

INTRO: Please turn with me to Isa 9:8-10:4. **God's anger endures against pride. Why? Four reasons.** Pride disdains discipline, pride neglects repentance, pride consumes churches, and pride legislates oppression. Now, I can imagine someone listening to the roadmap for this sermon and saying, "where's the gospel in that? How is that preaching the good news?" Well, let's think about that together for a moment. The gospel is not just that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. The gospel is the message that God is totally holy, completely separate from sin, completely sovereign, transcendent. He is our Creator and our Judge. He created man to know, love, and serve Him forever. But mankind rebelled against God's holiness and against His love. That rebellion drew down God's righteous anger at humanity for our sin. We are accountable to Him for that rebellion. He will not let us get away with it. But He sent Jesus Christ, His only Son, to die the death we deserved, and He raised Jesus from the dead to prove that Jesus never sinned, never deserved the judgment of sin, which is death. And so if we repent of our sin – if we turn from it and trust in Jesus, if we hide ourselves from God's anger in Jesus as our substitute – then God will forgive our rebellion and reconcile us to Himself.

What does Isaiah 9:8-10:4 have to do with that message? I'll tell you. Isaiah 9:8-10:4 show us the reason that Jesus had to die. God wants us to see ourselves in these verses. He wants us to look at these verses as if we're looking in a mirror, and to see our own pride, disdaining punishment, neglecting repentance, consuming the church, and legislating oppression. Now that's not very fun, we say. That feels like a psychological beat down. Why should I come in for that kind of treatment? I thought the church was supposed to be an uplifting place. Yes, it is; but the good news isn't as good if you don't realize how badly you need it. Who is God? is sin? Why does it matter? How does God treat sin like mine? Am I really in that much danger from God? Is my sin really that offensive to Him? And if it is, what does that mean for the way I see myself in relation to Him? What does my sin mean for how I understand Jesus' death and resurrection? What we are about to see, then, is why we need the salvation that Jesus offers. What are we being saved from? And we will see that what we need to be saved from is not just the impersonal cause-and-effect relationships of the moral universe. Nor are we saved simply from ourselves, or the world, or even from Satan. What we need to be saved from is God Himself.

Historical Review: Now before I start, I want to give us a brief historical review. This is like checking our program at the intermission of a Broadway musical to make sure we have all the characters straight. We're diving into the era of about 735BC. King David, the first king of the united Monarchy of Israel, was around 1,000BC. The kingdom of Israel remains united under David's son, Solomon. But Solomon's son, Rehoboam, rules harshly, and the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom refuse to be ruled by him. So they secede from the Davidic kingdom and make Jeroboam son of Nebat king over them in 1Kings 12. That's the beginning of what's known as the divided kingdom – the northern kingdom, 10 tribes, essentially at civil war with the southern kingdom, 2 tribes, for the rest of their existence. Ephraim, Samaria, and Israel are all synonyms for the northern kingdom – Ephraim is Samaria is Israel. Technically, Ephraim and Manasseh were the two largest tribes of the northern kingdom, and they were both sons of Joseph (Gen 48:14). That's why you see them paired together in Scripture so often. And that's why it's such a shame that they're at each other's throats later in Isaiah 9. In these early chapters of Isaiah, **Pekah** is king of the northern kingdom, Israel. **Ahaz** is king of Judah, the southern kingdom. **Rezin** is the king of Syria, which is also called Aram, because that's where the Aramean people lived. Syria and Assyria are different. Syria is Israel's smallish neighbor to the immediate north. Assyria is the superpower to the further northeast. Damascus is the capitol of Syria. Nineveh is the capitol of Assyria. Israel and Syria are trying to pressure Judah, the southern kingdom, into an anti-Assyrian alliance to resist being conquered by the Assyrian superpower and its military machine. Judah is resisting that pressure because Ahaz, king of Judah, thinks Judah is better off begging Assyria for mercy than try to resist. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. The northern kingdom will eventually fall to Assyria in 723BC. The southern kingdom eventually falls to Babylon in 586BC. We're at 730-740BC in Isaiah 9-10.

