

In Isaiah 1-12, Isaiah frequently referred to God as the Holy One of Israel.

Then, in the oracles concerning the nations, in chapters 13-27, there was only *one* use of “the Holy One.”

Now, in chapters 29-31, that designation is back.

What does it mean that God is the *Holy One*?

I like John Webster’s little book, *Holiness*.

He succinctly says that “God’s holiness is the holiness of the Father, Son and Spirit, the one who bears his holy name, who is holy in all his works, and who is the Holy One in our midst, establishing, maintaining, and perfecting righteous fellowship with the holy people of God.” (p32)

We often think of God’s holiness as that which makes him separate and different from us.

And that is true –

especially because our sin has separated us from God!!

Webster points out that God’s holiness not only makes him different and separate –

but God’s holiness *also* impels him to draw near to us –

that he might be *the Holy One in our midst*.

Of course, in order for a holy God to be in our midst,

something is going to have to be done about our un-holiness!

Because so long as we are unholy – the presence of God’s holiness would destroy us!

This theme is at the heart of the book of Isaiah.

The six woes in chapters 28-35 fit together.

All of them focus on the futility of trusting in Egypt against the power of Assyria, and call Judah to trust in Yahweh to deliver them.

Assyria is coming.

That is the relentless theme of chapters 1-35.

Assyria is coming.

Your only hope is to trust in the LORD,

because he alone can deliver you from their hand.

Tonight we will look at the Woe to Ariel,

and the Woe to those who hide from Yahweh.

First we look at the Woe to Ariel in 29:1-14

1. Woe to Ariel – the City Where David Encamped (v1-14)
a. The Coming Lamentation of Jerusalem (v1-4)

Ah, Ariel, Ariel,

the city where David encamped!

Add year to year;

let the feasts run their round.

² *Yet I will distress Ariel,*

and there shall be moaning and lamentation,

and she shall be to me like an Ariel.^[a]

³ *And I will encamp against you all around,*

and will besiege you with towers

and I will raise siegeworks against you.

⁴ *And you will be brought low; from the earth you shall speak,*

and from the dust your speech will be bowed down;

your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost,

and from the dust your speech shall whisper.

Jerusalem is here called “Ariel” which can mean “altar hearth” or “lion of God.”

Most likely here it means “altar hearth” –

certainly the language of feasts in verse 1 suggests a liturgical context.

What would it mean for Jerusalem to be God’s altar hearth?

The altar hearth is the place where sacrifices are consumed.

And the sacrifices were ordained by God as a picture of the final sacrifice of Jesus!

They were the way in which Israel could draw near to God.

To dwell in the presence of God means to dwell

in the presence of the fire of blessing *and* judgment.

Ariel is called “the city where David encamped.”

Isaiah 1-37 is focused around the house of David,

“The Book of the King.”

David had set up his camp at Jerusalem, and established his city there.

But now God is encamping at Jerusalem (v3).

He is besieging the City of David–Ariel, the place where God’s holy fire burns.

God is going to humble Jerusalem.

“You will be brought low; from the earth you shall speak,

and from the dust your speech will be bowed down;

your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost,

and from the dust your speech shall whisper.” (29:4)

In Genesis 2:7 God made man of the dust from the ground.

Now man is returned to dust.

Isaiah 27 said that God would return the city of man to the *tohu vbohu*,

the primeval state of being formless and void--barren and empty,

and now God says that Man—more precisely, the house of David—
will be returned to dust.
And from the dust your speech shall whisper.

God promised in chapters 13-27 that he would cast down every haughty city of man,
and here that city is Jerusalem.

But if Jerusalem is brought down to the dust,
if Jerusalem's voice is the voice of a ghost
her enemies shall be like "small dust"
—they shall be like chaff which the wind drives away (v5).

b. The Coming Rescue of Zion (v5-8)

⁵ *But the multitude of your foreign foes shall be like small dust,
and the multitude of the ruthless like passing chaff.*

In other words, God is coming in judgment against Jerusalem – against Ariel –
but then –

*And in an instant, suddenly,
⁶ you will be visited by the LORD of hosts
with thunder and with earthquake and great noise,
with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.*

In verses 1-4 God said that *he* would encamp against Jerusalem.
But now, he will come in judgment against their foes:

The visitation of Yahweh will first humble Jerusalem,
but then he will destroy her enemies,
and all who had besieged the city of God will be "like a dream, a vision of the night."
(Read v 8)

⁷ *And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel,
all that fight against her and her stronghold and distress her,
shall be like a dream, a vision of the night.*

⁸ *As when a hungry man dreams, and behold, he is eating,
and awakes with his hunger not satisfied,
or as when a thirsty man dreams, and behold, he is drinking,
and awakes faint, with his thirst not quenched,
so shall the multitude of all the nations be
that fight against Mount Zion.*

The nations may dream of conquering Mt. Zion –
but God says, "in your dreams!"

Jesus reflects on this when he says that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church.
There will be many who oppose the city of God.
But they cannot prevail.

God will again deliver his people from their foes.

You might think that this would be good news.
You might think that the people of God would rejoice at such a great salvation.

But they don't.

Remember that Isaiah was called to say to this people:

“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.
Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.” (6:9-10)

Jerusalem does not see.

c. The Drunken Stupor of Those Who Will Not See (v9-12)

⁹ *Astonish yourselves^[b] and be astonished;*

blind yourselves and be blind!

Be drunk,^[c] but not with wine;

stagger,^[d] but not with strong drink!

¹⁰ *For the LORD has poured out upon you*

a spirit of deep sleep,

and has closed your eyes (the prophets),

and covered your heads (the seers).

And so Isaiah says, “be stunned”, be indecisive, be bewildered, be astonished.

Blind yourselves and be blind!

You don't even need wine to be drunk!

You stagger even without strong drink!

Why has Jerusalem failed to understand God's deliverance?

Because God has poured out his spirit upon them.

No—not the gift of the Holy Spirit,

but a spirit of deep sleep.

He has closed their eyes.

The prophets—who should have seen what God was doing—
are blind.

The seers—who should have had visions from God—
have their heads covered—

in other words, their access to God has been removed.

¹¹ And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed." ¹² And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot read."

The vision of God's deliverance has become to you like the words of a sealed book.
And no one can read it.
No one can understand what God is doing.
We will hear in Isaiah 37 how God struck down the Assyrian army.
But Judah will not understand.
Judah cannot read the words of God,
because their hearts are hardened against him.

Paul quotes from verse 10 in Romans 11:8:

"What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.
The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened,
as it is written,
'God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear,'
down to this very day."

In Romans 11, Paul is explaining the "partial hardening" that has come upon Israel,
"until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.
And in this way all Israel will be saved..." (11:25-26)

Paul says this – because that's what Isaiah had taught!
Jerusalem was the Ariel – the altar hearth –
the place where the atoning sacrifice is made.
The judgment of God against sin – against death –
falls upon Israel – because Israel sinned.

And through that judgment salvation will come to the nations.
But "if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world,
what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" (11:15)

Isaiah explains the problem in verses 13-14:

d. Our Problem Is Our Distant Hearts – Which Only God Can Overcome (v13-14)

*¹³ And the Lord said:
"Because this people draw near with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me,*

and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,

Jesus quotes this in Matthew 15:8-9.

The problem in Isaiah's day still haunts the people of God in Jesus' day.

They behold the wondrous works of God with blind eyes.

God delivered Jerusalem by killing 185,000 Assyrian soldiers.

And you couldn't see that?

Seven hundred years later God will send his own Son to redeem his people,
but while he came to his own, his own did not receive him.

Their hearts are still far away.

We always need to beware of this problem!

It's easy to "draw near with our mouth" –

it's easy to *say* that we honor God, we love God, we praise God!

