



A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Isaiah 1

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Washington, DC, is often described as two contiguous cities. There's Washington, the federal city, with its beautiful buildings, museums and monuments, all the wonderful restaurants and night life, the excellent universities and hospitals. Washington is filled with important people, impressive people, people who matter. There's also the District. The District has the second worst schools in the nation. It ranks near the bottom of US cities in terms of affordable housing and violent crime. It ranks near the top in terms of mouse traps per capita. And behind all the grim statistics are men, women and children whose circumstances often aren't a priority to important people in the federal city. Newcomers to Washington are warned to avoid the District, because its rumored to be unsafe. District residents confirm these rumors to be true.

The Church of the Resurrection is called to be an embassy of God's kingdom to both Washington and the District. In a sense, we come as visitors from the future, announcing—and hopefully modeling—the redemption and reconciliation God has in store for Washington, DC. We pray and work and look forward to that day when our unified city will no longer be known for its crime and poverty and brokenness, but it will be known as the resurrected city, the city where Jesus reigns, the city in which God has made all things new.

This message begins a new sermon series in Isaiah. As we consider Isaiah 1 together, we'll see that it's also a tale of two cities: there's picture perfect Jerusalem, the glittering city you see on the tour bus—big and shiny with all its beautiful buildings and institutions. Then there's the decrepit Jerusalem behind the scenes. Get off the tour bus, nose around a little, and you'll discover that it's more like a movie set than a real city. Nothing is as it seems. Instead of strength and health, the city is sick and dying. Instead of vibrant worship, they're just going through the motions. Instead of good government, there's corruption and evil. As we read through Isaiah 1, we'll see what God has to say about a divided city like Jerusalem.

LISTENING TO GOD'S HERALD: THREE WAYS TO MAKE THE MOST OF ISAIAH

Isaiah wrote about Israel at the end of the 8th C BC, at a time when Jerusalem had enjoyed relative peace and prosperity for more than a century, and their leaders had grown complacent regarding simmering spiritual and social problems. The book of Isaiah chronicles the moral and spiritual disintegration of God's people as they chose to live for themselves rather than for the Lord. It also vividly describes the need for a savior King, who will sacrifice himself to rescue God's people and restore all that has been broken in our world. But how is Isaiah relevant to us today?

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We can read Isaiah ‘vertically,’ as people who need salvation in Jesus Christ. Each year in the fall we study the Old Testament as a way of anticipating and preparing for the birth of our Savior. The Old Testament is the prologue to the story of Jesus. It reminds us that we were a people living in darkness, awaiting God's light. We can read Isaiah in the light of Christ, as those whose sins are washed away by the blood of Christ our Savior.

On the other hand, not only does Jesus save *us* from sin, he’s also the Savior of the world. **We can also read Isaiah ‘horizontally,’ as Jesus’ ambassadors to Washington, DC.** Isaiah didn’t write specifically about Washington, DC, or the United States, or any contemporary government for that matter. He recorded God’s vision for Jerusalem and the Middle East of that time. But in reading Isaiah we can see God’s vision for the entire world, because someday Jesus, the true king of Jerusalem, will be King over all the nations, and the whole world will experience justice and peace. Isaiah shows us the way things ought to be in our city, under the rule of King Jesus. I’m confident that if Isaiah had written specifically about our city as he did for Jerusalem, then he would have called our attention to those suffering injustice and neglect all around us. That’s why, as we study this book, we mustn't overly spiritualize it, by focusing so much on getting our hearts right with God that we miss his compassion for our neighbors.

We can also make the most of Isaiah by keeping his prophetic objectives in mind. When I was a kid there was a popular TV show called “In Search Of...” Each week there was a new episode searching for Big Foot, or the Loch Ness Monster, or Atlantis, or some other paranormal legend. I remember one episode on Nostradamus, who was reported to have prophesied many contemporary events, including WWII and the rise and fall of Adolf Hitler, the Kennedy assassinations, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, California earthquakes and WWIII between Russia, Arabs and the West. Could it be that there were Prophets like Nostradamus, whose eyes rolled back in their heads and suddenly they were able to see tomorrow? For my middle school classmates and me, it certainly captured our imaginations.

