



Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber,
“Religiosity or Righteousness”

13 October 2024

Readings: James 1:22-27, Isaiah 1:-2:4

Series Introduction

Today we are starting a new series - **Darkness to Light – God’s Salvation in Isaiah 1-12.**

All of the Bible is God’s Word, but Isaiah is one of those books that always seems particularly significant, not least because after Psalms, it is the Old Testament book most quoted in the New Testament.

It has lots of well-known passages:

- Isaiah’s vision in the temple. (6:1-4+)
- ‘The virgin will conceive... Immanuel!’ (7:14)
- And with the title of this series...
 ‘The people walking in darkness
 have seen a great light;
 on those living in the land of deep darkness
 a light has dawned.’ (9:2)
- ‘Unto us a child is born.’ (9:6-7)
- ‘Comfort, comfort my people.’ (40:1)
- ‘Those who hope in the LORD will soar like eagles.’ (40:31)
- The servant passages...
- ‘We all, like sheep, have gone astray.’ (53:6)
- The grand visions of future glory in chapter 60 and on etc. etc.

Isaiah is a big book, and a significant book, and it begins: The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. (1:1)

We’re talking 740 - 680 BC, and it’s a significant time for God’s people. There is some background information in the Bible Study booklets available in the foyer or online. We’ve heard some favourite verses, but how does this ‘vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem’ begin? What’s the situation Isaiah is speaking into? It tells us straight away.

1. The Situation (1:1-9)

1a. A Rebellious People

This series is called **darkness to light** for good reason. We will get to the light, but as the book opens, the situation is that God’s people are in darkness, they have rebelled against him.

There had been warnings from God, before they entered into the promised land, that they were to obey him. But from what have we just heard read - they haven’t obeyed, they have rebelled; they have forsaken the LORD; they are described as a sinful nation and there are consequences as we heard.

Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted.

From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness - only wounds and bruises and open sores. (1:5b-6a)

1b. A Ruined Land

Are these afflictions metaphorical or literal? Either way, clearly the people are under judgment, and things will not go well for them in the promised land, exactly as God had told them, and the land is affected and will be ruined.

Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire;
your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you,
laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.
Daughter Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard,
like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city under siege. (1:7-8)

Assyria is on the rise as the world power, and Jerusalem will come under siege as we read in chapter 36: In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. (36:1)

But even then, there is grace. Jerusalem is spared at this time. There are some survivors (1:9). Although the people are far from God and deserve to be wiped out - like Sodom and Gomorrah - in God's grace they remain.

2. How did it come to this? (1:10-23)

So how did it come to this? Why are God's people in this situation – in darkness? As the title of today's sermon would suggest, it's tied up with religiosity vs righteousness and we see that their religion is worthless.

2a. Religion is Worthless

We've just had the footy finals and as you know, I'm a Port Adelaide supporter. (That's in the proper footy: Aussie Rules Football.) If I put on a Swans scarf and beanie will that make me a Sydney supporter? No!

The same thing is going on here. The externals are not consistent with where the people of Judah's hearts are at. They are going through the motions, the externals, and so much so that in verse 10 God addresses his people, the people of Judah and Jerusalem as Sodom and Gomorrah. They are going through the motions and so their religion is worthless.

Did you hear what God said about their religiosity?

- I have more than enough of burnt offerings.
- Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
- Your incense is detestable.
- Your festivals are a burden.
- Even when you offer many prayers I am not listening. (1:11-15)

Their religion is worthless! God gave them the law and the sacrifices and their religious system, but they are rejected by him because they are just going through the motions. Sometimes we think of the Old Testament focussing in the externals and the New Testament focussing on the heart, but that isn't the case. God never wanted religious ritual for the sake of it. He always wanted the heart. (See Deuteronomy 5:29; 6:5-6; 10:12-13)

And it can be all too easy for us to simply be doing our 'religious duty' and not have our heart in it. We can fall into the trap and think that simply by turning up we are impressing God. Jesus' harshest words for those who had the religious practice all sorted out. What did he call them? Whitewashed tombs – looking good on the outside, but on the inside – dead and unclean. (Matthew 23:27)

Sleeping in the garage won't make me a car any more than going to church will make me a Christian.

2b. Righteousness is Absent

And here, as Isaiah speaks to Judah, the lack of meaning in worship is clear from what they do in worship (and how they do it), and from what they do, and don't do, the rest of time. So God has hard words for them.

Take your evil deed out of my sight: Stop doing wrong.
Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless: Plead the case of the widow. (1:16b-17)

The stipulations about worship are of course in the law, but 'doing justice' is also part of Sinai covenant, and it's missing in Judah:

See how the faithful city has become a prostitute!
She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her - but now murderers!
(1:21)

Your rulers ... do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them. (1:23)

As Christians, we too are under an obligation for our worship to be accompanied by a life lived in keeping with God's ways. Here in Isaiah a concern for justice at fore and we see it in the New Testament too.

