

God's Covenant Courtroom Drama

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[0 : 0 0] This is the word of the Lord. Please keep that page open, difficult words, and so we'll pray for God's help as we come to them now. Our Father, we thank you that you are a God who speaks.

We thank you that you have not hidden yourself, and we thank you that we don't have to guess what you want, but you have spoken so clearly about who you are, your ways, and what you want from us and for us. And so tonight, Lord, we pray that you would give us eyes to see this prophetic vision, that you would give us ears to hear your word, that you would give us hearts that are open to receive your message. Lord, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Picture yourself at the cinema. The trailers have finished. Everything's gone dark. And a voice says, all rise. And on the screen, you see the picture of a courtroom. You see faces.

You don't know who they are yet. All you know is someone is on trial. It's a huge case. The world is watching. And the prosecution is invited to begin.

Would that grip you? Would you keep watching? Fill in the gaps in your mind. What is going to be the big conflict in this drama?

[1 : 3 8] Who are the big players? What's happened to bring us to this courtroom? How is it going to end? You sometimes think we treat the Bible as if it was a bit kind of dry and dusty and difficult to understand. Some of it is difficult, but it is anything but dull. Because that courtroom scene is exactly how the book of Isaiah begins. And it leaves us asking all those questions, doesn't it?

What's brought us to this point? Who's involved? And perhaps the biggest question of all, how is it going to end? Now, if you even flick through the book of Isaiah, you'll see that that end is quite a long way away.

That's 66 chapters, this book. If you're trying to count how many Sundays' worth of sermons that is, don't worry, we're not going to do the whole thing in one go for now. We are hoping to go through the first section up to the summer. That's the first 12 chapters. But maybe you're feeling a bit cheated by that. You want to know how it ends. But like any good writer, Isaiah drops glimpses of the destination as we go along. So we won't be left wondering how it's going to end, but hopefully we will along the way be crying out to get there. And not only in a kind of gotta keep reading kind of way, but in a personal, spiritual, the whole world is going here kind of way. Because as the plot unfolds through these 12 chapters, we'll begin to see why Isaiah has been called the evangelical prophets or the gospel prophets. In some ways that does a disservice to the other prophets. They're all gospel prophets. But the picture of Christ that we see in the book of Isaiah and his work is so vivid and compelling that it's easy to see why he's the prophet that the

New Testament writers turn back to you most often as they unpack the person and work of Christ. They quote or reference his writing about 85 times in the New Testament. His words even open one of the gospels. In the beginning, the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet. A voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. And so I don't think it's a stretch to call this series, as we will, the gospel according to Isaiah. Because in this book, we get an incredible trailer for the coming of Christ in history, his ongoing work in the world, and his future return.

But of course, Isaiah is writing a long time ago, speaking into a specific context, which he fills out as we go along. There are four kings listed there in verse 1. You can read about those in 2 Chronicles, between chapters 26 and 32. Their reigns covered about 100 years, between the 790s and 680s BC. Importantly, though, they're all kings of Judah. And that's the half of God's kingdom that stayed relatively more true to him during this period of history. And their capital is Jerusalem, as Isaiah points out. Now, that's going to be important, because in lots of ways, Isaiah's vision that he saw is a tale of two cities. It's a vision that takes us from sin city to the celestial city, from the city that is to the city that will be. And it takes all 66 chapters to get there.

[5 : 54] But to show us where we're coming from, he opens with a courtroom scene that sets out the problem at the heart of sin city and its sinful nation. So let's hear, then, God's prosecution.

Now, the first faces that we recognize in the courtroom are surprising ones, maybe verse 2. Hear me, you heavens. Listen, earth. Isaiah is calling the universe to lean in. This is like the lawyer saying, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. He is calling heaven and earth to witness the trial, because it is a trial of cosmic proportions. Isaiah's words here take us back to the very beginning, don't they? In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and God said, well, so now creation itself is called to listen again to God's voice. In a very real sense, its future hangs on his verdict, because it is the Lord himself, not only the creator, but the covenant God who is bringing the charges. And who is it on trial, verse 2? I reared children, he says, and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey, its owner's manger, but Israel does not know. My people do not understand. This is not God speaking out against the world. It is God charging his people, Israel, with stupid, stubborn rebellion.

Even a donkey knows where its food comes from. Even an ox knows not to bite the hand that feeds it. It's just animal instinct. But my people, they have less sense than animals, he says. I brought them home from hospital. I carried them through the door in the car seat. You know, I changed them and fed them. I got them to sleep and kept them alive. But they've turned into stubborn, rebellious teenagers.

