

A Spiritual Health Check

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is taken from Isaiah chapter 1.

It can be found on page 686 in the Church Bibles. The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Heaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear me, you heavens, listen, earth, for the Lord has spoken. I reared children 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.

Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption. They have forsaken the Lord, they have spurned the Holy One of Israel, and turned their backs on Him.

Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted.

[1 : 24] From the sole of your foot to the top of your head, there is no soundness, only wounds and bruises and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil.

Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire. Your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.

Daughter Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city under siege. Unless the Lord Almighty has left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom. We would have been like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom. Listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah.

The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me, says the Lord? I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals.

[2 : 33] I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?

Stop bringing me meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me. New moons, sabbaths and convocations. I cannot bear your worthless assemblers.

Your new moon feasts and your appointed festivals, I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you.

Even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. 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. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless.

[3 : 43] Plead the case of the widow. 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. This is the word of the Lord. We're going to be looking together at that passage in Isaiah chapter 1.

So it would be a great help to me if you could turn back to it. It's on page 686 in the church Bibles. If you're using the ones, hopefully, you find in the chair in front of you. Page 686.

You should find an outline as well inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful to see where we're going as we look at this portion of God's word together.

[4 : 40] But let's ask for God's help. Let's pray together. Almighty God and loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word in language that we can understand and the opportunity to hear you

Speak to us by your Spirit.

Father, we recognize that we are hungry in our lives, looking to fill ourselves up with all kinds of things. And we ask that by your Spirit, you would feed us this morning.

You'd help us to receive your Scripture, not just as words on a page, but as spiritual food for our souls. Help us to see Jesus, we pray, for we ask in his great name.

Amen. Amen. So this morning, we're going to start a new series looking at this book, Isaiah. Lots of us who've been Christians some length of time will know sections of Isaiah.

Chapter 9 gets a run out at our carol services. Chapter 53 gets a look in on Good Friday. But when you read the New Testament, it's clear that the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, they knew Isaiah extraordinarily well.

[5 : 53] And their whole understanding of who Jesus is and how they write about him is to, lots of the time, is demonstrating how those prophecies from Isaiah have been finally fulfilled in Jesus' coming.

So their understanding, their vision of Jesus is shaped by this prophecy from Isaiah. So if we want to go deeper in the Christian life, if we want the thrill of getting to know God better, then we could do a lot worse than spending time in Isaiah.

That's what we're going to do between now and Christmas time in our morning services here. But the book starts off with this very uncomfortable chapter. Isaiah speaks quite distressing and challenging words from God about God's people at the time.

So what he says might not be true of us or particular individuals here, or it might be. There might be something here that has the ring of truth for us. But we can use this chapter as a spiritual health check.

If you've got a car, you might be used to the winter health check. I know some cars don't need it. I've got a 13-year-old car, a Nissan Note. I park it proudly in Anisland, where we live, next to our neighbor's white Porsche.

[7 : 09] It's a magnificent combination. And for our Nissan Note, we're in the RAC. And around this time of year, they'll say, do you want to have a winter health check for a car like ours, where a guy comes and he checks the things that you need working on your car if you're going to get through the winter.

You know, he checks the wiper blades and the lights and the oil and the battery and so on. So you get your car looked at, not to kind of condemn the car, but so that you identify what needs to be dealt with and you take the right action.

And as we look at what was going on with God's people 2,700 years ago when Isaiah was alive, we can use it this morning as a kind of spiritual health check, a winter health check.

A checkup for each of us to use to reflect honestly on where we are with God. To ask yourself, how is your heart this morning when it comes to God?

What would God say? Well, let's see what he says about the people in Isaiah's time. If you look with me at verse 1, the vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw during the reigns of Isaiah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

[8 : 25] So we're after Moses when God's people were rescued and brought into the Promised Land. We're after great King David who ruled over God's people about 1,000 B.C. Two generations later, the kingdom was divided because one of the kings was an idiot and it got split between a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom that was loyal to the royal line, to King David's line.

Now, we're focused with Isaiah on that smaller southern kingdom around Jerusalem, Judah. And Isaiah was a messenger from God to those people living in that little kingdom over a long period of time, around 50 years, over 50 years, around 700 B.C.

They'd had a period of prosperity under King Isaiah. They were enjoying good times. But now, there's a real threat. Disaster is looming. There's an empire further north from them in the Middle East, Assyria, that's becoming a war machine.

And it's wreaking havoc in the region. So Judah, by the time we get this prophecy that Tracy read for us, Judah is like a body that's gone 10 rounds with Tyson Fury.

If you look at verse 5, he asks them, Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured. Your whole heart afflicted.