But is your *heart* near God?

Or is your heart far away?

What we can we do about this?

That's part of our problem.

We are not very good at changing our own hearts!

God must act.

God must do something to change *us!*

And so Isaiah concludes the Woe upon Ariel, by saying in v14,

*¹⁴ therefore, behold, I will again
do wonderful things with this people,
with wonder upon wonder;
and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden."*

How will God do this?

God's wondrous works of redemption are only comprehensible to the believing heart.

Paul uses this verse in 1 Corinthians 1:19 to show

that the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

Human wisdom cannot understand the things of God.

We must humble ourselves and learn wisdom from the LORD.

Paul says that God will change our hearts through the foolishness of *preaching*.

If you feel as though your heart is far away –

what can you do?
You can't change your own heart –
but you *can* seek the LORD – seek his face –
devote yourself to the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers.

So the first woe warns Jerusalem that they have a spiritual problem
far worse than the presenting problem of the Assyrian army.

The second woe reminds Judah that God is still sovereign (29:15-24).

2. Woe to Those Who Hide from the LORD (v15-24)

a. The Potter and the Clay: Turning the World Upside Down (v15-16)

i. He Did Not Make Me

ii. He Knows Nothing – He Does Not Understand

¹⁵ *Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel,
whose deeds are in the dark,
and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"*

What is Judah trying to hide?

This will be revealed most explicitly in chapter 30.

They are trying to hide their treaty with Egypt.

God had made it clear that Egypt was no refuge.

As we saw last time,

the last thing that the northern kingdom of Ephraim did
was to enter an alliance with Egypt.

Egypt failed Ephraim—and Egypt will fail Judah.

And yet Judah thinks that they can hide this from God.

They think that they can keep God's favor,

even as they break covenant with him by entering into an Egyptian alliance.

It is in this context that Isaiah uses the language of the Potter and the clay for the first time.

¹⁶ *You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,
that the thing made should say of its maker,
"He did not make me";
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,
"He has no understanding"?*

There are five instances of the image of the potter in Isaiah.

The first is in our passage tonight.

And it begins with a plain connection to Genesis 2 and the formation of man.

As the first woe spoke of Jerusalem returning to dust,

so also here we are called to remember the creation.
God is the maker of all things.
Can anyone suppose that he has no understanding?
Or as Paul puts it in Romans 9:20,
“Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘why have you made me like this?’”

The rulers of Judah have turned things upside down,
and have exalted themselves over Yahweh.
But God is about to turn everything upside down again.

Some of you have noticed that I have been emphasizing the importance of creation –
and particularly how we were made in the image of God.

The doctrine of creation is essential to how we understand ourselves.

God made us.
Too often, we act as though God isn’t there.
It’s easy to think, “Oh, well, he didn’t do about it *last time* –
so I can get away with it again...”

When we do that, we are saying, in effect, “He did not make me...
He has no understanding.”

b. “A Very Little While” – Humanity Restored (v17-21)

¹⁷ *Is it not yet a very little while
until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest?*

¹⁸ *In that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a book,
and out of their gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.*

Lebanon will be turned into a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field will be regarded as a forest.
The cities will become fields,
and the fields will become wild.
The deaf will hear the words of a book,
and the blind will see through the gloom.
God has blinded the eyes of the rulers,
but he will open the eyes of the poor and humble.

In verses 11-12, even the readers could not read the book.
But now the deaf shall hear the words of a book.

In verse 10 the eyes of the prophets were shut fast –
but now the eyes of the blind shall see!

Jesus says that this is what he came to do.

In Matthew 11:5, John the Baptist asks if Jesus is the one –
or if they should look for another.
And Jesus uses Isaiah 29:18 in his reply.

Jesus came in order that he might bring salvation to all the earth.

Jesus opens the eyes of the blind – he grants that the deaf might hear!

