By heeding him. That's an uncommon word today. It means that we should listen to him and obey. Wise people acknowledge God's authority and live like it.

### 3. People Are Wicked

#### \* Israel and Judah

The book of Isaiah is full of God speaking through Isaiah to his people. Let's heed his word and listen by turning now to another portion of this book. Please turn with me now to the beginning of this book, Isaiah chapter 1.

Isaiah 1:2–6 <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”

God is speaking to heaven and earth, speaking to all who will hear. Just like we saw in chapter 46, these words are poetic. When you hear that, don't think lines that rhyme. Think words that paint pictures so that the message is more powerful, more compelling because you can see the picture. “Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.” Do you see the picture? We all know that isn't right. Parents give a good gift to children when they bring them up well. And those children owe obedience and honor to their parents, not rebellion. So when we hear God sayings this, we ought to think, what is wrong with Israel that they are rebelling against their Father?

The word picture continues. “<sup>3</sup> The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” When you hear that, what comes to your mind? Even the ox knows its owner and the donkey knows its master's crib. So what is wrong with Israel that it doesn't know God as its owner and master? This isn't right.

The passage continues.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

God proclaims Israel as sinful. As a good apple tree this time of year is laden with fruit, weighed down with it, every branch full of it, so this people is laden with sin. They are evildoers and they come from a family of evildoers. In their dealings with YHWH, their good father, they despise and forsake him. They don't think God is worth much. They don't heed him or thank him or obey him.

Continue reading in v. 5.

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

Are they just partly sinful? No, the whole head, the whole heart, from the sole of the foot to the head is sin sickness. It's as ugly and smelly as a raw wound that hasn't been treated.

Verse 7:

Isaiah 1:7–9 <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. <sup>9</sup> If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

The fruit of their sins is all around them. Sometimes God makes our world not right so that we can see plainly that our souls are not right.

How are they sinning against God? What have they done to bring this upon themselves? Have they stopped worshipping God at the temple? Have ceased to bring the required sacrifices for their sins? Continue reading with me in v. 10.

Isaiah 1:10–15 <sup>10</sup> Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! [God is talking to Israel and calling them rulers of Sodom.] Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! <sup>11</sup> “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. <sup>12</sup> “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. <sup>15</sup> 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.

God says that he does not see their worship as worship. They are coming to the temple as they should, but their outward worship is not for real. We learn something important here. It is possible to look on the outside like you are worshipping God: coming to church, singing the songs, giving the offering, taking notes during the sermon, closing your eyes in prayer ... and at the same time, it may be no worship at all, but only a fake. How does God judge if it is real worship or fake? Real worship, God says, must come from an obedient life. The people of God had “hands full of blood.” Likely they were not all stabbing people and getting blood on their hands. This is poetic language for how they were treating the people around them: those who work for them, their neighbors, their family ... they were treating each other so unjustly, so unkindly, with such a lack of

mercy, with such oppression, that God judged, “Your hands are full of blood” and your worship is “an abomination to me.” I cannot endure your sins alongside your pretend worship services.

\* Babylon, Moab, ... the World

God sees. He sees all. No man can ever hide his sins from God. No man can ever rationalize away his sins before God. God sees the dark evil guilt of every man, woman, and child. Isaiah is not only recording God’s judgment against his people Israel and Judah. In chapter 13, God tells Isaiah to proclaim his coming judgment on Babylon ... in ch. 15, Moab, ... in ch. 17, Damascus, ... in ch 18, Cush, ... in ch. 19, Egypt, ... in ch. 23, Tyre and Sidon. And in case any who read this might think they have escaped because they are not from any of these peoples, in ch. 24 God proclaims his judgment upon the whole earth. Listen as I read Isaiah 24 starting with v. 4.

Isaiah 24:4–6 <sup>4</sup> The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. <sup>5</sup> The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. <sup>6</sup> Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.

Friends, God speaks now to you in your sin just as he speaks to Israel and Egypt and Babylon in the time Isaiah the prophet. These words are here to instruct us now, just as they were spoken many years ago to instruct the original hearers. And what is the instruction from God? What does he say to them and to us?

Isaiah 1:2–6 <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel [...] and all people that I have given birth to [...] do not know, my people do not understand.”

Just as God then promised and brought about judgment to Israel, Judah, Babylon, Egypt, and all the nations, so he surely promises and will bring about judgment for the sins of men and women and children today.

\*Summary

The God of Isaiah is big and mighty. He rightly sees the sins of people as terribly wicked and rightly promises judgment.

