



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for June 17, 2007
Released on Wednesday, June 13, 2007**

“Isaiah Called for True Worship”

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 58:6–12.

Background Scripture: Isaiah 1:10–11, 14-20; 2 Kings 15:32–35.

Printed Text: Isaiah 1:10–11, 14-20.

Isaiah 1:10–11, 14-20

10 Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah.

11 To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: 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.

...

14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them.

15 And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.

16 Wash ye, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil;

17 Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

18 Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

19 If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land:

20 But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

INTRODUCTION

Isaiah is one of the most remarkable of the prophets. According to Isaiah 6:1, he was called to his ministry by God in the year that King Uzziah died. This is believed to be the year 739 B.C. According to the opening verse of the book, Isaiah ministered in the reigns of four kings of Judah, and his ministry was primarily to the southern nation of Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem. There is evidence in the book that he had access to royalty.

During Isaiah's earlier years, the nation of Assyria was a growing power in the world. In the year 722 B.C. that nation conquered the northern nation of Judah. Isaiah warned his people to trust in their God rather than make alliances with other nations. Later on, he began to warn Judah about the rising threat of Babylon. The people of Judah

were committing the same sins that had caused God to allow Israel's captivity by Assyria. Unless they repented of their ways, they too would suffer.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Isaiah 1:1 allows us to date Isaiah's lengthy prophetic ministry between 740 and 680 B.C. Last week we saw Hosea, an older contemporary of Isaiah, tell the northern kingdom of Israel to repent and recommit their ways to the Lord. Sadly, they refused. Within a few years after Hosea's ministry, the northern kingdom was defeated and dispersed. That happened in 722 B.C.

Isaiah's ministry to the southern kingdom of Judah had only slightly better prospects. The Lord told Isaiah that his preaching to Judah would also fall on deaf ears. But though they would also be taken into exile, the Lord would preserve a small remnant (Isaiah 6:9–13).

Isaiah's book contains glorious passages of this restoration of Judah, one of which is the text for next week. Apparently the original readers latched on to the good news and ignored the warnings and calls for repentance. They mistook the miraculous deliverance from the Assyrian army in 701 B.C. as a sign that God would never allow Judah to fall. By seeing the temple as something of a good-luck charm, they deviated from true worship (compare Jeremiah 7:4).

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to examine the passage in order to see what God wants in true worship.

Principle: to see that true worship is a matter of the heart being right with God.

Application: to understand that when we worship, we are to come to God with a heart that is right with Him.

HOW TO SAY IT

ASSYRIAN. Uh-sear-e-un.
GOMORRAH. Guh-more-uh.
SODOM. Sod-um.

Defendants Subpoenaed (Isaiah 1:10)

1. Why did God refer to Judah as Sodom and Gomorrah (Isaiah 1:10)?

By referring to Sodom and Gomorrah in verses 9 and 10, Isaiah hoped to impress on the people the seriousness of their situation. These cities were destroyed because of extreme wickedness (Genesis 19).

Surely the people of Judah must have resented being called Sodom and Gomorrah! There was no way they were that bad! But Isaiah was not speaking his own opinion. He was calling the people to listen to "the word of the Lord."

The references to both the "rulers" and the "people" show the same to be true of Judah. The Lord threatens punishment because His chosen people are sinful at all levels of society. *The word of the Lord* is parallel to *the law of our God*, both referring to the specific charges in the next verses.

Plaintiff Reads Charges (Isaiah 1:11, 14–15)

2. Why was God sick and tired of Judah's sacrifice offerings (v. 11)?

The Lord begins His testimony with a rhetorical question—a question that actually makes a statement. The problem is not the number of sacrifices (a *multitude* of them) nor the type of sacrifices (*burnt offerings* prescribed in the law). Neither is the quality of the animals at issue.

It must shock the people to learn that even though they offer sacrifices that are plentiful, correct, and good in and of themselves, God is not pleased.

God's assessment was that these people were just as hypocritical and sinful as those in the cities He had destroyed in earlier days had been. Their actions were repulsive to God, particularly their acts of worship. These acts followed the law of Moses, but were carried out ritualistically and without meaning. When the Lord says *I am full*, it is as if He is saying, "Your offerings make me sick—I am fed up!"