Therefore, (v19)

¹⁹ *The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,
and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.*

²⁰ *For the ruthless shall come to nothing
and the scoffer cease,*

*and all who watch to do evil shall be cut off,
²¹ who by a word make a man out to be an offender,
and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate,
and with an empty plea turn aside him who is in the right.*

The rulers of Judah are not only guilty of entering foreign alliances,
but also of oppressing the poor and needy.

Verse 21 says that they have borne false witness and perverted justice.

Those who ally with the enemies of God will surely mistreat the people of God.

After all, when you forget the LORD –
you don't care about the things that he cares about.

But Isaiah says that the ruthless shall come to nothing.

What does it mean to be ruthless?

The ruthless man will stop at nothing to get what he wants.

But Isaiah says that the ruthless man will become nothing!

The scoffer shall cease.

The scoffer is not just one who mocks and ridicules.

The scoffer is one who uses words to tear down and destroy.

(Paul will speak of the “reviler” in a similar way).

And all who watch to do evil shall be cut off –

those who by a word make a man out to be an offender,
and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate,
and with an empty plea turn aside him who is in the right.

It's easy right now to see this happening all around us!

I'm not sure that Isaiah was thinking of modern identity politics
when he said, "who by a word make a man out to be an offender" –
but this is literally happening in our day!

If you use the wrong word – you can be shunned pretty quick!
And it's a land mine out there!

There are snares and traps wherever you go!
And if you should "reprove someone in the gate" –
in other words, if you try to point out the problem in the public square?

Well, let's just say that we live in a day when the ruthless rule
and the scoffers lay their snares...

But this is why Jesus came!

We do not yet see everything in subjection under his feet!
But we see Jesus – sitting at the right hand of the Father,
crowned with glory and honor, because of the suffering of death.

But there is still hope for the meek (read 22-24).

c. "They Will Sanctify My Name" – Jacob Restored (v22-24)

²² *Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob:*

*"Jacob shall no more be ashamed,
no more shall his face grow pale.*

²³ *For when he sees his children,
the work of my hands, in his midst,
they will sanctify my name;
they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.*

²⁴ *And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding,
and those who murmur will accept instruction."*

Are you tempted to murmur?

Are you tempted to grumble against God's providence?

In the cross of Jesus, God has demonstrated his faithfulness to his promises to Abraham.

This is the first time that Abraham has been named in Isaiah.

Abraham is only named four times in the whole book.

But God's promises to Abraham underlie the message of the prophet.

And here, the focus is on how the LORD *redeemed* Abraham.

The idea of redemption is one of "buying back," "bailing out,"

“rescuing from trouble.”

The LORD redeemed Abraham when he brought Abraham’s seed out of Egypt.
Usually, though, the prophets speak of God redeeming *Jacob* – or Israel.
But, of course, if Jacob can be used as shorthand for speaking of his descendents,
then so can Abraham!

And we keep seeing in this section of Isaiah
an emphasis on how God’s blessing – God’s salvation –
will come upon the nations.
So it is hardly surprising for Isaiah to bring in Abraham here!

Because in Abraham’s Seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

God will yet deliver his people and bring back the wayward.

Both Isaiah and John are calling you to remember that God is the sovereign Lord
of creation and redemption.

You may think that you see the enemies of Christ in power.
You may think that God’s purposes have been thwarted.
But God remains the Potter who molded all things.
He has molded some vessels for destruction,
and others for glory.
Your task is to *sanctify* the Holy One of Jacob
and “stand in awe of the God of Israel.”

What does it mean to *sanctify* the Holy One of Jacob?
How can *you* sanctify God?!
It’s like Jesus taught us to pray,
“Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.”
May your name be treated as holy.
May your name be sanctified.

Sure, God’s name *is* Holy.
But when we act as though God didn’t make us –
when we act as though God doesn’t see us –
we are treating God’s name like dirt.

But when we stand in awe of him –
when we marvel at his wondrous works in Jesus Christ –
when we humble ourselves before him –
then we sanctify the Holy One of Jacob.