

Whom Shall I Fear?

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Date: 23 June 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Well, for two months now or so, we've been going through, haven't we, this opening section of Isaiah. And I wonder if you could describe it in a word or a phrase, what would that be?

There have been a few glimpses of glory, haven't there? A few glimmers of light. But on the whole, I think it'd be fair to say, it has been quite heavy, hasn't it?

There have been some glorious, gloriously beautiful and hopeful moments. But there has also been a lot of judgment.

Well, here in chapter 10, we have one last woe, one last message of judgment in this mini section of Isaiah that we've been going through.

We'll finish next week with chapter 11 and 12. But before we get there, there is one more message of judgment Isaiah knows his audience needs to hear.

[1 : 0 8] And what I do not want us to be thinking as we enter this passage is just sort of, here we go again.

There is a lot of judgment in Isaiah. There's actually a lot less in Isaiah than some of the other prophetic books. Be thankful we're not going through Jeremiah, if you're finding it heavy so far. But God does not needlessly record all of these oracles of woe to merely depress us.

Nor does he sort of superfluously repeat himself. Every one of these passages is here with a particular purpose. Every one of them is here to teach God's people a specific lesson from a particular perspective.

That is true of every verse and passage in the Bible. And that is no less true of the many judgment passages of the prophets. So as we come now to Isaiah 10, let us not think, here we go again.

But rather, what did Isaiah want or know his audience needed to hear and understand that they had not heard before?

[2 : 2 5] We'll see as we go through this passage that it is full of forestry imagery. And that provides, I think, a helpful picture of exactly this point.

It would be so easy to walk by this chapter, and many like it, and just glance quickly and think, it's just another tree. And walk on by without giving it much thought.

But stop underneath it for a moment. Pause to turn the words over in your mind. And dwell on it. Give the tree a gentle shake. And you will find much fruit, much good fruit falling from that tree that you would not get from anywhere else.

So let us not think it's just more judgment. But instead, stop and ask, what new fruit does this tree have to offer us? What specific message does God want us to hear through these words?

And as we do that with chapter 10, we're just going to break it up into two very simple parts. Looking first at what more, what specific aspect of God's wrath we learn about.

[3 : 38] And then secondly, what more we learn of God's mercy through these verses. So let us first turn to the wrath of God.

And this theme does stretch across the whole section, but we're going to focus here on verses 5 to 19. And as soon as we start reading there in verse 5, we know, don't we, that while this is another woe, it is more judgment, we immediately know something new is being taught.

Something different is going on here. Because the focus of God's wrath this time is not on his idolatrous people.

But now the focus of God's wrath is the instrument of his justice. Woe to Assyria.

Woe to the very people God is using to bring judgment upon Israel and Judah. Let me just remind ourselves of the historical context here.

[4 : 50] So we remember who Assyria is. Joe helpfully explained it again last week, didn't he? Isaiah is living in a time when the once united nation of Israel has been split into two kingdoms.

In the north, and quite confusingly, still referred to as Israel, even though it's only half the original Israel. In the north is the extremely idolatrous part, half of God's people.

And in the south, what is now called Judah, is the, I suppose it's only very idolatrous half of God's people. And it's those people in Judah to whom Isaiah is speaking.

And in the time of Isaiah, the northern kingdom, Israel, together with their allies around about, were plotting against Judah, the southern neighbor. Threatening their smaller southern neighbor.

So Judah needed help. I don't know if you remember, but we saw that back in chapter 7. Judah needed help, and Judah knew they needed help. But instead of turning to God for help, Judah turned to Assyria.

[6 : 02] Assyria were sort of the growing superpower of the day. An irresistible force that flattens everything that stood in its way.

And Judah, fearing invasion from their bigger northern neighbors, went for help to the mighty Assyrian Empire.

They did not turn to God for aid, but to Assyria. And initially, it looked like it might have worked. Because Assyria marched south, sure enough.

