

Isaiah 1:1-20

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- [0 : 00] The extreme weather has been the cause of much suffering and, tragically, many deaths. But it has also produced stunningly beautiful landscapes. And of the many images in my mind, the most vivid and dramatic is the satellite image of Scotland, covered in a blanket of ice and snow.
- I'm sure many of you have seen that image as it's been portrayed on the television. Now the reason for this particular image being so memorable, in my own mind at any rate, is not in the first instance the visual impact of the image, though it is a stunning image.
- But rather, the manner in which it serves as a powerful illustration of Scotland's great need. Namely, that a nation blighted and polluted by sin and rebellion against God and the purpose of the world.
- And the purpose of the world is to be able to experience the cleansing that can only come from above, as God is pleased to gift us repentance and forgiveness, that He would grant these gifts to us as a nation.
- [1 : 35] And the words of God recorded by the prophet Isaiah ring in our ears as we consider this image. Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.
- Though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool. But when did God speak these words?
- And is this message one that has something to say to us today? Well, God spoke them to a nation that, like our own, enjoyed a great and privileged spiritual heritage.
- But a nation that had chosen, like our own, solemnly and tragically to tread underfoot the goodness and the privileges and the very grace of God.
- Let's read the passage where we find these memorable words in Isaiah chapter 1, and we'll read from the beginning of the chapter through to verse 20.
- [2 : 46] Isaiah chapter 1, reading from the beginning to verse 20. It's on page 685 in our Bibles. Isaiah chapter 1, reading from the beginning to verse 20.
- Isaiah chapter 1, reading from the beginning to verse 20.
- Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? 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, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil.
- Your country is desolate. Your city is burned with fire. Your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers. The daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege.
- Unless the Lord Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom. We would have been like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom.
- [4 : 45] Listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah. The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me? Says the Lord. I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals.

I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?

Stop bringing meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me. New moons, Sabbaths and convocations. I cannot bear your evil assemblies.

Your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you.

Even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight.

[5 : 45] Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right. Seek justice. Encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow. 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.

If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land. But if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. For the Lord has spoken. The prophet has been given a vision by God.

And the vision that he has been given and that he shares with us in this first chapter of his book is the vision of a cosmic courtroom where God is the chief prosecutor and also the omnipotent judge.

[6 : 53] And Judah is the accused. And the very heavens and earth serve as witnesses. The courtroom scene and this picture that is being presented becomes apparent from the very beginning of the vision as it is related to us in verse 2.

Hear, O heavens, listen, O earth, for the Lord has spoken. And the courtroom scene is developed in the following way.

And this is how we want to consider this passage this morning. First of all, the charges are leveled. God acting as chief prosecutor, but also in due course as the omnipotent judge, levels charges against the accused.

He levels charges against Judah and Jerusalem. But then as we come to the verse that we are particularly concerned with or that in any case has drawn us to the passage, we also have a verdict announced.

And in verse 18, we effectively have a verdict being announced by God, having leveled the charges, having laid out the evidence that is a verdict announced.

[8 : 12] And then immediately following, we have a response required. And so that's the manner in which we want to consider the passage before us.

First of all, to consider the charges that are leveled. Now, this part is extensive. It goes from verse 2, really, one way of understanding it would be right through to verse 17.

And given how extensive it is, we will necessarily have to give what we might call an executive summary of this divine discourse, of these charges being leveled by God to the account of Judah.

And as we consider the charges leveled, we can divide it in the following way. We can identify the sins committed by Judah.

We can notice the consequences of their sin. And we can also notice their futile, and we might even say sinful, attempts to right their wrongs.

[9 : 20] So in this part, God lays out the sins that the people have committed. He identifies the consequences of their sin. And he also speaks of and rejects their futile attempts to solve the problem of their sin in their own way, according to their own agenda.

So let's think of the charges leveled in that way. First of all, the sins committed. And particularly from verse 2 through to verse 4 and 5, we have these sins identified.

But rather than identify specific sins, what we have rather is God accusing Judah of sinning in three ways, we might say.

And Judah is guilty of sinning against God in three ways. The first way, generic way if you wish, that they sin, is that they have sinned against nature, we might describe it.

And I think particularly of verse 2 and 3. I rear children and brought them up. God is speaking.

[10 : 36] He is speaking of this nation, and he says, I rear 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.

The picture is of a child rebelling against his own parents. And what God is saying is that even in the natural world, that is something that just shouldn't happen. It is something that even those who know nothing of God would say, Well, that is a shocking thing.

That is a scandalous thing that a child who has been nurtured and reared and cared for by his mother and father, that he would rebel against his parents. It should not be.

