

It's Always Been About the Cross

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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You know, today when we talk about a cross, you do realize historically untold numbers of individuals have lost their physical life on what we know as a cross, a form of punishment traditionally attributed to what we know as the Romans. It was a means by taking some type of criminal for some type of offense and instituting what you and I know as the death penalty. That's what it is, but have you noticed that in the songs we sing and in the Scriptures we read, anytime we're referring to the cross of Jesus Christ, it's always qualified, it's not just a cross, Colossians 1 says it's his cross because his cross was different than any other cross. The cross of Jesus Christ was different than the thief's cross next to him, and what we've just sung, "The Mighty Cross," allow me to identify the word "mighty." Are you ready for this? That which exhibits superiority in strength and in scope. So when we say the mighty cross, we're saying that what Jesus did on the cross is superior to what anybody else has ever done in the creation of humanity. So when we say the mighty cross, the scope and the strength is greater than anything else we could imagine.

Let's pray.

Lord, today as we have celebrated the goodness and, shall we say, the mightiness of your grace, Lord, as we cherish the cross of Jesus Christ, Lord, as we search the Scriptures that are the underpinning and the undertones of what we have celebrated together in song, help us to realize that your cross is so definitively different not just from other crosses but from anything else that has ever transpired in the history of humanity. Help us, O God, from your word to see that distinction today. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to turn in your Bibles to the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 1. Now, when you hear songs about it or you sing words about the cross, it's usually not typical that you think, "Oh yeah, the prophet Isaiah," for when we speak of the cross, we typically think of the end of the Gospels. In fact, in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, though they have different accounts and different stories, a variety of different interactions in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the one common thread through all four of them is they all speak of and describe the crucifixion event because that is the purpose of and the reason for Jesus' incarnation. You walk through the letters of Paul, the

great hymns and songs of our faith, there is this theme running through all of them regarding the cross of Jesus Christ because if it were not for his "mighty cross," we wouldn't be here this morning, we wouldn't be singing the songs we've sung, and we would not hold the book we have in our hands this day. So as we turn to Isaiah 1, allow me to declare this morning that the cross of Jesus Christ, it's always been about the cross. It's not a modern phenomena. In fact, it's not just a 2,000 year phenomena since the tomb was discovered to be empty, in fact, hundreds of years as we're about to see before Jesus Christ ever stepped foot on Mount Calvary, it had been about the cross.

Now as you turn to Isaiah 1, you'll discover this is the first chapter in a very lengthy book of the Bible, in fact, 66 chapters in length. The prophet Isaiah finds himself typically distinguished, if not one of the, as the most recognized of all the prophets in your Bible. In fact, oftentimes during what we know as the Christmas and Easter season, it is his words that the Lord gives him that we sing in song and we speak in celebration. If you want to see some of the most vivid passages in the Bible about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, about the heavens opening up, about his kingdom being established, just read Isaiah. If you want to see some of the most vivid pictures of what it's going to look like for all of eternity to be around the throne room of God, just read Isaiah. If you want to see the unfortunate consequence of humanity's rebellion and the eternal ramifications thereof, read Isaiah. In fact, all throughout the book of Isaiah we have so many incredible pictures of the items of our faith, but today we discover that much like the songs we have sung, much like the Gospels that we cherish, the message of the cross is woven through this great prophet's message as well.

I want to begin in chapter 1 of the book of Isaiah, the very first statement. It says,

1 The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. 2 Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. 3 The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. 4 Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.

In fact, in this great book of the Bible, the book of Isaiah, it begins with a very clear message regarding a problem, there is a problem that has taken place in the scope of the universe; there's a problem that's taken place on earth and this problem was initiated by you and I. It was initiated by man. It says here that we, as the children of God, we have rebelled against our Creator, we have produced a seed of evildoers.

Let me share with you what this looks like in everyday life. Those of you who have or are raising children, those of you who at one point have been a child – please note the humor – have you ever had this experience either spoke to you or you have spoken it to somebody else? I've experienced this. As a parent, how many times have I caught myself

saying, "After all that I provide for you, I put a roof over your head, I put clothes on your back, I put food in your belly, and this is how you want to act?" Please tell me I'm not the only parent in the room. Please? It was said to me, it's been said for generations, in fact, I'm convinced that one of the reasons the Lord allows us to have teenagers is to understand this passage because all that we do and all we provide and they rebel.

It says here that we, as humanity, have taken the blessings, the prosperity of God, and we have wasted them on our own human endeavors. Think about this for a moment, how we've initiated this. Go back to the garden of Eden. The Lord set us up in the best position you could imagine. He puts us in a place where there are no problems: there is no pain; there is no agony; there is no heartache; there is no greed; there is no lust. There's none of those things. Ladies, there is no pain for y'all. Guys, we don't even have to work for our food. It can't get any better than this but what did we say? "Oh, God, you're so mean. There is so much more that we could have. If we would just eat of the forbidden fruit, it would solve all of our problems. We could be like the gods. We would be wise in our own eyes." And what did we do? We rebelled.

It's the story not just of the Israelites in Isaiah's day, it's our story of all time. In fact, several years later, the Israelites found themselves in captivity, 400 years they were the slaves of Egypt. They had to do whatever the taskmasters told them. They had to work 16-18 hour days with little, if no, compensation but that which was for survival. For 400 years, the Lord finally delivers them. They go through the Red Sea, the Egyptians are swallowed by the water, and within two weeks they have the audacity to say, "We had it better in Egypt. God, why did you bring us to this wilderness?" Don't you know the Lord's saying, "Hey, look at what I've given you." Do you know in the wilderness their clothes didn't wear out and they never had to worry about food? It's the same story and what do we do? We rebel.

You fast forward and there was a guy by the name of Solomon. Think about Solomon for just a moment. He was the guy who was allowed to fulfill his dad's dream, the building of the temple, a permanent place for what we know as the ark of the covenant; a permanent place for the presence and the Spirit of God. The Israelites had been longing for this for years. He finally gets to the point, he follows, he obeys, he does, and then the man who the Bible calls the wisest man in the world did what I would declare one of the most unwise things. Do not read too much into this and it's not today's message, but he goes out and gets 300 wives and 600 girlfriends. Yeah, let's just leave it there for just a moment. What happened? All their idols infiltrated the household and don't you know the Lord is saying, "I have my presence in your living room. I have the power of that which brought you out of captivity, took you into the Promised Land." By the way, when they went into the Promised Land, within seven years they had fallen into idolatry.

Jesus Christ shows up on the scene, he heals the land, he walks across the water, he multiplies the bread, and then just moments before they put him on a cross, what does his community say? "We'd rather have Barabbas. That's right, give us the serial killer, not the one who heals the sick and the lame. Give us the one who has terrorized us for years, not the one who can feed us by multiplying food."

You see, when it says here that they were a seed of evildoers, they were rebellious children, we need to understand that when we talk about the cross of Jesus Christ, the reason that we even talk about it today is because the problem that we initiated but God has not overlooked it. Notice what it says there in verse 4, we, "they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward." The Bible makes it very clear that God has not turned his cheek at our rebellion. In fact, what we discover throughout the whole text of Isaiah and all of the Bible is eventually the price must be paid.

You get to the end of the Bible, the book of Revelation, it says there's a day, there's a time where all of humanity both great and small stand before the Lord, and the books are opened, the book of life and the books of works, and it says that every man was judged according to these. And what we discover in those days, that the anger, the wrath of God is poured out on either one or two entities. If you find yourself self-sufficient like Adam and Eve, self-sufficient like so many other characters and say, "I've got this. I can pull myself up by my own bootstraps," you do realize in God's economy boots don't have straps? You can't do it. But if you think you can, he says, "Fine. Let's judge your righteousness versus mine." And his anger will be poured out on those who rebel. But for those who believe, and we'll talk about this a little bit more in a moment, his anger was poured out on Mount Calvary when it says Jesus Christ became our propitiation, he became the punishment for our sins.

So this problem that we initiated, God has not overlooked it, he has not ignored it, it must be dealt with, which leads to the promise just a few verses over, one of the great passages not just in the Bible but through the history of what we know as Gospel music. Verse 18 says,

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.

The Lord makes a promise here even in light of what he's described us as humanity, there is a promise that our sins can be forgiven, that our souls can be saved. Now here's what's amazing to me: we should have been the ones who initiated the agreement. We should have been the ones who said, "Alright, God, we messed up in the garden. We messed up in the wilderness. We messed up here. We messed up there. Is there any way that we can fix this mess?" But we didn't do it. What does God do? God comes down and says, "Okay, you have messed up, you have sinned, you have rebelled, let us reason together." Interesting that the Lord, himself, is going to negotiate the terms to satisfy his own anger and what does he say, he says, "Thou your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow."

You know, it's interesting that the terms, the compromise, shall we say, of the agreement is that he would bear the pain, he would provide the means of sacrifice, he would pour out his blood. Now think about that for just a moment. We're the ones who created this

whole mess, we didn't call out to get it fixed, but our own Creator says, "You need it fixed. Allow me to interject my promise. I want to forgive you. I want to save you." So what do we do? We ignore it. We ignore it. We say, "No, I've got this. I know better." We've got the same disease as they had in the garden of Eden, we think somehow we know better.

Let me prove it. Turn a few pages to chapter 5. Chapter 5 of the book of Isaiah, one of the most politically incorrect passage but one of my favorites in all of the Bible. Allow me to share with you this is not just a passage about the Israelites, this is not just a passage about 3,000 years ago, we could take these words, put them on the ticker of the television networks of our day and we would believe them to be the headlines of our day. It says here in verse 20 of Isaiah 5,

20 Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!
21 Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!

So the Lord comes and he makes this promise, "I will forgive you. I will save you. Though you've rebelled against me, I've got a solution in my Son Jesus Christ." So what do we decide? We decide, "No, that which is really good we're going to call evil, and that which is evil we're going to call good. That which is dark we're going to call light. That which is light we're going to call dark."

Allow me to illustrate how this fleshes out in our society today, is that when there are constructs that are contrary to the things of God, when there are positions that are contrary to the word of God, when there are philosophies and ideas and actions and words that are against the word of God, we live in a community, we live in a culture, we live in a world that says, "You must not just have it, you must celebrate it because that's the best way to live life." But if you, by chance, say, "Well, I think God knows what he's talking about. I think the Bible says..." Have you noticed all of a sudden you're old-fashioned, archaic, narrow-minded and need to be shoved in a corner? We've called evil good and we've called good evil. We've called darkness light and light darkness. We've called bitter sweet and sweet bitterness. Why? Because we've made the decision that even though God promised to take care of our sin problem, we would rather just as Satan did in Isaiah 14 later on when he says, "I will exalt myself. I will become like the Most High," we've decided rather than be the creatures in God's image, we want to create our own God in our own image.

You see, we initiated this problem. God initiated a promise which has largely been ignored by humanity. He took his promise so seriously, if you'll turn over to chapter 7, that he was willing to make a supernatural provision. Now what we're about to read in chapter 7 of Isaiah is one of the great Christmas passages of our culture and community. Ahaz is the king of Israel. He's rebellious in all forms and all fashions. Beginning in verse 10 of Isaiah 7 it says,

10 Moreover the LORD spake again unto Ahaz, saying, 11 Ask thee a sign of the LORD thy God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above. 12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the LORD. 13 And he said, Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Now let's walk through the progression here. We've got a problem, humanity has rebelled against God. We initiated it and he's not going to ignore it, but God has promised that salvation and forgiveness is possible but, again, we largely ignore it. So then the Lord says, "Okay, even though I've promised, allow me to provide something. I'm going to provide for you a sign. I'm going to provide for you something that is unbelievably, unequivocally supernatural." Now when you begin to study in your Bible what we know as signs, the rainbow over Noah's flood was a sign; when the fleece was dry and the ground was wet around it, that's a sign; Jesus Christ took those that were in opposition to him in Matthew 12 and said, "If you want a sign, I'll give you a sign. Put me in the ground, three days later I'm going to raise from the dead. That's the only sign I'm going to give you." So here the Lord says, "That's fine. You're still going to ignore what I want to offer you, this deal that I'm going to strike with you, then ask me a sign. Ask it to me. Ask me to do something unbelievably supernatural." What does Ahaz do? He said, "Oh, I would never ask that of God. There is no way I would tempt God."

Do you see that Ahaz has the same problem we do? "Oh God, even though what you say sounds great, I still know better than you do. I still know what is better. There is no way that what you're saying can be better than what I have contrived in my own mind, it's not better than what my friends have told me, what these guys have told me. I know how to do this better." And what do we do? We ignore it. But think about what the Lord was providing. When he says, "Seek from me a sign, a virgin shall conceive," can we all just in agreement say that when somebody who is labeled as is described in this passage gives birth to a child, that is supernatural? Can we all just agree that when you are tempted by every sin known to man, not only as Hebrews 4:15 says but in the wilderness with Satan himself for 40 days and 40 nights and you never fall into temptation, can we agree that is supernatural? And when you go on to Mount Calvary and you take the nails in your hands and your feet, the thorns on your head, and according to 2 Corinthians 5, you take the sin of humanity upon yourself so your righteousness can be transferred to them, can we agree that's supernatural? And when three days later when everybody's ready to mourn and to prepare the body for its final resting place and the angels declare, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" can we agree that is supernatural?

So the Lord has provided the supernatural. The Lord has said, "I've provided a supernatural birth, I've provided a supernatural life, I've provided a supernatural death, I've provided a supernatural resurrection." And what does Ahaz do? He says, "Oh, I would never ask that of you, God." You know, we claim in our culture today that we've "evolved" so much. Now don't get me wrong, I am grateful for HVAC and indoor plumbing but we haven't done much else. We've got the same issues. We're just like

Ahaz. We hear the songs about Jesus, we read the words of Jesus and we say, "Oh, I would never ask that of you, God. I've got this. I know what I'm doing."

The good news of this passage is found in chapter 12 of the book of Isaiah, because the Lord shares with us the possibilities of the cross. You see, the problem is it was initiated by us, not ignored by God; the promise is the Lord said, "I will make a deal with you, I will make it to where your sins can be forgiven if you'll just believe. I'll provide you a supernatural entity, my only begotten Son, who will be born and live and die and raised supernaturally from the grave."

I want you to notice, I'm going to read the entire chapter of Isaiah 12. Don't panic, it's only six verses in length. It says,

1 And in that day thou shalt say, O LORD, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me.
2 Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.
3 Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.
4 And in that day shall ye say, Praise the LORD, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted.
5 Sing unto the LORD; for he hath done excellent things: this is known in all the earth.
6 Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.

Here's the possibility initiated by God according to what you just read, his anger can be turned away from you. The wrath you deserve, the punishment that is due to you can be turned. By the way, you realize that's what we call mercy. Mercy is that which you rightfully deserve that is not placed upon you. Grace is that which you don't deserve that the Lord bestows to you. That's why we call him a God of mercy, his wrath is turned, and a God of grace, he bestows salvation that we cannot earn and we do not deserve. But the Lord initiates this possibility, that his anger can be turned away from us; that his wrath does not have to fall upon us. And here's the beauty: we do not have to ignore this possibility. Notice what it says in verse 2, "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation." And if I counted right, that's five times that the person pronoun is used.

You know, I began a few moments ago talking about how we describe the cross as mighty or his cross or the cross of Jesus Christ, you see, all those words "salvation, trust, strength, song," none of them mean anything unless you qualify them. He's my salvation. He's my song. He's my God. And we don't have to ignore it because we go to the book of Romans and it lays it out so clearly and we call it the Roman Road. It says that for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and the wages of that sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. You fast forward to chapter 10 and it says whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. You understand that's why we call it the Gospel, the good news, that we messed up, we initiated this problem. God promised, we ignored it. God provided, we ignored it. God says, "I'll even turn my

anger and take it on myself." Why would we ignore it anymore? He has given us the solution to all of our mess in the cross of Jesus Christ which is mighty and superior in strength and in scope because it is the only means of forgiveness, it is the only means of salvation. The question is not today on the facts or on the truth or on the aspect, it all boils down to the personal pronouns: my and I. It is the cross of Jesus Christ, has it been borne for you and have you exhibited your faith in him?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe today you find yourself in an environment such as this and maybe this is your first time, maybe this is your 10,000th time, it doesn't matter the quantity but I do believe in the providence of God. I do believe that whatever brought you here this morning it was very purposeful and the Lord spoke very clearly not only through song but through his word about your need for the cross of Jesus Christ. Maybe today is the first time you've considered it. Maybe you've been putting it off for years. But maybe today you're the one, maybe you're the person who said, "Do you know what? It's about time I took care of this." The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. You say, "Well, how do I do that?" In just a moment I'm going to encourage you just to have a conversation with the Lord. You don't have to have this conversation out loud, in fact, you don't even have to say the same words that I might say but let me just encourage you just to do what the Bible talks about having a time of prayer. It's just a conversation with God. Maybe your prayer would go a little something like this. "God, today I just want to admit, I just want to confess something that I know you already know about me, but I need to let you know that I realize it too, I'm the problem. I'm the one who's messed up. I'm the one who has rebelled. I'm the one who has sinned but I believe today that the only answer to my sin problem is Jesus Christ. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was born supernaturally on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he lived a supernatural sinless life. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he died a supernatural death, that he was willing to take the punishment and the wrath of my sins on himself, and I believe today, God, that he rose a supernatural resurrection, that three days later they found the tomb empty and he walked among them. Lord, today I declare these truths because I know that in all the issues and problems of the world that I rarely have an answer for, I know that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me. In the best way I know how, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're the one today that had that conversation, maybe you're that person today for the first time you quit doing it on your own power and your own strength and you just yielded and said, "Okay, God, I'm going to trust you and you alone." If today that's the conversation you had, we'd love to celebrate with you. In just a moment I'm going to pray for us and then as we have a time of celebration, we'd love to engage in a conversation, we'd love to hear what the Lord is doing in your life.

Heavenly Father, as we gather today, we gather in the name of a Savior risen from the dead supernaturally, Jesus Christ, and Lord, we are so grateful that as Isaiah 59 says, that your arm is not short and that it cannot save and it cannot extend your hand of grace

and mercy. Please, O God, as you've extended that hand today, may we receive it with gladness. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as our team leads us. Whatever decision, I'll be right here at the front.