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:26-27)

Do you remember our series almost a year ago, '**God's Justice in a Hurting World**'? Are you doing anything different as result of time spent hearing sermons on that topic and doing Bible studies? And more generally, does our being here on a Sunday affect the rest of the week? It is easy to slip into taking things for granted, thinking that our religious practice or our theological knowledge is enough and not be being continually transformed and growing in a lived out godliness in response to the grace of God.

3. The Choice? (1:18-31)

In view of God's pronouncement the people are offered a **choice** between continuing to be Rebels or being Repentant.

Zion will be delivered with justice,
her penitent ones with righteousness.
But rebels and sinners will both be broken,
and those who forsake the LORD will perish. (1:27-28)

3a. Rebellion → Punishment

It's clear that continued rebellion will lead to punishment.

The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark;
both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire.' (1:31)

If you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (1:20)

3b. Repentance → Forgiveness, Redemption, Righteousness and Peace

But there is an alternative...

'Come now, let us settle the matter,' 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 good things of the land.'

(1:18-19)

Here is a clear expression of grace. Their guilt has been clearly established, but the offer of full forgiveness is there. The only condition is to cease rebellion and then this repentance, this turning leads to forgiveness, redemption, righteousness and peace.

But from the flow of the book of Isaiah and the books of Kings and Chronicles it seems there is no widespread repentance, but God still will purify:

Therefore the Lord, the LORD Almighty,
the Mighty One of Israel, declares: ...

'I will turn my hand against you;
I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities.
I will restore your leaders as in days of old,
your rulers as at the beginning
Afterward you will be called
the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City.' (1:24a, 25-26)

God keeps patiently offering grace and the Assyrian Crisis is averted, Jerusalem does not fall at this time, but in 587BC Jerusalem will fall to the Babylonians and the people will go into Exile as a way of purging and restoring. The aim is clear – for God to have a people in relationship with himself, a people whose religion actually means something and issues righteousness. Chapters 40 on look forward to the return from exile but even then things are not perfect and there is further looking forward to the ultimate Day of the LORD, but even here in the opening of the book of Isaiah we get that forward look...

Isaiah 2:1-4

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established

as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say,

'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.'

The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war any more.

As we look at Israel and the Middle East in October 2024 it all seems so far away from fulfillment. So how do we understand it?

The **Last Days** and the definitive **Day of the LORD** refers to the coming of Christ to deal with the problem of not only Israel's and Judah's sin, but of all humanity. And he does that in his death and in his resurrection. He then ascends to heaven and the Holy Spirit is poured out. That "Jesus Event" is the Day of the LORD, the day of his decisive action... but wait, there's more! We look forward to the culmination and consummation when Jesus returns at the end of the age. It's like a two-part Day of the LORD. And we look forward with a sure and certain hope to that Day.

Isaiah spoke of the last days, and the question is often asked by Christians, 'Are we in the last days?' I trust you know the biblical answer to that question. The answer is 'yes' we are living in the last days and we have been for almost 2,000 years!

Do you remember the Day of Pentecost (50 days after Jesus' death and resurrection, 10 days after his ascension), as recorded in Acts 2. The Holy Spirit fills the disciples and they speak in other languages, 'declaring the wonders of God.' And Peter explains to the gathered crowd:

'These people are not drunk. ... No! This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

"In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people. ...

And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (Acts 2:15-17a, 21)

Peter says that Joel's prophecy is fulfilled; we are in the last days – which is the whole time between Jesus' first coming and his final appearance.

Conclusion

We live in light of all that Jesus has done and we look forward to his return. We live in the tension of 'the already and the not yet' and in a different part of 'salvation history' from those in the eighth century BC when Isaiah was prophesying, but the choice for us as we wait is the same: Meaningless worship *or* a life committed to God.

It's not our religious activity that saves, however pious. It's not even our care of orphans and widows, because we fall short in so many areas. And so in repentance we throw ourselves on the mercy of Jesus and we are saved by grace, through faith, not by works. But then, empowered by his Spirit, we do the good works he has prepared for us to do; and transformed by his Spirit we grow in living out the righteousness and holiness that we are declared to have in Christ, in response to all God has done for us.

This series is called 'Darkness to Light' and we make that transition when we are saved, when we respond in repentance and faith that first time. And there is the ongoing call to keep living in the light:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth).

(Ephesians 5:8-9)

We finished our reading at 2:4, but the very next verse (which acts as hinge between this week's reading and next week's) is a fitting appeal after what we have read today:

Come, descendants of Jacob [Come Kiama Anglican Church]
let us walk in the light of the LORD. (2:5)

Amen.