

A Warning from the Past

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Date: 01 December 2019

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[0 : 00] Our reading today is taken from Isaiah chapter 9, starting at verse 8.

And it's on page 694 in the Church Bibles. Isaiah chapter 9, starting at verse 8. The Lord has sent a message against Jacob.

It will fall on Israel. All the people will know it. Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria, who stay with pride and arrogance of heart.

The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild them with dressed stone. The fig trees have been felled, but we will replace them with cedars. But the Lord has strengthened reason's foes against them and has spurred their enemies on.

Arameans from the east and Philistines from the west have devoured Israel with open mouth. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away.

[1 : 16] His hand is still upraised. But the people have not returned to him who struck them, nor have they sought the Lord Almighty.

So the Lord will cut off from Israel both head and tail, both palm, branch and reed in a single day. The elders and dignitaries are the head.

The prophets who teach lies are the tail. Those who guide this people mislead them, and those who are guided are led astray. Therefore, the Lord will take no pleasure in the young men, nor will he pity the fatherless and the widows.

For everyone is ungodly and wicked. Every mouth speaks folly. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away.

His hand is still upraised. Surely wickedness burns like a fire. It consumes briars and thorns. It sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upwards in a column of smoke.

[2 : 26] By the wrath of the Lord Almighty, the land will be scorched, and the people will be fuel for the fire. They will not spare one another. On the right they will devour, but still be hungry.

On the left they will eat, but not be satisfied. Each will feed on the flesh of their own offspring.

Manasseh will feed on Ephraim, and Ephraim on Manasseh.

Together they will turn against Judah. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away. His hand is still upraised.

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights, and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.

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

[3 : 32] Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives, or fall among the slain. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away.

His hand is still upraised. This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, Ruth, for that reading.

Do keep your Bibles open. If you've immediately slammed them shut, as I often tend to do, then do please find that passage again. It's on page 694 in the Bibles.

It's great, indeed, to be with you again. I give thanks to God that he has helped you to determine to honour his authority by following his revealed will in Scripture, rather than thinking that you know better.

His authority is what's being reaffirmed, not mine, nor of any other person. When I was made a bishop, I was actually hit on the head by the archbishop with a Bible.

[4 : 46] And that was to remind me that I always derive any authority I have only from him through his word. Well, it's also a privilege to continue in your series on Isaiah.

The passage that Ruth has just read us is a tough one. It's very dark, isn't it? And it seems to start pretty dark, and it gets darker as you go on.

So we have got none of the wonderful Counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace that you will have had last week, nor the shoot that will come up from the stump of Jesse, the branch that will bear fruit with the Spirit of the Lord resting on him of chapter 11 that you'll get to a little bit later on.

No, this passage is almost universally negative. It perhaps explains why the stump of Jesse was a stump from which the branches then came.

But it is part of Scripture. It is part of God's Word. So I'm not at liberty to airbrush it out just because it's difficult. But actually all Scripture is difficult, not necessarily to understand what it's saying, but it is difficult because our minds and our hearts are naturally deaf and blind to it.

[6 : 15] And so we need to pray. So let's pray now. O Lord, open our eyes, the eyes of our hearts and ears and minds and hearts, that we may see wonderful things today in your law.

For we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, keeping Bibles open, probably a bit of a recap. I want to sort of get our bearings.

Where are we in this mammoth book, wonderful book of Isaiah? Isaiah is a prophet. I like to sort of picture a prophet a bit like a nutcracker.

It's a sort of time of year when you get your nutcrackers out for the walnuts and things like that that you're going to crack. And what happens when you've got a nutcracker, they come in all shapes and sizes, is you've got to have a kind of base plate or an anvil against which to bring down something either sharp or with considerable pressure to crack open the nut.

Well, Isaiah is a little bit like a nutcracker. He preaches the revealed will of God, which had already been established.

[7 : 29] It's the base plate back from Deuteronomy and from the Moses' law. And he preaches about that, and he points out where his contemporaries were not following that law, what the consequences were for doing that.

He calls them to return for blessings as outlined in Deuteronomy 28, for example, or, if they choose not to, the curses that are also in that same chapter and which we have in chapter 10, verse 1 of our passage.

Well, during that particular part of history of God's people in the Old Testament, there are a number of references to it in our passage, and I will try and help us to understand because they can be a bit confusing.