[9 : 45] And the specific problem described is of invasion in verse 7. Your country is desolate. Your city's burned with fire. Your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste.

So then in verse 8, he says, The city of Jerusalem is left like a shelter. That's daughter Zion, the city of Jerusalem. Is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city under siege. A hut in a cucumber field. I don't know if you get the picture. When I go running on the canal, you see allotments. And when you see these allotments, sometimes you get nice allotments, don't you? But you get some allotments where you get the fields with the vegetables, and you'll have someone's erected a kind of makeshift shed to store their tools. And it looks a bit ramshackle, a bit unsteady in the midst of all this kind of growth of vegetation.

And that's the picture, the unsteadiness, the insecurity. That's the picture of Jerusalem, now that these marauding armies have come from the north, and they've burned the towns and cities around.

[10:57] They've taken the crops that they wanted. And the question for Judah to be asking when that's happened is, why has God allowed this to happen to us? Because God gave them the land.

What has gone wrong between them and God? We're going to hear God diagnosing the problem, exposing a cover-up, and then prescribing the remedy. So our first point, diagnosing the problem. If we just look back up at verse 4, he says, In other words, God's people have rejected God. They've turned away from Him in their hearts. And Isaiah uses three devastating pictures to show how awful that is. First, it's like children being raised in a loving, generous home by caring parents and then renouncing their parents.

Verse 2. Verse 2. Hear me, you heavens. Listen, earth. This is something so extraordinary, God calls the cosmos to bear witness to what's gone on here.

[12:18] For the Lord has spoken. I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. That's his first picture. Then his second picture is of an ox.

He says, Even an ox wouldn't treat its owner like that. Even a donkey knows where its food comes from. Verse 3. The ox knows its master. The donkey its owner's manger.

But Israel does not know. My people do not understand. That's how unnatural it is when we sin. If we're people who know God, if we trust God, and then we sin, it's like we're children who've rebelled against the perfect parents.

We're like an ox that has just forgotten who owns it. Or like a donkey that's forgotten where it could get its food from. That's the problem. And as we go through the chapter, we see how disturbing that is.

So if you look down at verse 24, God speaks about his enemies. He says, I will vent my wrath on my fours and avenge myself on my enemies. And that's the kind of language we hear God using in the Bible about Pharaoh who threw baby boys into the River Nile.

[13:27] Or about the king of the Ammonites a few centuries earlier who'd said that he wanted to gouge out the eyes of the people of Israel. They're the enemies of God.

But then the shock of verse 25, who are the enemies? He says, I will turn my hand against you. He's talking about his own people.

And it's not because he's lost his temper. God never loses his temper. No, it's because his people have turned against him in their hearts. They've made themselves his enemies.

That's the choice they've made. So it's sobering for us, especially if you've been a Christian for a reasonable stretch of time. Because these were the people who had a long history with God. But Isaiah calls them to think not about their heritage, but about where are you with God today. So this is our spiritual health check. And I wonder if we could just use it as an invitation this morning from God to search your own heart and think about what direction you're going in with God.

[14:35] Could you ask yourself questions like, how is my heart this morning when it comes to God? If you think about what gets you most excited at the moment, what are you excited about?

What are you daydreaming about? What do you love? Is God anywhere near that? Do you feel a sense of joy at having been saved by God? Do you feel a sense of excitement at other people coming to hear about God?

Are you longing for and praying for opportunities to share the news about Jesus with friends?

Maybe you could use your own prayer life as part of your diagnosis.

Are you finding it natural to pray? Are you enjoying prayer? Are you praying regularly? The writer J.C. Ryle says this. He says, it's Victorian times, right?

But he said this. You may be very sure people fall in private long before they fall in public. They are backsliders on their knees long before they backslide openly in the eyes of the world.

[15 : 39] Like Peter, they first disregard the Lord's warning to watch and pray. And then, like Peter, their strength is gone. And in the hour of temptation, they deny their Lord.

So thinking about our own prayer life and where we stand with God there. Could you think about your own Bible reading? Are you in a discipline of Bible reading? Not just to tick a box, but because you see time with Jesus in his word as your daily bread to be fed and to grow.

Could you think about your own ambitions to live God's way? Jesus said, blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Are you longing?

Are you longing? Are you hungering to be more godly? Are you in the battle against sin? Or do you just feel apathy? Think, well, there was a time when I was more bothered.

But I don't think I am so bothered now. Well, in Isaiah's time, if Judah, God's people, went through that kind of self-examination, it was spiritually very sick.

[16 : 42] So what did that look like in Judah? What does it look like when God's people are that sick? You know, had they closed the temple and gone off to pagan shrines?

