

His Hand is Still Upraised

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Well, I don't know if you feel like you're getting to grips with the world of Isaiah yet. The further we go back into the mists of time, the more distant we get from our own context, the harder it gets to get our heads into what's going on.

Isaiah is speaking over two and a half thousand years ago, something like three and a half thousand miles away. So, we shouldn't expect it to be obvious at a glance what's going on, or with a kind of quick skim through.

We have to do a bit of work, don't we, to understand what he's saying and why. I think that's a helpful rule of thumb to bring to our personal Bible reading and study as well, isn't it?

We shouldn't expect it just to be gems lifted off the surface of the page. Some of it's like that. Much of it requires a bit of digging and investment and time.

But by now, if you've been with us through our series, hopefully you'll have seen that the world of Isaiah is something like this. Some 200 years ago, God's kingdom split in two.

[1 : 08] So, now we have Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In Isaiah's time, the northern kingdom of Israel was teaming up with another big player, Syria, to invade the southern kingdom of Judah.

But lurking in the shadows was a rising empire, a confusingly called the Assyrian Empire, threatening to wipe them all off the map.

And it's against that backdrop then that Isaiah is speaking to the southern kingdom of Judah, which was overall the more faithful half of God's kingdom.

But by now, Judah, too, was beginning to go the way of Israel, which had nosedived into sin and idolatry. And way back in chapter 1, if you were here to remember that, we saw Isaiah's main job as prophet was to confront God's people with their sin in light of God's law.

So, he's playing the prosecution. And yet, unlike any prosecutor in history, he has also along the way, hasn't he, brought good news from God that the wrong things that they had done were not the end of the story.

[2 : 27] They would not get the last word. We saw that last time in chapter 9, that God would shine a light into his people's darkness to save them from their sin by sending a promised eternal king.

And so, here is Isaiah fighting for the heart and soul of his people in the south, in Judah, that they might turn back to the Lord wholeheartedly and leave their sin and idolatry behind.

But press pause, because in chapters 9 and 10, Isaiah turns to speak to their neighbors. Tonight, he speaks to Israel, and then next week to Assyria.

And that's especially important for us to recognize tonight, because it would be really easy to think he's carrying on preaching to his congregation in Judah. But when he says, verse 8, look, the Lord has sent a message against Jacob.

It will fall on Israel. He's talking, verse 9, about Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria. Now, those are northern places.

[3 : 34] So, we shouldn't be like those people who say England when they mean Britain.

Admittedly, normally English people. We should pick up that when Isaiah says Israel, he's talking about the less faithful northern kingdom, not all God's people bundled into one.

And that's important for us, because, as we'll see, his message is much starker than it has been. But even though he's not speaking to us, he is still speaking for us.

If our trust is in Christ tonight, we're not in this position. But we can still learn from what Isaiah says to those who are. And perhaps that is you tonight.

It's an easy passage with a hard message. There are four bits which all end with the same stark, heavy words. Yet for all this, says Isaiah, his anger is not turned away.

His hand is still upraised. And so, with each step, we go further down into the depths of God's holy anger against his people's sin.

[4 : 46] So, tonight, we're just going to look at those four descending steps before we turn and think about what it means for us. Now, let's see then how, in his anger, the Lord stripped away, firstly, their stuff and prosperity.

The people in the north say, verse 9, with pride and arrogance of heart, the bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with dressed stone.

The fig trees have been felled, but we will replace them with cedars. It all sounds really positive, doesn't it? Build back better. If that sounds familiar, that was the government's slogan when they began to rebuild out of the pandemic.

Everything's fallen apart. But we're going to put it all back, and then some. The bricks have been toppled. Let's replace them with nicely cut stone. The fig trees are gone.

Let's put in cedars this time. Our stuff is ruined, and our prosperity is shot to pieces. But that's okay, because now everything gets an upgrade. Build back better.

[5 : 55] But as great as that sounds, there's a couple of reasons that it's not a cause for celebration here in Isaiah. Firstly, because they say it, verse 9, with pride and arrogance of heart.

Step back. It's an incredibly presumptuous thing to say, isn't it? They're full of faith in their own plans. They believe in social progress and economic growth.

But there's no humble recognition here that what happened to the bricks and fig trees couldn't also happen to the stones and cedars, which is, in fact, made more likely because they are clearly not relying on the Lord for their plans to succeed, or indeed doing it for His glory and not their own.

Pride and arrogance of heart. We've met those same two words before back in chapter 2, where Isaiah warned in verse 12, the eyes of the arrogant will be humbled and human pride be brought low.