You don't want anything to do with me. I'm quite happy to live under my roof and eat my food, but they do not treat me as their God and creator and holy one. Now, notice the speech marks end there at the end of verse 3. But verse 4 picks up the same charge. The Lord has finished speaking, but someone now takes up the Lord's case and is prosecuting his people. So, who's speaking now? Well, this is Isaiah himself. Now, we don't tend to be, I think, as Christians today that familiar with the prophets, maybe bits and pieces, but we're certainly not comfortable with their role description in the Old Testament. See, what Isaiah is doing here is bread and butter for a prophet in the Old Testament.

[8 : 57] Okay, then 9 to 5 was being God's lawyers. So, when his people broke his law, God picks up the phone to his prophets and gets the prophets to take his people to courts. And if you've ever seen a courtroom drama or been to court, you'll know that the job of a lawyer isn't to put across his or her own perspective or opinion or ideas. It is to apply the law to people's behavior. This is what the law says. This is what you've done. Now, that's probably a massive oversimplification, but the point is that lawyers are not free to make it up as they go along. And in the same way, prophets in the Old Testament were there to say, this is what God's law says. And normally, they had the unenviable task of then saying, and you have broken the law. So, here is Isaiah making God's case in court. This is a covenant courtroom drama, or as the commentators would call it, a covenant lawsuit, because God's people have broken the terms of God's covenant. But how? Now, if Isaiah was a play, we could think of chapters one to five as the overture. The curtain rises in chapter six with his call, and act one begins in chapter seven.

The overture, it's only there, isn't it, to introduce us to the musical themes, the kind of melodic lines. It doesn't tell the story. And so, Isaiah doesn't completely give the game away in chapter one. Suffice it to say that his people have been getting into bed with people and things that are not the God that they're supposed to be in relationship with. And they're behaving more and more like their arrivals on the world stage in search of security and salvation.

Isaiah is going to fill out that picture as we go on. But suffice it to say that God is not happy with that. Look at the way he describes what they've done. They have rebelled, verse T, or verse four, the forsaken, spurned, turned their backs on him. He is their holy one. He is the personal and perfect God who has pledged himself to his people, his protection, his provision, but they have not stayed true to him.

And look where it's got you, says Isaiah. Just a glance down at verses five and six. They are extremely graphic verses, aren't they?

[11 : 54] A body left for dead, ruined, torn apart, broken. God's people saw themselves as a 20-something bodybuilder, the picture of health. But that mutilated mess is what is looking back at them as Isaiah holds up the mirror for them to see.

A body all but dead, only wounds and welts and open sores. Verses seven and eight describe the same horror, but on the ground. Sin City, daughter Zion, left like a rotten shed, falling apart in a field that's been stripped bare. So the question, verse five, why should you be beaten anymore?

Why do you persist in your rebellion? Isaiah's courtroom days are long gone, but God's prosecution echoes down through the ages.

Because if this is how God views our reliance on our own strength, or our own brilliant or not so brilliant ideas, the security that we find in human governments, or work contracts, or committed relationships to keep us safe, instead of him and his word, well, wouldn't he be right to put us on trial today?

Part of the problem back then was that his people couldn't see the problem. They had less instinct than animals when it came to God. And so it is no surprise, is it, if our people are getting into bed with or flirting with other lords and saviors that are not the Lord himself, don't register as sin and rebellion in our consciences. You're quite the opposite. Perhaps if you're sitting here tonight and you're not a Christian, you know, it does surprise you, it's never occurred to you that God is ready to take you to court for turning your back on him.

[14:05] But God holds up the mirror and shows us that we are not just naughty sometimes, but we are dead on arrival. There is no do better next time. There's no try again, try a bit harder. There's no part of you that isn't broken and bleeding, he says. You look again at the worlds piled up in verse 4, sinful, guilty, evil doers, corruption. They are like nails in a coffin. And notice that there is no reply.

There's no defense that can stand against God's prosecution. So the question again, why carry on? Why do you persist in rebellion?

Well, that's where the prosecution goes next with God's plea. Usually it's the defendant who's asked, isn't it? How do you plead? We've noticed there is no defense here. And yet God does enter a plea, so to speak. He pleads with his people to change their ways. In verse 9, Isaiah says, unless the Lord Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom and been like Gomorrah. Now he's referring to an invasion that had devastated the land, destroyed cities, many people had died. Later on, he recounts how the Lord has graciously intervened and stopped the invasion before everyone suffered that fate. But Isaiah is clear that the invasion itself was like the fire that fell on those two cities long ago. God himself personally wiped Sodom and Gomorrah off the map in judgment for their sin. So now he says the cities of Judah and Jerusalem are as guilty as Sodom and Gomorrah and would have been wiped off the map by God unless he had graciously held back his hand and spared a remnant. And that's not because these survivors were better than other people. In fact,

Isaiah calls them in verse 10, rulers of Sodom, people of Gomorrah. They are in fact no better than the people who perished. You know, as I was trying to think of a kind of modern day court case to compare this to, I thought if we take Isaiah's language seriously, we could reach, couldn't we, legitimately, I think, for the Nuremberg trials. God is not holding back. He is putting evil people on the stand. And the fact that they have survived does not clear them of their guilt.

It's to people like that that Isaiah is saying, hear God's case against you and listen to his plea. Now, we, and they, I think, might want to say, you really, is it that bad? Is that not just over-egging it?

[17:17] You know, they're in church every Sunday, they've got a Bible, they do Christian things that they're generally nice people. Their version of that was the temples up and running, we bring our sacrifices, we keep the festivals, we offer prayers. You can't, you see that we're decent religious people.

Yeah, we know you, God. We know what you're like. We know what you want. And okay, all right, if we're a bit loose with our love and our lives during the week, it's all right. No big deal. We can always sort it out the weekend. We can always put another lamb on the altar. Always put up a few prayers and we're easy. But hear the word of the Lord, you dead men walking, verse 11. The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me, says the Lord? You just glance down to verse 13, it hardly gets stronger than this in the whole Old Testament. Stop bringing meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me. You mean Sabbaths and convocations? I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your new mean feasts, your appointed festivals? I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me. I'm weary of bearing them. God says, I can't take another Sunday. You're singing greats on me. I can't bear your pointless preaching. Your communions I hate with all my heart. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you. Even when you offer many prayers, I'm not listening.

Is it really that bad? Why don't you love our service, Lord? God. Well, the end of verse 15 tells us why. You spread out your hands in prayer, but they are dripping with blood.

And not the blood of sacrifices, verse 17, but the blood of your brothers and sisters, the blood of the oppressed, the fatherless, and the widow. He is saying to his people, you think you can ignore me and my word all week, do what you want, and then come to church on Sunday and it's all okay? There is no number of church services. There's no quantity of blood that can magically make your refusal to listen, your constant rebellion, fine with me, says God. He was if he was only a switch to be flicked on and off by a quick round of the temple. So here is God's plea, verse 16.

[19 : 56] Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong. Get that blood off your hands and stop trampling my word. And verse 17, learn to do what I say is right. Take me and my word seriously. Start actually doing what it says. To quote a New Testament letter that gets at the same issue for Christians in the church, James says, those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves. And their religion is worthless.

Religion that our God and Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

And friends, that is still God's plea to us today. There is no amount of Christianity that we can pretend to do to get right with God.

Our lives actually need to change in response to his words. God is so clear here, isn't he, that coming to church or being involved in Christian things isn't a tasty starter if the main course is vomit induces is vomit inducing? He says that as a combination he hates. Everything we serve to him, everything we serve should be exactly what he has ordered. So turn your life around, he says. Repent. Say sorry for the ways that you've broken my law. Stop doing that wrong thing and learn to do right by me. Now if God's language feels strong and it does, remember who he's speaking to. This is a nation that is trying to have an on-again, off-again relationship with the faithful covenant God.

[22 : 05] And so if that is ye, and your Christianity really is turning up occasionally on a Sunday, or throwing up a quick prayer when things are going bad, then these words should land on ye with their full force. You are opening your hands to God in prayer that is still filthy from whatever it is that you've been doing with them during the week. And he says that he looks away from that.

And he shuts his ears to your prayers. You tonight need the cleansing, the purifying, the washing clean that only God can give.

So wash and make yourself clean, he says. Start tonight. Turn away from your sins. Start living for him. Begin doing what is in his word, not only hearing it, and then carrying on regardless.

Now I trust a lot of us are not living that life. I hope we're not. I hope for many of us, our time here on a Sunday, our prayers, our worship, is the high point in a life lived for God during the whole week. You many of us have been cleansed and washed clean by the Holy Spirit as we've put our trust in the blood of his son Jesus. And so, therefore, to the extent that this is still true of us, as it will be to some extent, to that extent then, these words need to land on us too.

If we are in Christ, his call to repent and have a whole heart towards him shouldn't crush us. Because in the words of Titus chapter 3, God has saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he's poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.

[24 : 10] But therefore, because we have been washed clean by God, we should want to be clean then in what we think about, say, and do. We should want to put God's word into practice, and so our lives should change as we hear his word, so that we're not hearers only, but doers also.

So that our worship isn't skin deep, it's not surface level, but it comes from the heart. That is God's plea to me and you, to turn from our sin and live for him.

They're strong words, but don't we need to hear them? But even if we do that, friends, and with all our strength, begin tomorrow to try to live differently from now on, well, here's the question, how can that change God's verdict?

