

Isaiah 29

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Date: 18 September 2016

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[0 : 00] Let me begin with a question. How good are you at saying hard things to people you care about?!

What about if you thought that your friend was about to risk their marriage by starting an affair? Would you be willing to warn them about it? Or what if your work colleague had made a really embarrassing mess of a presentation? And that presentation is going to later be made before the board.

Would you be willing to brave your friend's defensiveness or perhaps even her anger by suggesting that it might be improved even though she thought it was brilliant? My guess is in each of those scenarios the answer to that question really comes down to how much do you care about? How concerned are you about them? And it's likely that each one of us will only begin that kind of potentially very difficult conversation like the ones I just mentioned if we really, really care about the other person.

[1 : 37] Or to push it a little bit further, we could say that we'd only speak to them if we were more concerned about their good and their well-being than our comfort and our reputation.

And then in those situations we would, wouldn't we? We'd be willing to say the hard stuff. And as we come to Isaiah, I imagine that some of you come with a little feeling of struggle. And there may be a number of reasons why we get to kind of Isaiah 21 and it's a little bit of a bind because Isaiah hasn't excited us maybe as it should have.

Because Isaiah so far has primarily been about judgment. And God says some very hard stuff doesn't he to the people of Judah in this book and by implication to us.

And he says it over and over again. And we've already seen that in the chapters we've come to. We're going to see it again as we work through the coming chapters.

Through the chapter 39. But the question is, why does God say so much hard stuff? And the answer is because he really cares. He really cares about his people.

[2 : 45] In fact, the astonishing truth of the Bible is that God is more passionately committed to your good than even you are. And that means God is willing to say the hard things.

He is apparently willing to tell us the consequences of what will happen if we run away from him. God tells you what will happen if you rebel against him. If you ignore him.

And he does it in order to woo you back. To call you back to the abundant life that he intends for each one of us. And that is what we'll be seeing over the next few weeks. He is continually saying the hard stuff because God wants you to go back to him.

And in today's chapter we're going to particularly see that Isaiah is going to move us from a place of judgment. To a place of salvation. A place of rescue.

And then he's going to show us what is the key from moving from a place of judgment to a place of rescue. So three sections. First of all I want us to think about God's judgment of sin.

[3 : 44] And then quickly I want us to see the sin that God here judges. And then I want to think about the key from moving from one to the other. So this chapter comes in sort of a new section for Isaiah. The new section begins in chapter 28.

And one of the ways that we know that the new section has begun is there's a series of woes. The beginning of chapter 8. It really should be woe.

It says are the proud crowd of the drunkards. It's woe to the proud crowds of the drunkards of Ephraim. And we've moved. There's a new king in town. We've moved from the time of King Ahaz of Judah to his son King Hezekiah.

And Hezekiah seems to be a little bit better. He seems to be a more godly king. Hezekiah's heart is set on seeking God. However he struggles.

And Hezekiah struggles as his father did with longing to go into big political alliances. To save the nation by aligning himself with neighbouring nations.

[4 : 46] For their security. Instead of trusting in God. He thinks the way to security is trusting in the other nations. And specifically Hezekiah is thrown in his lot with Egypt. And he's thinking they will protect our little country of Judah from the superpower of Assyria.

And we're going to see that that is going to turn very pear shaped indeed. And underneath this basic lack of trust. We're going to see that there's a number of really serious issues.

That have continued to sever the relationship between the people of God Judah and God himself. And all of that brings a declaration of judgment. So look at chapter 29.

Ah Ariel. Ariel. The city where David encamped. Add year to year. Let the feasts run there round. Yet I will distress Ariel. And there shall be moaning and lamentation.

And she shall be like an Ariel. And I will encamp against you all around. And I will besiege you with towers. And I will rage siege works against you. And you will be brought low.

[5 : 50] From the earth you shall speak. From the dust your speech shall be bowed down. Your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost. And from the dust your speech shall be just like a whisper. Well the first thing you've got to think of is what on earth is this Ariel?

Now what comes to your mind? What comes to your mind when you hear that kind of thing? I asked the children. And they said something from The Little Mermaid. Which I had no idea.

There's a song about Ariel. But I don't know about you. What comes to my mind when you think of Ariel? What is it? Watching poker isn't it? And doesn't that seem to fit? Isaiah 1.

Your sins shall be washed whiter than the snow. However that's very very unlikely as that. If you look at Wikipedia. That trusted source of information.

You'll find out won't you. That actually it's got Ariel this word. It's got quite a few reference points in our modern culture. But none of those is what Isaiah is getting at. The reason that he uses this word Ariel is because he's going to use the word Ariel to refer to the city.

[6 : 54] So we get the answer right away. It's the city where David settled. What's the city where David settled? Jerusalem. Jerusalem. God's capital city. And we're actually given the answer in verse 2.

There should be a footnote. Ariel means altar hearth. You know you have a fire. And you have a hearth of the fire. And you put the wood onto the hearth in preparation for it.

Burn it. And Jerusalem was an altar hearth. In the sense that it was in a positive way. It was where the sacrifices took place.

It was where people went to atone for their sin. And it was where people went to bring offerings to God. And Isaiah says the problem now is that God intends the whole city to be an Ariel.

To be something that will be destroyed by fire. God now intends the whole city to become an altar hearth. Fire will come. And it will consume the offering won't it. And fire will come and consume the city.

[7 : 54] So in verse 3 God says I'll encamp around you. Just like David encamped around Jerusalem. There was a time wasn't there when it was inhabited by Jebusites. And now God is going to encamp around.

God is going to come against this city. And you will mourn and lament. And then we're told in verse 4. And you will be brought low. You will be brought low.

Why? Because God is the one who judges sin. And God won't let you get away with it. And that will actually follow us from verses 5 to 8. It's a little bit of a surprise to the reader.

Because in these verses what you find is God says there'll come a time when I'll change sides.

There'll come a time when I will flip. And I will become the great defender of the city of Jerusalem against their enemies.

So that the fire on the altar half is now going to end up consuming the attackers. And so the city in the end will be delivered. But the reversal of circumstances clearly isn't because the people of Jerusalem have got their act together.

[9 : 01] Have they? In verses 9 and 10. We're told what are the people like in the city of Jerusalem. Well they're exactly like God had told Isaiah they would be like in Isaiah 6. Do you remember that commission?

Where Isaiah says, God says to Isaiah you'll go and you'll preach your heart out. And the only response you'll get is rejection. And that seems to be fulfilled doesn't it in verses 9 and 10.

The people will dig deeper into their unbelief. They are stunned. They are blind. They are like drunk men as God has judged their unbelief. The further unbelief. And so in verse 13 we're specifically told what is the sin that so grieves God here.

So secondly see the sin that God will judge. Here's the sin God judges. Verse 13. Because these people draw near me with their mouth. And they honour me with their lips.

But their hearts are far from me. And their fear of me is a commandment taught by men. God comes down in judgment.

[10:04] On the people here for their traditionalism. For their formalism. For their practices. That they are totally external. That they are completely cut off.

From the internal transformation of the heart. Which is interesting isn't it? Because that is the verse. Is this verse. Isaiah 29 verse 13.

That Jesus quotes when he deals with the Pharisees. And the religious people of his day. And he tells them of their religiosity. He tells them of their hypocrisy.

And their traditions. And I always find it interesting. That this is the sin that Jesus seems to go after. More than any other sin. You'd think wouldn't you.

He'd be chasing down the immoral of the day. The people who are doing the really big sins. The sins we can easily identify. But much as he's got a problem with.

[11:00] Any kind of lifestyle. That goes against the truth of God's word. He leaves his strongest words. His hardest condemnation is for religious people. For people like us.

For people who go to church. Sunday after Sunday. For people who can sing the hymns by memory. For people who can probably say the Lord's Prayer backwards. For people who've got their Bibles open.

On their laps as the preacher preaches. But on the inside they are dead. And they're empty rituals. And it's really. It's so easy to spot it in others.

It's so easy to spot it in Catholicism. It's so easy to spot it in the Orthodox. It's so easy to spot it in churches.

Where sin gets totally out of hand and carried away. But the Lord says. What about you leaving? What about you? You want to be with your lips.

[11:56] But where's your heart? And I wonder what your answer would be to God this morning. Jesus. If he asked you that. If you were to take a brief inventory of your heart.

Through the first part of this service. And ask yourself. When you sang those opening words. Did you taste the truth? Did you? Did you? There dwells the Lord our King.

The Lord our righteousness. Victorious over death and sin. The Prince of Peace. On Zion's sacred height. His kingdom he maintains.

And glorious with his saints in light. Forever reigns. Did you taste that truth? Or was your mind elsewhere? Were your lips moving?

But your heart's another place. And as we prayed. Was your heart stirred by that? Or were you thinking about this afternoon? Or what you've got this week?

[12:59] And these are important questions. Because they address. Matters that matter most to God. And they matter most to Jesus.

I'm not saying that it's absolutely terrible. If your mind goes off somewhere during a worship service. I'm not saying that. But if there is a pattern. Where Sunday by Sunday you come.