It is a sin against nature. It is a sin against the way things are meant to be. And yet God says, and yet my people, that is what they have done. I have raised them.

I have nurtured them. I have loved them. I have cared for them. I have provided for them. I have stayed up late when they were sick. I have woken up in the middle of the night to care for them. And yet they have rebelled against me. How can it be?

[11 : 38] They have sinned against the natural order of things. And then God goes on to say, and contrast them with animals, with beasts.

He says, the ox knows his master. The donkey is owner's manger. Even an ox, even a donkey, realizes who his owner is and realizes that he is due to give loyalty to his owner and to be there for his owner, to recognize his owner's voice.

But my people, not even that. They're going even beyond what you would expect to see as something outrageous in the natural world. Their sin is against nature.

Their sin is against the very order of things. They think that they know God. They know about him. They know his name.

But they don't know him. Israel does not know. My people does not understand. So the sin that has been committed, the charge that has been leveled in the first place is that they have sinned against nature.

[12 : 41] But also we could say the following as a generic type of sin. They have sinned against privilege. They have sinned against privilege in verse 4. Ah, sinful nation.

A people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption. But then, notice what follows. They have forsaken the Lord. They have forsaken Yahweh. They have forsaken the covenant God who had elected them and chosen them.

They have spurned the Holy One of Israel. They had spurned the God who had elected and chosen and fixed his gracious eyes upon them. Here was a privileged people.

Here was a people who had been chosen by God amongst all the nations. Not because they were better than the others. Not because they had anything to commend themselves. But God, by sheer grace, had fixed his eyes upon them and had chosen them and had made them his own, had drawn them into his family.

Theirs was a great privilege. And God says, yet despite this great privilege, despite who you are, despite all your advantages and privileges and blessings, you have forsaken the Lord.

- [13 : 54] You have forsaken your covenant God. You have forsaken the Holy One of Israel. The other nations might have looked on with envy at the privileges of Israel, and yet Israel think nothing of their privileges.
- They think nothing of the God who has chosen them and who has blessed them in such a measure. God was their God. God was their God.
- The God Almighty, the only living and true God, was their God. They were his people. And yet, the charge leveled against them is that they have forsaken the Lord.
- They have spurned the Holy One of Israel. They have turned their backs on him. And so their sin is a sin against privilege. It is particularly grave.
- It is particularly serious. It is particularly to be condemned for this aspect of it, that they sin against privilege.
- [14 : 59] But then also, in the charges that are leveled, we can detect or identify this other, if you wish, genetic sin, that they have sinned against reason.
- And this really flows with a description or flows into a description of the consequences of their sin. But first of all, to notice this element that they have sinned against reason.
- From verse 5, God, as he levels the charges against Judah, he says, Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? 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 it goes on. And while this is a description, in a sense, of the consequences of their sin, it also highlights this fact, that their sin is against reason.
- You see, what God is saying is, why are you so foolish? Can you not see what's happening? Can you not see the destruction that has been wrought by your sin? Can you not see the harm that has been done to yourself?
- [16 : 05] Have a look in the mirror. Just look at yourselves and see the chaos that your life is and the disaster that your life is, and yet you continue to sin. This is foolishness.
- This is unreasonable. This is to sin against reason. The tone of these verses describes for us and presents to us the folly of sin, the lunacy of sin, the fatal and demented attraction to that which harms and destroys.
- We could maybe imagine a young girl trapped in a fatal attraction to a man who subjects her to constant abuse and humiliation. But she always returns for more.
- He beats her. He humiliates her. He does her great damage. And yet she, fatally attracted, returns for more. And this is what God is saying of the nation's relationship with sin.
- Sin only destroys. Sin only produces suffering and violence and destruction. And yet they continue in more and more of the same.
- [17 : 18] They have sinned against reason. They have done that which is utterly foolish and utterly without reason. And of course, these sins committed, and we are not given in any great measure a description of particular individual sins.
- But these sins committed, sins against nature, sins against privilege, sin against reason, do have consequences. We've already seen some of the consequences in the vivid descriptions that we've just been noticing in verses 5 and 6.
- But the consequences continue to be described by God from verse 7. And these are national consequences. They go beyond the individual to the whole of the nation.
- Your country is desolate. Your city is burned with fire. Your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you. And it continues. And we can't go into any detail at all on this.
- But we have these consequences of their sin described by God. It is a desperate picture.

[18 : 31] And it is a description of the consequences of sin for a nation. And as we look back thousands of years to this particular nation, so let us be brought forward to our own day and cry out to God that He would have mercy on our nation.

But notice just before we continue that in the midst of the charges being leveled, there is a ray of hope that we just want to highlight with no commentary. Then in verse 9, unless the Lord Almighty had left us some survivors.

The Lord Himself in His grace has maintained a faithful remnant, some survivors, in the midst of this moral and spiritual decline.

So we have their sins committed. We have the consequences suffered. But we also have described by God their futile attempts to right their wrongs. From verse 10 through to verse 17, or certainly through to verse 15, we have these futile attempts to right their wrongs.

And again, it's not possible to go into any detail, but the attempt that they make is by means of religious observance. And yet we're told, and we've read the passage, we're told that God intensely hated what they were doing.

[19 : 50] He found it abhorrent. He found it obnoxious. The language used is incredibly powerful. He hates what they're doing. This religious observance that they are performing, He takes no delight in it, quite the contrary.

And the question is why? Why does God so intensely hate their religion? Are the religious practices described wrong in themselves? They speak of prayer. They speak of sacrifices.

They speak of these things that are not wrong in and of themselves. Rather, they are what God had ordained should be done by His people. Why then does God hate what they do?

Well, the problem comes vividly to light in verse 15. Having described what they are doing, we then read there, When you spread out your hands in prayer, surely a good thing, I will hide my eyes from you, Even if you offer many prayers, surely a good thing, I will not listen, your hands are full of blood.

To describe the problem in a nutshell, those hands spread out in prayer were dripping with blood. There is an unholy alliance of religious duty and personal iniquity.

[21 : 11] And this is what God hates and abhors, the hypocrisy of their religion. They religiously perform the duties, but their lives are lives that are governed by sin and by their own agendas, and not governed by God.

So, we have the charges leveled by God, the sins that they are guilty of, and it is a bleak and a dark picture. But then in verse 18, we have what we can understand as the verdict announced.

And we might imagine that at the close of this trial, as it were, the evidence having been presented, the evidence is so overwhelming, we might wonder, as the verdict is awaited, is this, I pose the question, is this a moment of high drama?

Are the witnesses that have already been identified, the heavens and the earth, are they biting their cosmic fingernails in the public gallery at the imminent announcement?

The verdict is to be announced. Well, not really. You wouldn't imagine much drama at all, because it's an open and shut case. There can be no doubt as to the verdict.

[22 : 29] Were there some doubt, there might be drama, but there is no doubt as to the verdict. The evidence is so overwhelming. The nation is guilty. It's as guilty as sin.

No objective observer could have come to any other conclusion. The heavens look on, the earth looks on, and they say Judah is guilty. Judah is desperately guilty. There can be only one verdict.

Guilty as charged. They can expect nothing but condemnation. There can be no other verdict. Or can there?

Could there possibly be another verdict? Well, listen to the prosecutor. Listen to the judge address the accused. Come now.

Let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are as scarlet, and they are, they shall be as white as snow.

[23 : 28] Though they are red as crimson, and they most assuredly are, they shall be like wool. The heavens gasp, and the earth trembles in disbelief.

How can it be? How can this be the verdict? For one so guilty, for one so clearly guilty as charged, how can this be the verdict?

And yet this is the verdict. Come, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

And there are two things that we can say about this verdict, or two that we wish to say this morning. First of all, this is a verdict full of realism, but also full of grace.

Full of realism as to the guilt of the accused. There is no hiding over or ignoring that the accused do indeed, or does indeed stand guilty.

[24 : 31] The sin of the accused is indeed as scarlet. The sin of the accused is indeed red as crimson. And there is no attempt by God to minimize the gravity of their guilt and the gravity of their condition.

Their guilt is great in its gravity. The scarlet of innocent bloodshed. And it's great in all its pervasiveness. The crimson, as it were, ingrained in their very nature as people.

So the verdict is a realistic one, as it describes the condition of the nation. And as we think of ourselves, are we so different? If God were to stand in judgment over you, and He will.

How would you stand? Guilty as charged. So the verdict is full of realism, but we can also say that the verdict is full of grace.

The guilt is great, but the grace of God is greater. In this verdict, He promises a cleansing and full forgiveness.

[25 : 50] And as we think of these images that are so vivid and so, as it were, applicable and so easy for us to imagine, especially in these days of a snow-covered landscape, as we think of these images, we can notice that there are two distinct truths that are identified by this image of the snow and of the wool and of the cleansing.

First of all, it is, of course, this picture of cleansing. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow. The stain of sin is removed.

The sinner is forgiven. And this forgiveness that God offers is full and it is free. And it is applicable and able to achieve the objective of cleansing, however filthy the one forgiven.

And again, the picture of the snow is such a helpful image. We can imagine any kind of landscape, the most rubbish-filled landscape you can imagine.

