

**ISAIAH 1:1-20**  
**AFFLICHTING THE COMFORTABLE**

A few years ago, a couple of cell phone providers began offering a service called “Escape-A-Date” and “Rescue Ring.”

Let’s say you are going out with someone, and you are not so sure you will have a good time. You can arrange for someone from the company to call you. That person will tell you what to say, such as, “Not again! I’ll be right there!”

If you are having a lousy time, you can say that out loud, and you have a perfect excuse to escape your date.

How convenient. You are acting as if you would love to stay with that person, when you really don’t want to be with that person at all.

In our journey through the Old Testament, we have reached the book of Isaiah. This book was written over a wide span of time, around 700 B.C.

The kings of the united kingdom of Israel - Saul, David and Solomon - are gone. The kingdom is now split into two kingdoms - the northern kingdom, known as Israel, and the southern kingdom, known as Judah.

Isaiah wrote during the reigns of four kings of Judah - Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. During this time, the nation of Assyria harassed and threatened both Israel and Judah. Assyria defeated Israel and took the people of Israel into captivity, but God protected Judah.

The book of Isaiah is a book of extremes. Isaiah offers harsh rebukes to Judah and other nations, especially in the first 39 chapters. But he also gives kind words of comfort, especially in chapters 40-66.

The Lord through Isaiah afflicts the comfortable, and he comforts the afflicted. Today, we will listen as he afflicts the comfortable. Next week, we will listen as he comforts the afflicted.

In chapter 1, Isaiah afflicts the comfortable. We might say he afflicts them, because while they act like they want to be with the Lord, they really don’t want to be with him at all.

But WHO are these comfortable people, who need to be afflicted? Who are these words for?

Are they just for ISRAEL? Maybe these words are just for the Jews who lived in that day, and possibly for the Jews who live today.

But the rest of the Bible reveals something different. For example, near the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul tells his readers that the Scriptures were “written to teach us.” His readers are both Jews and non-Jews. These words are not just for Israel.

Are they just for AMERICA? Some might say so, because they believe America is especially special to God. They will use the words of the prophets to afflict or comfort our nation.

But Paul writes to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” God’s plan is for people of all nations, not just one nation in particular.

Are they for UNBELIEVERS? After all, if you do not believe in the God revealed here, you need to be warned about the coming judgment.

Yes, but while some of Isaiah’s words are directed to unbelievers, most of his words are directed to people who profess to believe in the One Isaiah calls “the Holy One of Israel.”

So could it be, that these words are ultimately for THE CHURCH?

I believe so. I believe if you look at the whole of God’s revelation, you will see that God is ultimately speaking not just to Israel, and not just to a particular nation like America, and not just to unbelievers. His words, here and elsewhere, are first and foremost for the church.

For example, Paul writes in Ephesians 3 that the mystery of Jesus Christ has been revealed. But why?

“(God’s) intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known...according to his eternal purpose...”

God’s eternal purpose is accomplished through the church. The word of God, and these words of God, are first and foremost for the church. They are for people of this generation and all generations who gather together to profess their faith in the God of the Bible.

They are for us. They are for you, and they are for me, who profess to believe in the God revealed in the Bible, and who spoke in the words of Isaiah.

Is that good news, or bad news? It feels bad, because these are hard words, and they will afflict professing believers, who are too comfortable.

So after asking, “Who?”, we ask WHY? Why is this happening?

WHY THE TROUBLE we read about here?

In verses 5 to 8, we read about trouble for Judah. We are not sure exactly what event this is. It could be from 701 B.C., when Sennacherib, ruler of Assyria, laid siege to the city of Jerusalem.

Whenever it is, it is trouble. Just pick out some words here:

“Beaten... injured... afflicted... no soundness... desolate... stripped by foreigners...laid waste...a city under

siege...”

That does not sound comfortable! But Judah is so comfortable in this: the people are still going about their religious business. They have their sacrifices, their incense, their festivals, and their feasts.

But this makes no sense! They are doing their religious business! So why are they facing such trouble? And it's not just trouble. WHY THE EMPTINESS?

Isaiah declares in verse 13, all this religious “busyness” is “meaningless.” It is empty. It means nothing to God. He takes no pleasure in it.

Again, this makes no sense! Didn't God command all of this? When we read those early books of the New Testament, don't we see instructions on worship? If they are doing what God commanded, why is it empty to him?

WHY THE HATRED?

We read in verse 14, “Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts, my soul hates.”

He hates the festivals! He despises the feasts! God cannot bear to see them worshipping like this.

Why? Why the trouble, the emptiness, and the hatred?

Finally, we see the answer, starting at the end of verse 15:

“Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!

“Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

What is happening? The profession of their faith in worship, should lead to an expression of their faith in life. But it does not.

It could be sweet to God. But it is sour to God. It could signal a closer relationship with God. But it secures only a worse relationship with God.

They do their religious business, but it does not change their lives, and God hates it.

But it is not just them. It is you. It is me. It is us. It is whoever in our community professes faith, then expresses a life that makes a lie of the profession of faith.

It is the employer who sings of God's justice on Sunday, then cheats his customers with inept work and incorrect accounting, all week long.

It is the woman who weekly claims how she loves the Lord, then daily demonstrates how she hates her neighbors.

It is the young person who announces he loves Jesus when he is with his parents and church friends, but truly loves the approval of his other friends, and when no one sees, lives their life, and loves their loves.

It is the congregation that speaks of caring for all people, but cares only for people who are just like them.

