



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 11 Issue 18

May 6, 2012

A Conflict of Wills

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* details the adventures of a sailor, Captain Ahab, and his obsession with the hunting down and killing of a large whale. Ahab's preoccupation with this whale is masterfully brought out giving us a graphic portrayal of man's struggle with obsession. Yet there is much more to this book than meets the eye for ultimately Melville penned this book to describe man's obsession to overcome God and so rule, direct, and control Him.

Yet such an endeavor is folly. For in seeking to control God we, like Jonah, ultimately destroy ourselves. We see it in *Moby Dick*. In the end, Captain Ahab is overcome by the whale which is none other than Jesus Christ. We pick up the story with Ahab's final words before plunging a harpoon into the whale.

Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee;

from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee...Thus, I give up the spear!'

The harpoon was darted; the stricken whale flew forward; with igniting velocity the line ran through the grooves; ran foul. Ahab stooped to clear it; he did clear it; but the flying turn caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the boat, ere the crew knew he was gone.

The inspiration for Melville's book obviously came from the Bible and the many passages which describe man's hatred of God and so the battle that rages between the sinner and God (cf. Romans 1:21-23; Psalm 14; Genesis 3:1).

That conflict is graphically portrayed in the opening chapters of Isaiah. As with Jeremiah¹ and Ezekiel², Isaiah opens his prophecy with a lengthy preface, chapters 1-5. In this section, Isaiah doesn't name nations³ nor does he give any dateable material; he is being purposely vague. Yet it is clear that the prophet is writing at a time when Judah is engaged in a massive conflict, most notably against God.

Isaiah 5:25-26, "On this account the anger of the Lord has burned against His people, and He has stretched out His hand against them and struck them down, and the mountains quaked; and their corpses lay like refuse in the middle of the streets. For all this His anger is not spent, but His hand is still stretched out. He will also lift up a standard to the distant nation, and will whistle for it from the ends of the earth; and behold, it will come with speed swiftly."

In time, Isaiah will identify "this nation" as well as discuss the serious trials and conflicts in which Judah was engaged. Yet in this section, chapters 1-5, the prophet intends simply to give the overall tenor of Isaiah and so Judah's struggle with God. Notice some of the peculiarities. Isaiah 2 marks an intentional shift in Isaiah's focus.

Isaiah 2:1, "The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem."

The way this is written, it sounds as though Isaiah just began his prophecy. From this we conclude that Isaiah 2 was intended to be a distinct section and so not a continuation of chapter 1. Further notice that through the use of a Hebrew grammatical tool called *Inclusio* (where the writer begins and ends an intended section using the same words and/or subject matter), Isaiah brackets the contents of Isaiah 2:2-4:6 and so makes this section a literary unit in the Hebrew.

Isaiah 2:2, "Now it will come about that in the last days..."

Then Isaiah talks about the blessings of the Lord.

Isaiah 4:2, "In that day..."

With this once again he talks about the blessings of the Lord. This indicates to us that Isaiah purposely structured this preface to include three main sections:

- Chapter 1 which contains a description of what Judah had become in their sin.
- Chapters 2-4 in which Isaiah places God’s glorious plan for Jerusalem next to what Jerusalem had become on account of their sin, and then
- Chapter 5 where God uses the metaphor of a vineyard to prove that He had done everything possible to protect Judah from its sin, yet the nation simply wouldn’t respond.

Through it all it is clear that a conflict had been raging between the people of Judah and their obligation to serve the Lord, and it is this conflict that I want us to consider this morning and next week.

The Will of the Nation

Isaiah 1:2-4, “Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; for the Lord speaks [Isaiah uses the form of a Covenant Lawsuit by which God here sues His people for their love, devotion, and worship], ‘Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me. An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master’s manger, *but* Israel does not know, My people do not understand.’ Alas, sinful nation, people weighed down with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly! They have abandoned the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away from Him.”-

This passage details just some of the problem. God intended to relate to His people as “a Father to a child.” Yet Judah resented this and so revolted. Now what is amazing about this is that Judah’s rebellion placed them lower than an “Ox” or “Donkey.” These dumb, beasts of burden know their master and so submit when he calls. Yet not so with Judah!

