

Text: Isaiah 1:2-31

Title: "Alas, the sinning nation!"

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: There are many today who want to deny that America was ever a Christian nation. The idea is that our country's founders were Deists who believed little of the truth of the Bible. The facts of history expose these ideas as a propagandistic rewriting of our nation's heritage.

For example, the state constitution of Massachusetts (1780) required the following: "Any person chosen governor, lieutenant governor, counselor, senator, or representative, and accepting the trust, shall – before he proceed to execute the duties of his place or office – make and subscribe the following declaration, viz: 'I, _____, do declare, that I believe the Christian religion and have a firm persuasion of its truth.'"

The Pennsylvania constitution (1776), which Benjamin Franklin helped to draft, went further: "And each member [of the legislature] before he takes his seat, shall make and subscribe the following declaration, viz: 'I do believe in one God, the Creator and Governor of the universe, the Rewarder of the good, and the Punisher of the wicked; and I acknowledge the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be given by Divine inspiration.'"

Isaiah's God dealt with many in Isaiah's day who desired the same rewriting of Israel's history. They desired to forget their nation's godly heritage. They had become a nation that had abandoned their faith, and this first chapter of Isaiah summarizes this problem and what God had decided to do about it in the Book of Isaiah (v. 4).

I have titled the message this morning, "Alas, the sinning of a sinful nation" from verse 4. One Hebraist explains that the word translated *Ah*, which I am translating as *Alas*, "includes the thought of pain, pity, wonder and deep abhorrence at the unbelievable ingratitude of the nation. . . . Words are not sufficient enough to express Isaiah's feelings: he must break forth into an agonizing cry" (Young, 43-44). The same scholar explains that the word *sinful* is "a form of a verb that indicates constant and habitual sinning."

So, our passage, summarizing the Book of Isaiah as a whole, is the heart's cry of the LORD (Yahweh), the Holy One of Israel, in response to the sinning of a sinful nation. His heart cries out for our nation as well this morning, and it does also for our families and our lives as individuals.

When we read the words, "Alas, the sinning of a sinful nation," we have not understood the prophet's message for us until we can read there, "Alas, the sinning of us sinful men and women." From the chapter, I would like us to see three things about this sinning of nations, which are comprised of sinful men and women.

I. This sinning is a betrayal of a good God (vv. 2-4, 21-23).

Illustration: We find ourselves dealing with difficult weather once again on this Lord's Day in New Hampshire's winter. When we do so, it is comforting to me to remember the answer to the question the disciples asked after Jesus calmed the storm on the sea: "What manner of man is this that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" (Matt. 8:27). The answer is that Jesus is the man who is also the God who commands the waves of the earth and the winds of heaven.

Application: In our passage God begins His word to the sinning nation by issuing a command to heaven and to earth.

They are to hear; they are to give ear; and the reason they must hear and give ear is that the Lord has spoken (v. 2).

God's creation always obeys Him. But because of the one creature who can refuse to hear and give ear to his Creator, sinners like you and me, "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (Rom. 8:22). Heaven and earth bear witness to man's sin through the Adamic curse. And so the Lord wants all heaven and earth to hear what He has to say about this sin.

And what He has to say is that this sinning is a betrayal of the sinner against Him, our good God. Any ox understands he has an owner to serve; every donkey knows from where his food and shelter come. Not so with the ungrateful sinner. He can live in living spaces like ours and return from grocery stores like the ones we shop at and never give a second thought to the truth that every good gift comes from above, from the Father of lights, with whom is no variable-ness, neither shadow of turning" (Jam. 1:17).

This betrayal is especially egregious in the lives of children "nourished and brought up" in a special way by the Lord. The word *nourished* in Hebrew means *make great*. We hear in this lament an echo of the Abrahamic Covenant, the prized possession of a chosen people, "I will *make* of thee [Abraham] a *great* nation."

God had done that for His people, but they rebelled. Rather than a great nation, they had become a sinning nation, laden with iniquity, the offspring of evil, and destructive children. They forsook the Lord and His covenant; they made the Holy One of Israel angry; and they fell into apostasy.

The falling backward is detailed in verse 21-23. Those verses read like a David Barton book about how our nation used to

be great but has lost that greatness. Harlotry is the pagan sensuality we see around us. Murderers remind us of the gang violence of our streets. Silver becoming dross and wine being diluted with water makes me think of our porous borders. Corrupt politicians, the allies of thieves, are reelected in our country year after year. And just like defenseless widows and orphans are mistreated in this world of injustice, most leaders in our nation promise the continued killing of the unborn.

Israel was not always what she had become, nor were we. She had been a righteous nation that knew the blessing of God. So had we. This sinning is the betrayal of a good God and the forfeiture of His past blessings on us.

II. The sinning is beyond self-help (vv. 5-15).

Illustration: Sodom and Gomorrah were the cities of the plain in Abraham's day, which were destroyed by God for their sin. Abraham had prayed for the cities prior to their destruction, calling on God to spare them if He found a righteous remnant in them. He did not, and after the removal of Lot and his family, judgment fell in the form of an airburst.

Application: Here in Isaiah's time, the Lord tells the daughter of Zion that she is no better than Sodom and Gomorrah, except that He had left her a very small remnant (v. 9). It is significant that Judah and Jerusalem had not come up with this blessing on their own. It is the Lord who saves the remnant. Israel had no saving power of her own (vv. 5-6).

The sinning of this sinful nation is beyond self-help. Her destroyed political power could not save her (vv. 7-8). Her corrupt religious hypocrisy could not save her (vv. 11-15). Israel's religion and prayers had become their religion and prayers, not the religion and prayers of the Lord ("your sac-

rifices" v. 11; "your hand" v. 12; "your new moons" v. 14; "your appointed feasts" v. 14; "your hands" v. 15).

It is not the sacrifices and prayers that God hated; it was the hypocrisy behind the sacrifices and prayers. In verse 13, God is no longer able to endure the combination of iniquity and solemn meetings. These should not go together.

If this sinning is beyond self-help, from where are we to find the help needed? Verse 10 tells us that sinners need to obey the command that the rest of heaven and earth obeys in verse 2 - "Hear the word of the Lord" and "Give ear to the law of our God." Heaven and earth never disobey when they are told to hear and give ear. Will we obey?

Young: "Judah is not commanded to experience, but to hear. The imperative implies more than the mere physical act of hearing; it implies a hearing that results in obedience to the thing heard. . . . A mere hearing of the word is of no profit. 'But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only' (Jas. 1:22). One does not truly hear God's word unless he obeys that word. If one does not obey, it is as though he had not even heard" (60). Again, will we hear and obey God's Word to be saved from our sin which is beyond self-help?

III. The sinning is not beyond God's help (vv. 16-20, 24-31).

Illustration: David is one of the heroes of the book of Isaiah. He is mentioned 10 times by this major prophet. We read in Isaiah about the house of David, the throne of David, the tent of David, the city of David, and finally the God of David whose love for David recognizes him as *My servant David*.

David is celebrated in Isaiah in no small part because there was a day in which he took up the Lord's offer for help to sinners that Isaiah lays out in these verses (vv. 16-18). You

may remember David's sin. He impregnated the wife of one of his mighty men and then arranged to have the man killed in order to cover up his sin. The day one of us church members does this is the day church discipline proceedings begin at New Boston Baptist Church.

And yet, this same David is one of the heroes of the book of Isaiah because he trusted what the Lord's help could do for a sinner like him. At the end of his rope, David prayed the prayer of Psalm 51, including verse 7 with its reference to snow: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."

Application: Here in New Hampshire, we know how white snow is. I have said before that I believe that there are no such things as white people and black people, that we are all different shades of brown. All you have to do is hold someone's arm up to a drift of new snow to see that the arm is not white. The snow is white; the arm is a shade of brown.

The Lord promises that sinners can have scarlet sins turned white, and David found out that the promise was better than true, that his darkened heart was made whiter than snow. We too can wash and cleanse our sins, and we do so by simply asking the Lord to do it in faith like David asked.

When we ask to be washed, the evil of our doings is put away from before the Lord's eyes (v. 16). All sin is before the Lord's eyes. David prayed, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (Ps. 51:4).

When we ask to be washed, we cease the evil of unbelief (v. 16). David prayed, "Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom" (Ps. 51:6).

And after we ask to be washed, we learn to do well, living just lives, defending the defenseless against oppression (v. 17). David prayed, "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee" (Ps. 51:12-13).

These are commands, not mere invitations – wash, cleanse, put away, cease, learn, seek, relieve, judge, plead, come. The choice to obey is ours, but the consequences of our choice are not. Our choice is going to affect us in two significant ways. How we chose will determine (1) the quality of life we have in this earthly temporal existence (vv. 19-20). And perhaps more consequentially, the choice we make will affect (2) our eternal destiny (vv. 24-31).

In terms of this destiny, on the one hand are the eternal blessings of a redeemed Zion with a bright and righteous future; on the other hand is the destruction of transgressors and sinners in a burning fire that will never be extinguished. Again, we must live with our choice.

Conclusion: Of course, we would not have this wonderful opportunity to choose had it not been for the Son of David, Jesus Christ, and His sacrifice for our sins. As Isaiah describes the sinning of sinners as beyond self-help, he asks a related question in verse 5: "Why should ye be stricken anymore?" In other words, you cannot be saved by being stricken, for striking you only leads to more rebellion from you.

But that word *stricken* is used in Isaiah 53:4, where we read of the One who was stricken for us. The verse says of the Messiah, Jesus Christ: "Surely, He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastise-

ment of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (vv. 4-7). Jesus was stricken for us because striking us did us no good.

The Lord Jesus repeated Isaiah's "Come now, saith the Lord," in the first person: "Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me. For I am meek and lowly of heart. And ye shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Alas, sinning nation, sinning man, woman, and child, come now to Jesus Christ for your forgiveness and salvation.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching