

Light in the midst of darkness

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[0 : 00] and also to learn God's Word together, let me open with prayer first. Let's pray. Our dear Heavenly Father, it is because of your great love, we know we are not consumed by your wrath.

And Lord, as we come before you, a holy and righteous God, we want to give you thanks for your sovereign grace and for your faithfulness to us. In spite of this current pandemic, despite of facing an uncertain and unknown future, Lord, we thank you for keeping us your people by your grace.

And Lord, we continue to ask even this morning as you speak to us through your living Word that you will give us humble hearts and attentive ears so that as we learn these truths, it will not just inform our minds, but it will transform our hearts.

Enable me, Lord, to speak your truth with clarity and with power through your Spirit's guidance. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Last year, most of us thought and really hoped that the pandemic would have gotten better in 2021.

However, we know that things have gotten worse this year. And I remember seeing a post in social media that shows on a particular day in May last year, there was about 7,000 plus cases in total after two months.

[1 : 36] But now, on that very same date this year, there are 7,000 plus cases per day. And so what we see, we see new variants, we see more deaths, a worsening economy.

And people are just getting tired of this seemingly never-ending pandemic. And what is even more frustrating during such times is the prevalence of political instability and injustice.

And besides that, we see immoral and sinful living becoming not only more acceptable in a society, but are even celebrated through the Pride Month, through the wearing of rainbow symbols all around social media, even in the Euro 2020, in support of the LGBTQ plus group.

In recent times, there was a Hollywood actress who announced that she is now a man. And politicians and celebrities praised her for being true to herself.

However, when a famous gay fashion designer in Hollywood became a Christian, he was rejected and he was marginalised.

[3 : 03] And so we see evil being called good and good being called evil. And sadly, even within the church, we have been shocked with news of certain popular Christian leaders who have been living in sin and deceit.

And as we read and see these things, we may feel sad or even angry. And we should, because sin is terrible.

Sin is ugly. But the question is, what about the sin in us? We might not have fallen into a public scandal.

But how have our lives been during this pandemic? Are our secret sins thriving in the midst of this isolation, of these dark times?

And if God were to take an audit on our lives, if our secret lives were to be made public, how will we fare? Will God be pleased?

[4 : 12] Well, that is what God wants us to consider here today in Isaiah chapter 1. The prophet Isaiah lived in a time of growing darkness.

He lived through the reigns of four kings in Judah. King Uzziah, King Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. When King Uzziah passed away, the international scene was full of threat.

With the Assyrians growing in power and even conquering nations. In 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel.

And Judah was also faced with the same threat. But beyond all the external threat that they faced, there are bigger problems back in Judah, where prophet Isaiah was ministering at.

They saw the downfall of the northern kingdom, Israel. They knew that Israel fell because they fell into idolatry.

[5 : 23] The Assyrian invasion was ultimately God's judgment upon them. And yet, the rulers and the people of Judah continued in their corrupt practices, despite all the religious activities that they were involved in.

Although they were godly kings like King Hezekiah, who trusted the Lord, who implemented reforms, it did not last. The spiritual decline of Judah is real and worsening.

So it is with this dark and gloomy backdrop that God speaks through the prophet Isaiah. So the vision Isaiah receives from God starts off with the historical Jerusalem and Judah of Isaiah's day.

Hear, O heavens, listen, O earth, the Lord has spoken. And so we get a picture of a courtroom here with God being the judge and Judah as the accused.

And the heavens and the earth were summoned to show how serious is the charge that God has against Judah.

[6 : 47] So what are the charges that God is bringing against His people? Firstly, we see in verse 2 that God describes the people of Jerusalem and Judah as His own children.

He said, I reared children and brought them up. And this brings us to recall the Exodus from Egypt and how God made a covenant with them.

as I'll be reading from Exodus 6, verse 6 to 8. I am the Lord. I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.

I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people and I will be your God.

and I will bring you to the land I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and Jacob. And God told them in Deuteronomy, chapter 7 and chapter 9, that out of the many great nations around them, He chose them to be His treasured possession, to be His holy nation, to give them that privilege to know Him and to make Him known.

[8 : 15] However, God made it very clear to them. It was not because they were many in number. It was not because they were a righteous people that God chose them.

It was purely the grace and the love of God. However, we see in verses 2 to 4 that they were described as ungrateful and rebellious children.

We know in our Asian culture, we are thought that we must be filial to our parents. We must respect them and obey them because they have brought us into this world and raised us up.

But think about it. How much more do we owe God who gave us our parents and more than that, gave us life and redeemed us from everlasting destruction?

So in rebelling against God who created, chose, rescued and loved them, Judah was described to be worse than animals because even animals know and listen to their master.

[9 : 30] They did evil in God's sight. They turned their back against God and so they were guilty as judged. But what about us today?

Perhaps we too are guilty of taking God and His grace for granted. We know the facts about God and the gospel that we hear and the word of God that we hear every Sunday but yet we have grown down and bored with Him.

As our love for the world grows, our love for God decreases. We start to lose the sense of awe and the heart of gratitude towards Him.

We feel it safe to ignore Him from Monday to Saturday just as long as I faithfully attend Sunday service.

Well, in verses 5 to 9 Isaiah shows us what Judah's condition is like as a result of ignoring God.

[10 : 38] So in verse 5 and 6 we see that they are pictured as a person who is filled with open wounds and injuries.

They have burned cities, desolated countryside. they were living in isolation. They were under siege and this probably refers to the invasion of Judah by the Assyrians in 701 BC.

And so this was a painful and present reality. They were already experiencing the consequences of their rebellion. And you can see also from verse 5 we see God's grief over his children's rebellion.

And actually he longs for them to repent rather than go on suffering. He is their judge and king but he is also their heavenly father who deeply loves them.

Maybe some of you may have had a rebellious child or you may have known someone who has one. To see a child suffering unnecessarily because of their persistent rebellion really grieves the parent's heart.

[12 : 05] And so we know that it grieves God's heart and God does not take delight in the death of the wicked. Instead he longs for them to repent to return to him.

But sadly they did not repent and they persisted in their rebellion against God. And so in verse 10 once again Isaiah calls Judah hear the word of God listen to it carefully listen to it seriously because prior to verse 10 Isaiah mentioned that it was truly by God's grace that Judah did not end up to become like Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Israelites knew the story of Sodom and Gomorrah very well. They knew how burning sulfur rained down from the heavens and completely destroyed these two cities.

And this was God's judgment upon them for their gross wickedness. But for the Israelites Sodom and Gomorrah deserved this judgment.

Not us. Not us the Israelites. They are terrible. We are sinful but we are not as bad as them. We are the physical descendants of Abraham.

[13 : 33] We have a covenant with God. We have the law of God. We have the temple of God. we are obviously more superior morally compared to them.

So instead of being filled with thankfulness they became self-righteous. They become blinded to their own sin.

And we can fall into this lie too don't we? We compare ourselves maybe to our nasty bosses our unhelpful colleagues our inconsiderate neighbours our corrupt leaders and we feel good about ourselves because we think we are not as sinful as them relatively speaking or outwardly speaking and therefore we have that danger of taking our sin not seriously.

However God refers to the rulers of Judah as you rulers of Sodom and to the people of Judah you people of Gomorrah and that will be a great shock to them.

In other words God is describing that the way they were living their lives is equally offensive to God as Sodom and Gomorrah meaning to say Judah don't think that you are any better than them you equally deserve God's judgment for your sinful and idolatrous ways.

[15 : 16] And so we see despite of how religious they are God laid down his charges against them in verses 11 to 15. So as I am going to read out these verses do take note of the strong words that God uses against empty religion.