1. PRIDE DISDAINS DISCIPLINE (ISA 9:8-12)

It would be easy to read right over Isa 9:8, but we shouldn't. "*The Lord has sent a word against Jacob, and it will fall on Israel.*" That sentence is a thunderbolt. It warns us against presuming on God. Jacob is another name

for Israel. Israel is God's people. Yet the Lord is sending a word against them. That in itself would have been scandalous to an ancient Jew. And the perfect tense verb, "*has sent*," tells us there's no going back. The word will not be recalled, and it will accomplish God's purpose. "*It will fall on Israel.*" This is not the language of blessing, like rain gently falling on the green grass. This is like a giant meteor falling on a city.

There's a lesson here about God's word even before the lesson begins about pride and punishment. When God speaks, it is as good as done. His word is effective. It accomplishes whatever it articulates. It is just like Genesis 1. *God said...and it was so....God said...and it was so.* God's word is still the tool He uses to accomplish His purposes, and it is the only tool He needs. That's why we're so committed to preaching God's word in this church, because God's word is God's way of doing God's work. And notice, God is not above sending a word against his own people. We should not presume on God, as if being part of the church means that we are now exempt from any of his discipline or disapproval. God disciplines every son he receives (Heb 12). In Isa 9:9, the purpose of sending this word to fall against Israel is that "*all the people will know, Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria.*" God wants His own people in the northern kingdom to acknowledge something.

In v.10, that something is their own pride, which is first of all stubborn. "*...who say in pride and in arrogance of heart: 'The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place.'*" This is disdain of discipline. God had been the one knocking down their brick buildings and toppling their trees. That was a punishment for their wickedness. But Israel's reaction in v.10 is basically "so what? We'll just re-build it to be even bigger and better. Instead of brick, we'll upgrade to dressed stones; and instead of these little sycamores, we'll plant big cedars." That's pride disdaining punishment. Israel's faith is in their own supposedly indomitable spirit, their own resilience as a people. Knock us down, and we'll get up stronger. We will rebuild, retool, and recreate ourselves and our world better and stronger (Oswalt, 252). They've taken God's judgment as a challenge, which only proves they don't know who they're dealing with, because in v.11 Isaiah counters by saying "*But the Lord raises the adversaries of Rezin against him.*"

That enemy is probably Assyria (Motyer, 107; Smith, 1:246). Israel had aligned with Rezin King of Syria, to resist Assyria. So Assyria would now treat Israel just like Syria – as an enemy. But it is God Himself who is raising up Assyria as Israel's enemy. Friend, God is sovereign. He is in control, even over the great superpowers of the world. He can raise these powers up to become enemies against His own people when they disobey. **Ps 75:7** "*It is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another*" (cf. Ps 58:11; Egypt in Isa 19:2). The northern kingdom should have known better. God had a long history of raising up enemies against his people when they disobeyed His law. When Solomon let his foreign wives turn his heart to foreign gods, **1Kings 11:14** says "*The Lord raise up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite.*" (cf. 1Kgs 14:23). And it happened all through the book of Judges. God is no regional, relative God. He is Almighty. He rules even over nations who do not believe in Him; and He will not be co-opted into just another deity in your own personal pantheon. He is the one and only sovereign God, and He is sovereign over you, friend, whether you believe in Him or not. He rules as king over all the nations, no matter what their size, government, or official religion; and He is the only one who has that right to rule, because He created all peoples.