And would overwhelm Judah's enemies, including idolatrous Israel. But what we've seen, haven't we, through these opening chapters of Isaiah, is that what Judah at the time would have thought was savvy politics, when we see behind the scenes, we learn, in fact, this is actually God's divine punishment.

And so, acting as the tool of God's judgment, Assyria would not stop in idolatrous Israel, but continue their march of destruction into idolatrous Judah.

[7 : 23] That is what we've seen so far. Israel and Judah have been sitting as the accused. They have been declared guilty, according to their faithlessness to God's covenant.

And so, the only appropriate sentence of divine judgment had been handed down. Sort of a very brief summary of the narrative we've been following through in the opening chapter of Isaiah.

But it is, I think, necessary to understand where we now arrive in chapter 10. Because judgment has been decreed upon Judah, and then, as we saw last week, Israel.

But now it is Assyria's turn. Now it is Assyria's turn to take their seats in the courtroom and hear the charges against them.

And what we see in verses 5 to 19 are the charges being read out, the evidence presented, and the hammer falling and declaring them guilty.

[8 : 30] Assyria is guilty. And as these charges are read out, and their guilt declared, Isaiah, doesn't he, unashamedly and unapologetically plows headfirst into deep theological waters.

Because here, God is holding to account the very acts that he was swinging against Israel and Judah. Holding up without a moment's hesitation, God's sovereignty and Assyria's responsibility.

The Bible gladly presents those two things as true. And it is not our job to understand it, but to accept it.

In that passage, Edna read earlier from us in Romans 9. I mean, Paul kind of simply and quite bluntly says, I know someone's going to ask me about this. So let me tell you, or let me ask you, who are you?

Who are you to question God's ways? Who do you think you are to be able to get your finite mind around the mysteries of the eternal God's ways and purposes?

[9 : 53] And that is the attitude we must always come to complex theological issues with. God is God, and we are not. But Isaiah 10 maybe does give us just a tiny bit of flesh on the bones, even if it is just a tiny sliver that might leave us somewhat unsatisfied.

Because if you look there in verses 6 and 7, Assyria is not declared guilty, are they, for carrying out the Lord's divine will, but rather for unintentionally carrying out God's will through godless motives.

They might have been an instrument God used to achieve His purposes, but their motives matter. Because while there is one action, there are two purposes, aren't there?

The Lord wants justice. But Assyria wants destruction. The Lord is bringing this end about because it was the deserved punishment for a wicked people.

But the Assyrian army, they did not care if their enemies were guilty or not. They did not care if they were idolaters or faithful worshipers.

[11 : 21] The Assyrians only cared about putting an end to every nation that was before them, whether good or wicked. If Assyria was faced with a faithful Judah, they would have just as equally desired to destroy them.

But the Lord would not. And they delighted in their destruction and took pride in their strength, trusting in what God had given them to serve His purposes.

They thought they could use it to serve their own purposes. Verses 8 to 11 and then 13 and 14 as well are the words of the king of Assyria.

And if you look there, you'll see he is talking, isn't he, about how incomparably great he is. How wonderful his achievements are.

How unsurpassable is his strength and wisdom. How unstoppable his army is. But that misplaced trust is exactly what the Lord will hold him to account for in verse 12.

[12 : 30] When the Lord has finished all His work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, then He will say, I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes.

Now, we'll get to the heart of the matter in just a moment. Why Judah needed to hear this oracle against Assyria.

But it is, I think, worth just very briefly stopping off here for a moment. Assyria were used for the Lord's ends, were they not?

And they were imbued with great strength for that purpose. But what we need to know is that inadvertently carrying out the Lord's will while living for your own glory is very different to seeking to do the Lord's will for His glory.

And the Lord clearly judges the two very differently. Feels like an obvious point.

[13 : 39] Sometimes those are the ones we think we can skip over and end up never seeing. But we need to know the Assyrians would not have a leg to stand on in God's courtroom if they try to point at how God had worked through them for His glory.

