

The Day of the Lord
The Gospel According to Isaiah
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Bible Text: Isaiah 2
Preached on: Sunday, October 6, 2013

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Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Isaiah 2. This is a return visit to this chapter that is about the subject of the latter days, you'll see that if you glance at verse 2. The last days. There was a time, I suppose, in the middle of the 20th century when the topic of the last days was all the rage. There were prophetic or pathetic conferences held all over the place investigating themes about what was going to happen in the last days and what we were to expect and what signs we were to look for and whether or not the last days had arrived or were soon to arrive and who the antichrist might be. Was the antichrist really the pope of Rome? Was the antichrist the Fuhrer of Germany? Was the antichrist the leader of Nazi Italy? Was the antichrist the Secretary of State of the United States. That was one suggestion at one point, I remember it very clearly.

Well, we're glad we got through all that stuff and we can deposit it in the trashcan of history and move on from there but what Isaiah is talking about is the last days from God's perspective. We saw last time that he sees the future of the church, that is, the future of those who are true believers, the elect of God, the final church of God, as a great mountain temple established by God, transcending everything from heaven to earth, encompassing the earth. A massive picture language describing that great day.

The chapter is a study in contrasts. In the first part that takes in verses 1-4, we see a small little mountain of the house of the Lord exalted to the heavens. In the second part, we see high mountains and lofty hills and proud towers of Babylon, a kind of Babylon picture, symbols of human arrogance brought down to nothing. In the first part, nations flow to the mountain of the house of the Lord to learn about God. In the second part, the holy nation itself is filled with foreigners and traitors and soothsayers and false religionists. In part one, the nations walk in the light of God's truth. In part two, the holy nation, the church, worships its own inventions. In one, the nations reject weapons of violence and in the other, there is no limit to the warhorses and chariots. In one there is peace and harmony, in the other there is terror, fear, humiliation.

Contrast is dramatic between these two parts and the picture you get in this snapshot that we read earlier from verse 6 and following, is a picture of God's people and the lesson of this section is simply this: when the church becomes the world, the church becomes the enemy. Let's look at those two things together. When the church becomes the world, that

is really what we're being shown here. Verse 5 is a transitional verse; it's an exhortation. "O house of Jacob," that is, Israel, "come, let us walk in the light of the LORD." Let the truth of God, the revelation of God found in his Word, let that truth shape your understanding of who you are; your understanding of the future; your understanding of God's demands upon you as his people. It's addressed to the house of Jacob; it's addressed to whoever will hear among the people of Israel; "those who have an ear to hear, let them hear what the spirit says to the churches." But when you come to verse 6, you discover that the house of Jacob has not listened; they have not heard. Israel has not repented; Israel has not given ear to what the spirit is saying.

Everything changes in verse 6. Because they have not heard, notice what happens: they are rejected. "You have rejected your people, the house of Jacob," that is Israel. Isaiah is foreseeing a day when God will reject the majority of his own people. Israel. He will not reject them all. We know that he has his elect within Israel, but he will reject that people and the big lesson of that for us as the church of Jesus Christ today is this: that the church as an institution is God's holy nation but if that nation does not respond to God's Word, God will reject it. That's what Jesus is threatening in Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, when he says to churches, "If you don't hear what I'm saying, if you don't repent when you hear my word," he says to churches, "I will remove your candlestick. Your lamp of witness will be snuffed out."

Learn from Israel. These things were written for our instruction. See what happened to the church that was Israel. When it did not repent, it was rejected, "You have rejected the house of Jacob." This is a solemn and searching word to the holy nation. We know from 1 Peter that these descriptions that we have in the Old Testament for Israel now apply to the Israel of God, the church today. "To the Jew first and also to the Gentile." God has been preaching his gospel and men and women have been brought into this community of his people.

In verses 6-9, there is a discreet section in which Isaiah is praying. Do you notice that? He is talking to God. If this were being sung, we would be singing an "Amen" at the end of the verse 9. "For you," he's talking to God, "have rejected your people, the house of Jacob." That's how he begins and as the people are listening in to God's prophet talking to God, they are thinking to themselves that he is going to pray that God would not forget us; he's going to pray that God would pardon us and restore us and bring us life and liberty and joy once again. But he's fooling. He's getting their attention. They're listening up but in the end he's not going to pray for their pardon or their forgiveness, he's going to pray according to the will of God. "Do not forgive them." It's hard to imagine stronger, more solemn words than these, especially when you remember this is God's prophet speaking to God about God's people.