Isaiah was a prophet. But if you think he was a prophet like Nostradamus, think again. Prophets in the Old Testament weren’t fortune tellers. They were God's envoys or diplomats. In the ancient world, when an empire annexed another nation, the two parties would often formalize their new relationship with a treaty, sometimes written on two stone tablets (one for the empire, and one for the vassal state). The treaty would spell out the services each party would render to the other, as well as the consequences for non-compliance. For example, the imperial army would protect the tributary in exchange for regular tax payments. But if the annexed territory refused to pay, the imperial army would return and carry them off into exile and slavery. However, since empires generally preferred tax revenue over the expense of war, they would first send envoys to the annexed territory, to remind them of the promises they had made, and to urge them toward compliance—or else. Either pay your taxes, or the empire will come and destroy you. The biblical prophets played a very similar role.

In our sermon series on Exodus, we learned that when God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, he took them to Mt. Sinai and made a treaty with them, written on two identical stone tablets. The treaty promised that God would protect and guide Israel, in exchange for Israel's loyalty to him by worshipping him alone, and by living faithfully as his ambassadors among the

nations. If Israel kept the terms of the agreement, God would bless them and they would flourish. But if Israel turned away from God, he would punish them with exile.

The historical books of the Old Testament record the ups and downs of Israel's relationship with God through the centuries. In times of faithfulness, they flourished. In times of apostasy, they suffered. And unfortunately, there were more times of apostasy than faithfulness. So God began sending them envoys—prophets—to remind them of the terms of the treaty they ratified with God back at Mt. Sinai. The message of the prophets was consistently this: God will accomplish his purposes in the world, with or without Israel's teamwork. He preferred that his people return to him, but if they didn't, he would punish them with exile.

So when we think of Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, we mustn't think of them as fortune tellers. *The Old Testament prophets always spoke God's truth, but not everything they said was 100% guaranteed to happen.* That's because they were God's negotiators, on the one hand warning and threatening, and on the other hand coaxing and wooing. In other words, while they guaranteed God's "ultimate promises," they also alerted people to "contingent predictions."

Think of "contingent predictions" as those blessings and curses the prophets spell out as they woo and warn on God's behalf. Contingent predictions may or may not happen, depending upon how people respond. For example:

If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 1:19-20 ESV)

For those who obey, blessings will follow. For those who disobey, curses will follow. Think of the people of Nineveh after they heard Jonah's "contingent prediction" of God's impending judgment. The Ninevites responded by repenting in sackcloth and ashes, and God spared their city (to the great displeasure of Jonah). Our God has a strong bias toward mercy over wrath. It's his nature to be merciful for a thousand generations, while his anger only lasts for a moment. That's why he arms his prophets with contingent predictions—because he always prefers reconciliation over punishment.

God's "ultimate promises," on the other hand, are those outcomes that are guaranteed, no matter how people respond. The "ultimate promises" describe the certain future that he is determined to bring about, as the overarching biblical narrative of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation unfolds. God will send his servant King to suffer and die on behalf of the people. God will draw all nations to himself. God will bring justice to widows and orphans and all who are suffering at the margins. These ultimate promises will come about because God will make all things new, wipe away every tear, and right every wrong. Ultimate promises are guaranteed to come true.

So, we can make the most of Isaiah by reading 1) *vertically*, as people who need salvation in Jesus Christ; 2) *horizontally*, as Jesus' ambassadors in the city, and 3) *bifocally*, with Isaiah's prophetic short-term and long-term objectives in mind.

THE REAL JERUSALEM: THREE SNAPSHOTS YOU WON'T GET ON THE DOUBLE-DECKER BUS TOUR

The book of Isaiah begins with a bold and vivid hook, showing us what how badly Jerusalem had deteriorated toward the end of his ministry. Isaiah does this by taking readers off the beaten path, where the tour buses don't go, to see the real Jerusalem that is so desperately in need of God's intervention.