But His people to the north still haven't got it. And the other reason we can't cheer at this announcement is, whereas the COVID pandemic was not a direct judgment of God on human sin, the tearing up of walls and orchards in Israel was.

[7 : 16] Their land had been invaded because they hadn't stayed true to the Lord. Verse 11 makes that clear, that not only did the Lord permit Assyria to invade, He actually strengthened Rezin's foes against them and spurred their enemies on.

So Israel wasn't like, Assyria wasn't like a dangerous dog off the lead. It was more like, as Isaiah is going to say in chapter 10, a knife in God's hands.

So that their reaction would almost be comical, wouldn't it, if it wasn't so serious. Don't worry. The Lord God, who we've ignored and offended for hundreds of years, has wrecked our lives in His holy anger, but never mind, we'll build back better.

We haven't just missed the point, have we? They are shooting at completely the wrong target. In His anger, the Lord stripped away their stuff and their prosperity, yet for all this, His anger is not turned away.

His hand is still upraised. So next, He strips away their civic and spiritual leadership. Verse 13, they didn't respond as they should to the Lord's discipline.

[8 : 32] They've not returned to Him who struck them. So now, He says, He'll cut off the head and the tail. The elders and dignitaries of the head, verse 15, the prophets who teach lies of the tail.

And that is very appropriate when you think about it, isn't it? The leaders in Israel should have been the ones interpreting what happened in light of God's law.

The elders statesmen, the prophets, should have been saying, when the nations invade us, God is not happy. Instead, they were saying, build back better.

So the Lord begins with them. And verse 16 stresses that point we picked up on last week in a different context about those who mislead being more culpable than those who are misled, even though they ultimately both come under God's condemnation.

It's a reminder again, isn't it, of the responsibility of Christian leaders to lead by God's word, not by our own opinions or interpretation of things. I think in the run-up to the election, it's a reminder as well, isn't it, of the responsibility of our civic leaders to God, to handle the authority God gives them in a way that honors Him, in a way that pleases them.

[9 : 52] And again, things are not as cut and dried as they were in the old covenant. A national disaster doesn't equal God's judgment in the same way that when churches struggle, it doesn't

necessarily mean that we've offended God in some way, but when the people that we look to for guidance and direction, when they don't point us to Christ by their words or even by their character and convictions, they are misleading people.

And God is angry with that. And verse 17 adds that if people in high office are not protected by their position, well, neither are the poorest and most vulnerable.

Again, they may have been mistreated and misled, but for their participation in a rebellious national life, for their contribution to that collective turning from God, the Lord does not smile on them simply because they are fatherless and widows.

In fact, I think uniquely in the Bible, verse 17 says literally, the Lord has no compassion on the fatherless and widows. That should hit us hard.

It's quite something for the God who stakes his reputation on protecting the poor and vulnerable. But it is a serious reminder, isn't it, that our social standing, be it high or low, isn't what makes us right with God.

[11:29] As I have said, from top to bottom, from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot, the body of his people is sick and rotting. So in his anger, the Lord strips away the civic and spiritual leadership, the head and tail.

Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away. His hand is still upraised. So thirdly, he strips away their sense of right and wrong.

Their wickedness, verse 18, is like a forest fire. It started as a hot barbecue tray of ashes tossed in a bin or a cigarette butt chucked in the grass. But by now, it's grown out of control.

Now it sets the forest thicket to blaze so it rolls upwards in a column of smoke. And we've seen that, haven't we, almost every summer now in southern Europe or America or Australia.

Images of these great fires, whole towns, have to evacuate because no one can stop the burning. Well, that's where Israel's wickedness has got to. But it's got there in part because, look, verse 19, the Lord has stopped sending the rescue vehicles.

[12:43] By the wrath of the Lord Almighty, the land will be scorched. So is it the people's wickedness or is it God's anger that is burning the nation up?

Well, both, says Isaiah. Because in his wrath, the Lord has given his people over to the worst of what they truly want. We call that his reprobation.

You had every opportunity to choose faith and obedience and life, he says, but you chose wickedness instead again and again and again. So now, says God, you have it your way.

You have it your way and see where it gets you. Under God's wrath, the people's wickedness would keep burning and burn hotter so that they wouldn't even spare each other.

And whatever remaining residual sense of right and wrong that remained in the land would be evaporated in the heat of their sin and rebellion as wickedness ran loose in the land.