We are foolish if we think we can disdain God's discipline and get away with it. There's no future in that. When Israel says in v.10 that we'll just rebuild bigger and better, God's reply in v.11 is "No you won't, because I'm not done. I'm bringing Assyria against you, and even Syria, who you thought you were using as an ally, is going to turn on you. I will make even your alliances turn sour to work against you, and I'll raise up the Philistines again for good measure." Israel could not outmaneuver God, even when she deployed all her politics, strategies, and tactics. Yet even this initial punishment does not exhaust the anger of God over the pride of his people. His anger has not turned away, even after all this.... Christian, do not disdain God's discipline in your life. Learn to discern it. It's one thing to suffer for righteousness. It's another thing to suffer as a sinner, to suffer the consequences of your own sin. Learn to discern the difference, and don't disdain God's discipline. It's not a battle you can win. You cannot outmaneuver God. Repent, which leads us to point 2.

2. PRIDE NEGLECTS REPENTANCE (ISA 9:13-17)

Look there in v.13. “*The people did not turn to him who struck them, nor inquire of the Lord of Hosts....*” This is the irony of repentance. For God’s anger to turn away from you, you have to turn toward Him. You have to agree with Him that your sin deserves His anger, and that the only way His anger against you can be averted is in the death of Jesus Christ. You can’t run from God; in fact, that’s not even the effect that God’s discipline is designed have. God’s corrections are designed draw you to him, not drive you from him. It’s a repeated refrain in Scripture. **Hos 6:1-3** “*Come, let us return to the Lord, for **he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.** After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.*” **Isa 30:26** “*The light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the Lord binds up the brokenness of his people, and **heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.***”

Friend, sinner, listen. God is a good and responsible father. He doesn’t let disobedience go unaddressed in his house. A good dad wants his son to know that sin hurts; but dad wants that hurt to come from his own loving hand. A good father takes no pleasure in disciplining his son, but he does it so that his son will be restored to an obedient relationship with him; and when dad’s done doing the discipline, he wants to be the one to hug his son while he’s still crying over the pain of that discipline. The same hand that disciplines is the hand that wipes away the tears. That’s God’s way with His own. He tears us, but only that he may heal us; he strikes us down, but he will bind us up. He heals the wounds inflicted by his blow. But the prerequisite to healing is “*Come, let us return to the Lord.*” We have to turn to him who struck us. The comfort is not for the one who turns away after being disciplined. It’s for the one who turns back, who climbs into dad’s lap, crying and hurting and sorry, and melts into his dad’s chest, dissolved in tears of repentance and reconciliation (cf. Amos 4:6-11).

But Israel wouldn’t have it. In v.13 they refuse to “...*inquire of the Lord of hosts.*” They refused to pray about the situation, and in vv.14-15, much of the blame is laid at the feet of the leaders. The elder and the honored man were functioning as the head, and the prophet was functioning as the tail. Power was corrupting prophecy. The honored man, as head, was manipulating the prophet, as the tail, so that the prophet ended up preaching whatever the honored man wanted to hear, which of course did not include preaching repentance. The prophet was preaching lies because he feared the elder and the honored man more than he feared God. The honored men didn’t want to be told that they themselves were the ones who needed to repent. And so they used their power and influence among God’s people to manipulate the prophets into speaking more comfortable things. This theme is so important that Isaiah will come back to it even more clearly in **Isa 30:9-11** *They are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord, who say to the seers, ‘Do not see,’ and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.’*

It was like the situation in **1Kings 22:13**, a few generations before Isaiah’s day, when Ahab was king in Israel and he and Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, were wondering whether to go to war against Ramoth-Gilead. They summon 400 prophets, and every one of them gives them a green light. “*All the prophets prophesied so and said, ‘Go up to Ramoth-gilead and triumph – the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.’*” But Jehoshaphat knew these prophets were just telling Ahab what he wanted to hear. So he sends for Micaiah, a faithful prophet. *And the messenger who went to summon Micaiah said to him, ‘Behold, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king. Let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably.’* It’s that kind of pressure that Isaiah is talking about in Isaiah 9. The honored men are wagging the tail of prophecy; the prophets are letting it happen; the people love it; it’s been going on at least since the days of Ahab; and so God is going to cut off both head and tail (cf. Jer 5:31; 28:1-17; Micah 2:6, 11).