And yet, when the snow comes and covers it all, it's pure, it's white. And so, too, with us, whatever our condition, however grave our condition, however sinful our lives have been, whatever sin we are guilty of, when the snow comes and covers, when God forgives, it is all made beautiful.

[27 : 23] And there is a full and a complete cleansing. So, the images of snow and wool speak of cleansing, but they go beyond cleansing. They speak also of transformation.

You see, the snow and the wool exemplify that which is naturally white. And certainly the snow, can you imagine snow that is anything other than white? Can you imagine snow falling from the sky that's blue or red or green?

No, snow is in its very essence white. It's not snow if it's not white. Snow is intrinsically white, if you wish. It is in its very nature.

And so, God's promise, the promise that He gives and the offer that He makes to this accused Judah, guilty as charged, is not only to deal with the stain of sin, but the very nature from which it springs.

We are not only cleansed by the work of God, but we are transformed by the work of God. We are, in the language of the New Testament, born again with a new nature.

[28 : 29] And this is the surprising verdict, full of realistic recognition of the grave guilt of the accused, and yet, full of grace, as cleansing is offered, as new life and a new start and transformation is also offered to the accused.

This is the verdict. But the courtroom drama takes one further twist, or certainly one further twist that we want to comment on this morning.

And it is this, that a response is required to the verdict of God. A response is required to this gracious offer that God makes.

We read there in verse 19, having made this surprising, grace-filled offer to the accused. Then we read, You see, the great question of the accused is, how will they respond?

How will the accused respond to this opportunity that is given? And God Himself identifies as the only two possible responses. The only two possible responses for Judah, and the only two possible responses for you, dear friend.

[29 : 55] And what is the first response? If you are willing, if you are willing and obedient, this offer of forgiveness, full and free, is on the table.

Will you receive it? Will you receive this gracious offer that God makes to you even this morning? This offer of cleansing and transformation?

How will you receive it? The picture painted speaks of cleansing. And indeed, this cleansing is explicitly stated as required there in verse 16, where God says to the guilty party, Wash and make yourselves clean.

It's necessary for this cleansing to take place. But how is it to take place? It's clear that God is offering to cleanse, but how will this be so?

The psalmist throws some light on that question in the words that we've read in Psalm 51, and in verse 7, which we can read again.

[31 : 02] The psalmist, conscious of his sin, expresses himself in this way, Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. This cleansing that God offers is available to those who would ask for it. This is what you must do.

This is the means established by God that you might enjoy this cleansing. You would ask for it. God is willing to cleanse. God is willing to forgive. But it is for you to ask that he would do so with the psalmist.

Ask God that he would cleanse you. Ask God that he would forgive you. How is it that God is able to forgive you? Well, in the light of the New Testament, in the light of what we know concerning Jesus, we know that God is able to forgive those who are guilty of sin by applying to us the blood of his dear son Jesus.

The finished work of Jesus, who died on the cross as the perfect and sufficient sacrifice for your sin, that death, that bloodshed, is able to cleanse from all sin.

[32 : 21] We think of the words that we read in 1 Peter, for you know that it was not with perishable things, such as silver or gold, that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

Or we think of the dialogue in heaven between John and one of the elders. Who are these who are clothed in white? Where did they come from? I answered, says John, Sir, you know.

And the elder responds, They are those who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.

The response required is to willingly obey and to receive the forgiveness that is offered, to go by the means established by God, asking God that He would forgive you, putting your trust in the Savior that God has provided, putting your trust in Jesus.

And so I ask you this morning, are you willing? Will you be obedient? Will you repent? Will you ask God to forgive you? Will you trust in Jesus?

[33 : 41] As your Savior and your Lord? Well, this is one possible response, but God solemnly identifies another. In verse 20 we read, But if you resist and rebel, if you resist, if you resist, what will happen?

You will be devoured by the sword. If you resist. Is there anyone here this morning resisting the grace of God?

Is there anyone here resisting this offer that is made? Is there anyone here holding back and saying, Not yet. Tomorrow I'll wait for a more opportune season.

This isn't a convenient time. If you resist and rebel, the Word of God says, You will be devoured by the sword.

And some might say, Well, this is very harsh language. Well, if that is your opinion, I limit myself simply to read how the verse concludes, For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

[34 : 47] The mouth of the Lord has spoken. These are not my words. These are not the words of some extreme religious sect. These are the words of God. If you resist and rebel, if you will not receive the grace offered, if you will not seek the forgiveness that is made available to you, then this will be the solemn consequence.

And so I would say to you as we close, And I would remind you of the words of God directed to you. 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. Let us pray.