So we've got God's people, commonly known as Israel, but also, as you'll see in chapter 9, verse 8, known as Jacob, sometimes even known as Ephraim.

But for several hundred years, this group of people living in the land at the bottom right-hand corner of the Mediterranean, this group of people had been split for several hundred years into two kingdoms.

[8 : 53] And I'm going to help you to understand and remember this with the help of a very expensive visual aid that I brought. First of all, you've got the southern kingdom, the kingdom of Judah.

Now, if I am Israel, anything below the waist is to be understood as Judah, all right? It consisted of two tribes.

It had the line of King David and his descendants on the throne. It had Jerusalem, the capital. It had the temple where they would draw near to God.

And, of course, it had Isaiah the prophet speaking to them. And the particular period he's writing to is at the end of a long reign of peace and prosperity.

So that's the south, Judah. In the north, above the waist, and helpfully bigger, there were, as you will see in verse 8, the ten tribes of what is also known as Israel, confusingly.

[10 : 01] So you can either refer to Israel as the whole lot, or Israel as just the northern bit. Mostly here, it is the northern bit above the waist. Consisted of ten tribes, sometimes called Ephraim, as in verse 9.

Its capital was Samaria, where they had an alternative religious center. And, confusingly, Ephraim is not only the whole country of Israel, or perhaps the northern bit, it is also one of the tribes.

One of the ten tribes was Ephraim. You'll see that in verse 21, the end of chapter 9. And they were close relatives of another tribe called Manasseh, that you will see in that same verse.

So you've got northern kingdom Israel, southern kingdom Judah. Those are God's people, but you've also got, throughout Isaiah, and you'll see more of it later, other nations.

These were instruments of God's hand of discipline on His people. But for the purposes of today, just to pick out a few of them. In verse 12, you have Aram, or sometimes known as Syria, with its capital Damascus, verse 12, located to the east of Israel.

[11 : 23] I had to put this down, because, of course, you're looking at me this way. So we're looking out that way. So Aram is that way. Its king is a man called Rezin. Rezin.

You'll find him in our passage he's referred to. It's king of Aram is Rezin, or it's the sort of thing you get at B&Q;, isn't it, to cover your fence with a Rezin.

Okay? So you've got Aram, Syria. You've got on the right down here, you've got Philistia, or the Philistines, ancient enemies of the people of God, living in what is now the Gaza region and Palestine.

And then there's one other that's not named in this passage, but it is referred to, and that is Assyria. You'll learn more about that in the future.

Now that is beyond Syria, beyond Aram, out that way. And it is a superpower, and it was one that was going to call our friend Mr. B&Q; Rezin and others to order.

[12 : 31] Well, Isaiah is a vision concerning Judah, below the waist, and Jerusalem, also below the waist, that Isaiah, son of Amos, saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

That's what you learned back in chapter 1, verse 1. Directed at the southern kingdom, Judah, below the waist, which, but in our passage, He's talking mainly to the northern kingdom, Israel, above the waist.

And He's talking in the final run-up to a final destruction and deportation by the Assyrians. And it is told as a warning to the people of Judah.

So, what does our passage say? Well, I'm going to walk us through it to get the gist, and then ask, what is God wanting to teach Judah, as He warns them, and what is He teaching us in St. Silas in the 21st century?

So, telling the story, first of all, there are four distinct sections that you'll find in this passage, all ending with the same chorus. Yet, for all this, His anger is not turned away.

[13 : 46] His hand is still upraised. Verse 9, verse 17, verse 21, and verse 4 of chapter 10. Something that, indeed, He has spoken about to Judah in chapter 5, verse 25.

And the first section, which is from 8 to 12, I've called pride before the fall. Pride before the fall. The Lord, it says, if you look at verse 8, has spoken against Jacob, against Israel, against Samaria, the northern bit, and everyone is going to see what the Lord does against Israel.

They are marked by pride and arrogance of heart. As illustrated in verse 10, when they say they are going to bring success out of disaster, they're going to have an upgrade from, and to use the disaster with all their houses in ruins, they're going to use it to actually build even bigger places in the future.

I'm reading a biography at the moment of Napoleon Bonaparte, once emperor of most of Europe, except for the United Kingdom. But by 1814, he'd been finally crushed, and he was made sovereign king of the island of Elba, a tiny little island in the Mediterranean.

