

## A Rebellious Nation

Isaiah 1:1-9, 18, 25-26

**“The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s  
manger, but Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand.”**

Some of the most beautiful and most powerful language in English literature is found in the prophecy of Isaiah. It is a book that contains the language of both *indictment* and *invitation*; a book that paints a picture of severe spiritual darkness, and yet contains the foregleam of coming Messiah. In fact, the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah paints such a clear picture of our suffering, redeeming Messiah that it is often called, “The gospel according to Isaiah.” Here is what Ray C. Stedman has to say about the book of Isaiah:

**“The book of Isaiah, as a matter of fact, could be considered a miniature Bible. There are 66 books of the Bible, and Isaiah has 66 chapters. The Bible divides between the Old and the New Testaments, and Isaiah divides into two halves. The Old Testament has 39 books, and the first division of Isaiah has 39 chapters. The New Testament has 27 books, and the second half of Isaiah has 27 chapters. The opening chapter of the second division of Isaiah, Chapter 40, describes the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Messiah, the voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." In the New Testament likewise, the first figure introduced is John the Baptist, crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." The closing chapter of Isaiah deals with the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, deals with the same subject -- the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. This great prophecy of Isaiah, therefore, captures not only the theme of all Scripture and its central focus on the Savior of mankind himself, but also it reflects the divisions of the Bible itself.”**

There may be those who would question the value of bothering with Israel’s history. It’s just ancient history. What could it possibly have to do with us today? Everything!

Paul, in writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10), gives certain warnings from Israel’s history. He concludes with this admonition:

**“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! (vv. 11-12).**

If we are wise, we will examine ourselves to see if we are truly following the Lord. We will also survey the spiritual and moral landscape of our own nation to see if there is a mirror image of Israel’s rebellion against God and her ignorance of the Lord. Nothing could be more profitable for the people of God as they enter this season of Lent, a season of soul-searching.

Isaiah lived in tumultuous times. Israel was surrounded by ambitious superpowers: Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. She was caught in the cross-hairs of invading armies. It was a time of constant threat, danger, and impending devastation. On to the stage stepped the prophet Isaiah, sent by God to announce to the people the causes of their mounting misery.

By the time Isaiah began his ministry, his people had been divided into two kingdoms for about two hundred years, the northern kingdom of Israel (ten tribes) and the southern kingdom of Judah (two tribes). The northern kingdom of Israel had seen some 18 kings come and go – all of them bad and rebellious against the Lord. The southern kingdom of Judah had been ruled by some 11 kings leading up to Isaiah’s ministry, some good and some bad.

Now, as Isaiah embarks on his ministry, there is a national crisis brewing in the northern kingdom of Israel. The superpower Assyria is about to engulf Israel. What’s more, during the span of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry to the southern kingdom, Judah will be faced with repeated threats from her larger surrounding nations. Ultimately, Babylon will bring the hammer down on her.

One thing that we must understand clearly is this: while it is true that the surrounding nations had their own agendas, all revolving around ambition, the greater truth is that these nations were subject to the sovereign rule of God Almighty, though they knew it not. When Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah he intended one thing, but God intended another. In God’s hands Nebuchadnezzar was an instrument of chastisement, a rod of punishment used to bring God’s people to repentance. What are Isaiah’s first words? Listen to the Lord as he speaks through him:

**“I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. O 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”** (vv. 2-4).

What a terrible indictment! The people of God stand accused of rebellion and corruption. They are worse than animals! The imagery could not be more compelling. Neither oxen nor donkeys are known for their intelligence. We often hear the expressions, “As dumb as an ox,” and, “As stubborn as a mule.” It’s not merely that Israel is like these dumb beasts; no, she is worse! If they are dumb, she is even dumber! The ox at least knows its owner, but Israel and Judah do not know who owns them. The donkey knows who takes care of him, but God’s own people do not know who takes care of them.

How often do we hear people say that they don’t need God? The more affluent a society is – like ours in Canada – the less the people sense their need of their Creator and Sustainer. How many Canadians go about their daily business with the attitude that they don’t need God! Really? Did the Lord God not make the air that we breathe involuntarily all day long? Do we not eat food every day that comes from processes set in motion long ago by our Creator? Hasn’t God wonderfully dressed the earth so that it is a more than suitable habitation for man? God has provided so lovingly everything we need.