If I am seeing this right, I see this most in two kinds of people:

\* “Prayed the prayer” people. “I prayed the prayer to accept Jesus at some point in the past, so now I am fine, no matter what I do.”

\* “Went to church” people. “I go to church, so I must be fine, no matter what I do.”

Isaiah is writing to “prayed the prayer” people and to “went to church” people. He is writing to all who profess faith in the God of the Bible.

What about you? What about me? What about us? How wide is the gap between the profession of your faith, and its expression in your life?

Who is this about? It is about people who claim faith.

Why is God so repulsed by their worship? Because He sees such a gap between what they say about God, and what they do before God.

So...WHAT? What is the Lord through Isaiah calling us to do here?

It starts with this: SEEK MERCY.

We read in verse 18, “‘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 as crimson, they shall be like wool.’”

As we see all through Isaiah, God is the Judge. We are the defendants.

What will the verdict be? It will be “guilty.” We can do all the religious business we want. But what we are, falls far short of what we say.

Isaiah is telling us to quit pretending. Stop acting as if you have somehow achieved something that will make you good enough for God. You have not.

Our only hope is in the pure mercy of God, delivered by a Person who keeps popping up in Isaiah.

In chapter 7, he is the son of a virgin, and his name is Immanuel.

In chapter 9, he is the child who is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

In chapter 42, he is the servant of the Lord.

In chapter 53, he is the servant, who will suffer.

He is Jesus, who secures the mercy of God, by suffering for the sins of people who do religious business,

then live lives of guilt, evil, and corruption.

Some of you have heard me describe a play called “The Long Silence.” It is set in a field, where many people have come to be judged by God.

Instead, they want to judge God. They say, “This will be his sentence. Let Him be born in poverty, let him be born a minority and let the legitimacy of His birth be questioned for the rest of His life. Let Him be given a work that is so fantastic that even His closest family will think Him a lunatic for attempting it, and let Him be condemned for it.

“Let Him be condemned to die. Alone.”

Then silence falls over the crowd. They realize that God has already done this. Jesus has served the sentence they (and we) deserve.

Have you ever sought the mercy and grace of God?

Or are you too proud? Are you still grasping onto this shred of a thought that somehow your goodness, will make you good enough for God?

It is a tragedy. So many people around us, and maybe among us, think they are good enough, because they have prayed a prayer, or sat in a pew, and done some sort of religious business.

But Isaiah’s afflicting words shake us from this. They call us to throw ourselves fully, purely, only, upon the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

Repent of your religiosity. Turn from it, and turn in faith to Jesus.

What do we do? Seek mercy. And SEEK RIGHTEOUSNESS.

Verse 19: “If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land.” The fruit of seeking mercy, is seeking righteousness. If your heart is filled with the mercy of God, your life will pursue the righteousness of God.

Several weeks ago in our email newsletter, I offered these words from Martin Lloyd-Jones, as he wrote on the beatitude, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

“If this verse is to you one of the most blessed statements of the whole of Scripture, you can be quite certain you are a Christian; if it is not, you had better examine the foundations again.”

Is that a blessed statement to you? If you possess God’s mercy, you will seek God’s righteousness. You do not just do religious “business.” Jesus Christ is changing your life, so that it more and more reflects his righteousness.

For example:

\* Is Jesus changing the way you handle your money? Apart from Jesus, we live as consumers, who care only to get what we can. But with the mercy of Jesus, we seek to live as righteous stewards, who care wisely for what we have been given.

\* Is Jesus changing your willingness to forgive those who hurt you? Apart from Jesus, we hold on to our anger and bitterness, even for a very long time. But with the mercy of Jesus, we seek to offer righteous forgiveness, because we want to reflect the righteousness of the God who has forgiven us.

\* Is Jesus changing your concern for your unbelieving friend? Apart from Jesus, we are content to fit in, and be like people, as long as they will like us. But with the mercy of Jesus, we righteously seek to really listen, and we long to radically love, because we want them to know the mercy we know.

\* Is Jesus changing your attitude toward the gap between the profession of your lips, and its expression in your life? Apart from Jesus, you come and do your religious business, then get about your business, and live however you want. But with the mercy of Jesus, you fight to close the gap.

You pray with passion about your struggles with sin. You seek help with those struggles from other believers. You run from what might lead you to stumble into unrighteousness. You let God’s truth dwell in you richly.

Are you comfortable this morning?

If your hope is in anything but the blood of Jesus Christ to make you clean, I pray these words will afflict you, and that you will hurry to the comfort found in the gospel, where you discover the free mercy of God.

If your response to God’s mercy is anything but a hunger and thirst for righteousness, I pray these words will afflict you, so that you will strive to pursue a new life with the Savior who changes you.

I love to watch the movie about the building of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. The movie shows how they built up the two sides toward each other, until the day when the final piece would be put in the middle.

I forget the exact number, but if the two sides were even something like 1/64th of an inch out of alignment, the Arch would not come together.

Praise God that he shows mercy to people who are far more off, than only 1/64th of an inch! The gap is wide, between the side of what we profess with our lips, and the side of what we express in our lives.

Religious “busyness” does not close the gap. Only the mercy of Jesus, given in his body and blood, closes the gap.

Then the merciful Jesus moves us to grow in righteousness, so that the gap gets smaller and smaller, until

the day of glory, when it is all gone.

In the words of Isaiah: do you know? Do you understand?

You cannot escape the Holy One of Israel, who is the Holy One of All. Seek his mercy. Seek his righteousness.