Well, no. That's the disturbing thing. It's our second point. Exposing a cover-up. If you'd gone by Israel's religious life, things were looking pretty lively.

And yet, because of the way their hearts have turned away from God, God is appalled that they still bother to worship Him. So He calls them Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities that were judged in history for immorality.

And in verse 10, He says this, Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom. Listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah. The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me?

I have more than enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened animals. I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.

[17 : 43] This is God speaking, who saved His people and He gave them the system, the sacrificial system. But He's disgusted by their religious life because He sees that it's a sham.

He says in verse 13, Stop bringing meaningless offerings. It's literally gifts of nothingness. Your incense is detestable to me.

So at the end of verse 13, He tells us of something He cannot bear. What can God not bear? I wonder what we think of that. What is it that God cannot bear?

If you look at verse 13, I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. It's their gatherings in His name. He can't bear it when His people go through the religious motions, but their hearts are far away from Him.

The hypocrisy of it, He can't bear. Using religion as a mask to hide what's really going on. I remember a friend, she was talking to me about her ex-boyfriend who treated her badly.

[18 : 45] And she said this to me. She said, she was talking about some of the things he did. And then she said, And you know the other thing that used to really annoy me about him? He always used to turn up with a poxy bunch of flowers, as though that made everything all right again.

So of course, it's not that giving flowers is a bad thing. I guess giving flowers is a good thing, right? But it's just, if by a guy's life, he's showing that he just really doesn't care about his wife or his girlfriend, then turning up with a bunch of flowers just adds insult to the injury.

And so it is for God when it comes to our formal worship of Him. So what might that look like today? Well, it would be wrong for us to hear that and think that God's saying, If you're not really gushing with adoration for me, don't bother going to church.

That cannot be, that would be a really dangerous thing to think. Because we come together as a church family, not because we've got ourselves together spiritually, and we're firing on all cylinders spiritually.

Rather, we come together because we're broken spiritually, and we need God's help, and we need each other's help to keep going. So if we're aware that we've been drifting, if we're feeling hard-hearted towards God, the worst thing we can do in that situation is to stay away from church.

[20 : 12] Whoever we are, whether we're a mature Christian, a young Christian, a drifting Christian, a seeker, a skeptic, church is the right place to be. So the problem is not with coming along.

The problem is coming along to pretend that you're something you're not. It's a problem of inauthenticity. We could ask ourselves, could we ask, is our coming along to church just to meet expectations?

Do I do it as a chore, and do I think that by doing it, I can keep God happy? Are we enjoying the Sunday singing, but not really bothered about living God's way, and seeing his rule over our lives? The place where God looks for evidence to prove his case about how their hearts are is how they're treating the needy. If you look at verse 17, he says, learn to do right, seek justice, defend the oppressed, and he speaks of the needy at the time, take up the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

It's not that they would be saved by doing those things, just as we're not saved by our good works either. But the way that God's people were failing to look after the needy, the widow, the orphan, the victims of injustice, here was evidence that they don't really care for the things God cares for, because they don't really care for God.

[21 : 37] Jesus sees the same connections, doesn't he? In the upper room with his disciples, John 14, he said, if you love me, keep my commands. That we would prove our faith in God by loving the things that he loves.

That we'd be marked by other person-centered love, like he is. Selfless love. Because we have encountered his selfless love for us. And so we can show that love to those in need.

But when instead we keep our hearts away from him and we use religion as a mask to hide behind, he's not fooled and he can't bear it. That's our second point, exposing the cover-up.

So what will God do about it? That's our third point this morning, prescribing the remedy. God looks at his unrepentant city, his unrepentant people, and he describes the people as a harlot city.

If you look at verse 21, see how the faithful city has become a prostitute. She once was full of justice. Righteousness used to dwell in her.

[22 : 44] But now, murderers. It's incredible language. This is God describing his people. She's like a woman who was a beloved bride for me. And now I've found her out in the street taking money for sex.

And God declares he's going to act. He's going to do something about it. Look at verse 25. He says, I will turn my hand against you. And then there comes this extraordinary twist.

If you look at the result of the judgment that's coming, as we go on in verse 25, it's not destruction. He says, I will turn my hand against you. I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities.

You know, dross was the impurity around a precious stone. Well, it still is today. And you refine, and you clear the dross to get the precious stone. And God is going to make his people precious.

He's going to do something that will transform his people. And then he goes on, and he goes back to that picture of a city again, the prostitute city. Verse 26, I will restore your leaders as in days of old, your rulers as at the beginning.

[24 : 00] Afterwards, you will be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. You see the contrast between the end of verse 26 and the beginning of verse 21.

This is the great promise of the prophet Isaiah from God, that God takes his people who are the harlot city, the prostitute city, and he's going to transform them and recreate them to be the faithful city, the city of righteousness.

That's the promise that runs through the whole book. And the big question that the book's going to answer is how on earth is God going to do that? How is the just, holy God going to redeem this sinful, useless people in a way that doesn't undermine his justice and transforms them so that they'll be the people he always made them to be?

I don't know how familiar you are with the Mr. Men and Little Miss books for children. I've now had several cycles of them, including when I was a child. And in the world of the Little Miss and Mr. Men, the people and the places, they have pretty simple names to keep you tuned in with what's going on.

So the butcher is Mr. Bacon and the baker is Mrs. Crumb and the doctor is Dr. Makeywell. And the same goes for the places. Okay, so Mr. Noisy lives in Wobble Town because he's stomping around and everything's shaking.

[25 : 23] And the story of Little Miss Sunshine starts with her coming back from holiday, if you remember this, and she goes past a sign that says this way to Misery Land. And she thinks, I've never been to Misery Land.

I'll see what it's like. And sure enough, everyone is miserable in Misery Land, especially the king. But by the time Little Miss Sunshine has got to work, everyone in Misery Land is laughing, and she

makes a new picket sign that says Laughter Land.

And when she gets home and she bumps into Mr. Happy, she mentions that she's just been to Misery Land, and he says he'd never heard of such a place, and she reassures him that there isn't a place with that name anymore.

Well, this is the great relief of chapter one of Isaiah, that God's people, the plan all along was that they were to be righteous city and like a magnet for the nations.

That was God's salvation plan, that God's people would live such righteous lives that the world would be drawn in to know him through them. Jesus said, didn't he, you are the light of the world.

[26 : 27] A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Drawing people in to turn back to God. And in Isaiah's time, we could reasonably have crossed out the sign that said righteous city and changed it to harlot city, sin city, hypocrisy city.

That was God's people. But God has a plan, and he's going to transform them. He points them forward to a time when they themselves will look back with shame at how they used to be, because they've been changed.

Verse 27, he says, Zion will be delivered with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness. And so when we ask those questions at the beginning, and hopefully we'll reflect on those ourselves personally about where we are with God, let's be reassured by that picture, that God asks us to be honest with him and with ourselves about where we're going with God, not to condemn us, but because he wants us to take action and turn back to him this morning.

Because if only we'll do that, he will forgive us, and by his spirit he will transform us. So then like a shot of sunlight bursting through the clouds of chapter 1 of Isaiah comes the offer of verse 18.

Let's look at that together. Verse 18, he says, come now, after all that he said about them, come now, let us settle the matter, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

[28 : 06] Though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. So he gives us this decision to make. Will we turn back to him in obedience, verse 19, or will we resist him in verse 20?

And if we will turn back, what a glorious picture in verse 18. He said that he ignores their religion because it's like they've got blood on their hands.

God looks at the way we treated each other and he sees our hands stained with blood. It won't wash off. It's like dye cast into our hands. And then he says, if you would only turn back to me and ask me, I'll wash it all off.

I'll wash you clean. The red blood will be like white snow. The crimson stains will be like clean wool. How can God do what he's promised here and deliver his people with justice?

Washing us clean and still being just and holy? Well, the picture is taken up by the Apostle John in Revelation chapter 7 where he says, the Lamb who was slain is on the throne in heaven and the multitude stands before him from every tribe and people and language and they're dressed in white robes.

[29 : 21] They're clean. And one of the elders says to John as he has this vision of the multitude of people, he says, they're the ones who've come out of the great tribulation.

They've washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. It's thanks to his blood spilt on the cross that the blood on our hands can be washed away and we stand before God spotless in his eyes.

So however much we feel that we're far from God this morning, we've drifted from God, that's the offer to us. All we have to do is turn to God and ask him to repent.

Let me ask, would you be willing to do that afresh this morning? Wherever you feel convicted by your own spiritual health check, you just come clean before God and turn back to him.

let's pray together. Just a moment of quiet for each of us to do business with God. Let's pray together. Come now, let us settle the matter, says the Lord.

[30 : 51] Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Heavenly Father, we praise you for your righteousness, for your holiness, that you see our hearts and minds and you see through religious cover-up.

we praise you for your patience, that you meet us in your word, not to condemn us, but to convict us and draw us back to you.

We praise you for your grace, that you deliver your people with justice at the cross. Father God, help us to turn back to you, we pray.

by your spirit, fix our eyes on your deliverance and love at the cross, that by it you would transform us from the inside out to be the faithful city you redeemed us to be, that the world might see us and turn to you and be saved.
For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.