[13:48] Sadly, I have to point out that as terrifying as that is in itself, the translation at the end of verse 20 takes it too far. That word translated there, offspring, in Hebrews, actually, as you'll see in the footnote, the word arm, which is still quite graphic.

But we can understand that, can't we? In the light of the rest of the verse, they turn to the left and the right eating and devouring, but they're still not satisfied, so they turn on their own bodies, figuratively speaking.

Or even the next verse, the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim are kind of side by side in the land, like a kind of arms by the side of a body. So perhaps it's getting at that idea of eating away at their own national limbs, so to speak.

Isaiah said that sin is destructive like a fire. I think now he's saying sin is intensely self-destructive, like eating your own arm.

But there's no reason whatsoever in the text or context to think that Isaiah is referring to eating children. It's so horrible to read that we can't not pause and say that, even though it shouldn't really be there.

[15:05] And yet that shouldn't lessen our fear at the thought that in his wrath, God would remove all restraint on sin and give people over to the worst of what they want so that their wickedness would grow out of control.

And nor should it be less sobering for us to realize that even when people get their fill of sin, when people get as much of what they want, whatever it is that they want, it still doesn't satisfy their hearts and their longings, but only consumes and destroys them and those around them.

In his anger, he stripped away their sense of right and wrong. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.

And so finally, chapter 10, he stripped away their life and safety. The questions in verse 3 make it clear we're reaching ground zero.

What will you do on the day of reckoning when disaster comes from afar, he asks. To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? What, when, who, where?

[16:25] By now, there is no answer to the interrogation. So the Lord supplies the answer. Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain.

The enemy is at the gate. Assyria is on the horizon and this will be the reality for the people of the northern kingdom. Once they were God's people, very soon, they will be no people at all.

So here are your choices, he says. Would you rather be captured or killed? Would you rather be a slave or a corpse? In the end, he is going to take away their life and safety.

But here's the scariest part. How does verse 4 end? Yet for all this, for all this, his anger is not turned away.

His hand is still upraised. Three times you've heard that there is still worse to come. Losing all their stuff and prosperity wasn't enough.

[17:35] Losing their civic and spiritual leaders hasn't cut it. Losing their sense of right and wrong hasn't satisfied the sentence. Now we read that not even death can turn away the Lord's anger or stay his hand.

They will be captured and they will be killed. And there is still worse to come. These are incredibly difficult words for us to hear.

They rightly sit heavy on us. But that is God's message to Israel through Isaiah. It's game over. No more second chances.

What then is God's message for us? I said at the start that Isaiah isn't speaking to us but he is speaking for us.

He's describing God's dealing with Israel so that Judah will listen and learn. So what were God's relatively more faithful people in Judah supposed to take from this?

[18:38] Well I take it that they were not supposed to cheer and celebrate. Because despite having 150 years to catch up on we have heard haven't we in Isaiah's prophecy and they knew very well that they were guilty of the very same sins as their northern neighbours.

The Lord has not congratulated Judah on being the better behaved of two badly behaved twins. He has told them again and again hasn't he that they must turn back.

So now his point is if you won't turn back then watch what is happening to the north very very carefully. Because unless you repent it is coming for you very very soon.

I take it then this is a warning for those who haven't yet hit ground zero to turn back while there is still time and not go the way of Israel and end up at exactly the same point.

So let's think about that warning before we see how we should respond. Here is the warning for us. His hand is still upraised.

[19:57] His hand is still upraised. And there is a pastor at Desai Christian Fellowship Jeremy McCoy who did his PhD on the wrath of God.

I don't know about you but I don't fancy three or four years immersed in the study of the anger of God. But I wonder if many of us don't give it three or four minutes let alone years.

When was the last time you really stopped and thought or prayed about the fact that God is angry with sin? Perhaps at Apush we think about Christ's return and what that will mean for those who haven't settled their faith in him.

We confess that we thought this morning in the creed that from there from the right hand of God he will come to judge the living and the dead. But we have to understand that God is not indifferent up until then.

As if on that day he's going to open the books and then he will begin to get angry. Psalm 7 says God is a righteous judge a God who feels indignation every day.

[21:10] He doesn't erupt he doesn't fly off the handle his anger is not unpredictable no the Bible says he is constantly and consistently angry with everything that cuts against his holy character.