You prisoners might get their sentences reduced for good behavior, but it doesn't make them not guilty of their original crime, right? And so with us, try harder, do better. It can't give life back to the spiritually dead.

It can't change our guilt or overturn God's verdict. And so God ends not with a plea, but with something that's surely unprecedented in the whole of court cases in history.

[25 : 38] He ends with a promise. You know, I hope we feel this, that he would be right at this point, wouldn't he, to press for the harshest possible sentence.

But instead, what does he choose to do in verse 18? He chooses to offer a settlement. Just read these verses with me.

Come now, let us settle the matter, 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 good things of the land. But if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

There's still a need to change there, isn't there? To be willing towards God, obedient, instead of resisting and rebelling. But it comes with this glorious promise from God, that though our sins before him are a deep red stain, he will wash our sins away completely.

[26 : 52] If you've ever spilled red wine on someone's carpet or sofa, you know that the guilt and the regret that immediately washes over you. I once burnt a hole in someone's carpet.

That was not pleasant. You feel awful, don't you? But you know by the time you've done it, that there's really not much that can be done anymore. And so no matter how nice the person is about it, you know, don't worry about it, they say.

You know that it's there, and you still feel bad about it. And if next time you go there's a throw on the sofa or there's a rug on the carpet, well, you still know what's under there, don't you?

And you know that if they lifted it up, what you would see would be the stain that you left before.

See, as long as the stain is still there, you will continue to feel guilty and ashamed of it.

It will still be there to see. But what does the Lord say? Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

[27 : 57] He doesn't say it's fine, nor does he cover it up. Your sin is a deep, dark stain before me, he says, but I will make it as if it had never been there.

You have sinned, but I will make it as if you had never sinned. Remember, they didn't have vanished back then.

The idea of getting a scarlet or a crimson stain out and leaving it as white as snow or wool would have been impossible. But I will do the impossible with your sins, says the Lord. I will remove it from before me so that I could never even tell that it was there.

As the prosecution rests his case, is that not the last thing that you would expect for him to say?

That he, the prosecutor, will deal with the charges?

That he would take away the guilt? These are the first faint lines of a sketch that Isaiah will build up throughout his book of a Savior God who would not only forgive his people their sins, but take the guilt and the stain of their rebellion and what they had done off their shoulders and deal with it himself.

[29 : 19] A Savior who ultimately would take their place in the courtroom and stand trial for their sins and be served the fullest possible sentence and die, his body broken, his blood poured out so that the shattered, dead and bleeding body of his people would live.

And be made whole and the blood red stain of our sins would be washed white as snow. These are the first faint lines in Isaiah's sketch of Jesus Christ and his finished work on the cross.

So if you know tonight that you still need that stain of your sin to be washed away before God and that guilt to be removed, would you only ask him and he will do it?

I love the certainty of those words. Shall be. There's no doubt, there's no guessing with God over whether our sins really are washed away.

When we turn back to him and trust him to deal with our sins, they shall be white as snow. They shall be white as wool. And notice that it's not Isaiah speaking for God, although that would be good enough.

[30 : 47] He was speaking as he says that. It is God himself. This is God in his own words. This is his promise to all who stop trying to put up a defense and instead turn to settle with him.

And he does not ask us to pay a penny, but he says, I will pay and I will deal with it and I will wash it away. So tonight, friends, would you turn from resisting and rebelling and be willing and obedient towards him?

Our sins are laid bare before him, but let's settle it, he says, once and for all. Through this death of my son and by his blood that can wash away every sin.

Let's turn to him now as we pray together. Let's pray. Come now, let us settle the matter, says the Lord.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. Our Father, we recognize before you how unworthy we are to receive those words of life.

[32 : 21] Lord, how surprised and shocked we are that you would speak them to rebels like us. Lord, we confess that our sin is a deep red stain that we could not remove, however hard we tried.

Lord, how we thank you for these words of promise that you would take them away as far as east is from the west, never to be remembered again. And Lord, how we thank you for their fulfillment and the reality of them in the finished work of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our Father, we thank you and we marvel that his body was made to be like the body of his people, open wounds and sores, his body broken, so that we would be made whole, forgiven, cleansed, renewed.

Our Father, we just praise you for him. And we ask, Lord, that through our series in Isaiah that our love for him would grow and grow. Lord, that as our sin and our recognition of our sin grows deeper and darker, that the diamond of the gospel would glitter ever more brightly in our hearts.

And Father, we pray for those among us tonight who as yet have not known what it is for their sins to be washed away by the blood of Christ.

[33 : 38] And Father, how we pray by your Holy Spirit that you would bring faith and conviction, that you would bring assurance of your promise. And Lord, that such dear friends would turn to ye and put their faith in the saving work of your Son, never to be undone.

Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.