The multitudes of your sacrifices what are they to me says the Lord I have more than enough of burnt offerings of rams and of the fat of fattened animals I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats stop bringing meaningless offerings your incense is detestable to me new moons sabbaths and convocations I cannot bear your evil assemblies your new moon festivals and appointed feasts my soul hates they have become a burden to me I am wary of bearing them when you spread out your hands in prayer I will hide my eyes from you even if you offer many prayers I will not listen your hands are full of blood as you notice even while they were living in rebellion and being faced with

God's impending judgment Judah was still very busy with their religious activities they were offering sacrifices they were bringing offerings to God to God however the problem is that these spiritual activities have become a cover up or an excuse for them to continue in their sinful and worldly living because their lives have been so tainted with sin but they thought that just by fulfilling their obligation to God their spiritual obligation to God that would just solve the problem and that's why God says that he hates such empty and superficial religion it is meaningless to him it is detestable to him and that's why

God told the Israelites in verses 16 and 17 wash and make yourself clean take your evil deeds out of my sight stop doing wrong learn to do what is right seek justice encourage the oppressed defend the cause of the fatherless and plead the case of the widow in other words God is telling them stop using your spiritual your religious activities as a cover or to use it to ease your guilty conscience treat your sins seriously don't rationalise it don't tolerate it don't put on a mask or put on a show and live a double life no but instead turn away from your wicked ways and turn back to God and that is what we see God saying to King Saul in 1st Samuel chapter 15 verse 22 and 23 he says but

Samuel replied does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord to obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams for rebellion is like the sin of divination and arrogance like the evil of idolatry King Saul also thought that by offering sacrifices to God that will make his disobedience to God's clear command not so serious and that's why what we see is that God desires the true sacrifice and why is this true sacrifice from us it is not just our Sunday mornings it is not just the offerings that we give to him it is that our whole life is lived as a living sacrifice before him in

[19 : 57] Romans chapter 12 verse 1 the apostle Paul write therefore I urge you brothers in view of God's mercy in response to God's gospel to offer your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God this is your spiritual act of worship God wants more than just something you give him or something you do for him he wants you he wants the whole person and that's why the Bible makes it very clear either Jesus is Lord of all our lives of every aspect of our lives or he is not Lord at all there is no middle ground and therefore we too can also fall into this trap of self deception thinking that we can compartmentalize our lives as Christians we tell

God you know I have fulfilled my spiritual obligation to you I spend one to two hours on Sunday mornings for you every morning and night I pray five minutes to you I tithe my salary I even give financial support for mission works and I serve in some ministry in church and so God now the remaining time and money that I have is for me right is for me to use as I like and so what happens is we are unwilling to surrender every aspect of our lives to the Lordship of Christ it may be our relationships it may be the amount of time that we spend on the things that we watch in YouTube or Netflix it may be our ambition our career our hobbies or even our secret sins like pornography or addictions because we cannot come to

God negotiating with him God I give you 80% of my life I'm going to keep 20% to myself we cannot just give God two hours on Sunday morning and then after that go on living worldly and materialistic lives but does this mean that spiritual activities are pointless firstly we need to understand that they are not wrong in themselves for it is God who commanded his people to practice them they were meant to draw the people closer to God and to set the Israelites apart from the surrounding pagan nations and their practices they demonstrate the holiness of God and the seriousness of sin and that's why Jesus said to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 23 verse 23 woe to you teachers of the law and

Pharisees you hypocrites you give a tenth of your spices mint dill and cumin but you have neglected the more important matters of the law justice mercy and faithfulness you should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former if you notice Jesus is not saying that they are hypocrites because they practice tithing or that tithing is not important the issue was not between choosing mercy faithfulness and justice or choosing fighting it is that these external expressions that these actions mean nothing to God or worse still it is detestable to God when they don't flow out from a heart and a life that is holy and pleasing to God when our public life and our private life does not match when our spiritual activities are just to fulfill our obligations to ease our guilty conscience

