

Isaiah 1

We come each week to remember the sacrifice of our Redeemer, Jesus the Christ. And as we gather together, we do so being (for the most part) Gentiles who have embraced the Hope of Israel. Being wild olive branches, we are grafted into the rootstock of the Abrahamic covenant, standing by faith and not by works, lest any man should boast. We long for the day when the kingdom shall be restored to Israel, and when we might take our inheritance with our Messiah, as the Greater Seed of Abraham. In that day, ungodliness shall be turned away from Jacob, and the remnant of Israel shall look upon him whom they pierced, and shall mourn before him as mourning on account of the only begotten. Then they shall spurn the false prophets in whom is no light, and embrace the Truth as it is in Christ Jesus, and enter into the New Covenant, even as it is written: “this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith Yahweh, ***I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts;*** and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. 30:33).

In the chapter before us, which forms one of our Old Testament readings for the day, we have a preface to the prophecy of Isaiah. This first chapter describes the rebellion of Israel against her Maker, the faithful remnant that is left and the restoration of Jerusalem as the city of righteousness, the faithful city. But as we consider these particulars – particularly the failures of Israel - we do so not to vaunt ourselves against the natural branches which were cut off, but to heed their example, that we might not fall as they did. Many lessons can be learned by considering Israel’s history, as portrayed by the Spirit, and we shall consider some of these by way of exhortation today.

A key passage in Isaiah chapter 1 is verse 2, a verse that summarizes the central message of the book itself:

“hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for Yahweh hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me” (Isa. 1:2).

Israel comprised the children of God, borne from the womb, and brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord - something that is also spoken of later in the prophecy:

“Hearken unto me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, which are borne by me from the belly, ***which are carried from the womb***” (Isa. 46:3)

And again, Ezekiel describes a similar point:

“... as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to supple thee; thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all. None eye pitied thee, to do any of these unto thee, to have compassion upon thee ... And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live: yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live. I have caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field, and thou hast increased and waxen great ...” (Ezek. 16:5-7).

But even though Israel, as a national bride, were taken from birth to be blessed and multiplied, they soon forgot their Lord and Father who was the source of their beauty and prosperity. They rebelled against Him, and despised His ways, and the Law He had given them. The house of Israel were first in the transgression, with the house of Judah following close behind. Like Sodom, they corrupted themselves in their trespasses against Yahweh, as Ezekiel continues to testify of Judah:

“... thine elder sister is Samaria, she and her daughters that dwell at her left hand: and thy younger sister that dwelleth at thy right hand, is ***Sodom and her daughters***. Yet thou hast not walked after their ways, nor done after their abominations: but as it that were a very little thing, thou wast corrupted ***more than they*** in all thy ways” (Ezek. 16:46-47).

SODOM AND GOMORRAH

Becoming even worse than Sodom, the nation quickly became corrupted in their abominations. The prophet continues to describe “the iniquity of thy sister Sodom” as being thus: “pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty, and committed abomination before me: therefore I took them away as I saw good” (Eze. 16:48-49).

Many of these things can be seen in the modern world in which we live. Pride, abundance of idleness, lack of care for the poor and needy, haughtiness, and abominations are all hallmarks of today’s society, certainly in the western world. But there was another aspect to the sin of Sodom as described by Isaiah, when also speaking of Judah: “... they declare their sin as Sodom, ***they hide it not***” (Isa. 3:9). The apostle wrote: “some men’s sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment, some men they follow after” (1 Tim. 5:24), and the sin of Sodom is a case in point. There was no attempt to disguise, or cover their sin: it was open, declared before all men. Again, this is something that characterizes the age in which we live: sin, iniquity, and licentiousness are openly displayed in the media advertising that we are all subject to. Intentionally designed to appeal to the flesh and the lust thereof, the pleasures of sin are openly displayed and promoted before all to induce us to follow the carnal mind – fulfilling the desires of the flesh, which are at enmity with the ways of Yahweh. The only antidote is to fill our minds with the things of the Truth (Phil. 4:8), so that we can identify the evil, and turn away from it.

