

Summary of Huts in a Cucumber Patch:

Fiendish nation. Rebellious children. *Jubilant, charismatic worship?* It marked Isaiah's day. It marks our own. God detests the hypocrisy of raising open hands in worship while raising closed fists against the defenseless in society. If God is not merciful to his church in our day, how can we not become like Sodom? We are "huts in a cucumber patch" (Isaiah 1:8).

Huts in a Cucumber Patch

Isaiah 1:1-20

He was a man whose face was set firm, like flint set against the daggers of those who would seek to destroy him and his message. He was a man of with a singular vision, unequaled in scope and majesty in the history of the world; and he would not be silenced until the word of the Lord had gone forth to accomplish its purpose. Isaiah was a prophet of noble birth who held court with four mighty kings of Israel. These kings reigned from 792 BC – 686 BC, a total of 106 years.

Let me summarize the reign of these kings for you. **Uzziah**, **Jotham** and **Hezekiah** were kings who **did what was right** in the eyes of the Lord, and Isaiah's ministry is probably responsible to a large degree for their faithfulness. **Ahaz**, the father of Hezekiah, was a wicked king who followed in the ways of Israel's kings. One of the primary tasks of the prophet was to be God's spokesman to the king, to make sure that the king was acting according to the book of the covenant (the law), and keeping his reign set upon a proper path. As king Saul found out, in many ways, it is the prophet and not the king who has the real authority in the nation. But this is a tension that continually exists throughout the OT. For though Isaiah's words held great sway with Hezekiah (for example), it was his son the very wicked king **Manasseh** that Jewish tradition says **sawed the martyr Isaiah in half**. This is how the prophet met his fateful end.

But this is not a sermon about Isaiah because it is not a book about Isaiah. It is about God, **the Holy One of Israel**, the Lord of Hosts. Isaiah's call (**ch. 6**) takes place in the year that Uzziah died (**740 BC**). The time span of Isaiah's oracles were from **739-701 BC** (ch. 1-39), **605-539 BC** (ch. 40-55), and **539-500 BC** (ch. 56-66). This is a span of 239 years! These time spans show that the book of Isaiah can be divided into three main sections.

You might think of **chs. 1-39** as asking the question: **Whom should we trust?** This question becomes the basis for the later message of servanthood. Now, the times during which this oracle takes place were some of the most tumultuous in Israel's history. Centuries earlier, after the reign of Solomon, **the united kingdom of Israel was divided into northern and southern halves**. The northern half became Israel and the southern half became Judah. For two hundred years this division lasted until Israel was destroyed and her people taken captive by the Assyrian Empire led by Sargon II. The destruction of the northern kingdom took place in **722 BC**. Recall, Isaiah's vision begins around **739 BC**.

But Isaiah's message was not given to the north. For her, it was too late. She would not listen to earlier prophets like Amos and Hosea. She was on her way to exile, for not one of her kings did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. **Isaiah 1:1** tells us that this is "the vision of **Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning JUDAH and JERUSALEM in the days of [these four southern kings.]**"

It is easy to ignore this, so I want you to imagine the political scenario going on here, especially **after 722 BC**, that is after the fall of the north. Something that no one thought would ever happen (though it was predicted many times) happened. God's people, his chosen nation, those he had brought out of exile in Egypt with a mighty hand were no longer a nation.

They had been captured, taken back into exile, made servants of tyrant Gentile dogs. Yet, for some inexplicable reason, Judah, the southern kingdom, is not captured.

The Assyrian army, the Roman empire of the day, is breathing hot down your neck from the north and the only hope you have that can help you physically speaking is Egypt – the very nation you had been freed from centuries earlier. Do you trust Egypt? Do you hope for the best with your army against the greatest empire on earth that has just destroyed your brother to the north? Or will you trust God? **Whom should we trust?** This is the all important question. Now you get a little bit of the feeling of what these southern kings were being asked to do by the prophet. Why should they trust God or one of his prophets when God did not take care of our own flesh and blood up north? *This is a tough, tough choice.* It is what makes the reign and choice of Hezekiah so astonishing for its faithfulness. And it is what makes Manasseh so very much more wicked in rebelling after Hezekiah dies.

When we read the Scriptures, it is easy for us to take the humanity out of the story, to forget that things were not really that much different then than they are today. We have God's word, his explanation of the way history really is. But these men could not see it, unless they beheld it by faith – and faith in any generation is very difficult to have, especially when your life is on the line. It's why God has to grant faith. It must come from him.