3. How can you better prepare yourself to hear the Word of the Lord? What progress have you made in this regard?

It has been said that understanding God's Word is like a bank account: you get out of it what you put into it. A true hearer of the Word of God must invest time and effort into the task. It is not just listening to a message one day a week, but also daily taking time to read and hear God's Word (see Proverbs 8:34).

Ecclesiastes 5:1 says that we need to "be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools." The *sacrifice of fools* in this context is about speaking many words *about* or *to* God while failing to hear words *from* God (compare Matthew 6:7, 8). We hear God's Word best when we hear it for what it actually is and not what we want it to be (2 Timothy 4:3,4).

4. What were the "appointed feasts" (v. 14)?

The blistering indictment continues with strong statements of the Lord's contempt. He hates the *appointed feasts*. God actually referred to their feasts as "your" (v. 14) new moons and appointed feasts. They were no longer His, for the people had corrupted them and were no longer fulfilling the purposes for which they had been established. When He gave the law to Moses, God gave detailed instructions about how the people of Israel were to treat these special days. They were always to honor Him and recognize His goodness and faithfulness to His people. They were never intended to be simply for the people.

Psalm 81:3-4 says, "Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day. For this was a statute for Israel, and a law of the God of Jacob." The "new moon" observations were to be held at the beginning of each month, as prescribed in Numbers 28:11-15. Certain offerings were specified for that time, and in each case they were to be offerings "made by fire unto the Lord" (v. 13).

"Appointed feasts" (Isa. 1:14) refers to the feasts that were to be observed at specific times and in specific places. God was probably thinking of the three annual major feasts every man of Israel was to observe, along with the lesser feasts for which God also gave instructions (Leviticus 23). The times of intended worship and fellowship were no longer being carried out as He had described. The result was that when they spread out their hands to Him in prayer, He hid His eyes from seeing them and refused to listen to what they said (Isa. 1:15).

5. What specific reason did God give for His refusal to see their sacrifices and hear them pray (v. 15)?

The reason for God's refusal was explained in one simple statement: "Your hands are full of blood" (Isa. 1:15). The same hands they extended to God in prayer had been used to commit violent deeds, leaving them defiled and guilty in the sight of God. Perhaps once again we should stop to examine our own hearts. Is it possible there are times when we approach God in worship on Sunday after having done sinful deeds during the previous week? This might not be actual shedding of blood, but it could include impure thoughts, lies, stealing, and so forth.

Judge Offers a Chance (Isaiah 1:16–20)

6. What actions did God require of Judah to stop their bad ways (v. 16)?

It was not enough for the people of Judah to feel sorry about their sins. They would need to change their ways. Three actions are mentioned in verse 16. The first of these is "Wash you, make you clean." This is not a call to exert human effort or to stir up enough willpower to accomplish the change. It is a call to allow God to cleanse the heart. James 4:8 says it this way: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded."

The second action is "Put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes" (Isa. 1:16). True repentance is a change of mind that results in a new direction for life. The people of Judah seemed to think that they could live any way they wanted to as long as they made things right with God through the sacrificial system. That attitude had turned the entire system of sacrifice into a sham with no practical, life-affecting meaning in it. We too must realize that a relationship with God determines how we live on a daily basis.

The third action is "Cease to do evil" (v. 16). When evil has been put out of one's life, this will happen. Then, and only then, can a person be godly and live righteously.

The negative commands are followed by five positive ones (v. 17). This is not saying that a relationship with God is the result of certain activities. It is saying that a right relationship with God will be shown in the way His people live. The challenges are to always do what is right, to seek justice in every situation, to help give relief to those who are in oppressive circumstances, to be willing to do anything needed to help orphans, and to always defend the rights of widows.

A compassionate heart extended toward the needy reveals a tenderness that comes from truly knowing the Lord. This is not regulated by the motions of ritualistic worship.

7. What are some ways your church can help the oppressed, the fatherless, the widow, and the widowers? What should your own part be in this ministry?

There are many possibilities. A starting point is to examine why more hasn't been done so far. Often we fail to help these people because we have become blind to them. We can be guilty of being involved in a "holy huddle" where we fail to look outward to those to whom we are called to minister. To develop a mind-set of *go and share* rather than strictly *come and see* is a start.

8. What chance did the Lord offer Judah (v. 18)?

Properly understanding this well-known verse requires that the reader remember that the Lord is still speaking in His role as judge. When He says to Judah, *Come now, and let us reason together*, He does not mean to invite these people to sit down over coffee and doughnuts to discuss things. This is not a give-and-take negotiation. Rather, the Lord is challenging them in court to consider the truth of what He has been saying, to realize the peril in which they find themselves!

9. How does the Lord's appeal reveal His grace and mercy (v. 18b)?

After confronting His people with the reality of their sin, the Lord now holds out the hope of the good they may experience. As we will see, He then lays out the condition for that good (v. 19) and warns them of the punishment for failure to repent (v. 20).

Here in verse 18b God refers to sin as "scarlet" and "red like crimson," and cleansing as making it white, like both snow and wool. The red colors refer to the guilt associated with hands full of blood as described in verse 15.

Isaiah 1:18b is a lovely portrayal of the magnitude of God's grace. Sin is described as a terrible departure from God and His ways. In the same sentence, there is a gracious appeal for people to come to Him and let Him cleanse them completely. That offer remains today. God will forgive your sin when it is confessed and forsaken. Should you be thinking that you have done something so terrible that God will never forgive it, realize that such reasoning is coming from your enemy, Satan. God wants to forgive you.

10. What risk did God take in giving people free will (vs. 19,20)?

We ought to be grateful that God has allowed us free will, which means we have the privilege of making choices. He could have made us robots, and we would have mechanically performed everything just the way He wanted. The joy of loving Him would have been replaced with an automatic response requiring no heartfelt emotions. The risk God took in allowing us this privilege is the fact that we can choose contrary to His will. Of course, there are consequences attached to such wrong choices.

This truth can be seen clearly in these two verses. Isaiah 1:19 refers to being willing to obey God, while verse 20 refers to being rebellious and refusing to obey Him. The results that follow are diametrically different.

11. What were Judah's choices and the resulting circumstances?

If Judah conformed to the ways of God, they would be blessed and allowed to continue in the land, enjoying the results of their labor. But if they refused to pay attention, thus continuing in their sinful ways, they would be taken into captivity by a foreign power wielding swords against them.

The Hebrew word translated "willing" in verse 19 means "to acquiesce, or to submit one's will to." The idea is one of laying aside what one naturally wants to do in order to do what God asks instead. Human nature is such that we are prone to selfish, sinful propensities. Knowing God's holy standards, however, places us in the position of making a decision. This is where our free will can become a problem. Will we choose our own desires or God's? The people of Judah were continually making the choice to go their own way.

God promised abundant crops and continued existence on their land if they willingly obeyed Him. To refuse to do so would reveal a rebellious attitude and would result in a forfeiting of God's blessing. To be devoured with the sword was figurative language indicating capture by someone from outside the land. Eventually, in 586 B.C., Judah was taken captive by Babylon as a result of her continued refusal to obey God.

The final statement puts the full authority of God behind Isaiah's words. This should have caused fear in the hearts of the people, but by this time they had become so hardened that they did not listen to Isaiah. We should pray often for God to help us have tender and willing hearts toward His Word so that we can enjoy His bountiful blessings upon us.

CONCLUSION

True worship is a matter of the heart. Our outward rituals mean nothing to God if our hearts are not right before Him.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, we thank You for counting us as purer than snow. We love You because You first loved us. May our love for You drive us to examine honestly our deepest thoughts and motives, that in the end our scarlet lives may become white as snow. At all times we rely on Your grace to save us in spite of our shortcomings. In the name of Jesus our Savior, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"To obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22).

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

In our lesson next week, we see how God invites everyone to feast with Him and know His salvation. Study Isaiah 55:1-11.

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