Jerusalem the mighty fortress is still standing, barely (Isa 1:2-9). We tend to think of Jerusalem as the capital city of a great nation. But this first snapshot reveals that Jerusalem is more like a shack in the middle of a vegetable patch. Invading armies have laid waste to fields and villages for miles in every direction. So, Isaiah says,

Your country lies desolate;
 your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
 foreigners devour your land;
 it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.
And the daughter of Zion is left
 like a booth in a vineyard,
like a lodge in a cucumber field,
 like a besieged city. (Isaiah 1:7-8 ESV)

What good are the government and the priesthood and all those beautiful buildings if the whole country is devastated and Jerusalem is surrounded by enemies?

Yet the city remains in complete denial about the situation. In vv 2-4 they're like rebellious children, intent on doing what is forbidden, no matter how destructive the consequences may be. Even dumb animals know where to find the feeding trough and who fills it every day. But the people have rebelled against their provider and sustainer, which has made them far more stupid than the animals.

In vv 5-6 they're like someone who's been mugged, with bruises and sores and open wounds from head to toe, yet so completely unaware that they aren't even wearing any bandages! They're dazed and confused, so completely disconnected from God that they're completely oblivious to what's going on. It's ironic, because (v 9) had it not been for the Lord's protection and mercy, Jerusalem would have been razed, and the whole land would have been utterly erased from the map, like Sodom and Gomorrah.

In other words, the postcards show Jerusalem's strong gates and thick city walls, but those aren't the reason why the city's still standing. It's only God's mercy that has kept the marauders from bulldozing the city. Apart from the Lord, the mighty fortress of Jerusalem will fall. Behind the scenes, Jerusalem the Mighty Fortress is like a ramshackle hut in a potato field.

Jerusalem the holy city is still worshiping, vainly (Isa 1:10-20). Remember Psalm 122, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord?'" Think of all those pilgrims who sang it happily, as they made their last ascent up to the temple, to stand in God's presence

inside the gates. God continues to draw near to those who genuinely seek him. But in Isaiah's time, Jerusalem's rulers and people had so turned away from the Lord that their worship practices had become entirely vacuous. In fact, in v 10 the unbridled sin of the city had become so horrific that the Jerusalem was like Sodom and Gomorrah, cities in which there was no law except that you do as you please, and to the victor belong the spoils. Consequently, God announced (v 11) that all their religious activities had become completely useless. Why?

In v 12, instead of coming to the temple to enjoy God's presence, they trampled his courts as they came for reasons other than God. We all do this from time to time, coming to worship in order to see friends without giving any thought to meeting with God. We mustn't forget that God is the most important person we meet in worship every week.

Not only was Jerusalem's worship utterly pointless, it had become offensive, provoking God's anger. In v13, God says their "incense is an abomination to me." Speaking of the juxtaposition of their depravity and holy assemblies, God says, "I cannot endure it." In v 14 all of their hypocrisy had become a "burden" to him. You think God always listens, no matter what? No!

When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood. (Isaiah 1:15 ESV)

In other words, the postcards show Jerusalem's glorious temple with its incense and sacrifices, but it's all a sham. Behind the scenes, God can't stand it. He's neither watching nor listening.

Jerusalem the city of justice is still ruling, wickedly (Isa 1:21-26). In *Ghettoside*, LA Times reporter Jill Leovy describes life in the violent Watts neighborhood of LA, where homicide is the number one cause of death for men living there, and yet the police arrest a suspect in only a third of all murders. Why is it that justice is swift in Hollywood, but not in Watts? Because the government and institutions of Los Angeles are intrinsically skewed toward Hollywood, where the important and beautiful people are.