I once heard someone who professed to be a Christian said I don't need to go to church to be close to Jesus or to be holy I see many people go to church and their lives are still bad as long as I believe in Jesus in my heart and I pray to God that is enough already as a Christian granted the act of just going to church on Sundays does not automatically make us closer or right with God just like how the act of offering sacrifices to God does not make the Israelites pleasing to God so reading the Bible praying sharing the gospel serving in the ministry doing good works all this does not make us a true Christian or make us right with God however the Bible says that a true Christian will desire and will commit themselves to these acts of devotion and service because they flow out from a right and a close relationship with

[25 : 32] God so brothers and sisters as we reflect on these truths do we find ourselves so quick to criticise the sin we see around us but we ignore the sin that we see in us and especially for us who have grown up in church or who have been Christians for many years the danger of just going through the motions of spiritual disciplines of spiritual activities is real without realising it they can just become a habit or just an obligation to fulfill without experiencing true life transformation from encountering the true and living God in his word and that's why we constantly need to ask God each and every day God reveal our true spiritual condition to us as we read his word as we pray and so we have seen the persistent rebellion of

Judah and also the empty religion they have practiced from verses 2 to 17 and what we realize is that their biggest problem is not the threat of invasion by the Assyrians or the political instability that they were facing and that is true for us as well our biggest problem is not ultimately the threat of COVID-19 or a bad economic recession or even incompetent leaders although there are real problems our biggest problem just as it is the biggest problem of Judah is that we have sinned against a holy God and we come under his wrath and his judgment what is our sin like verse 18 tells us it is like scarlet it is red as crimson scarlet or crimson is a color of a deep red permanent dye and when the stain that it causes on the clothes is impossible it's virtually impossible to remove we must remember that there was no such thing as chlorox in

Isaiah's day so their lives were so stained with sin and so are our lives so what is expected what is inevitable for such sin for such a stain judgment but in verse 18 God tells us something amazing something unexpected we see grace appears the divine judge reasons with the accused and makes an offer that is generous beyond measure here is the offer we can be made white as snow if we repent and stop rebelling we can experience God's redemptive grace we can enjoy the blessings that God has given us that is the offer that God is giving to the people in

Isaiah's day however he warned them if they persist in their rebellion and reject God's offer of redemption they will be destroyed in verses 19 and 20 but sadly we can see from verses 21 to 23 we still see no change of heart in the people we see God's offer of redemption rejected and then God announcing his judgment upon them however we see in verses 25 God something surprising happens God did not pronounce total annihilation or complete destruction on his people although they deserve it just like Sodom and Gomorrah instead the judgment is pictured here as a purification process to get rid of the impurities in order to produce refined metal so this once faithful city that has already prostituted themselves to sin now will be made faithful again after going through

God's fire of judgment wicked leaders will be replaced with righteous ones and the pure matter that is refined by the fire of judgment represents the remnants of God who have repented and accepted God's offer of redemption so we see that even in judgment God still remembers mercy and if you look at verses 29 to 31 it continues to describe the corrupt state of this once faithful city they are polluted with idol worship involving the sacred oaks and gardens but ironically those guilty of following these practices themselves will become like dying oak and a dried up garden getting prepared to be burned in other words judgment is sure and it is coming so now we have a dilemma here as we stand before a righteous and holy judge

[31 : 37] God's justice demands that our sin must be punished it must be dealt with so how then can God redeem his sinful people to redeem something or someone means that a price a ransom has to be paid in exchange and the answer is actually found in verse 27 God says that he will redeem his people with justice the penitent the repentant with righteousness redemption does not come in the absence of judgment it comes through judgment in other words God does not redeem his people by bypassing his justice or by closing one eye towards their sins just because of their religious activities that will be unjust and unrighteous if

God were to do that and so later on in Isaiah chapter 53 verse 5 we see how God further unfolds the rich concept of redemption he says but he was pierced for our transgressions he was crushed for our iniquities the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed so our redemption is only possible because the promised Messiah would take our sin and bear it on himself as he died on the cross and suffer God's judgment in our place we should be the one dying we should be the one judged but the promised Messiah graciously bear it all on himself and so in Romans chapter 3 verse 25 and 26 Paul further explains how