Isaiah chapter 1 continues to speak of Israel in these terms of Sodom and Gomorrah, alluding back to Abraham, whose pleadings would have spared the cities if but ten righteous men were found there:

“Except Yahweh of hosts had left unto us ***a very small remnant***, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah” (Isa. 1:9).

If there had been found a remnant in Sodom and Gomorrah, they would have been spared judgment - but there was a faithful remnant in Israel that prevented the nation from being utterly destroyed, which we shall come to consider shortly. The nation as a whole had descended into a condition and state of being morally worse than those cities, hence the prophet addressed them thus: “Hear the word of Yahweh, ye rulers ***of Sodom***; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people ***of Gomorrah*** ...” (Isa. 1:10). And notice that here, the prophecy was directed at all classes of society: both “rulers” and “people”. None were without excuse: all heard the warnings of the prophet, and had the individual responsibility to amend their ways.

STRICKEN BY YAHWEH

Isaiah chapter 1 proceeds to describe the nation in terms of a body suffering with wounds:

“why should ye be stricken any more? Ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it, but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment” (Isa. 1:5-6).

Sometimes it is suggested that this depicts a nation that is spiritually diseased. However the context rather indicates that the condition is one of being smitten under divine intervention: “why should ye be ***stricken*** any more?” Wounds and bruises come from being smitten, not only disease - consider the following parallel testimonies:

“O Yahweh, are not thine eyes upon the truth? ***Thou hast stricken them***, but they have not grieved: thou hast consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction ...” (Jer. 5:3).

“therefore I will make thee sick ***in smiting thee***, in making thee desolate because of thy sins” (Mic. 6:13).

“Come and let us return unto Yahweh: for he hath torn, and he will heal us: **he hath smitten**, and he will bind us up” (Hos. 6:1).

It is a divine principle that “whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (Heb. 12:6). This is a paradox for men of the flesh: The natural way is to assume that if things in our life are going “wrong”, then God has left us, and is no longer with us. But the difficulties that life brings are actually tokens of our Father’s love for us! The spiritually minded will perceive the Divine Hand of Providence in their lives, bringing difficulties and trials to develop and strengthen a perfected faith. So it is written that: “if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye illegitimate and not sons” (Heb. 12:8). Israel were being “stricken” and bruised under the hand of Yahweh, yet they refused to learn, and continued in their sin: hence Isaiah’s question: “why should ye be stricken any more?”

A FAITHFUL REMNANT

As we indicated earlier, there was a remnant left within the nation: “Except Yahweh of hosts had left unto us a **very small remnant**, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah” (Isa. 1:9). Though it were “very small”, the remnant remained all the same. This verse is cited in Romans chapter 9 to illustrate the wider principle that there always has been a faithful remnant who hold fast to the principles of mercy and truth when the majority have gone astray. Isaiah again alludes to this principle a few chapters later:

“Though thy people Israel be as the sand of the sea, **yet a remnant** of them shall return” (Isa. 10:22).

This is a fundamental principle that we must try to appreciate: sometimes brethren lament the current situation where the inroads of apostasy appear to be gaining strength in the ecclesias, and the question is asked, Shall there be faith in the earth when Messiah comes (alluding to Luke 18:8)? But there always has, and always will be a remnant who hold fast to the Truth – like the seven thousand in the days of Elijah. The Way of Life will continue to be preserved and illuminated in even the darkest days of evil. The purpose of Yahweh will be accomplished - like it always has been - not by a powerful majority, but through a few despised folk: “the foolish things of the world” and “the weak things of the world” (1 Cor. 1:27). We must therefore individually consider our own position: are we following the majority into perdition, or are we part of the faithful remnant with whom Yahweh has a purpose?

REJECTION OF SACRIFICE

Because the people had turned from their God in word and deed, their sacrifices were no longer accepted:

“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? Saith Yahweh: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and **I delight not** in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats” (Isa. 1:11).

The principle is clearly expressed in Hosea chapter 6:

“I desired mercy, **and not sacrifice**; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hos. 6:6).

The unmerciful who oppressed the poor, and spurned the knowledge of God were rejected along with their sacrifices. Mercy, according to Messiah, was a “weightier matter” of the Law (Mat. 23:23), and is therefore a characteristic of the faithful, who seek to emulate their Heavenly Father. This is the teaching of Christ: “be ye merciful, as your Father also is merciful”, for as he taught: “he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil” (Lu. 6:35, 36).

When he sinned in the matter of Bathsheba, king David found himself in the position of having no animal offering that could atone for his sin. The sacrifice of animals was not desired in his circumstance; what was required instead was a humble acknowledgment of sin:

“... **thou desirest not sacrifice**; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burn offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psa. 51:16-17).

The Law could not cleanse David from his sin: it rather condemned him. All he could do was to throw himself upon the mercy of Yahweh, and pray that Yahweh would cleanse him upon the principles of the New Covenant:

“have **mercy** upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies **blot out** my transgressions. **Wash me** thoroughly from mine iniquity, and **cleanse me** from my sin ... **purge me** with hyssop, and I shall be clean: **wash me**, and I shall be whiter than snow ...” (Psa. 51:1-2, 7).

In similar language, Isaiah chapter 1 describes the promise of Yahweh that when His People acknowledge their iniquities and seek to be cleansed from their sin, he will purge them to become as white as snow, and as white as wool:

“wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil ... come now, and let us reason together, saith Yahweh: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be **as white as snow**; though they be red like crimson, they shall be **as wool**” (Isa. 1:16, 18).

Their hands were “full of blood” (vs 15) of the poor, hence their sins were as red stains which needed cleansing. But their sins would be covered, like a covering of snow presents a surface that is clean and white. Their covering would be “as wool” - which indicates to us that there would be a lamb who would provide a covering for their sin. The Lord Jesus Christ - as the Slain Lamb - is the only one who can wash us from our sins. John saw the great company of the Redeemed as: “they which came out of great tribulation, and **have washed** their robes, and **made them white** in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14). Whereas the sins of Israel were red with the blood of the oppressed, the saints in Christ cleanse their garments in the shed blood of the sacrificial Lamb. Blood is not normally a cleansing agent: it naturally stains, rather than cleans. But paradoxically, association with the blood of Christ is essential for a washing of righteousness. It is written that Christ “loved the ecclesia, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it **through the washing of water by the Word**, That he might present it to himself a glorious ecclesia, not having spot nor wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27). Notice, in Revelation 7 the cleansing agent is the blood of Christ, whereas in Ephesians 5, it is the water of the Word. Combining the two, we see that it is belief in the testimony of the Word concerning the “name of Jesus Christ”, that forms the basis of our cleansing by the blood of Christ.

THE FUTURE

Whilst speaking of the sinful state of Israel, suffering under the smiting of Yahweh, Isaiah chapter 1 also describes the means by which their iniquity shall be purged, becoming a holy nation once more. So verses 26 and 27 provide a wonderful vision of the future of Jerusalem:

“... **I will restore thy judges** as at the first, and thy counselors as at the beginning: afterward thou shalt be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and they that return of her (marg.) with righteousness” (Isa. 1:26-27).

As a consequence of the restoration of Judges in Israel, Jerusalem shall once again become a city of righteousness and faith. The remnant shall return in righteousness, cleansed and purged from their sins. Interestingly, John saw a vision of this time, when there will be set thrones for judgment (cp. Psa. 122:5). In Revelation chapter 4, the judges are symbolized by 24 elders sitting in glory, with clean white garments:

“And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, **clothed in white raiment**; and they had on their heads crowns of gold” (Rev. 4:4).

We come then, to bring our thoughts to the shed blood of our Redeemer, as emblemized in the wine before us. We direct our attention to the body of Messiah, given for the remission of our sins. We do so, not seeking to establish our own righteousness, but rather to wash our robes in his precious blood, that we might be saved from our sins, and be given garments of salvation to wear before the throne of Glory. Let us heed the example of Israel of old: Yahweh does not delight in the faithless slaughter of animals, but in the confession of a humble spirit, and a contrite heart. Let us therefore “offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name” (Heb. 13:15), that we might find grace to help in time of need, and be given a place in that wonderful kingdom to come.

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