When I was first ordained, a veteran pastor took me aside and said, "Don't let your ministry fall prey to the whoredom of the city." What he meant was this: people use Washington like they do prostitutes. They come to the city and make use of it for their own ends, without regard for the people who live here. They want the benefits of the city without any relationship with the people of the city. Pastors and churches do this too. We can skew towards the important and beautiful people, whoring after prestige and influence, at the expense of the least of these."

In this third snapshot of the real Jerusalem, we see whoredom instead of fidelity.

How the faithful city has become a whore,
she who was full of justice!
Righteousness lodged in her,
but now murderers. (Isaiah 1:21 ESV)

Like the institutions of so many American cities, Jerusalem sold justice to the highest bidder, with the result that there was no longer any justice for those on the margins. In v 23, government leaders run after gifts and bribes, while impoverished orphans and widows suffer.

Again, you've seen the postcards, but the real Jerusalem is very different. The mighty fortress is still standing, barely. The holy city is still worshiping, vainly. And the just city is still ruling, wickedly.

GOD'S PROMISE AT THE CROSSROADS

God's ultimate promises haven't changed. The strength, and holiness, and justice of Jerusalem will be restored. John writes:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. (Rev 21:2)

This will happen, guaranteed. It's a certain promise. So the question for us all as we stand at the crossroads is whose side are we on? We can choose the path of selfishness, which will only lead to further blindness to God's mercy and protection in our lives. Selfishness only leads to further estrangement from the God who hates hypocrisy in worship. Selfishness only further infuriates God, who sees how others suffer as we chase after fleeting pleasures. We can choose the path of selfishness, knowing that it will lead us to misery and ruin in the end. Or we can choose the path of repentance and reconciliation with God, joining with him in his renewal of all things. This is the path to genuine safety, true worship, and justice for all.

Therefore the Lord declares,
the LORD of hosts,
the Mighty One of Israel:
“Ah, I will get relief from my enemies
and avenge myself on my foes.
I will turn my hand against you
and will smelt away your dross as with lye
and remove all your alloy.
And I will restore your judges as at the first,
and your counselors as at the beginning.
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,
the faithful city.” (Isaiah 1:24-26 ESV)

We stand at the crossroads with a choice to make. If you choose to follow the Lord, the path begins with *repentance*, by turning from our own selfishness and hypocrisy and infidelity, and choosing to follow the Lord in a new way of life. Repentance involves a change of heart and a change of practices:

cease to do evil,
learn to do good;

seek justice,
 correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
 plead the widow's cause. (Isaiah 1:16-17 ESV)

But what about our guilt? What of the blood on our hands (v 15) from all the sins we've committed, all the injustices we've perpetuated throughout our lives?

“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 like crimson,
 they shall become like wool. (Isaiah 1:16-18 ESV)

How will God do it? He cannot simply wipe away our sins, in a way that violates his justice. Think of all the orphans and widows who suffered while Jerusalem's rulers chased after bribes and gifts. God won't simply tell the rulers to “forget about it,” erasing their debts and leaving the orphans and widows without reparations. Someone has to pay for the abuse and neglect shown to the most vulnerable. And make no mistake, God will redeem Jerusalem, and Washington, and all creation in a way that satisfies his justice. How does he do it?

By sending all our sins and problems to the cross of Christ. Jesus dies as a substitute, taking God's wrath upon himself, so that those who repent and return to the Lord might receive God's mercy instead. This is another certain promise of the Bible, for all people, whether the rulers of Jerusalem, or the people of Washington, DC. We who are (vv5-6) sick from head to toe, with bruises and sores and wounds not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil, may be redeemed by putting our faith in Jesus, by whose wounds we are healed. The certain promise of Isaiah, which comes at the climax of his book, is that Jesus took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isa 53:4-5)

So Isaiah's bottom line promise is this: God is going to redeem our world. But we're at the crossroads, and we must choose whether to join him or not.

Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
 and those in her who repent, by righteousness.
But rebels and sinners shall be broken together,
 and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed. (Isaiah 1:27-28 ESV)