

Summary for The Smelting Furnace

In the midst of hot anger, God remembers his covenant and has mercy upon his people. As a metallurgist fires away the impure metal from his precious gold, God will smelt the sin from his people in the furnace of suffering. If you don't want to be convicted of your own sin (and grateful for God's mercy in the process), don't listen to this message.

ISA 1:21 How the faithful city has become a harlot,
She who was full of justice!
Righteousness once lodged in her,
But now murderers. [22] Your [silver has become dross](#),
Your drink diluted with water. [23] Your rulers are rebels,
And companions of thieves;
Everyone loves a bribe,
And chases after rewards.
They do not defend the orphan,
Nor does the widow's plea come before them.

ISA 1:24 Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts,
The Mighty One of Israel declares,
"Ah, I will be relieved of My adversaries,
And avenge Myself on My foes. [25] "I will also turn My hand against you,
And will [smelt away your dross](#) as with lye,
And will [remove all your alloy](#). [26] "Then I will [restore](#) your judges as at the first,
And your counselors as at the beginning;
After that you will be called the city of righteousness,
A faithful city."

ISA 1:27 Zion will be redeemed with justice,
And her repentant ones with righteousness. [28] But transgressors and sinners will be crushed together,
And those who forsake the LORD shall come to an end. [29] Surely, you will be ashamed of the [oaks](#) which you have desired,
And you will be embarrassed at the [gardens](#) which you have chosen. [30] For you will be like an oak whose leaf fades away,
Or as a garden that has no water. [31] And the [strong man](#) will become [tinder](#), His work also a [spark](#). Thus they shall both burn together, And there will be none to quench them.

The Smelting Furnace

Isaiah 1:21-31

The more I read the bible, the more I begin to understand how two opposing forces are continually battling to bring about their own purposes. Don't misunderstand me. Biblical history is not Star Wars where the good force is battling the evil force –and neither side is superior to the other. We are not dealing with Buddhism's yin/yang here. Rather, it is the story of *persons* waging war against each other, very unequal persons.

Biblical history is different from other perspectives on history, for this is a history that is going somewhere. According to God, life isn't a matter of karma and fate and chance all rolled up into one. It is a matter of purpose and predetermination and power that resides in the mind and strength of God. The Mighty Creator of history is bound and determined that he is going to bring about his purposes over and against the wicked and powerless men and devils that seek to alter its predetermined course.

When I look at [Isaiah 1:21-31](#), it is remarkable to me how very much Solomon was right: there really is [nothing new under the sun](#). In this battle of beings we find very

different strategies. **God's strategy always looks forward, to the future.** History for God is never divorced from eschatology – future things. **God's purpose is to redeem the past in the future.** But for man it is different. **We are always looking backwards, to what might have been. For us, history is about regret not redemption.** Whereas God's purpose is to redeem the past in the future, our purpose seems to be to go about corrupting the future by returning to our past. Ironically though, our return to our past is often times done because we have forgotten our past, but we are just too unoriginal as a species to come up with anything new!

EDEN

What I find so interesting is that both parties have the same goal. Both of us want to bring about Eden. **God wants to redeem Eden,** to once again open the way to the tree of life, to allow the waters of life to flow freely to his people. But God knows that this may only be accomplished as the sin that bars our way to the garden is dealt a swift blow. God will permanently bar wicked men from entering this sanctuary, while he allows his redeemed and chosen ones to partake in the fruit of his Spirit.

Men also want Eden. **But what we want is a return to the situation that we had after Eve ate the fruit but before God came in the cool of the day to speak with our first parents.** We want the knowledge of good and evil with no consequences. We want to eat of the forbidden fruit. And so we make our gardens and grow our trees ([Isaiah 1:29](#)) hoping that somehow we might call ourselves back to this first time, hoping that somehow God will not be waiting for us, will not care, or will not be able to find us hiding from him.

I say all of this to help you to understand the words of God that lay open before us this morning. Here is an outline of the text. God has created a faithful people, a people like precious metal, a righteous people, a just people. This people has forsaken God and now he is going to get revenge. His revenge will mean complete destruction for those who will not return to him. But his revenge is also tempered with mercy. And this God who seeks revenge is going to remember his promises and his plan to redeem and he is going to restore the unfaithful woman by extracting out all of her corruption, purifying her of her filth and worthlessness. Then she will become a faithful city once again.

The passage looks forward, because that's the way redemption must be. I realize that you are at least subconsciously aware that the Bible looks forward. You know that eschatology is an important thing, though perhaps you are not aware of just how pervasive this theme really is. The movement of the passage goes from a faithless city to a faithful and restored city. It starts and ends with Zion. Christian, this is your hope. And it is very important that you are seeing this in the Bible more and more. God would not keep stuttering these ideas to you if he didn't think they were important for you to grasp.

Zion is Jerusalem and Jerusalem is itself patterned after the Garden of Eden. From its walls to its lofty position, to its Holy Space (the temple), this city is like Eden. Eden is an important place to think about, because man's ideas of returning to Eden come up even in our passage. Isaiah mentions wicked people making their gardens and desiring their trees, yet in God's site these things are worthless. **We will look more at what this means in a moment,** but I want you to understand here that this pagan earth worship - worshiping trees in garden groves - should recall to your mind

the very first setting of the Bible. You see? There is nothing new under the sun. We make our gardens and worship our trees all in an unoriginal attempt to run from God. It's like we are Adam and Eve. It's like we are playing hide and seek from God, hoping that he will not find us even though we keep returning to our same hiding place again and again.

Isaiah 1:1-20 Recap

I want to remind you again how it was that in the previous section, God set forth his mercy based upon the covenant made with Israel. If she would only repent, God will still show kindness, though this nation was an abomination in his site. Now, we begin to see just how bad things really are. "In theory, Israel could know forgiveness and healing (vv. 19-20); but, as a matter of fact, Israel's condition is so far gone that destruction cannot be averted."¹

"How the faithful city has become a harlot" (vs 21). Jerusalem has been given over to prostitution. Of course, this theme is very common in the prophets. But do you understand why it is that God calls the city a harlot? The broad context is because Israel had turned to other gods. To break the first commandment is to sleep with another god, it is to commit prostitution – for God is the husband of his church and idols are another lover. Ezekiel says it like this, "you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them."

Most of you probably realize this *broad* connection. But perhaps the details have escaped you. You see, it is very easy to go to that default mode that says, "Oh, those silly Israelites were so primitive. We are much more evolved than they were. Because we don't make carved statues and then worship them. So we don't have to worry about becoming like them." I pray this is not you. Friends, notice the context.

Here is what the idolatry looked like! Israel was full of justice. That is one of the ways she worshiped God and did not break the first commandment. Righteousness once dwelled in her. When God's wife is just and righteous (*mishpat* and *sedeq*), then she proves her worship and therefore fidelity towards her Husband. Well, now I wonder if that is a new way for you to be thinking about idolatry? Have you ever considered that upholding justice in the land is obeying the first commandment? To be righteous in action is to have no other gods before God? **That seems to bring it a bit closer to home than just some ancient people bowing down in front of sticks and stones, doesn't it?** It certainly shows how our society has gone searching after harlots, for it is a matter of fact that every single day in our land the law is denigrated and redefined more than it was before in order to ensure that we can be as unjust and unrighteous of a nation as we possibly can be.

And of course, this has infiltrated the church too. It seems to me that in the church, we break **justice** more in what we do not do than in what we actually do. It is our *lack* of care, our *lack* of help, our *lack* of service to towards others that makes us unjust more than that we are actually breaking the law or trying to get criminals off without punishment.

But with righteousness, it is the opposite as it is with justice. When people who call themselves Christian endorse and participate in the murder of babies, the ordination of homosexuals, the employment of gossips in secretary positions, the non-discipline

¹ John Oswalt, *Isaiah* (NICOT), p. 103.

of slanderous or promiscuous laity, the constant filthy talk and laziness at work, and the worship of sports and entertainment, then we have become prostitutes. We have broken the first commandment. We have become Jerusalem. God have mercy on his church in our day...

Now, I want to us to think about Isaiah as literature for a moment. The prophet writes much differently than does the Apostle. I love the way the prophets write out the situation so poetically and pictorially. The city of God is said to have been **silver**. It says, "your silver has become dross, your drink diluted with water."

What does this mean? It is a jab at the ruling elite class in the society. Isaiah uses a metaphor that these were societies of silver and fine liquor. But they become corrupt. How so? **Her rulers became rebels**. Those who led the church and the society rebelled against God. They have gone their own way. **They become companions with thieves**. That is, they loved to make company and friendships with those who stole from others. Why? So they in their positions of power they might accumulate wealth. That's what stealing is supposed to gain you: wealth.

These leaders love bribes. They chase after rewards (monetary). These are more indictments that money has taken the place of God in this society. Now, I was thinking about bribery and being a companion with thieves. Beloved, I get very concerned when I ponder what I know God's people think when they read these things. I said it a minute ago, I will say it again. We think that we are not these people, don't we? **WE don't make friends with thieves. WE don't love bribes. WE won't chase after rewards. That is just dumb old Israel. But we are different!**

Hear this when I tell you that this very same attitude can be said about Israel. She didn't THINK she was doing these things either. Isn't that obvious by the fact that the prophets have to tell them these things? These are word pictures that God gives these people so that they might understand that their obsession with money and power is *like* loving bribes. God's people have been greatly effected by the temptation for money in our day, have we not? Now, of course it is one thing to have a standard of living. It costs more to live here than it does in other places. We are not to become leftists and condemn money *per se*. That is just silliness. Money is quite necessary in any society.

But surely, we all have more – MUCH MORE – than we need. And we are not being told this anymore in Evangelicalism. TV preachers are telling us how we can all be (and should all be) very, very rich. Indeed, if we are not rich then somehow we are sinful and disobeying God and not living by faith. But let's get back on topic. How many of us here are in debt? How many of us rob God by not tithing a tenth of what we earn to the church as per the commands of the Bible? How many of us make it a regular habit of sharing our wealth with other Christians who really are in need, both in our own church and in other countries? The lifestyles of Christians in this society are, quite honestly, no different than are the lifestyles of pagans. Should this be friends? We have all the same toys and material things, we give just as little away, and we are just as guilty as Israel was. I brought this up last week, and I will bring it up again now.

The whole obsession that today's church has with "biggie size" greatly distresses me. You will find, without exception, that to biggie size your church is to spend literally millions if not tens of millions of dollars on things like jumbo trons and lighting systems and gymnasiums and sound systems and high tech power point projectors

and extravagant buildings and coffee shops and the list goes on and on – *just so we might be noticed by society*. **Compare the budget of the church sanctuary with the budget most churches have for helping people in their own congregation who are in need.** These people usually only get *special offerings*, because there is nothing budgeted for these things in the first place. Now you see what I'm talking about.

Now, please understand that I am not saying that to be big is to be bad. Some churches can't help their size and God has blessed them in this way. Who among us wouldn't like to have a bigger congregation? What I am talking about is the *mentality* of the mega-church that says we *have to be big*, we have to be extravagant, we have to be powerful, we have to have all the modern things in order to be effective for God. This is nothing more than the worship of power and money and size. It is pure and simple adultery with the world. I don't believe that most people think they actually fall into this category. And that is part of the problem. God likens this to loving bribes and chasing after rewards. We are guilty as charged.

As James says in summarizing the entire Old Testament, "*religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*" There is a connection between helping the poor and not being polluted by the world. This is why Isaiah says that the leaders of Israel do not hear the plea of the widow and they do not defend the orphan. What do you think God thinks about this? He brings it up all the time.

It is important to point out here that true religion is outward focused much more than it is inward focused. *True religion is taken into culture and works its way out there.* True religion sees justice occur in society and in church. But most of our emphasis these days is on the "personal relationship," the spiritual disciplines, the fasting, all of the inward things. Maybe we think we can accomplish these things better if we have huge auditoriums and fancy lights, I don't know. What I do know is that not a lot of talk is on the widow and the orphan. This needs to change in American Christianity.

If we really want to know how God feels about this, then we should read [Isaiah 1:24](#). "*The Lord God of Hosts, the Mighty One of Israel declares, 'ah, I will be relieved of My adversaries, and avenge Myself on My foes.'*" The Mighty One is the Lord of armies. The "hosts" there means army; a mighty army of angels who will do his bidding the moment he asks. The names of God here are given to show that God is going to war against his people. And because He is Mighty, he will win. God always wins. God has been hurt, his people are now his enemies, his adversaries, and he is going to get revenge. He will avenge himself against his foes, his people, those who seek to battle him.

"*I will turn My hand against you.*" What horrible words. Words for Israel. Words for today?

But, here is what I am so thankful for. As harsh as *I* might be against the sins of the contemporary church, and I believe rightfully so (or I would not say them), and as much as it is true that God says he will strike at his people here, God is still a covenantal God; and he remembers his unconditional promises for the sake of his Son Jesus Christ and for the sake of those he has covenanted with.

You cannot understand just how profound this is until you have been convicted of your own sin, can you? This is why it remains ever so important for the law to be preached in all of its terror and to be brought to bear upon us in our day. How can *you* be thankful for God's mercy if *you* are nothing but a basically good person who occasionally does things that make you feel bad about yourself?

And so, I now ask you to stare in disbelief, to look in wonder at the words that seemingly come out of nowhere in [verse 25](#). Remember the previous words: Your silver has become dross. Now God tells us, "I will smelt away your dross as with lye. I will remove all your alloy." This is a picture of *purification*. It is the identical picture that Paul gives to the church at Corinth in that much abused passage, "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (1 Cor 3:12-15).

This is a picture of pure metal, like silver or gold, being purified of its worthless content in the heat of a furnace. Perhaps you need some definitions here. **Do you know what dross is?** It is the scum that forms on the surface of molten metal as a result of oxidation. **Do you know what lye is?** It is a strong alkaline solution of potassium salts that you get by leaching wood ashes. It is what they make soap out of. **And do you know what an alloy is?** It is the mixture of two or more metals where the atoms of one replace or occupy intermediate places between the atoms of the other. Brass is an alloy of zinc and copper. So the idea here is that as a metallurgist heats up the fire, sticks the ore into the fire and all of the worthless, unusable rusty metal burns away, keeping only the pure ore, so God is going to do with is people. The alloy of sin and righteousness that exists in this already/not yet stage of history is going to be fired up so that the sin, like dross, is burned away and all that remains is the pure gold of righteousness.

It is a wonderful picture, if not a bit scary. **It is wonderful, because** where there should not be any hope; there is hope. Where there was sin, there is now justice. Because God brings justice out of nothing. **But this is scary, because** the only way the dross can leave is if it is *burned* with fire. This is a picture, then, of suffering. In history, the Babylonian captivity became the fire that burned away the dross of Israel's sin against God. It purified the nation. And when they finally returned to the land, as Ezra and Nehemiah show, these were a repentant people who no longer wanted to sin against God. Their repentance was still imperfect and looks forward to a future time of purification on the Day of the Lord.

But for Israel, the way this works itself out is that the [judges](#) that were so corrupt now act as they did "[at the first](#)" and the [counselors](#) as they did [at the beginning](#). We can't be certain of what time is in view here. Probably Isaiah is picturing an ideal, the ideal of the Davidic/Solomonic kingdoms where justice reigned. Perhaps it is going way back to the beginning of the very nation itself. Maybe it even goes back to before the fall, when there was no sin. Any way you look at it, the result is the same. The faithful city that became a prostitute is now to be called the city of righteousness, a faithful city once again.

Now, when the dross is burned off of the metal, it does not cease to exist entirely. Rather, it is separated from the pure ore so that the silver or gold is made more pure

than before while the dross is taken away and put into another place, such as the trashcan.

This analogy is important on more than one level. Spiritually speaking, we are right to say that our sin is the dross that is being thrown into the trashcan. But nationally speaking, there is another level to this. We see this played out in [verses 27-31](#). There are now two types of people within Israel, even as there are two types of people at the end of history. We see Zion is now redeemed with justice and her repentant ones with righteousness.

In Hebrew poetry, the most regular thing you see is that two lines repeat the same idea in different ways. You end up with two terms that are being used as synonymns. [Here, "Zion" is the same as "the repentant ones."](#) This is one group of people. But the other is called ["transgressors and sinners and those who forsake the Lord"](#). This is the dross of true Israel. These are the alloy.

What happens to the dross of the wicked? They are crushed together, and they shall come to an end. It is verse 29 where this Edenic theme is picked up. In these days, Israel was participating in the worship of the pagan fertility gods of the nations around them. Specifically you will remember the names of [Baal](#) and [Ashtoreth](#). The scene developed in front of us now is one of people dancing around garden groves of oak trees in an attempt to worship and call down these gods to help them out. This is the meaning of the garden and the oak. I often think of modern day Wiccans and druids going up into the hills of Boulder or in the forests around Sedona or on the slopes of Mt. Shasta – drumming and dancing themselves into a frenzy in an attempt to worship mother earth. [Nothing is new under the sun.](#)

It is the garden and the tree that recall to my mind the Garden of Eden. And it is as if mankind is running straight back to Eden, hoping to participate in the same wicked sins of the knowledge of good and evil that held our first parents so captive so long ago. But to God, these trees are not evergreens. [They are oaks, whose leaves fade away.](#) And there is [no water in this garden as there was in the well-watered Garden of God](#). Our attempts to worship God's creation always lead to our own destruction. As fall signals the end of life for the season, so to does the falling of the leaves of the oak symbolize the end of the wicked. This is the futility of earth worship, the earth always goes into a dead, winter season.

Isaiah finishes by using a very interesting metaphor. The wicked man is here called, rather sarcastically, the strong man. This wicked man is himself called tinder. Tinder is the very dry, easily burned fuel that often starts fires. His works of idolatry and injustice are called a spark. In other words, the works of the wicked man are the spark that leads to flame that leads to an inferno that will bring a horrible end to the so called strong man. Both the strong man and his work will burn together. And there will be none to quench them. The very last verse of Isaiah says, ["And \[the righteous\] will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."](#)

This is a description of hell, eternal torment. It is the eternal unrelenting place of the strong man, the wicked, the rebel, the sinner, the transgressor. The image is horrific. A blazing inferno will rage with not a drop of water to cool it or put it out. And this will last not a day or a week or a year or a thousand years. It will go on and on and on forever and ever. There will be an infinite burning up of the wicked.

The more evil he does in this life, the hotter the flames will be that will consume him on that Day.

Conclusion

I want you to consider now how it is that redemption always looks forward and how man always looks backward. You need to take your eyes off of the sins that our father's committed and that you are perhaps even now committing yourself, things that you have heard now. God's plan is to redeem his people and this earth. He will remove the dross from the metal. He will bring water to the garden. Only those who faithfully stay planted to the end and who constantly undergo the testing of fire in suffering for Christ will see positive result of this truth. Search your own heart today to make sure that you are not a rebel and a murderer. Let us thank God together for his amazing mercy that he has on his people in this life as he tests us in his smelting furnace.