What mattered was their motive, not what they had been empowered to do. There is no righteousness for people through whom God might work, but who themselves are only interested in living for their own glory and power and prestige.

Being able to point at how God had worked through them was not going to get the Assyrians anywhere. Motives matter. If we assume we are on the right path because God seems to be doing something through us, we should not rest in that for a moment.

Do not trust in that. Give thanks for it if you recognize it. But spiritual renewal in people is not measured by how God works through them, but how God is working in them.

If the king of Assyria had rocked up with a humble heart, having achieved nothing, that would have been a much healthier sign than God doing mighty acts through him.

[15 : 09] Trusting in whatever gifts God works through will get no one anywhere. And God's wrath will be rightly pronounced on those who pridefully trust in the strength that God has given them.

So we learn that God's wrath falls in the very instruments He uses to achieve His purposes because of their pride. But more importantly from this section, I think what we learn is that the wrath of God is a wrath completely unlike any other.

There is nothing that compares. Remember that these words, that they are concerning Assyria, but we need to remember that they are spoken, aren't they, in the hearing of Judah.

Why did Judah need to hear these words against Assyria? I think that becomes particularly clear in verses 16 to 19. Because remember, from the context we mentioned earlier, Assyria was not at this point an oppressor Judah needed freed from.

They were in fact a false hope that Judah needed to learn not to trust in. And this oracle upon the Assyrians asked the question of Judah, who should you really fear?

[16 : 42] Who should you really be putting your trust in? Who do you think is the most powerful person in the room?

They were living fearful of displeasing Assyria. Because to the naked eye, they seemed the most terrifying force around.

But what they needed to learn was that they would have been far better, necessary even, to have lived fearful of displeasing God.

Because Assyria's wrath is nothing, nothing, compared to God's wrath. Assyria might be the means by which judgment is brought upon Israel and Judah.

But standing over it all, standing in judgment of Assyria too, is the Lord, the Lord Almighty. It says it again and again through this passage.

[17 : 52] I don't know if you picked that up. The Lord, the Lord Almighty. It is like a trifecta of titles that declare God's absolute supremacy. And while an axe that was Assyria might have felled some trees in Judah, it is the Lord, the Lord Almighty, who is going to send a fire to utterly consume all Assyria in a moment.

Verse 17. The light of Israel become a fire, their holy one aflame. In a single day, it will burn and consume his thorns and his briars. A consuming fire that will burn to the ground all that the king of Assyria and his pomp has built up.

But the Lord's wrath is not just different in degree from that of the supposedly mighty Assyrian army. It is greater, but it is also terrifyingly more comprehensive.

The NAV sort of leaves out a couple of, I think, really key words in verse 18 that help land the message that Isaiah is preaching to the people of Judah. If you look down there at verse 18, you'll see, still talking about this consuming fire.

The NAV reads, the splendor of his forests and fertile fields, it will completely destroy. The will completely destroy is in Hebrew, literally, will destroy both body and soul.

[19 : 27] The Lord's consuming fire will destroy completely body and soul.

The Lord's wrath is to be more greatly feared, not only because the Lord of hosts can outmuscle the king of Assyria, but because the Lord of creation can destroy not just bodies, but souls.

It is not just a greater power. It is an altogether different kind of judgment. and it is an immeasurably more terrifying thought.

The worst any mere mortal can do is shorten the days of your already short life. And the Assyrians were a terrifying prospect.

They were barbaric and cruel. They showed no mercy. They tortured and humiliated their enemies. but they could only shorten the days of your life.

[20 : 46] But God, God is the one who can destroy body and soul. The combination here of soul and body is unique, at least kind of within this context in the Old Testament.

And given how closely the messages appear to be, I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that Jesus has this passage in mind when he says to his disciples, plainly in Matthew 10, he says, do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, Jesus says, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Those words of Jesus are, I think, the message Isaiah wanted his audience to hear above all else. Do not fear those who can kill the body.

Rather, fear the one who can destroy both body and soul. I was at a conference a few years ago and there was a Q&A; session with a panel of pastors and somebody asked everyone in the panel to answer the question, what is the greatest threat facing the church today?

[22 : 15] what is the greatest threat facing the church today? A few different answers were given, all of them helpful, but the one that really struck with me, because I thought it got to the very heart of the issue, was one of the pastors who just said three simple words.

What is the greatest threat facing the church today? The answer came back, fear of man.

Question, isn't it, is who are we living to please? Or better, who do we live fearing to displease? It can be so quick, can't we, to run from sharing the gospel for fear of what people might think, of how they might respond, of what they might do to us?

We can be so slow to speak plainly what the Bible says on certain issues for fear of what man might say or do or think.

And we live, don't we, we live in relatively very comfortable times. And yet, that fear for us can be so very real on a day-to-day basis.

[24 : 03] How much more so for Judah, whose very lives were on the line. The Assyrians were a genuinely terrifying enemy. It's easy to stand in judgment over them, isn't it?

We would have been there with them. Persecution is fearful. People can cause real pain. The people of Judah really were faced with an invading army hovering on their border.

How easy it is to let our fear of man dictate our actions. But here is what Isaiah knows Judah needs to hear.

The genuinely terrifying might of Assyria is absolutely nothing. It does not register on the scale compared to the wrath of God.

They can wield their weapons of war and cause you pain for a time. But that is all. So who are we going to fear?

[25 : 18] Who is it, honestly, that we would desperately not want to displease? There is only one right answer, isn't there?

We see, don't we, through these verses two, I think, fresh things about the Lord's wrath we have not seen yet before. It is enacted even against those who unwittingly carry out his divine purposes if they do so pridefully.

And it is a far more terrifying wrath than anything you will find in creation because it can destroy what nothing else can destroy.

Now, if that was the end of the lesson, that was the end of the story, it would have been a lesson well learned.

But for everyone who heard that message in isolation, the reality is it would have been too late, wouldn't it? For those in Judah, judgment had already been pronounced on them.

[26 : 48] they had already been declared guilty. And so, if the end of the story was hearing just how terrifying God's wrath would be, they are just going to live in dread of what was to come.

But that is not, praise God, the end of the story. It was too late for Judah to undo what they had already done.

But something else enters into the picture. It is a good and necessary lesson to learn that God is to be feared above all else.

But we need, don't we, we need something more if we are not to be on the end of God's righteous wrath that destroys both body and soul. And that something more does not come from ourselves, but from God.

Because our God is a God of justice, but he is also a God of mercy. God of God is to see, secondly, even in his acts of justice upon the Assyrians, the Lord brings mercy to his people.

[28 : 23] He knew the eternal danger of trusting in the Assyrians, and so he visited his wrath upon them, his terrifying wrath, in order to show mercy to his people.

How does that work, verse 20? Because through his righteous wrath, he reveals to his people who they really need to trust and fear in. And when they trust and fear in the Lord, he will save them.

For all the destruction that Assyria will bring, it will not be the end for God's covenant people. people. Because although they deserve to be utterly wiped out, a remnant will return.

It is only a remnant. This is not a triumphal victory by any means. But it is hope.

It is a guarantee of God's faithfulness to his covenant promises. He will not let an end be put to his people, even though that is what they deserve, but he preserves.

[29 : 36] He preserves a remnant, and we'll see more fully next week why that remnant, small as it is, is so full of hope. Because it is the assurance, isn't it, that in spite of the faithlessness of God's people, he will still raise up a son of David to be an everlasting king on the eternal throne of God's kingdom.

God's people have failed, but God's promises still stand, and God will still be merciful.

So this is where Isaiah brings us to, verse 24. Therefore, this is what the Lord, the Lord Almighty says. He says, My people who live in Zion, do not be afraid of the Assyrians who beat you with a rod and lift up a club against you as Egypt did.

Very soon, my anger against you will end, and my wrath will be directed to their destruction.

Do not fear Assyria, we've seen that, haven't we? And know that my anger against, towards you will end.

[30 : 52] God promises his faithless people, that a day is coming when his anger will no more be directed against them.

Why? Why does Judah not feel the full force of God's wrath as Assyria and the northern kingdom of Israel would? God's grace? It's not because of their better performance, is it?

It's not the size or their wealth, not because of the gifts they could bring to the table as servants of God. It is solely because of God's mercy.

mercy. And when we see, when we dwell on God's wrath, when we understand how terrifying it is, we start to see, do we not, ever more clearly, the magnitude of his mercy.

the people of Judah were recipients earlier in Isaiah of the very same wars that have come to Israel and Assyria.

[32 : 09] Everyone, everyone, the people of Judah, the people of Israel, the people of Assyria, you and me, are all deserving of nothing, nothing other than God's terrifying wrath, which can destroy both body and soul.

But God chooses to have mercy. He chooses to have mercy on whom he will have mercy. through in Christ this evening, know that it is not anything that you have done or not done.

There is no basis for our salvation other than God restraining his wrath and showing us his mercy. It is not that we have made wiser decisions than others.

It is not because we've lived a life slightly above average. it is solely that God in his sovereignty has chosen to have mercy on us.

It is a gift of God's grace to those who had done nothing to deserve it. that is a humbling thought, isn't it?

[33 : 41] We love to try and take some of the credit, even if it is only the tiniest smidgen, but there is no credit for us to take because there is no righteousness in any outside of Christ.

Yes, things are done by many which align with God's will. We saw that with the Assyrians, but motives matter and what is not done for God's glory is deserving of God's wrath.

That is all we ever had to offer outside of Christ. Christ. And yet God, in His mercy, not only restrained His wrath as He does here in Isaiah 10, but He bore that fearful wrath Himself.

That dreadful, terrifying thought of suffering at the hands of the one who can destroy both body and soul. Jesus Christ bore that wrath for us, not because we were worthy, but because He is merciful.

God's wrath borne by Christ for us who have nothing to offer but our sinfulness. Jesus says, plainly, doesn't He, in a way, fear the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell.

[35 : 23] But that fear for us now is knowing God's incomparable power. It is not in Christ a fear of experiencing that ourselves. else.

We can, and perhaps should, fear the parental discipline of our Father in heaven, but we need never fear suffering the full force of His wrath, because that has been dealt with.

That debt is gone, and it shall never return. Every one of us lives in desperate need of God's mercy.

Pray that you would know it yourself. Let us end by asking simply, who shall we fear?

If we fear any power of man, we will find ourselves putting our hope, in sinking sand. But to fear the Lord is to know His mercy.

[36 : 44] To fear the Lord is to know we bring nothing to the table. To fear the Lord is to trust wholly in Jesus' blood and righteousness.

And when we fear the Lord, we fear nothing. Because in His great mercy, He has withheld His most terrifying wrath from those who fully deserved it.

God wants us to know His mercy, but it is a mercy which we will only fully understand when we comprehend something of this wrath.

God. That is why Isaiah spends so much time on it. That is where he ends this chapter. Once again, reminding Judah of the judgment he will mete out upon the Assyrians.

we need to understand God's wrath so that we will properly understand His mercy. That we might not fear the world, but fear the Lord.

[37 : 56] And so rest in His mercy and rest in His Son. Let us come before Him now in prayer together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father, we confess that if we were to stand condemned in our sins, justly enduring Your wrath, we could not bear it.

But we thank You and praise You and praise You. We deserve nothing but judgment Your mercy and Your grace.

We praise You that You have borne the wrath we deserved, that You have given Your one and only Son for our sake. So help us to live in a right fear of You now, delighting to do Your will, knowing that so long as You are for us, there is nothing this world can do that will remove us from Your safe hands.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.