And he lands in 1814 with about 1,000 people to take on the French king who'd replaced him, Russia, Britain, Austria, and Prussia.

[15 : 25] Well, he met his Waterloo as a result of that attempt. And as he did, so the northern kingdom, above the waist, Israel, met their Waterloo as well.

Now, Rezin, Mr. B and Q, and the northern kingdom were allies at this stage, so Assyria is going to come. So, in verse 12, they will also be nearer, with their nearer neighbors, the Arameans and the Philistines.

More are going to come in to do an act on Israel. Yet, for all this, he says, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.

The second section, from verse 13 to 17, I've called no turning back despite a beating. So, pride before the fall, now, no turning back despite the beating.

The humbling has not had any impact. They have not turned back. Look at verse 13, the people have not returned to him who struck him, nor have they sought the Lord Almighty.

[16:35] So, God will act again. It's universal. It's against the leaders, the elders, the dignitaries and the prophets who are the head and tail who were responsible for misleading the people, verses 14 and 15.

But he's also holding responsible those, in verse 16, who are being led. No one gets away with it. And it is summed up in verse 17.

Therefore, the Lord will take no pleasure in the young men, nor will he pity the fatherless and widows, for everyone, everyone is ungodly and wicked. Every mouth speaks folly.

Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised. The third section, from 18 to 21, goes from bad to worse.

That's what I've called it. Isaiah uses the image of a fire that consumes everything. So will the wrath of the Lord Almighty scorch the land of Israel and its people will be like kindling that actually fuel the fire as they go up in smoke.

[17:49] Desperation and hunger, they won't even spare each other, so Manasseh will eat Ephraim, Ephraim will eat Manasseh, and then together they'll go after Judah, the southern kingdom below the waist.

And of course, in Judah at the same time, what is happening is that they have a king called King Ahaz. And in two kings, it says that King Ahaz was like the kings of Israel.

He even sacrificed his own son in the fire. So like Israel in the north, where Manasseh will feed on Ephraim and Ephraim on Manasseh, and both unite against Judah in the south, we have the first indication of this prophecy hitting closer to home.

Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised. The fourth and final section, 10, verses 1 to 4, the final day of reckoning.

It could be that this is now more directly focused on bringing out the warning from the example of Israel to the people of Judah, who are Isaiah's primary concern.

[18:57] It doesn't really matter. It's actually for all of them. He picks out the leadership of Israel and Judah, and he curses them for exploiting their weaker brethren for whom God has had and has a particular concern, the poor, the oppressed, the widows, the fatherless.

And he asks them directly, verses 3 and 4, What will you do on the day of reckoning when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches?

Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain. What will you do? How will you escape the coming inevitable destruction?

Who's going to help you? What good will your riches do you then? Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away. His hand is still upraised.

Well, we see God speaks of anger against the northern kingdom and the cause of that anger is pride, turning their back on God.

[20:07] How will it be shown? Well, it will be shown by these other nations coming in. Who will be involved? Well, we've seen that. So what are we going to do about it?

Well, that is what happened to Israel, the northern kingdom. Two kings relates to us how their rebellious pride and arrogance, they made this alliance with Mr. B and Q Rezin and were eventually crushed by Assyria and taken into exile all because they would not turn back to God.

Our question is why? Why not? But Isaiah was speaking to the southern kingdom, Judah, a Judah audience on the king Ahaz. In 2 Chronicles chapter 28, he tells us that the Lord humbled Judah because of Ahaz for he had promoted wickedness in Judah.

He turned, he was the one who requested the king of Assyria to come. He turned to the king of Assyria but for help and that king came to him but gave him trouble instead of help.

In his time of trouble, King Ahaz became even more unfaithful to the Lord. In every town in Judah, he burned sacrifices to other gods and aroused the anger of God, the God of his ancestors.

[21:31] You see, Judah, the southern kingdom, was following hot on the heels of Israel, the northern kingdom. And so, Isaiah chapters 9 and 10 serve as a warning to them of what the inevitable result would be unless they turned back.

But ultimately, they weren't going to turn back. If you remember from chapter 6, Isaiah realized that he wasn't actually going to have much of an impact but they were eventually taken into exile by the Babylonians 150 years later.

That reminds us that a holy God must and will deal with justice about his sinful, rebellious people.