One of the things that Jeremy brought out in his doctorate is that God's wrath is not an attribute of God in the way that his love or his holiness are part of his eternal being because of course before sin there was nothing to have provoked his anger and so he said God's wrath began when the first

sin was committed when his eternal perfections his holiness his goodness his justice his love were offended by what his creatures chose to do so that we could think of his wrath as like the rough underside of his attributes for him to be those things perfectly he must be perfectly set against what is unloving unjust not good wrong evil if he wasn't angry with those things God would not be who he is so if anger is not essential to God's being and yet towards sin his anger is as constant and unchanging as his love and goodness and truth it is holy anger so friends let's be clear that God is not angry in the way that people in your life may be angry you don't have to tread on eggshells around him or try to work out what it is you've done wrong this time his anger is predictable if we know what God is like we will know what he is angry with in fact he has told us plainly in his word what offends him and that his hand is raised because of those things as Paul writes in Romans 1 the wrath of God is being revealed present tense against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness but then perhaps we ask well where then is God's wrath

I don't see it until we remember how his wrath is revealed what did he do in Israel well he gave them over to their sin and took away all the speed bumps and let them drive off into the darkness and see where it got them friends just because people's lives our lives or our nation or our world isn't falling apart at the seams don't think for a minute that God's hand is not raised in anger when people proudly make plans and promises for a new and improved society instead of humbling themselves before God's sovereignty and glory then the wrath of God is revealed when our country our church is left without leaders who don't reflect his character and his convictions then the wrath of God is revealed when people have the life they have always wanted contrary to his will and his word then the wrath of

God is revealed when people breathe their last and die without hope or confidence in a savior then the wrath of God is revealed you see his hand is still raised in anger over our sinful world and the message for us tonight brothers and sisters is therefore not to play with sin or treat it lightly if our trust is in Christ we have been spared his wrath but if we think that frees us up to keep sinning we haven't grasped grasped what Christ came to do at all when you're tempted to sin or you do sin and you become conscious of your sin remember what it cost him not only physically but spiritually to suffer the eternal punishment reserved for you as he hung on the cross God sent Christ to do that and he did it not to save you from the devil but to save you from himself

God did not send Christ because he didn't mind your sin God sent Christ because he was angry with your sin and so if you are tempted to live in pride and arrogance presuming on God's grace counting your sin lightly thinking you're getting away with it because of Christ be warned tonight that God is not fooled by that the message of Isaiah 9 and 10 is look where that got them back then and change course now while you have time you could live past a hundred and think you've had the best life and your sins haven't caught up with you but let this sink in again that not even death exhausted his wrath they fell among the slain on the day of reckoning and his hand was still upraised that is a fearful thought for us on the other side of death to meet a God whom you have angered and his anger continue against you without ever coming to an end friends tonight if you are comfortable in your sin and cruising off into it instead of slamming on the brakes and turning back to the Lord that is where that road ends in hell and none of us know when we will run out of road and the road is not as long as you would think so take the warning and stop right now and turn and come back to the Lord for his hand is still upraised against all the sin that we refuse to turn back from but how can we come back if his anger is not turned away as I repeat that again and again doesn't he his anger is not turned away how can we come near to him well as we finish let us ask what can turn away his anger desire

[27 : 56] Isaiah doesn't tell us here but something must shield us from God's wrath for us to act on this warning and be protected and not be condemned Isaiah doesn't get there fully until chapter 53 but there he talks prophetically about a suffering servant who would die as a sacrifice to be the shield from God's wrath that we need surely he took up our pain he writes and bore our suffering yet we considered him punished by God and stricken by him and afflicted but he was pierced for our transgressions he was crushed for our iniquities the punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed we all like sheep have gone astray each of us has turned to our own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all one to be punished in the place of many to serve our sentence to take our place to deflect

God's anger away from us and onto himself to be what the New Testament calls a propitiation a sacrifice to satisfy God's wrath against sin and that suffering servant that sin bearing sacrifice is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ we read from Galatians that on the cross he swapped places with us he who never sinned was cursed and punished for breaking God's law so that sinners and law breakers like us might receive God's eternal blessing that he deserved so tonight brothers and sisters we can come back to God freely and know his forgiveness because Christ has turned away his anger from us and taken it on himself so that we never have to face

God's wrath or the punishment for our sins because he has been punished in our place God's anger his wrath is satisfied against you if your faith is in him tonight and that is not only held out to the Christians here but to you whoever you are whatever has brought you here and from whatever point in life you are standing and turning tonight would you put your trust in Jesus to be that sacrifice for your sins even for the first time and be spared God's anger for your sins so that you would know only his forgiveness and blessing and life with him friends let us turn from our sin and let's trust in him let's do so as we pray together let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray