

Isaiah 1:21-31

Faithful City—Redux

Because people are running headlong into the ruin of idolatry and injustice, the Sovereign Lord works mightily to redeem and restore righteousness.

The problem: The inseparable pair of idolatry and injustice (1:21-23).

- What Isaiah is saying is “that social injustice is ultimately the result of refusal to entrust oneself to a fair and loving God.”—John N. Oswalt
- v. 21a “faithful city has become a whore”—idolatry inevitable fruit of turning from God (cf. vv. 28-29 “forsaken the Lord” but desiring and choosing “oaks” and “gardens”)
- vv. 21b-23 “but now murderers”—idolatry inevitably leads to injustice
 - The “best” (silver/best wine) is corrupted
 - Leaders (princes) embody the people
 - Love of money/position/power/comfort thwarts justice
- Prostitution is not for the love of sex or of the persons engaged. It is a desperate, mercenary attempt to purchase something else. The prostitute abandons dignity and principle to get “it.”
- We become what we worship: What you seek to give you stability in life and to overcome challenges in life is your god. This will shape your values, policies, laws, etc.
- What are the gods of our society? You can trace back from the injustices of our society to the gods that have produced them.

The solution: The inseparable pair of redemption and righteousness (1:24-27).

- Because the Sovereign Lord “returns” His hand upon His people (v. 25), and “returns” their judges to justice (v. 26), His people “return” to Him (v. 27).
- v. 24a 3 names: The Lord (sovereignty); Yahweh of Hosts (military power); Mighty One of Israel (saving power)
- “relief” and “avenge” speak of the satisfaction of justice for God
- v. 25 “I will turn My hand against you” is a bit more ambiguous in the Hebrew:
 - “turn” is the word often translated “repent” and may better be translated “return”
 - “against you” is just as likely to be translated as “upon you”
 - “I will return My hand upon you” contains a promise and a warning, as God’s hand is mighty to save and to destroy. What follows is both a promise to redeem and a warning to the unrepentant.
 - Smelting is a “painful” process that involves the purgation of impurities, but yields a precious product. That is sanctification (Heb. 12:11).
- v. 26a “restore your judges . . . and your counselors” – sound leadership a true blessing; “as at the first . . . the beginning”—idealized Jerusalem, with David/Solomon’s zenith as type
- v. 26b “City of Righteousness (Hebrew: zedek)”—Pre-Israelite tradition of Jerusalem’s reputation for righteousness witnessed by names of early kings Melchizedek and Adonizedek.

According to the Jewish Midrash Genesis Rabbah 43.6 Adoni-Zedek means “Lord of Zedek” with “Zedek” being the alternate place-name for Jerusalem. Jerusalem, as the City of David, is associated with justice and righteousness in reality, much like Camelot, as the City of Arthur, would be associated with the Knights’ Code of chivalry in legend. Of course, this realization will manifest fully and finally at the consummation of the Kingdom of Christ (Rev. 21:9-27). “The Faithful City” brings us all the way back around—problem solved.

- v. 27 “by justice . . . by righteousness”—redemption does not come at the expense of righteousness; the righteousness by which people are redeemed is not ours, since the very best (silver/best wine) is corrupt (cf. Isa. 64:6); God saves us by His righteousness by satisfying His righteous requirements in His Servant (Isa. 53:10-11); so God is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26)
- “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matt. 5:14). You are the citizens of Redeemed Zion. How does your life and this church show itself to be the City of Righteousness? Do we bring justice to the fatherless (v. 23)? Does the widow’s cause come to us (v. 23)? As those who are counted righteous in Christ, are we bringing righteousness and justice to the nation?
 - Problem with social gospel—does not take seriously the fallen human condition; no social program of education and values training will bring justice; only a supernatural work of God in our hearts
 - The gospel has as many social implications as it does personal implications.
- “The Lord does not destroy the forest of human pride to leave us a field of stumps (6:13). Rather, the destruction is in order that the true glory of humanity, that which it derives from its Lord, may appear (66:9, 13, 21, 22).”—John N. Oswalt

The warning: The inseparable pair of repudiation and ruin (1:28-31).

- All are warned not to presume upon God’s grace. Those upon whom His hand returns in grace and mercy He turns in repentance. Those who do not turn in repentance find His hand heavy indeed. Those who repudiate God’s gospel will end in ruin.
- vv. 28-31—Idolatrous People who foolishly boast in the strength they receive from their gods: rebels, sinners, forsake the Lord, desire oaks and choose gardens (“sacred” space for idols), the strong and his work (idols/idol worship)
- We become what we worship: The idols of our hearts do not have life in themselves, so they cannot impart life to us. Thus idolaters become like an oak, not in its strength and majesty as nourished by God, but “like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water.” Their furious pursuit of their idols will produce a spark. Since they are dry wood they become kindling for the fire, and are consumed with their idolatrous works. Having rejected the Lord, there is none who can put the fire out.
- How can we sound the warning for those who are about to consume themselves in pursuit of false gods?