God redeems his people with justice and righteousness God presented him Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood he did this to demonstrate his justice because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus so the blood that Jesus shed on the cross as the perfect sacrifice is what satisfies God's justice it satisfies God's wrath and that's why our sin though it is red as quinsome although it is like scarlet now it can be made white as snow if we repent and trust in

Jesus in chapter 2 we see how Isaiah moves from the present Judah and Jerusalem and move to the last days from the near future to the far future he describes in verse 2 that the day will come when God's holy mountain will stand supreme and God will draw all nations to himself as he rules over all the earth so we see what Israel failed to do Jesus did perfectly he will be the rightful judge and king people will know him and submit to his word as we see in verse 3 and we know that ever since the fall conflict and wars permeate throughout history but in the last days all this will come to an end only only when the one true

God rules over all the nations will there be true universal peace because only he can rule with perfect justice righteousness and grace so even as Isaiah looked to the near future even as the remnants of God looked to the near future things don't look very promising it is bleak and dark however God gave them redemptive hope a light that is shining through their dark and evil times God calls them to walk in his light in chapter 2 verse 5 yet if you notice they still do not know when the Messiah would come they do not know when is the last days they never got to see the fulfillment of this redemption in their lifetime but we know that

[36 : 55] God kept his promise the Messiah did come and he completed his redemptive work on the cross and we have experienced that present reality of redemption in our lives and yet each and every day as we live our lives we are constantly reminded of the ugliness of sin that we see in us and that we see around us and that's why let us not downplay sin's seriousness just because the society treats it as okay or normal or acceptable because if we treat our sins lightly we will not treasure the gospel brothers and sisters the gospel is not just a collection of facts in our mind never assume the gospel never graduate from it just because we know the facts in the gospel are you growing in gratitude in indebtedness to God as you grow in understanding of the gospel does the gospel impact the way you relate with your family members the way you spend your leisure time the way you plan for your future the way you make decisions each and every day don't let the familiarity that we have with the gospel cause us to lose sight or to lose our wonder of the cross or to take the gospel for granted preach it to ourselves and preach it to others each and every day for without the cross there will be no redemption but only judgment awaiting us and we know that those who persistently rebel against

God and reject Christ will one day face God's judgment when Jesus returns there is so many people out there right now who are lost and drowning in the sea of sin we have seen the light and we are called to walk in this light we are called to be lighthouses of God in this dark world are our lights burning brightly are we actively praying for opportunities to share this glorious hope of redemption to others and can they see the reality of it lived out in our lives and that's why let us continue to look for practical ways even in this pandemic to reach out to those around us who are needy who are lost in sin we are safe from sin so that we can serve the living God and even as we long for our hope of future redemption from the presence of sin where sin and death will be destroyed we know that hardship and persecution is a present reality there will be times that we grieve over loss conflicts and disagreements in relationships is inescapable the battle against sin is lifelong but take heart we have an unshakable hope because we trust in a faithful redeemer and we serve a risen king

I'll end with this famous hymn that says Jesus paid it all all to him I owe sin has left a crimson stain he washed it white as snow let us close in prayer our dear every father if you were to count our sin against us who of us can stand but with you there is forgiveness that's why you are greatly feared lord we know that we are unworthy of the cross but because of the cross we have been made worthy and that's why we want to give you thanks and praise for your great love and mercy upon us and we pray that each and every day of our lives we will not take this grace for granted we will not just go on in our Christian life just business as usual status quo just because we are used to it just because we are comfortable with it but that we will continue to let your grace motivate teach us compel us to say no to sin to worldliness and to live upright godly lives in this present age while we wait for the glorious appearing of our lord

Jesus Christ and we ask that you empower us with your spirit guide us with your word so that we as your church can continue to be the light in a dark world where people truly need to hear the glorious hope of redemption in Christ Jesus we pray this in Jesus name amen