The relevance for modern preaching is hard to miss. The honored men in churches can have an awful influence on preaching. It’s the job of the preacher not to cave in, and it’s the job of the congregation to

exercise a godly peer pressure that makes such influence seem totally out of place in the church. And it is in the congregation's best interest to recognize and root out that kind of wrong pressure on pastors, because in v.16 we read that *"those who guide this people have been leading them astray, and those who are guided by them are swallowed up."* If a congregation lets honored men control the content coming from the pulpit, that congregation will be swallowed up, which is judgment language. It's the same scenario as **2Tim 4:3-4** *"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."* That accumulation of teachers to suit their own passions is led by the honored men that Isaiah is talking about.

In Isa 9:17, God has run out of compassion because *'everyone is godless and an evil-doer, and every mouth speaks folly.'* The corruption has spread like gangrene through the whole body. The whole society, from king to cobbler, had become corrupt. Even the orphans and widows were not exempt, which is instructive for us. Just because someone is an orphan or a widow doesn't mean they're righteous. These particular orphans and widows were godless fools just like the rest of society, and God refused to have compassion on them. This is what's wrong with liberation theology, by the way. Liberation theology assumes that all God is interested in is releasing the yoke of social injustice and political oppression, and assumes that God is always on the side of the poor and oppressed no matter how they act, whether they repent or not. That's simply not true. Not everyone who suffers social injustice and political oppression and economic poverty is innocent.

This problem of honored men pulling the strings of the pulpit is a danger for every local church. Every local church can become full of godless, evil people who think they are fine with God, all because the honored men are able to manipulate weak-willed, spineless pastors. Isaiah shows us where that leads. Everyone in a church can still believe in God, still think that Jesus died for our sins; still think we're downtrodden and forlorn by the world; yet all those same people can still be practical atheists – godless – not in their stated theology, not in their neglect of public worship – but godless in the way they live, the way they refuse to apply their theology to their lives. Judah was consummately religious. They kept up all the right appearances; yet they were all evil-doers in God's eyes. And the impetus for the downturn comes when the elder and honored man becomes the head, and the weak-willed prophet who speaks lies becomes the tail. This is a call for us to be careful who we listen to even inside the church. We shouldn't necessarily take advice from Christian men simply because they're honored in the world, or old, or wealthy. And on the flip side, it's not enough for a preacher to be a gifted public speaker, or a dynamic personality, or a bleeding heart extrovert, or an omni-competent program manager. A preacher often has to have courage to stand against the honored men and preach God's word.

3. PRIDE CONSUMES CHURCHES (ISA 9:18-21)

We've already seen the word "devour" in verse 12, but here in vv.18-21 words for devouring and consuming start to predominate. **V.18** *wickedness consumes briars and thorns, it kindles thickets.* **V.19** *the land is scorched.* **V.20** *they devour on the left...each devours the flesh of his own arm.* **V.21** *Manasseh devours Ephraim and Ephraim devours Manasseh.'* V.19 *"Through the wrath of the lord of hosts the land is scorched, and the people are like fuel for the fire; no one spares another."* So this fire is not a purifying fire. It's a consuming fire, a fire with a voracious appetite. As pride refuses to repent in vv.13-17, it produces more and more wickedness in v.18, and that wickedness consumes the church. In fact, **the proud church begins to eat itself alive.** *"No one spares another.... Manasseh devours Ephraim, Ephraim devours Manasseh, and both are against Judah."* That's what it looks like to God when churches are distracted with bickering and infighting and gossip and slander and backbiting and complaining. But again, there are two fires. One is the fire of wickedness; but the other is the fire of God's wrath. Look there in v.19. *"Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts the land is scorched, and the people are like fuel for the fire."* God Himself is the threat behind the threat. The symptom is dissension in the church. But that very dissension, it appears, is a judgment from God Himself. The reason that wickedness is burning through the camp is that God is burning; God is angry. That's why the land is scorched. That's why the people are like fuel for the fire. God is angry.

