

Abiding Fruit

Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart

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My People Do Not Understand Isaiah 1:3

These words were spoken to the nation of Judah in the Old Testament by God through Isaiah the prophet. They had gotten so far from God that they did not know God. They were idolatrous. They had replaced God with gods of their own making. The demise of the northern kingdom, Israel, in 722 BC would be of no benefit to them in the days that lay ahead. They would not learn the lessons of history, not did they care to.

In the one hundred years or so prior to Judah's fall, the nation enjoyed some very good kings and some very bad kings. It is hard to believe that Hezekiah could have such a wicked father, Ahaz, and be such a good man himself who loved the Lord, and then to produce a son, Manasseh, who was probably the most wicked of all the kings in the Old Testament.

During Isaiah's prophetic ministry, Assyria is the world power but her power and dominion is waning. The Babylonians were beginning to assert themselves and soon would dominate the ancient world.

The prophets were God's spokesmen. They were to tell the nation only what God had told them. They were to add nothing to God's word and take nothing away from it either. In other words, the ministry of the prophets was commissioned by God, approved by God and authenticated by God, as His word was fulfilled. We see this in hindsight perfectly. Judah did not see it though it was staring them in the face. God spoke over and over again to the nation, but they were stubborn and hardhearted and refused to hear the word of the Lord. There is a danger in hearing the word of God and not responding to it simply because we think we have heard the same stuff over and over again.

The prophet Isaiah ministered during the reigns of four kings (Uzziah, 790 – 739; Jotham, 750 – 732; Ahaz, 735 – 715; Hezekiah, 715 – 686). He was married (8:3), and had two sons, Shear-Jashub (7:3) and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (8:3). According to tradition, Isaiah was martyred during the reign of Manasseh. It was the church father, Justin Martyr (100 – 165 AD) who said that Isaiah was killed by being sawn in two (see also Heb. 11:37).

During Isaiah's lifetime, the history of Israel was in turmoil. Great political events were in the making. Israel was heading for destruction in 722 BC, and if Judah was not careful, the nation would end up like Israel. It was a time for seeking God and His counsel. It was a time to be praying like never before. Chaos reigned in the land, in the cities and in the royal palaces. It was a time to be listening to God's word through His prophets. Spiritual decline begins slowly, but it gathers momentum and the downward spiral ensures fast painful collapse.

Isaiah's success as a spokesman for God is to be forgiven of his sins. This involves confession and repentance before God (see Isa. 6). The need for forgiveness is a present reality for all of us. Unless we begin with a candid assessment of our spiritual condition, we cannot begin to live with God or for God. We must see ourselves as God sees us. Isaiah follows the theology of Deuteronomy, which declares that judgment must come to a people who fail to live according to God's Law. Indeed, any society that ignores God's Law will experience spiritual catastrophe. For Israel and Judah this is located in a covenant

relationship. Moses and Joshua promised the blessing of God for obedience and the judgment of God for disobedience (see Deut. 28, 29; Josh 23, 24).

Isaiah 1 – 39 focuses on the need for the nation to deal with their sin before they can enjoy fellowship with God. Judgment is God's disciplinary way that leads to restoration and forgiveness. Isaiah 40 – 66 speaks of redemption (the forgiveness of sins through a suffering Servant of God). It also speaks of cosmological changes.

All through the prophecy, Isaiah holds God up before us to see Him in His glory and beauty. God is not outside of history, but rather He is on the inside, controlling and directing all events to their divinely appointed end. We might say that God is apart from his creation, yet God is part of His creation. Isaiah uses the name "the Lord" (Yahweh) more than 300 times. Yahweh is the covenant name for God. He also uses the name "Elohim" stressing God's absolute Sovereignty.

The people of God need comfort (Isa. 40:1), and only the God of comfort can bring this to His needy people. Spiritual impoverishment is the result of a drifting away from God. Nobody drifts away from God fast – it is a gradual slide, but it is an inevitable slide. How desperately we need the consolation of our Redeemer to meet us in our troubles. The danger of drifting is addressed by the writer to the Hebrews (Heb. 2:1). Drifting away from God comes through neglect of the means that God has provided for the vitality of our spiritual life. Drifting away from God leads to the hardening of our hearts, and if we fail to pay attention to the hardness of our hearts, we will be in danger of falling away from God (which is a very serious position to be in).

This was Judah's problem. Their spiritual life had slowly eroded over time. They liked the way the pagans around them did things. They played with idols and forgot about Yahweh. Idols do not have to be statues or things we see around us (the sun or the moon, trees, etc). They can exist deep in our hearts. Idolatry is anything that takes away from the true worship of God. Idols displace God. The good life, money, prosperity, good health can be idols to us. We can become more concerned with them than with God. We arrive at this position through shameful neglect of God.

We live in a time when God is relegated to the dictates of our schedules. If God does not fit in, then God must wait, we reason. Along with this thinking goes the conscience salving idea that God is okay with that. This is what we call spiritual ignorance and blindness. God complains through Isaiah that *"my people, Israel, do not know, nor do they understand"* (1:3).

Spiritual neglect and darkened minds lead to complete sinfulness. Isaiah speaks of the nation being unsound from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head (1:6). Their heads and hearts were sick and weak (1:5). Spiritual life involves all of us. You cannot relegate some part to God and another part to yourself. Your whole life is either for God or not.

Complete destruction awaits the nation, and it is the mere good pleasure of God that he holds back from destroying all of them. Isaiah says they would have become like Sodom and Gomorrah if God did not leave a few people behind (1:9). If God did not act in grace toward us when we sin against Him, He would reach out and destroy us like the ancient cities of the plain.

We must pursue God's ways boldly and confidently. He assures us of His blessing and love. We must act in obedience (1:19). We must not be afraid to confess our sins to God. We have an Advocate standing at the Father's right hand who defends us and pleads the merits of His finished atonement on our behalf. Let us be an understanding people – understanding of God's ways and purposes for the benefit of our spiritual lives. He promises that though our sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool (1:18).