And you are not engaging. That is a red flag. And that is a red flag. Because Jesus says it's the heart. The heart of the matter. Is the matter of the human heart.

I don't know if you've seen. There's a viral video. Called Why I Hate Religion. But I Love Jesus. It's by Jefferson Beth Key. He's a guy in Seattle.

It's not actually that brilliant. But there's parts of it I think. Because he's had 31 million views.

There's a video of me preaching on YouTube. That's about 15 views. That's my brother mainly.

[14:00] So I'm slightly jealous. But Jefferson Beth Key is not completely right. Is he? Because religion. The Bible uses the word religion. There are times when the Bible speaks about religion.

And it's neutral. There are times when the Bible speaks about religion. And it's positive. And so Beth Key does overstate his case. He should have described it as false religion. Or man-made tradition.

Or legalistic religion. But that obviously doesn't rhyme as well. But let me give you a portion. Of what he spoke. Religion might preach grace.

But another thing they practice. Tend to ridicule God's people. They did it to John the Baptist. They can't fix their problems. So they just mask it. Not realizing that religion is like spraying perfume on a casket.

See the problem with religion is it never gets to the core. It's just behavior modification. Like a long list of chores. Like let's dress up on the outside. Make look nice and neat.

[14:58] But it's funny. That's what they used to do to mummies. While the corpse rots underneath. It's terrible poetry. But can you see? That is what they did. That's what the Pharisees did.

And it's what Isaiah's audience were up to. And there's a real danger that you and I are up to it too. And you see God cares for you too much to let that go.

He cares too much about how his people. The problem isn't so much that you've got lots of things going on in your head this morning. And you can't concentrate.

That is not the problem. And the problem isn't we've got other things to worry about. That's not the problem. The problem is deep down we think we don't need God.

That is what takes us in this direction. I found this very helpful quote from Mark Deva. Where he says that spiritual hypocrisy comes from making an idol of rejecting Jesus. Spiritual hypocrisy comes from making an idol of rejecting Jesus.

[16:01] Think about that. And if that stings it's supposed to. God cares too much for you to leave you alone this morning. And when you and I pretend in our spiritual lives.

We basically say I'm alright. I can do this on my own. I don't need Jesus. And underneath the spiritual veneer. Underneath the pretense.

Is a heart that thinks it doesn't need the saviour. It's a heart that basically says I've got this religion thing covered. It's a heart that sees God as some kind of accessory to your life.

But when push comes to shove. He's ultimately expendable. And that is such a dangerous path. Because let me show you where that path ends up. Isaiah does that in verses 15 to 16.

He says our again should be woe. Woe you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel. Whose deeds are in the dark. And who say who sees us. Who knows us.

[17:01] You turn things upside down. Shall the potter be regarded as the clay. That the thing made should save its maker. He did not make me. For the thing formed of him who formed it. Say he has no understanding.

It is not yet a very little while. You have come to nothing. Isaiah says that kind of formalism. That he's talking about. And Jesus talks about.

That kind of traditionalism. Eventually leads you. To the exclusion from God completely in your life. Alec Matias said this in his commentary.

We end up saying that God is no more than we are. Which comes from a spirit of self-sufficiency.

That God has nothing to do with what we are. Which is a spirit of spiritual arrogance. And that God is actually less than we are.

Which comes from a spirit of thoughtless stupidity. It is a denial of God's distinctiveness. A denial of God's sovereignty. A denial of his wisdom. And that denial of God's distinctiveness.

[18:00] Sovereignty and wisdom. Are the stepping stones on the way to eternal judgment. All of which starts so innocently. With respectable formalism. And that is the sin that God judges.

And Isaiah doesn't back down on this. He doesn't back down on this judgment. But as we have seen with Isaiah. You will remember that Isaiah so often begins with judgment.

But then he takes us for a picture of hope. He begins with judgment. But then he takes us for a picture of salvation. Because he wants to wake you up. Out of the stupor of pretending and unbelief.

And one of the ways he does that is he points us again and again to a glorious future. And he wants to give you this forever perspective. This perspective that says this is not the be all and end all.

There is something beyond this world that you need to be focused on. And that is really what verses 17 to 24 are about. Let me just read you verses 18 to 21. In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book.

[19:00] And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. And the meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord. And the poor among mankind shall exalt in the Holy One of Israel. For the ruthless shall come to nothing.

And the scoffer cease. And all who watch to do evil shall be cut off. Who by a word make a man out to be an offender. And lay a snare of him who reproves in the gate. And with an empty plea turn him aside to his right.

What does Isaiah see in those verses? They are not easy verses. But he sees a world transformed. He sees a society transformed. He sees it transformed in our relationship with God.