What is God so angry about? He's angry about how his people bite and devour and destroy each other with their evil speech and evil schemes. And ultimately, He is angry about the practical atheism of his people. They are treating each other as if God doesn't know or doesn't see what they are doing to each other. They are devouring each other as if God won't notice or care. It's not doctrinal atheism. The Jews were still theists. It's practical atheism, which the Psalmist describes in Psalm 10. The practical atheist says in Ps 10:4 "There is no God," but what he really means by that is Ps 10:11, "he says in his heart, 'God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it.'" Or again in Ps 10:13 the practical atheist renounces God by saying "in his heart "[God] will not call to account?" God is there, but he's inconsequential. He is there, but he doesn't care, so he may as well not be there at all. But the Psalmist knows better in Ps 10:14 "But you do see, for you note mischief and vexation, that you may take it into your hands." The practical atheist is a fool, because he treats God as inconsequential, when he knows full well otherwise. But this practical atheism and the insatiable appetite it fosters is not satisfying. In Isa 9:20, the man is so hungry that after he slices meat and devours, he goes on to eat his own arm! Our pride awakens in us an appetite for superiority and recognition and self-indulgence that is a bottomless pit. And even after he eats his own arm, he's not satisfied. He's still hungry.

The shame of it is v.21. "Manasseh devours Ephraim, and Ephraim devours Manasseh; together they are against Judah." Civil war, among God's people! Yet it was still happening in the NT church of Galatia, because Paul had to write to them in **Gal 5:15** "The whole law is fulfilled in one word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you **bite and devour** one another, watch out that you are not **consumed** by one another." God's people are at war with each other. It's our pride that wants to be 'in' on the juicy bit of gossip. It's our pride that makes us get made, take our ball, and go home when we don't get our way in the church. Or, when we get our feelings hurt in the church, it's our pride that doesn't want to either admit it in gentle confrontation and reconciliation, or simply forbear it in love and persevere in that forbearance so that it doesn't fester and then seep out after weeks, or months, or years. That's how pride consumes churches – and we are not immune.

The church is a family – the family of faith. We are Ephraim and Manasseh – brothers in the same family, tribes in the same nation. We shouldn't be devouring each other. We shouldn't be at civil war with one another. But our pride wants to assume that we're always the ones with the legitimate beef against someone else, and that we couldn't possibly be wrong, or be over-reacting, or over-sensitive, or too demanding of others, or impatient with their faults. Pride refuses to be patient and gracious and forgiving and forgetful of the faults of others. Look at yourself, Christian. Don't you think you ever frustrate and exasperate others, or hurt their feelings without knowing it? Don't you think others, in this very room, are even now being gracious with your own faults, without you even being aware of it? Do you really think we can have a church where you never feel as if you need to bear with others in love? That church doesn't exist, and if you expect it to exist here, then you will ruin this church with your own unrealistic expectations of everyone else and how they should treat you.

Don't start a civil war in the church because you feel entitled to better treatment, more attention, or more influence. Acknowledge and confess your own sin against others. Recognize that others are bearing with you just as much or more than you are bearing with them. Humble yourself, Christian, for the sake of our corporate witness. Churches that are at civil war within themselves only disillusion unbelievers all the more.

And of course the worst of it is that churches at civil war with each other draw down the displeasure of God Himself. "For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is outstretched still." Civil war in churches is sometimes necessary for maintaining the truth of the gospel and for the cause of reform in the church. There is such a thing as "just war theory" in the church. There are some things that are worth fighting for. But our own pride is not one of them. And when our pride is what we're fighting for – pride of place, position, influence, attention, self-promotion – when self is what we're fighting for, the war itself becomes its own curse. Take it from Ephraim and Manasseh – you don't want civil war in the church. Peace in the church is well worth the price of humility. It will give a hundred-fold return on your investment of humility and self-denial. All too often

we expect everyone else to bear with our own sins and weaknesses, while we complain at the first instance of being called to bear with the sins and weaknesses of others. That's what leads to civil war in the church. Don't be the one to fire the first shot. Check your pride, Christian. What if we all expected to bear with everyone else, and make others bear with as little as possible in us? That's the kind of church we want to be. The greatest enemy of the church is not the world or even the devil. The greatest enemy of the church is the sin and pride that still remains within our own hearts, because it's already infiltrated the ranks. Watch out for yours.

4. PRIDE LEGISLATES OPPRESSION (ISA 10:1-4)

V.1 *“Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right....”* *“the poor of my people.”* God cares about public justice. He cares about the laws that govern society. It matters to God when rulers legalize oppression, not only because it's hurtful to people made in God's image, but also in part because human pride is what drives men to legalize cruelty toward others for the advantage of self. John Owen once said that every sin, if it had its way, would rise to become the highest species in the genus. If lust had its way, then every motion of lust would rise to adultery. If hatred had its way, every motion of hatred in our hearts would mature into murder. Pride is the same way. If it has its way, pride would always rise to legalize the domination of others and to legislate cruelty for the advantage of those who write the laws. God hates that, because it misrepresents His rule as the King of Kings. God is not cruel. God is good. He is good to His subjects. He punishes injustice, but His justice is a function of His righteous character and His goodness to the subjects of His kingdom whom He has sworn to defend. And at the risk of sounding too political, these are the kinds of criteria we should use to evaluate our own involvement in a participatory democracy. We can't idolize government by expecting it to be perfect or solve all our social problems. But we can't disengage from public life either, because God does care that human leaders don't legislate oppression in the public square.

This is one reason that I make a point to pray regularly for the different sectors of our government in the pastoral prayer – executive, judicial, and legislative. God commands us pray for kings and all those in authority over us in 1Tim 2:5, and there's no authority except from God. So God cares enough about public justice that He appoints every authority there is, and we should be praying that those authorities understand their accountability to God and act on it accordingly. I have to admit that I'm still sorting through all these public implications of the gospel myself, so I don't have much more to say on it specifically, other than that we should make room for disagreement among Christians on how we think the public implications of the gospel are best worked out in political and practical terms.

Public justice is so important to God, in fact, that in Isa 10:3-4 there is an inescapable punishment coming for leaders and legislators who mislead and mistreat people like this. The Judean diplomats might be hoping that Assyria will save them from the combined threat of Israel and Syria. But there was one threat that even Assyria could not handle – God himself. Here again, God is the ultimate threat. What we need to be saved from is not simply self, or the world, or the devil. What we need to be saved from is the judgment of God Himself (G.V. Smith, 252). *“For all this, his anger has not turned away, and His hand is stretched out still.”* The reason that refrain is so chilling is that God's outstretched hand was originally a picture of his strength in redeeming Israel out of slavery from Egypt. Now, his hand is stretched out for a very different purpose.

CONCLUSION

“For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.” God's hand is still stretched out today against all pride, all arrogance of heart. His sword is drawn against all those who disdain punishment, all those who neglect repentance, all those who consume churches, and those who legislate oppression. And the greatest question of this age, the greatest question of your life, friend, is: How can God's anger be turned away from me and my pride? There is a way, but there is only one. The world cannot save you from God. Only God can save you from God. That's why God had to send His only divine Son, Jesus Christ, to obey the whole law for His people, and then suffer the punishment due for their sins. **God has provided a propitiation for our**

pride, and His name is Jesus. That propitiation cleansed us of our sin and redirected the wrath of the Lord of Hosts away from us, and to Jesus. Jesus took all of God's judicial anger on behalf of all of God's people, once for all time. And for all those who have repented of their sins and hidden themselves in Jesus, God's anger has turned away. His hand is no longer stretched out in anger. It is now stretched out to redeem us from our sin and slavery. **We've seen that God's anger endures against all pride, because pride does four things among us:** it disdains discipline, it neglects repentance, it consumes churches, and it legislates oppression. **What's your pride been up to these days?**