And it would only be because the Lord chose to do something that a shoot will come up, chapter 11,

from the stump of Jesse, from his roots, a branch will come.

God himself would come in the form of a suffering servant and he would be pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities.

The punishment that brought peace was on him. By his wounds we are healed. So what should we take from this sobering passage?

[22 : 51] Don't worry about the detail. What should we take from this sobering passage? Because you see, we live at a different point of biblical history. But these verses are here to warn us and I just want to pick as I finish four brief things to underline.

First of all, God has spoken and acted and that is a warning for us too. You see, the Bible is full of examples like this one, like King Ahaz, like Israel and promises of the way that God acts which are consistent with his character.

We have far, far better and more opportunity than the people of Israel or Judah ever had. We have far less excuse than they had.

God speaks to us, warning us because of his desire that we would not perish. So God has spoken and acted. It's a warning to us from the Bible.

Secondly, our sin like that of Israel and then of Judah is the sin primarily of verse 9 of chapter 9, pride and arrogance of heart.

[24 : 07] Turning our back on God, thinking we know better. Maybe one could say that that is what a denomination here in this country has done. It has decided that it knows better than God and his revealed will in his words.

Turning away from God, turning away from the one possible source of rescue. And they thought that the mess that they'd got into was actually an opportunity for an upgrade in their living from bricks to dress stone, from fig trees to cedars.

And the result was that they did not return to him who struck them, nor did they seek the Lord Almighty. How like us, we are awful at acknowledging when we have gone wrong and turning back to the one who would love to see us.

The terrorist incident in London this week was a reminder. It's a reminder of many things and of course many lessons are being learnt, but our greatest problem is not going to be solved by more police officers nor different policies nor a change of government.

My own experience since last year, since I was last with you, has been of a very painful and humbling year. And I've been learning and I hope I continue to learn to put my trust in the one who can help and not in the ones who can't.

[25 : 42] So our sin like that of Israel and of Judah is pride. It's arrogance of heart. Thirdly, God sovereignly acts in judgment both in this life and when the Lord Jesus returns.

We're on the first Sunday of Advent if you hadn't realised. and I'm struck with the parallels between the progress of this passage that we've read today and that of sinful humanity as related to us by the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 1 where he says, the wrath of God, which spoken about lots here, the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

That is the arrogance. That's the pride and arrogant heart that says, we know better. It kindles God's wrath as it did then.

How is that wrath shown? Well, chapter 1 of Romans tells us, therefore God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts.

Verse 24 and in verse 26, because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. He gives us over to do what we want to do.

[27 : 14] That is the punishment. And then verse 28, furthermore, just as they didn't think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind so that they do what ought not to be done.

And so, just as he shows his wrath to the Israelites then by bringing in those foreign powers to dominate them, so his wrath is also displayed around us today as we look around us at a society that is collapsing and grabbing at all kinds of solutions, that is evidence of us being under God's judgment, his wrath.

So, he shows his wrath now, but as with Israel under the Assyrians, Judah under the Babylonians, there will be a final day of reckoning.

And we're reminded in the New Testament that in the past, God overlooked ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, to turn back.

For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.

[28 : 37] The message is that we should return to the one who has struck us and seek the Lord Almighty, something that Israel and Judah failed to do.

Why would we be any better, perhaps? What will we do on the day of reckoning? To whom will we run for help? Where will we leave our riches? Well, those are all valid questions for us to answer whilst we still can, but there will be this day of reckoning, and we focus on that on Advent as we prepare for the Lord Jesus to return.

Well, as it was true for Israel and Judah that the Lord had to take the initiative in grace to rescue his people through the shoot of the stump of Jesse, so we too were dead in our transgressions and sins, unable to help ourselves, but God, because of his great love for us, but God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

It is by grace that we are or may be saved. In this Advent season, no doubt, we'll be singing various familiar songs.

One of them is very familiar, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and it seems to reflect what was going on in the minds of these people at the time Isaiah was writing, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

[30 : 24] He has appeared, He has died, He has paid the penalty for us, but He will come again to put everything right. and so the song goes on, Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel, shall come to thee, O Israel.

Let's pray as we finish. We'll pray using an Advent special prayer.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son, Jesus Christ, came among us in great humility that on the last day when He shall come again in His glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal through Him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.