He sees it transformed in the removal of all who would seek to destroy what God is doing. He sees it in the practice of perfect justice. Because in that day there will be no injustice in the world.

But the question remains. How do you get from A to B? How do you get from a place of judgment to a place of salvation? How do you get from that place of judgment to a place of hope?

[20 : 01] To a place of joy? And the answer comes in verse 14. Here is the transition. And it may surprise us. Verse 14. Therefore behold I will again do wonderful things for this people with wonder upon wonder.

And the wisdom of their wise men shall perish. And the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden. God announces to me. What is the response to formalism and traditionalism? God says I will shock you.

I will shock you with wonder upon wonder. That will confound you. And I will remove the intelligence of the wise. And the wisdom of those who think they are wiser than God. And the question is.

Well how will God ultimately do that? And God will astound them in a number of ways during history at that point. But the ultimate reference point we are told aren't we? In 1 Corinthians chapter 1.

Which is the ultimate fulfilment of these verses. 1 Corinthians 1 verse 18 to 19. Where he says for the word of the cross is folly, is foolishness to those who are perishing. But to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

[21 : 03] For it is written I will destroy the wisdom of the wise. And the discernment of the discerning. I will thwart. Paul says Isaiah 29 is fulfilled at the cross of Christ.

And Paul is dealing with the same kind of people in Corinth. As Isaiah. People who are putting their confidence in human wisdom. And he goes on in Isaiah 29 verse 15.

Paul goes on to this verse in Isaiah 29. Because he wants you to see that the wonder upon wonder that he is describing. It is not miracles and healing. But the wonder upon wonder that will eventually astound and shock people is the cross of Jesus Christ.

And that helps us. How do you know? How can you indicate? What is the indicator in your heart of whether you are near or far to God this morning? Whether you are close to God this morning or far away?

Well it is what your heart does with the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the key. Isn't it?

[22 : 10] That is the key. As you meditate. As you come to the table this morning. What do you do? What do you feel? Can I ask that as you come to the table?

The Lord Jesus Christ. Because the way of the world. The wisdom of the world. Why would you ever want to believe in a saviour? You don't need a saviour according to the world.

You think actually the answer is within you. Isn't it? You can just be who you want to be. And you can justify yourself based on your own ability. Or your looks. Or your income. Or your results. And to them.

To the world. The message of the cross is foolishness. Paul says. For those who think the cross is foolishness. For those who want to continue with their veneer of spirituality. But it's got no heart. They are perishing. And he says condemnation and judgment will be their end. But those whose hearts are near to God. Those whom God delights in.

[23 : 10] And those who know that the only hope is the cross of Christ. It is those who understand that the cross of Jesus is the ultimate wonder of all wonders. Because it astounds you in the best possible way.

That God would send his son. Jesus Christ. The eternal son of God. To take flesh and die in your place.

To take the judgment of his father in heaven. For you. So that you could have his life. As I talked about in the end of the chapter.

And you see. In a sense. You could come to that point where. When you come to understand that the cross is the wonder that outstands. The world. And when you understand something of the cross.

And you understand the wonder of what God has done. You no longer mind hearing the hard words of God. You no longer mind hearing the hard stuff in the Bible. Because you know.

[24 : 15] Don't you. That it's through hearing the hard stuff. Of God's dealing with sin. That it's through that. You saw the depth of your need for the Lord Jesus.

That it's as you understand the hard stuff of the Bible. That God reveals to you. By his spirit. The wonder of what he's done in Christ.

He shows you the depth of your sin. You can't get away from that. But he also shows you the amazing provision of God for our predicament. And he drives you to the cross.

He took you to Jesus. And you heard the words of your sin. You heard the hard words of your lostness. But then you hear the good news.

That Jesus came to take the judgment for you. That he came to put himself on the aerial. He came to put himself on the altar hearth.

[25 : 13] He put himself on the aerial for you. And paid the sacrifice for your sin. So that your ultimate home is what? It's a new world. That's what I talked about. And so I guarantee you.

That if you read your Bible. And I hope you do read your Bible. You will come up again and again against the hard stuff. There will be hard words in the Bible. That you really wish you could skip over.

Or you could just move back from. But every word that is written in the holy and inerrant word of God. Is written there. Why? It's written there because he loves you.

It's written there because he loves you. And it's written there because he is not willing to let you stay in the mess that you're in spiritually. And they are there because God cares for you more than you will ever fathom.

More than you will ever understand. And they are there because he wants to bring you and me to a day by day. Hour by hour. Minute by minute.

[26 : 18] Reliance on the foolishness of the cross. And so may each of us have wisdom in the lesson. Let's pray.