Chapters 40-55 now pick up on this theme of servanthood. God is the one we are to trust, *but it is not God like men expect him.* **It is God the suffering servant who comes to save us.** It is the servant who is the one who will allow for God to have mercy on Judah without forsaking his own holiness. And here is a most important question that must be answered, for it is being asked for 40 chapters. **How can this "Holy One of Israel" have mercy on sinners and still be holy?** The answer lies in the servant.

Finally, **chapters 56-66** pick up one final theme. The servant becomes the anointed conqueror. We learn from the New Testament that these two divisions are not to be so sharply made, as if Christ is only servant the first time around and only conqueror the second time around. For Christ *became* the conqueror while on earth the first time. Satan is defeated. Christ did not, however, *consummate* his kingdom in every way, but leaves that until the time when all of his elect are brought into his kingdom. The first and last images of the book of Isaiah are a nice way to summarize the unity of the book of Isaiah. **Jerusalem, the wicked child is by the end of the book made into the new Jerusalem where there is peace like a river, a restored temple (in Christ) blessedness for evermore.** This is the progression of Isaiah's vision. This is the stunning reality of "THE VISION" as seen by Isaiah.

Now then, I have one more detail to explain because it effects us this morning. **Chapters 1-5** have no date. We do not know when this vision takes place. The call of Isaiah does not take place until **chapter 6**, so we know that these things must take place sometime after that. But when, we cannot say. This is important, because the writer of this book wants to take these five chapters to set the background to his story, to place the setting in its proper, spiritual perspective, not necessarily its historical perspective. Perhaps these things presented here are the physical reality that takes place when Judah is captured in **586 BC**, when the temple is destroyed and Jerusalem is taken into Babylon. But it is not the physical ruin that is to be in your head here. Rather, it is the spiritual ruin that was like a cancer – ravaging the body of Judah many years before the actual death took place. This is the scene we enter.

Chapter 1 begins with Judah and Jerusalem in ruin and wickedness. There is national upheaval and religious/cultic blasphemy going on. The vision begins with a courtroom summons. **"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth!"** God is calling the whole world to listen to the complaint that he has against his people. Perhaps the most powerful words in the entire book follow next: **"For the LORD has spoken."** **Interestingly, our passage begins and ends with these same words.** Out of the silence, God's word creates a complaint. Out of nothing, The Word goes forth and who can stand? Who can bear hear when God speaks?

And what horrible words they are. They are covenantal words of cursing. God has every right to bring this complaint and these curses against Judah, because she has violated the binding

terms of the legal covenant that she sealed with God on Sinai. Moses' covenantal song of [Deut 32](#) begins this same way as Isaiah. In other words, in these opening verses, Isaiah is harkening us back to Moses, "Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth." The covenant was made with heaven and earth as a witness. Now they are being called to testify against the people.

The words of [verse 2](#) go on to say, "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me." In Moses' song we hear the same thing, "The LORD saw this and rejected them because he was angered by his sons and daughters" ([Deut 32:19](#)). Israel had vowed to obey this covenant or face the promised curses. You recall the famous words enshrined on so many walls in people's homes that come from [Joshua 24](#), "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" ([Josh 24:15](#))? Well, what you may not remember is that these words were followed with words that not too many houses have plaques of: "You cannot serve the Lord, for He is a holy God" ([24:19](#)). In spite of Joshua's warning, the people bound themselves to the covenant. "We will serve the Lord." So Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord for yourselves to serve Him." And they said, "We are witnesses." ([Josh 24:21-22](#)).

If you do not understand this, you will miss the entire meaning of [Isaiah 1](#) and the rest of the book. This covenant was a *conditional* covenant. "Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD" ([Lev 18:5](#)). "However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you" ([Deut 28:15](#)). To sum this up, we may think of this national covenant from this perspective as a *works* covenant. Not a "works to gain salvation" covenant. In some ways, Israel was already in a covenant of grace, as the prologue to the Ten Commandments makes clear. God redeemed them out of bondage. He made them his people. But there were laws to obey to keep the physical blessings intact. The nation swore to uphold it. Now God is calling them to task on an historical/physical/national/corporate level.

[Verse 3](#) presents a rather sarcastic picture. Two animals not exactly known for their brain power are compared to Israel. "The ox knows his owner, and the donkey his master's crib." Even the dumbest beasts of creation know who rules and owns them. Yet, "Israel does not know, my people do not understand." My people are dumber than the ox, they have less common sense than an ass! God's complaint begins with sarcasm and it quickly turns into what one commentator called "karate chops."¹

([Verse 4](#)) In four swift phrases the people are leveled to their knees. "Woe! 1) *Sin*ning nation, 2) *guilt-laden* people; 3) *evil* generation, 4) *corrupt* children. They have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the **Holy One of Israel** to anger, they are gone away backward." Sin must be seen in the background of God's holiness. One of Isaiah's favorite phrases is "the **Holy One of Israel**." Here we see the first evidence that what Israel has done is not only a reproach against nature, it is an attack on the holiness of God. God is attacked in sin. Sin is a direct confrontation, with man spitting in God's face. What will the Holy One, the Holy One of Israel do? God is speaking, the whole world is listening and waiting...

Here then is the result of not knowing God, of not understanding – though they should have known and understood for they were in covenant with God, and "knowing" God is a covenantal term as well! Here is the result of rebellion, sin, iniquity, evil doing, and corruption against this Holy One. God strikes at you!

[Verse 5](#) is powerful and terrible. "Why should you be stricken any more?" Do you understand, brethren, that the results of our sin is God striking at us? That's [Romans 1](#) in a nutshell. As a nation it was from the top of the head to the sole of the foot. There was no soundness in the nation, but wounds, bruises, and putrifying sores. These are terms that one gets when going to battle! Israel has chosen to battle against God! And she is losing! Her

¹ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39*, NICOT, p. 87.

sores are **not closed** or **bound up**, and they are **not being soothed with ointment**. They are festering, horrible sores in God's sight – like the boils of Job who could only rub at them with shards of pottery.

Well, now how did these sores show up? Surely, the people were not running around with the plague or anything like that. This is why I believe Isaiah has pictured a later scene here at the beginning. **He is trying to show the people that their spiritual sin looks like this certain physical destruction that is coming.**

Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire. Your land, strangers devour in your presence, and it is desolate and overthrown by strangers. The slash and burn policies of warfare left neither crop nor building standing in the wake. All was destroyed, everything lay bare and left to rot in the scorching heat of the middle eastern sun. The result of breaking covenant.

And yet, in the midst of desolation, there is hope. This is astonishing. Out of nowhere, hope emerges in **verse 8**. These are God's children after all. He is still their Father. There are a couple of images here that a little explanation will help make clear. In the old days, when people lived in the city and it was time for harvest, it would take too much time to travel between the field and the house, so the farmer would erect a temporary booth in the middle of the field until the harvest was over. This is the picture before us now. No one would want to live here permanently. They were not meant for that. They were nothing but crude, rough shacks meant to last only a little while. **"The daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a hut in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city"** (Isaiah 1:8).

You may say, where is the hope? There is hope here, because Judah is left with *something*. She still has her vineyards, her cucumbers; she still has her booth. She has more than her brothers to the north who have nothing. But why? For the first time our question of how God can be holy and yet show mercy comes up. **And it is answered this way: It is because God has left the nation with a small remnant. Were it not for the remnant, Israel should have been as Sodom and should have ended up like Gomorrah (verse 9).**

The remnant is a theme that comes up again and again in the Scripture. Paul says that the remnant is to the nation what the elect are to the visible church. **The remnant are not spared because they are better than the rest. They are better than the rest because they are spared.** In other words, the purpose of introducing the remnant here is to show that God has preserved a "very small" group of people who are still faithful to his covenantal obligations. There are still some in Israel who love God's law, who delight in doing good, who love true worship, who take care of the poor.

Notice how the contrast is between the remnant and Sodom and Gomorrah. What Sodom was, the remnant is not. Sodom was wicked. The remnant is therefore righteous. **Historic Protestantism has always maintained that men are justified by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone.** In other words, God does not save without then granting to people a new desire to want to obey his law. In the remnant, God does both.

Now, **verse 10** is another stunning verse. God did not destroy the nation of Judah as he did Sodom and Gomorrah because of his grace in covenant with them; nevertheless these are the **"rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah!"** Israel is Sodom? The law of God makes this clear. It is important for those of you who sit here holding any nation, including modern day Israel in an untouchable regard. You need to listen to this verse, for this is the same sort of shock that the nation in Isaiah's day would have heard. You, Israel, ARE Sodom. Jerusalem is Gomorrah.

How can God call Israel, Sodom? What is Sodom but a place is gross sexual perversion, homosexuality, rape, abuse of the poor and downcast, and wealthy elites who trample on the workers? Apparently, Israel is no different in the days of Isaiah's vision! This is what Gomorrah was. To call Judah Sodom is to recall not only the evil, but the destruction that came upon them. This makes God's mercy all the more... merciful! One can hardly think of a

worse term to call a nation than Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, God has not yet burned them with fire.

Worship

Where as national deterioration is in view in these verses, it is cultic practices that are in view in the next section. What takes place beginning in verse 10 is something that today's church needs to pay particular attention. We need to be silent and listen and learn and understand with heavy hearts and open ears. It is quite possible, the way that Sodom and Gomorrah introduce the section on worship that these cities were very religious cities! We don't often think of them like this do we, but why else bring them up here and then enter into a direct attack on the worship of Judah?

Now, while many people in our day think that the equivalent of Israel is America, this is not true. The New Testament calls *the church* "the Israel of God." God is through dealing with nations as theocracies until Christ returns to bring all nations under his kingship. It is the church that holds the worship of God in her hands. And it is the church that God blesses because of the unconditional covenant, like a remnant in Israel to keep God from destroying a land.

Therefore, church, pay particular attention to the things that Judah was doing in these days concerning the worship of God. There were "multitudes of sacrifices" being offered (vs. 11). And these are said to be offered unto Yahweh, not idols! They were burning rams, and the fat of fed beasts was being offered up (vs. 11). There was no end of the blood of bulls and lambs and goats (vs. 11). And this is all exactly what was required in the law! Furthermore, Judah was observing the festivals. They had their new moons, their Sabbaths, and their assemblies (13). Jerusalem was spreading out her hands and offering many prayers to God. In other words, this was a religious church, a VERY religious church. It was not a land of atheists, but of worshipers. And all they were doing was in accordance with the law of Moses!

The first thing that comes to my mind when I read this is how different and yet how very much the same the western church in our day has become. We are the same, for we are a religious people, are we not? Everyone believes in God and everyone seems to worship – even if it is not in church. However, we are much worse than Israel, because Israel was at least following the law. They were obeying God's word, doing exactly what was commanded of them in religious observance. That's the point of these terms.

The same cannot be said of much of Protestantism in our day. Our forms of worship are often times so foreign to God's word that Buddhists, Mormons and Scientologists would not be offended by what we do. Indeed, it is often difficult to tell where the worship stops and the vaudeville entertainment begins, where the worship stops and where political rallies begin, where the worship stops and where corporations begin. Rarely is the bible even opened in our pulpits, for it is not seen as good enough to hold people's attention. Instead, our sermons have succumb to moral lessons taught to us by leftist Hollywood directors in the form of sound-byte movie clips. Our music is dominated by spectacle, complete with sound stages and lazar shows where people perform renovated, "Jesusized" concerts with old Beatles songs or more contemporary Brittany Spears tracks. We now have take out communion, with your favorite pizza and pop sacraments to fill your belly. And our prayers are dominated with our three little pronouns: "Me, Myself, and I." **If God was agitated by Judah's obedient worship, what shall we say that he thinks of American paganism infiltrating the hallowed doors of Protestant churches? Woe to us! For the Lord is speaking. Who can stand to hear from him?**

But you see, God is not just agitated with Judah's worship. He is flat out livid with fury, which makes much modern worship that much worse. We have described what Judah was doing in terms of worship, but notice how God looked at it. "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me?" (vs. 11). What good do you think these things accomplish, rebellious child? "I am full (completely satiated, have had enough) of your burnt offerings" "I do not delight in your blood" (vs. 11). Those who think that God loves sacrifice for sacrifices sake had better think twice. In God's eyes, killing helpless animals and shedding their blood to placate wrath when you have absolutely no intention of changing your ways is a terrible sin,

for it destroys what God made for absolutely no reason. In fact, it mocks God's holiness and his mercy. And the sacrifice of praise falls on deaf ears in times like this.

Listen to God's word. "Bring no more vain offerings" "Incense is an abomination unto me" "Away with your assemblies and sacred days" (vs. 13). I cannot stand them. They make me sick. They are evil and full of iniquity. "My soul hates your appointed feasts. They are a trouble to me, I am weary of them" (vs. 14). Does this sound like a God who can be called down with a nice song? Is this the sort of God to be intimate with when you bring sin into his house? Christian, God has not changed. God does not change. What was true then, is true *by definition* now. [God is not a ghost whom you can incantate to do your bidding with a little incense and an abracadabra chorus.](#) Do you understand that Israel was worshiping this Holy One of Israel in his temple and yet he was fed up with their assemblies, their church, their worship services?

Many people today think that they can pray to God and he will automatically hear and answer them. Listen to what God says about this, for the Lord is speaking: "When you spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you, yea, when you make many prayers, I will not hear" (vs. 15). There is a time when God will not hear or answer your prayers. Indeed, there is a time when God full well turns his eyes away from your prayers and turns a deaf ear to them.

What is that time? This was the way of it in Judah. There was a great disconnect going on. Her worship was so outwardly righteous and obedient. She was singing with much gusto and praying with great fervency. But her society was in shambles because of her sin. This hypocrisy was brought to the very entrance of the temple. "I will not hear: *because your hands are full of blood*" (vs. 15). Again, please understand this, in our day, the analogy is not America and church worship, but church worship and church life! God is not here concerned in this text with what the Gentiles are doing, but what God's people are doing outside of public meetings.

As I said before, our day is filled with much worse sin, for on a whole scale view, Protestant churches do not even have the externals right. One cannot have sincere worship if the worship is done improperly. [It is a contradiction to be sincere and disobedient.](#) Israel's problem was that she was not sincere in her *obedience*. Instead, she was a hypocrite.

Is not much of the church this way in our day? Denomination after denomination argues over whether to ordain and stamp with approval homosexual leaders. We are rapidly throwing the Scriptures out of our churches. Creeds, confessions, and doctrine are words that ring hollow in our ears. We build up incredible wealth in our churches, often times spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on sound systems and jumbo trons and lighting for our massive worship experience, while so many people are out of work, are homeless, are without family, are lonely in these very places! So many churches look to government as the answer to the crisis of the poor and downtrodden, while they neglect that duty themselves. People are not helping each other. They often times don't even know each other when they go to worship God. In fact, a great many people go to church so that they won't have to know anyone! It is totally consumer driven. God is not impressed with our largeness, our power, and our political clout. I think it is safe to say that instead in God's sight, much of the church is a giant open putrifying, gangrenous wound. We are pitiful, temporary, flimsy huts in a cucumber patch. The church needs to wake up and hear the prophets.

God commands his Old Testament church to do several things at this point. Many of them point to the second table of the law: Learn to do well, seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. What did God's people do, exactly, that drove him to not accept their worship? They refused to live according to the law. They offered up prayers while the widow went hungry. They feasted at Passover while the orphan lay dying in the street. They sang their songs while justice was forsaken. They were C & E Christians. And God hates Christmas and Easter Christians.

There is a very famous verse that comes to our attention next in this passage. **1:18**, "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" (**vs. 18**). This is obviously imagery that describes a *spiritual* condition. The mercy of God is ever before those whom he has covenanted with. As long as this covenant still exists, God still holds out mercy to his church. No matter how far astray the prodigal has gone, he is always welcomed back into the father's open arms if he will only repent.

There are several commands here. The first is to wash yourselves, make yourselves clean. Please remember that these are words given in covenant to Israel; and so they are words to the church. These are not words given to the nations, for the nations had no ability to turn from their sins – unless God supernaturally granted this ability as he did to Nineveh in the day so Jonah. The very fact that God raised up two mighty kings (Hezekiah and Josiah) to reform the people for a time demonstrates the ability to perform these commands.

Washing was the first step that the priests had to do in order to make themselves ceremonially clean for the rest of the temple/cultic worship that needed to be performed. So it is with the nation here. And washing always points forward to Christ's washing away of our sins. As Ephesians says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word."

Three words now appear in this order: **Stop, learn, seek**. This is the process of repentance. **Stop doing your evil**. No church, no person can repent unless they first stop doing their evil. And forgiveness will not come without it. **Learn to do well**. Return again to the Word that gives light to your path. Know again God's law and his requirements. **Then seek** with all your heart to obey this law, especially the weightier matters of loving your neighbor. "Relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." Do not let structures and institutions and governments and organizations and churches abuse those who are so easily abused. Have mercy in your heart for these people. Remember them. Care for them. Come to their aid. Rescue them. Plead for them when they have no voice, because they have no voice. Stop saying that they get what they deserve. Help them. Love them. Understand them. Stop blaming politicians for creating the situation. Act like the church and do something. This is a major and very important theme of the prophets, and one that gets to the heart of our own hearts. "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me." "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." It's not just the prophets, is it? This starts with your own brothers and sisters who are in need.

Now, God's mercy is here set forth. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good of the land. God will let you stay in the Promised Land though everything around you says it is impossible. God will perform this miracle for you because you are his precious children and he loves you. But children, if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured with the sword. In this way the terms of the covenant in Deuteronomy 28-29 are here restated very briefly.

It reminds me of Christ same words to his churches in Revelation. "Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (**Rev 2:5**). This isn't just Old Testament, is it? Friends, no church and no person is untouchable in this life. God will remove the soul even if the shell remains. These words are still for us today. It is not too late until such a time as God destroys us, our nation, as he has to all other nations. It is never too late to reform. It is never too late to call others to reform. But you must never think that these words are not for our church, for we are not a perfect church either. And you must never think that these words are not for you personally, for you are not a perfect person. The moment you think this way, you are in even greater need of hearing this message. May God be merciful to us, his church in our generation. May he grant us repentance and mercy towards others. The mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