Now, why this sudden disjunction in verse 6? In verses 1-4 we have a description of Zion as God intends it and as God will bring it to being. At the end of history, it will be a perfect temple, a perfect bride, a perfect city, a perfect people of God. And the nations will have come to Zion to discover which is the way of salvation, tell us the way to know God. And on that final day, God will display to the watching universe that he has a

church that he has been gathering out of the world, a church comprised of Jew and Gentile who have been brought to the Messiah, Jesus, and been made part of that final temple that is in him.

But here's the reality of today: the reality of today is that the visible church, just like visible Israel, is not always like that ideal Israel. Isaiah's argument if you read verses 6 and following, Isaiah's argument here is simply this: that Jerusalem and Judah, Zion, Israel is not the Zion of prophecy, rather it has absorbed the culture and the values of the nations round about. They have allowed themselves to become squeezed into the mold of the world. Israel, which always stood apart from the Goyim, the nations, Israel is now regarded by God, Isaiah says, as simply being one of the Goyim, one of the Gentiles, one of the nations and they'll be treated like one of the nations. Professor Richard Lovelace put it like this: "When men's hearts are not full of God, they become full of the world around like a sponge full of clear water that has been squeezed empty and then thrown into a mud puddle."

Here is a church that has absorbed the world. Now, let's be clear about this: when I talk about worldliness, I'm not talking about in the terms of the fundamentalists in the middle of the 20th century who interpreted the word "world" in very superficial and trivial ways. "I don't drink or smoke or chew or going around with girls that do," that kind of level of worldliness. A level of worldliness that Ruth Graham counted when she came to London in the 50s when Billy Graham was doing a crusade there and Billy said to her as he met her at the airport and noticed that she was decorated as American women were decorated in those days, "They don't wear make-up here. Wipe it off right away." She wiped it off right away and then reapplied it later because she wanted to expose her husband's hypocrisy. I mean, really, she did the right thing. But then the Graham's moved from London to Amsterdam and then it was Ruth's turn to be offended when she met all these Dutch Christian women who were smoking pipes.

I don't know what you think about make-up, I personally don't use it myself, or pipes or any of these things. I don't know what you think of those things, but let me tell you this: worldliness is a far more serious issue than any of that stuff. Worldliness as Isaiah describes it, is something that gets into your system; it's something that gets into your bones; it shapes your mind; it commands your will; it draws you away from the things of God. Worldliness, in biblical terms, has more to do with your affections than it has to do with your behavior. It is where your heart lies. It is that to which you give your heart and your affections and for these people and for us, our affections can easily become displaced as a result of peer pressure, cultural acceptance, religious pluralism, moral flexibility, educational credibility, professional advancement, scientific consensus of the bottom-line. Any of those things can push the centrality of God out of my life and push him to the periphery, to the margins of my experience.

This Zion is in rebellion against its God and God has rejected them and you notice his reasons because Isaiah provides us with the grounds for this rejection: because they are full. There is a word, he uses it four times in the original in this passage, "full of things from the east"; "filled with silver and gold"; "filled with horses and chariots." They are

full but they are full of their own stuff; they are full of superstitions that they have absorbed from the outside world, from the nations round about. They are full of “fortune-tellers like the Philistines.” In other words, they’ve absorbed the ideas of the nations around the superstitions and the philosophies and the understanding, the heresies of the nations round about; they’ve absorbed ideas. They are full “of foreigners,” that is, people they have made alliances with; people who are not the people of God but they’ve made their alliances, they’ve struck hands, got into business deals with these foreigners and they’ve done that for their own security purposes. This is the people of God who are supposed to be looking to God for their security but they have decided that in order to make sure that they’re secure, they will have alliances with other nations, other peoples.

What’s happened is a great displacement is trust from God to other things and they’ve turned aside from God; they’ve been diverted from God to these other things. They’ve got these economic agreements, these political military treaties. They are filled with their silver and gold. If you were to ask these people, “Where does your strength lie?” They would say, “You come and look at our treasury. You come and look at what we have been accumulating. We’re wealthy, we’ve got all kinds of evidence of our strength.” Chrysostom, the great preacher of the early church, says, “The prophet is not criticizing the use of their possessions but the misuse of them.” They are putting their confidence in them. They could not do it without them. The measure of their spirituality and their spiritual success is in their accumulation of these things and how connected they are to the culture round about. Not how different they are, but how connected they are. They have put their confidence in things other than God.