One of the first symptoms of a rebellious people is the sin of ingratitude. Why is mankind so blind to the goodness and generosity of God? When you go to the book of Romans, the apostle Paul wastes no time in recording God’s indictment against the whole fallen race:

**“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities ... have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened”** (1:18-21).

Paul goes on to elaborate the sinful condition of fallen man. Idolatry, sexual impurity, unnatural sexual relations, depravity, greed, envy, murder, strife, arrogance – Paul’s list seems endless. The human condition Paul describes in the first century A.D. is little different from that of Isaiah’s time. In fact, in Isaiah 1:10, as the Lord addresses his people he refers to them as Sodom and Gomorrah: **“Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah!”** Every vice listed by Paul was present in Isaiah’s day and in God’s people. Two of Judah’s kings, Ahaz and Mannaseh, threw off all restraint, stripping themselves of any remaining vestiges of humanity in their practice of sorcery and idolatry. They even sacrificed their own sons to the fires on the altars in the Valley of Ben Hinnom.

We say, “Thank God we do nothing like that in Canada!” No, but we use abortion as a means of birth control. We do not rise up in anger, demanding that those who promote child pornography and child abuse on the internet be brought to swift justice. We do nothing to stop the epidemic of sexual impurity seen every night in the week on our television screens.

Yesterday I heard a radio advertisement for a new movie, soon to be released, in which lesbian love scenes “sure to make you gasp” will be featured. Well, we may be capable of gasping, but can we blush? No, we have sunk to the same level as in the days of Isaiah and Jeremiah, who lamented, “Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush” (Jer. 6:15).

Oh, I tell you, there is a terrible price to be paid for sin. No man and no people ever sin cheaply! In Isaiah 1:4-9, the people are pictured as being loaded with guilt, laden down, beaten, injured and afflicted, beset with wounds and welts and open sores. Their country is desolate, their cities burned, their fields stripped. Once again, we say, “What does that have to do with us?” Think of the terrible cost of crime, child abuse, teen-age pregnancies, the war against drugs, marital breakdown. There is a conspiracy in politics and education to keep God on the fringes of public life. We do not want to mention his name or acknowledge his presence, not in any meaningful way. You ask me if I see a mirror image of ancient Israel and Judah here in Canada today – my answer is yes! The more I read this first chapter in Isaiah, and the more I ponder our own situation here in Canada, the more I am inclined to say that animals seem to know what is best for them – even the ox and the ass – yet humans do not.

Oh, how we need to pray for our country! We need to be a people who rise early every morning and take the sins of the nation before our Father’s throne of grace. And having prayed, we need to go out into our world as salt and light, wherever that may be. If our world is at the retirement home, then we need to be salt and light as we go into the dining room. If our world is at the university, then we need to be salt and light as we go into the classroom. If our world is at the office, then once again, salt and light! If we fail to do this, then at the very least we are guilty of being the world’s unwitting accomplices. Listen to this clipping from a Christian magazine a few years ago:

**We pick up our newspaper and read about a three-year-old boy who is whipped with a belt for three hours because he wet his pants. We read about his cries and pleadings as his little body squirms under the foot of his stepfather. We read about this beating, which is his last in a year-long series of frequent beatings; his last because he died in his bed a half hour later. We read about how the boy’s body is found months later, buried in a creek, with a tiny cross clutched in his hands. We read about this brutal murder of a defenseless child, and we feel sick. Then we turn to the financial section and read about how the economy is doing. We turn to the entertainment section and look for an interesting movie to go to. We turn to the sports section and read about last night’s game. Soon the sickness leaves us. We forget about the little boy, and in so doing, we forget that indifference makes us accomplices.**

We don't mean to be accomplices. The simple fact is that we are so engulfed in evil and wickedness in our land that we turn off in order to keep some semblance of sanity. We can turn off no longer. It is time for the church to heed the word of the Lord as found in Isaiah 1:18, 25-26:

**“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 ... I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. I will restore your judges as in days of old, your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City.”**

What a gracious, loving heavenly Father we have! He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, or even in their punishment. He wants to restore our people and heal our land. But Canada will never again be a land of righteousness and Victoria will not be a city of righteousness, a faithful city, unless and until the people of God get down on their knees in prayer and supplication. In the words of Harry Bultema, “There is only One who now can cause the sun of salvation to rise upon the weary nations. That One is Jesus Christ!” Let us all pray as we have never prayed before! Let us begin now.