What does it look like for us to heed his words? What does it look like for us to rightly respond to the God who knows all and judges rightly? It looks like our humbling ourselves before him. We must not try to dodge his accusations of our sins. We must agree with him that we are rebels against him and we disobey his laws. Agree with him not just now in the abstract – yes, I’m a sinner, but agree with him the next time you disobey your parents, are unkind to your spouse, cheat your employer, lust for that person or thing, indulge in self-pity or pride or anxiety or anger. If you agree with God that you

are a sinner, then admit it each time you sin. Be known as a humble repent-er, not a proud sin deny-er.

#### 4. God Offers Mercy To the Humble

God is big and he says that people are wicked. Yet, God has good news in the book of Isaiah for some of those wicked people. Continue reading with me at ch. 1 v. 16. Right after saying that he will not listen to their prayers because their hands are full of blood, God urges them to make a way of escape from his judgment.

Isaiah 1:16–20 <sup>16</sup> Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, <sup>17</sup> learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

God urges these people to repent. To repent of a sin is to turn away from it. "Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good."

Listen to God's mercy that comes next in v. 18.

<sup>18</sup> "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. <sup>19</sup> If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; <sup>20</sup> but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

God is letting his people know that though their sins are terrible and deep, like a bright red stain on a white shirt, the stain doesn't need to be permanent. The scarlet stain on their soul can become white as snow. How? God gives just a hint here when he says, "if you are willing and obedient." Willing to do what? Willing to do what he just said, "Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes."

God's mercy is available to all, but it does not come to all unconditionally. That's what v. 20 means when it warns, "But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword." The history of the Jewish people recorded in this OT shows the people rebelling against the God who reared them. And it shows this God pronouncing his judgment upon them for that rebellion, judgment like sword and famine and captivity. And this testament of God's deeds records God offering them mercy if they repent. When they did not, God brought the punishment he warned of. Many died because of their sins. God keeps his word. However, even when bringing judgment upon his people, God always included mercy. His judgment was never as thorough as their sins deserved. He never destroyed them all. Many died for their sins, but some people he preserved as a remnant who would repent and follow God again.

But why would repentance remove the stain of sin? It does not. The guilt of adultery is not undone by confession of guilt or expression of sorrow or even of repentance. What can a man pay to absolve him of his sins? Or to use Jesus' words, "What can a man give

in return for his soul?” People like us, whose sins are a bright red stain, have nothing we can give that will remove our guilt.

Then how is it that God whose justice is pure, who cannot therefore overlook any wickedness, ... how is it that he can show any man mercy? How is it that God’s character could allow any remnant to survive his judgment, since they were all sinners? God spoke of this to Isaiah and we read of it in ch. 53. Starting in v. 4, it reads:

Isaiah 53:4–6 <sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Here God says he will someday send a servant of his to suffer for the sins of others. This servant will be pierced, put to death, not for his own sins, but for ours. God will wound him, crush him, smite him, so that God might uphold pure justice and yet show us undeserved mercy. Jesus is that servant. He came not to be served, but to give his life as a ransom for many.

#### \* Summary

God kindly offers lavish mercy to the humble.

How should we respond to this? Prize his mercy! Seek his mercy! Sell all to obtain his mercy! What must you sell? Your pride. Humble yourself and admit your wickedness ... before God and before those you sin against. Friends, lay down your pride. It keeps you from God. He will oppose you and judge you if you remain in your pride and rebellion. Instead repent of your sins while breath remains in your lungs so that you can escape his judgment. There is no other way. I’m not talking about a one-time event of prizing his mercy and repenting, but about a day by day living out of prizing his mercy and repenting.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, how do we become astounded by who God is and amazed by his mercy? How do we get our faith in God re-ignited? We feed our souls with the word of God. And the book of Isaiah is a great book for doing this. In this book we’ve seen three great faith inspiring truths.

One, the God of Isaiah is big, massive. He speaks with authority. He knows all things. He accomplishes all this purposes. Nothing escapes his plan. So worship him; he’s more excellent than any other. Trust him; he’s good and able. Listen to and obey him.

The second great faith inspiring truth is that the God of Isaiah rightly sees the sins of people like us as terribly wicked and rightly promises judgment. So agree with God that

you are a sinner and admit it each time you sin. Be known as a humble repent-er, not a proud sin deny-er.

And faith inspiring truth number three, the God of Isaiah kindly offers lavish mercy to the humble. So prize his mercy, not your pride. Seek and receive his mercy by repenting of your sins while you can.

This is the God and gospel of Isaiah.