They are full of horses and chariots, that is, weapons systems. Do you know before they wanted to become like the nations round about? The holy nation of God didn’t need these horses and chariots. God fought for them. He went into battle for them. Before they could lift a sword, he was there spoiling the enemy and all they needed to do was to watch and see the hand of God. He promised to do that for them. Over and over again he demonstrated that’s what he would do but they’ve come to this position, this point in their experience, where they are saying to themselves, “We don’t trust God to turn up so let’s build our military machine because God may not turn up when we need him.”

All of these things Isaiah puts before us and he says, “You see, these things now identify the people. They are no longer dependent on God but they are dependent on these things. They are self-sufficient. They are no longer obeying God; they’re autonomous; they’re doing their own thing. They have become a post-Yahwehist society. Here is a religion of the living God that is now post-living God because they’ve abandoned him. Looking for security they’ve gone elsewhere. Looking for something to trust, looking for advice they have turned to fortune-tellers. Looking for safety when somebody comes and attacks them. They are looking to foreign alliances. Looking for something that they can show off that they are faithful and that they are successful. They look to their silver and gold.”

The prophet looks at his people; he looks at the Israel of his day and he says, “There is nothing there that attracts others to the God of Jacob.” He’s just begun this chapter by saying that there will come a time when the nations will come to the mountain of the

Lord and they'll say, "Let's go to the house of the Lord and learn from him." Nobody is coming to these people to learn from them. Nobody is saying, "We want what they've got." Nobody is saying, "These people are holy people. They are different people. We want to learn from them the ways of God and the things of God." And you can think today of churches in this land that are wealthy, that are full of things, that have been absorbing the culture all around them for years whose membership is shrinking by massive amounts. No one is coming to them and saying, "We've noticed how trendy you are and we've noticed how in touch with the cultural morays you are and how much we value your sexual openness and how much we think that your philosophical views of things are attractive and we want to learn from you." Nobody is coming to them for those things because they're not offering anything that can't be got somewhere else. They have become the world. They are no different than the world. The world looks at them and says, "They're as weird as we are." John Murray put it like this: "The mind of man is never a religious vacuum. If there is the absence of true religion, there is always the presence of the false. There is always something that fills the vacuum of men's minds."

So, verse 9 draws the conclusion, "man is humbled, and each one is brought low – do not forgive them!" Don't forgive them for this. The church has become the world. That's the point that Isaiah is making. There is no distinguishable difference. The church is the world. Isn't that a tragic thing? Can't you see that that can happen so easily? I mean, we're going to form alliances, we're going to do all that stuff. He's talking about the church at this time as a nation state; that's the kind of things they did. But you can imagine what these foreign alliances are. You can imagine what it is to hitch your wagon to the latest idea or the latest fad in cultural thinking and the church becomes the world.

Well, when the church becomes the world, let me tell you the second thing: the church becomes the enemy. The church becomes the enemy. Look at verse 10, "Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty." Well, there's something. Enter into the rock, hide in the dust from the terror of his majesty, from the splendor of his majesty. "The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day." What he's saying is this: when the church becomes the world, the church becomes the enemy, therefore, the church is linked to all the others in the world in facing the prospect of total, final judgment, being caught up in the conflagration of that final day of judgment.

You notice the prophet's vision of God here. He talks about the terror of the Lord; he talks about the splendor of his majesty; he says, "the LORD alone will be exalted in that day." This is what we pray for when we pray the words "Your kingdom come." "Your kingdom come" just doesn't mean part one of Isaiah 2 coming to pass, "your kingdom come" also means the negative of Isaiah 2 coming to pass as well. It means, the great and dreadful day of the Lord arrives for planet earth, the final day. God has a day, look at verse 12, "For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up – and it shall be brought low." And in a series of punches, you notice the repetition of that word "against"; "against all that is proud"; "against all that is lifted up";

“against all the cedars”; “against all the lofty mountains”; “against every high tower.”
Against, against, against. God is against a worldly church.

Before ever the Bible talks about what God does to the ungodly, it talks about what God does to the church. Isn't that a frightening thought? I come before you today and I tell you this: I am terrified for the church of God. I love the church of God; I love everything about the church of God and there are some people who will get all diverted into things that don't matter and some of them are here, who argue back and forth about things that frankly don't amount to a hill of beans when it comes to this issue that we're talking about today and it's this: God is concerned for the purity, the purity, and the reality of his church in the world. The church is in danger. The church is in danger of being diverted. Look at the language. It's the language of final judgment. “Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty.” He's talking to his people and he's saying the fall of Jerusalem is coming. The fall of Judah is coming. It will happen when Babylon attacks. And the fall of Jerusalem will come again. It will come again in AD 70 when the Romans came and devastated Jerusalem and Judah.