In their rebellion against God they had become “weighed down with their sin” (v. 4a). In fact, their rebellion was “multi-generational” (v. 4b). As a result, they “abandoned the Lord” (v. 4c) and so “cultivated a hatred for Him” (v. 4d)... even though they continued to uphold the outward form of their religion (vv. 11-15).

This again is only a sampling of their sin.

- While the nation held to a form of godliness (Isaiah 1:11-14), they had long since denied its power!
- In fact, if we detailed the sin of the nation referenced here by Isaiah, we would discover that Judah had become rebellious (Isaiah 1:2) and corrupt (Isaiah 1:4).
- Religiously they were unacceptable- ceremonially defiled (Isaiah 1:11).
- They lived like demons during the week bloodying their hands with their lust (Isaiah 1:15). But on Sunday they “poured it on” mouthing long, “godly” prayers thinking that the Lord would be impressed (Isaiah 1:15).
- They were degenerate (Isaiah 1:21a) and spiritually unfaithful to the Lord (Isaiah 1:21b). They had become enamored with money and material prosperity (Isaiah 1:23a).
- In fact, they were guilty of neglecting their most fundamental calling as a covenant nation- caring for the orphan and widow, (Isaiah 1:23b).
- No longer was God’s word that which influenced them; rather they had become conformed to

the secular nations which surrounded them (Isaiah 2:6a).

- Not surprisingly, during this time they were entangled with unholy and ungodly alliances with various and sundry the nations (Isaiah 2:6b).
- They had become false worshippers- filling their land with every kind of idol, trinket, and good luck charm imaginable (Isaiah 2:8).
- As a people they were proud, independent, and so self-dependent (Isaiah 2:11).
- Their land was filled with injustice (Isaiah 5:7).
- And a spirit of individualism pervaded their land such that many neglected the “community” which God gives in the form of the body of Christ (Isaiah 5:8).
- In fact, they were so emboldened in their sin, they actually welcomed the supposed “*wrath of God*”...

Isaiah 5:18a, 19, “Woe to those who... say, ‘Let Him make speed, let Him hasten His work, that we may see *it*; and let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near and come to pass, that we may know *it!*’”

- With such a disposition, they became crooked and perverse, calling evil good and good evil (Isaiah 5:20).
- In fact for many, their greatest goal in life was becoming “a hero in drinking wine” (Isaiah 5:22).

Such had become the nation during the era in which Isaiah lived. In fact, from the rest of this prophecy we could add much, much more by way of description. Yet this we do know:

- Judah no longer was willing to endure the word of the Lord (cf. Isaiah 6:9-10).
- No longer did the nation exist to honor and glorify their King. No longer did they delight in His presence.

They now were about themselves and so their agenda, rights, wants, desires, and needs! Family of God has this become your will today? Has your love for Christ grown cold? While you “hold to a form of godliness” have you “denied its power”? This power rests upon a close, abiding relationship with Christ by which we place ourselves at His disposal to do whatever He wills.

A passage like the one before us must sober us and cause us to examine our own heart! If God were to send a prophet today what would be the message given to the church? Look around, could you possibly say that it wouldn’t be any different from that which He gave to His people during the era of the prophets!

In our prosperity and passion for religious fulfillment, exciting worship, and entertainment, we have become as God’s people in Isaiah’s day!

What ought to characterize our churches therefore is NOT a happy-clappy fellowship, but one of intense mourning on account of their sin and so a turning unto to God! Yet practically speaking, how is this done? That will be the answer we consider next time as we finish our examination of Isaiah 1-5. For now, notice the result of the people’s rebellion.

The Resulting Chaos

Isaiah 1:5-7, “Where will you be stricken again, *as* you continue in *your* rebellion? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart is faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head there is nothing sound in it, *only* bruises, welts, and raw wounds, not pressed out or bandaged, nor softened with oil. Your land is desolate, your cities are burned with fire, your fields- strangers are devouring them in your presence; it is desolation, as overthrown by strangers.”

At this point, Isaiah most likely is penning this as a prophetic foreshadowing. The prophet is seeing the people/city/nation as it would be in the not-so-distant future. No doubt, this is why the people of Judah oft-times thought that Isaiah was mad. They weren't in desolation! Their bodies weren't ill! Their land wasn't besieged! Their cities weren't burned! Yet, this is what they would be in short order, in fact they were spiritually this way before the Lord at the writing of this prophecy.

From this we see the devastating effects of sin. Isaiah saw it, do you?! Think of a rebellious individual today.

- The world sees a self-made man. Do you see a man with lesions all over his body on account of his pride?
- The world sees an independent thinker. Do you see a man enslaved to his folly?
- The world sees the life of the party. Do you see a lost, empty individual seeking the approval of man in order to get by?
- The world sees a free spirit. Do you see a person enslaved to pleasure?
- The world sees a fun time? Do you see a path that leads to death?

Proverbs 14:13, “Even in laughter the heart may be in pain, and the end of joy may be grief.”- the laughter of the sinner is rather shallow. For so many people today sold to sin, their lives are a living hell filled with sorrow and grief. They drink and carry on NOT because they are free, BUT because they are endeavoring to inoculate themselves to the bitterness of life!

These are the “wages of sin” that accompanied Judah's rebellion against God. In fact, there is much, much more here. As a consequence of their sin, not necessarily a punishment, but most certainly a consequence of living without God, Judah would suffer greatly.

Proverbs 14:34, “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to *any* people.”

When Judah turned its back on God in their hatred for Him, they reaped many a foul consequence.

- God would turn His hand against the nation and so deprive it of His covenant blessing, Isaiah 1:25.
- Those who remain in rebellion would be crushed by God, Isaiah 1:28.
- Spiritually they would wither and dry up, Isaiah 1:29-30.
- Their pride would be humbled, Isaiah 2:17.
- Their alliances with man- that which they deemed to be their greatest hope- would fail them,

Isaiah 2:22.

- Their crops would fail and their food supply would vanish, Isaiah 3:1.
- The nation would be subject to unqualified leadership, Isaiah 3:2-4.
- Oppression, injustice, and unfairness would abound, Isaiah 3:5.
- In time, the strain and stress would be too much to bear, and it would show on their faces and in their bodies, Isaiah 3:9.
- The protection that is inherent in a covenant relationship with God would be removed, Isaiah 5:5a.
- As such, Judah would become prey to any and all stronger than they, Isaiah 5:5b.
- The environs of Judah would become a spiritual, emotional, and physical wasteland, Isaiah 5:6.
- The land would become unfruitful, Isaiah 5:10.
- And all of this would be but the birth pangs as eventually Judah would go into exile, Isaiah 5:13.
- Yet before that time, many a child of God would meet an untimely death, Isaiah 5:14.
- That which they thought was their strength would rot within them; they would become sick in their sin, Isaiah 5:24.
- In the end, they would be enslaved to that which they dreaded most, Isaiah 5:26-30.

Truly, it would be as:

Isaiah 3:11, "Woe to the wicked [the child of God who knows the word of God but must have his sin]! *It will go badly with him*, for what he deserves will be done to him."

These are "the wages of sin." It is not a pretty sight, but a very real one, being worked out today in this land in countless thousands of people's lives!

This is why bad things happen in this state of sin and misery. It is NOT because God is weak, passive, or indifferent. RATHER, it is because this world is broken and so suffering under the wages of sin!

Most of us know that meth is not a good thing to take, but many men ignore the truth and give into their "rebel" personality. They instantly become addicted which devastates everything about them.

- He loses his marriage and children.
- He loses his job.
- His weight declines as well as his health.
- And soon he is nothing more than a shell of a man.

Now how rational is it to blame his parents for his condition? How about his wife or kids? "*What an evil family he has. Look what they've done!*" What would you say if someone said this? You'd correct them and say, "No! He did it to himself. Such are the wages of meth!"

The awful things experienced by man in this world are the wages of sin! To blame God, to write a book and title it, "Why do bad things happen to good people" is a most irrational question! In the words of Jeremiah:

Lamentations 3:39, “Why should *any* living mortal, or *any* man, offer complaint in view of his sins?”

The opening chapters of Isaiah graphically bring this out! Had Judah trusted the Lord, they would have soared on the wings of eagles! Instead as a nation, their history was nothing more than their suffering on account of the wages of their sin. With this, we are brought to will of God.

The Will of God

While Judah was off doing its own thing and so reaping the wages of their sin, what was God’s disposition? What ultimately was He planning for His people? We can just imagine the torture, huh?

Isaiah 2:1-4,⁴ “The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. Now it will come about that in the last days, the mountain of the house of the Lord [this is a reference to Jerusalem, the city of God, the place where God deigned to dwell with His people...] will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. [This is a prophecy of the New Covenant era and the growth and expansion of the church] And many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.’ For the law will go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem [this occurs as the people of God engage the world around them and so bring His word to bear upon them]. And He will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples; and they will hammer their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war.”

As the people of God rejected the Lord in favor of Baal, the gods of the nations, and so their sin, where was God moving Redemptive History? Toward that climatic moment when Christ would come to the earth, establish His Kingdom, and so bring the truth of God to bear upon the nations. This was God’s response to the sins of His people! What ultimately will be the result? Notice how this section ends.

Isaiah 4:2-6, “In that day the Branch of the Lord [which is a Messianic title⁵ and so a reference to Christ, His Kingdom, and so His people] will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth *will* be the pride and the adornment of the survivors of Israel. And it will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy- everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem. When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion [lit. their vomit], and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, then the Lord will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night [In other words, the Lord Himself once again would take up residence in the city (cf. Exodus 13:21-22; 19:18)]; for over all the glory will be a canopy [literally “a marriage chamber” where the bride and groom spend their first night together (cf. Psalm 19:6; Joel 2:16)]. And there will be a shelter to *give* shade from the heat by day, and refuge and protection from the storm and the rain.”

This passage gives seven promises to the people of God who at the time were laden with sin-someday:

- God would make them beautiful, v. 2.
- They would embody that which the redeemed becomes in Christ: holy, v. 3.
- The filth of sin would be completely removed, v. 4a.
- Relationships would be restored, v. 4b.
- God's Shekinah glory once again would rest upon His people, v. 5a.]
- Once again, God's people enjoy a deep, abiding relationship with God, v. 5b.
- And they would live in peace and security never again threatened by the wages of sin, v. 6.

Does this not give new meaning to the promise found in?

Jeremiah 29:11, "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'"

As we'll see when we get there, this passage was given to God's people in the face of their impending national doom, Judah was going into exile on account of their sin! Yet, as we see in Isaiah:

- God's disposition toward His sinning people was/is not that of, "Because of your sin I'm going to get you! Watch out!"
- RATHER, prior to the terror of "the wages of sin" God was planning for the restoration and welfare of His people.

It is the same in our day as well! We most definitely do things intending evil, don't we? Sometimes we accidentally sin. But most of the time we do it on purpose, not caring what God's word or will is at the time. Now when we are thinking clearly, we are ashamed of this and so repent. But we can't help but to fear what God must be thinking, nor what He must be planning as a result. And so as sinners, we walk around waiting for the next shoe to drop. And then bad happens, really bad. And we soon deduce that the payment for our sin is not commensurate with the seriousness of our sin after all, it was only:

- A little sin.
- A white lie.
- A brief look.

No one was hurt. *Why is God being so mean?*

Yet family of God, I hope you see that there is no such thing as a "little sin." If no one sinned and you committed that sin you consider to be "little," all the horror of sin that has ravished this world would still be here. Again, there is no such thing as a little sin. Yet having said this, what ought we to deduce from Isaiah concerning God's disposition toward us when we sin?

- He is NOT angered unto wrath.
- RATHER in His mercy and grace, He continues to work out His redemptive plan in our lives by

which someday we will be delivered from the presence of sin altogether!

Revelation 21:4, "...He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be *any* death; there shall no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

It is toward this moment in Redemptive History that God is moving in all that He does and is doing in your life. This is why Paul could say this:

Philippians 1:6, "*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*"

Do you understand that though we in our sin mean it for evil, God in His grace always means it for good? How ought we to respond to such a glorious God as this? What would this God have us to do? We will answer this question in another sermon.

End Notes

¹ cf. Jeremiah 1:4-19.

² cf. Ezekiel 1:1-3:27.

³ ...except for Isaiah 2:6 in which he mentions the Philistines. Yet this is merely in passing and not in reference to the threat of the nation, but the fact that Judah had begun to look a lot like this wicked people group.

⁴ So glorious a picture was this that Micah later used this in his prophecy, cf. Micah 4:1-3!

⁵ cf. Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on May 6, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church