But you notice here he's thinking further ahead to this cosmic climax of the ages because the church has become simply one of the other nations, part of the world. It is caught up in that final, dreadful judgment. Jesus quotes these words. Jesus quotes these words. He speaks to his people and he warns the people of his day that there will come a day when they will begin to say to the mountains “fall on us” and to the hills “cover us” for there will be no protection on that day from the terror, the terror of the Lord.

You see, Isaiah has a huge view of God. Do you see what is the target of God's anger? It is the pride of man, “The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.” The God who made promises at the beginning of this chapter, promised to do great things, promised to exalt the lowest mountain into the highest hill, here promises the disobedient, proud people, he will do the opposite for them. Notice in verse 12, Yahweh who has scarcely been mentioned in this chapter so far, suddenly appears with his full title: he is the “LORD of hosts,” that is, he is the Lord of awesome splendor and ferocious power. Here is the Lord in full battle dress ready for action, ready to take on his enemies, ready to triumph over them.

And the target is his church, the church that was Israel and beyond that, the church that follows Israel into unbelief and disobedience. Those who blithely think that they're his allies and his beneficiaries have become his enemies and he warns them of that day: the LORD has a day against everything they put their trust in. They've been proud about the cedars of Lebanon and the oaks of Bashan; they were signs of their pride and self-sufficiency; the accoutrements of their royal power and prestige in verse 14; the places where they worshiped their idols, the mountains and the uplifted hills and every high tower and so on; their sources of self-security, the fortified wall; the ships and the beautiful crafts that were the material equipment designed to enhance their trade and their affluence. All the things they had, God is against them, attacking their autonomy and their self-sufficiency.

Yahweh alone is high. He alone is exalted. He will not share that status with anybody or anything else. He says to his church, "What are you proud about? What are you proud about this church? Is it the building? Is it the music? Is it the structures? Is it the kind of people who come here? What are you proud about when you come to church? If your pride is in any of those things, those are all human things. The only cause of pride is our God and this God is not concerned about what we feel or what we get when we come to worship. He's not even concerned with what we bring when we come to worship. When you sing and you're not a good singer, do you think he pays one whit of attention more to you if you're a good singer than if you're a bad singer? Of course he doesn't. What is he looking for? He's looking for a humble, contrite heart. That's what he's looking for.

And the God of Jacob, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, looks at his church and he says, "I'm sick of your arrogance." You think of the church, think of the Medieval church and I think at one building if you go to Rome, take the road that runs from the Coliseum to Saint John's Lateran and you'll find a little church there called the "Church of San Clemente." It's on three levels and the lowest level is a 1st century street. The houses are still there and you can go into Clemente's living room in his little house there where they met, the believers. Clemente is mentioned in the New Testament. You can go down the streets to the Mithraic temple; you can even go to the well at the corner of the street which is still a well and get water from it. Then you can go to the second level, that's the basement level, the second sub-level which is the 4th century church built by the Emperor Constantine and given to this congregation. You can imagine that there they were and for centuries they had been meeting in Clemente's living room. Do you know what they did? They did this big, bare, empty space. They put in the middle of it, they put a structure about this high with a door on four sides of this wall that they build and it was the size of Clemente's living room and the believers met there. Now that Christianity was legal, people would come in and watch the believers as they sat there around their table and somebody would get up and explain the gospel to them. If you became a believer and were baptized, you go to join them around the table in Clemente's living room in the middle of this amphitheater.

Times changed. The pagan temple down the road did a far better theatrical display than these simple believers singing their unaccompanied psalms and hearing the Word of God read. And soon the display in the pagan temple crept into the church. All the theater that developed in the Middle Ages was all an attempt to make the gospel more presentable to the masses of Rome. The more you could look like a grand theatrical operation, modeled perhaps on the Old Testament model of worship rather than in the New Testament synagogue form of worship, then the more attractive and powerful and impactful the worship would be. And you know where that led us. Today, it happens today, when pastors think that mixing with the movers and shakers and the celebrities and the politicians gives them status and influence and it diverts them from the work of God and the work of the Kingdom of God.

The arrogance of man. This is a warning to the church. Listen to the last verse, this is the exhortation, "Stop trusting in man." How can a disobedient people ever become the

people God wants them to be? Stop regarding man. The word “regarding” means “trusting” in man, in humanity whose nostrils, his breath, of what account is he? I mean, these great people of the world, you know in the end all they are is crumbling flesh. I remember as a little boy growing up I used to watch whenever I could watch, political discussion shows and so on, on television. We didn’t have as many of them in Britain as you have here but whenever they did come on, I was very interested. I was very into politics and then I would have to stop watching them because I got really agitated and upset. That still happens from time to time I have to tell you but I would watch these and there would be the men who were famous in those days. They were the movers and shakers; they were always on television; they were always telling us what they were going to do. They were in power; they had power at their fingertips. These were the great men of the world. Then when I was in London as a minister, I was asked to go into those houses of Parliament and speak to the Parliamentarians from time to time and I remember walking through the corridors of Westminster and these members of Parliament were shuffling by and some of these elderly gents who were wandering by, by this stage they are really, really ancient and they’re making their way to the House of Lords. I recognized them. They were the movers and shakers back when; they were the men of power. Now all they are, are crumbling monuments shuffling their way towards shuffling off their mortal coil.

Don’t put your trust in men, says Isaiah. Why? Because in their nostrils is only breathe and they’re going to stop breathing. The world outside there has opinions. Are you going to listen to them? Their opinions are going to be dead a hundred years from now. They’re going to be gone. There will be new opinions then. What the prophet is saying to the church is, “Put your confidence in the Lord and not in the cultural consensus. Don’t introduce into the church things that are obtained out there but have no place here.” The spirit of competition for example, that doesn’t belong here, not in the fellowship of God’s people.

The humble society of believers. Do you know, the larger message of this book is don’t trust in men but trust in the man? Trust in *the* man. There are two words that are used in verse 22 that are used somewhere else in Isaiah. The word “regarding” which means “trusting” and the word translated “what account” is also translated by “esteemed.” Isaiah 53, “He was despised and rejected by men. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not.” The problem is, you see, the people of Israel did not trust in their Messiah; they did not esteem their Messiah and Jerusalem was destroyed. But the only way of hope is to trust in the one.

That brings me to the second exhortation which is this: walk in the light of the Lord. Go back to verse 5. It’s transitional, it points backwards and it points forward, looks back to the prophetic vision of the future, that’s the way it’s going to be. But it’s not only a word of hope, as we saw last week, to the believer, it’s a word of challenge to the unbeliever. In the Bayeux Tapestry in Normandy in France, you’ll see one battle scene that illustrates a battle that’s going against the Normans and the picture shows the troops running away from the center of the battle and the bishop riding on his horse with a spear and he’s

prodding those who are running away with his spear and he's pushing them back into the battle again. Underneath it says "The Bishop Comforteth His Troops." Pushing them back into action. In other words, he's trying to encourage them to "head back into the fight, boys, come on." It's a word of encouragement but it's also a word of warning. This is a word that works both ways here.

The God of Jacob is to be acknowledged in the house of Jacob. His people have a special responsibility to walk in the light that has been revealed. The church has got to be people who have gone up, verse 3, "gone up to the house of the Lord," and then in verse 5, "walk in the light of the Lord." Obedient people are then a signpost to the world of the way of salvation because they live in his presence and they live by his truth. And the light of the Lord today ultimately, I suppose, is the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That is the ultimate light of God. Delight in that. Delight in the destiny, the certainty of the destiny. Here is the reality: what Alexander the Great fought for, what Caesar died for, what Napoleon wasted his life to achieve, what Hitler committed atrocities to establish, what the West has thrown away in its self-indulgence, Christ shall have. He shall have absolute rule over all his enemies.

So, walk in the light until that day. Stay in the battle for truth and righteousness. Resist the devil. Rejoice in God. Though some days the battle may go in the favor of the enemy, keep believing and trusting until that day when the trumpet shall sound. I suppose somebody up there might even be ready to do it, but no. When the trumpet shall sound and the Lord shall descend and the angels will sing "Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigns!" That's our destiny. Let the world do what it wants but let's be a people who walk in the light of God's truth and become a signpost to the world and not merely the world's mimic.

Let's pray.

Father, we pray that you would give us a sense of the wonder of what it means to belong to your people and the terror of what it means as your people to be caught up in that great and terrible Day of the Lord, the day of judgment. We pray that you would prepare us to be a light to the nations and a signpost pointing to Jesus. We pray that in his strong name. Amen.