

The Lord will enter into judgment

Foundations

By Paul Yeulett

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Grove Chapel
Camberwell Grove
London
SE5 8RF

Website: www.grovechapel.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/grovechapel

Dear friends, brothers and sisters, I intend to begin a new series this morning and this evening. If you're wondering where we're going perhaps with this passage, we'll be in this passage I intend only this morning but I want to come back to the first words I uttered at the beginning of the service. If the foundations are destroyed, what shall the righteous do? I'm sure I'm far from being alone in this building this morning in thinking that as we look around us at our world, at our society, at our country, at our city, we are seeing good, godly, lasting foundations being undermined and ripped up and destroyed, and it is time for the righteous, it is time for God's people to ask the question, "Have we lost a sense of what those good foundations are? How can we recover and rediscover the foundations that the Lord himself has established?"

Today I want to give attention to this chapter, chapter 3 of Isaiah. I've read it to you, we've read it together. It's a sad chapter, isn't it? It's a serious chapter. It's an alarming chapter. There are many verses I could land on to focus on but I'll just for today, as it were, zoom in on verse 14 simply to get us going. "The LORD will enter into judgment." What is this chapter about? This chapter is the unfolding of the righteous good, wise judgment of God against his people as they turn away from him. It's an alarming chapter. It's not a chapter that you might preach at a great evangelistic event. Maybe, maybe not. Or preach at a wedding, or preach at Christmas or Easter or anything like that, but it's in God's word and I want to ask the question this morning two or three times as I go through this chapter: does history repeat itself? Are we now pretty much where Isaiah 3 is? We may be because the word of God is always up-to-date. The Bible is always a book for today and for now. The Bible never grows obsolete and irrelevant. We should never say, "Well, that was then. The past is a different country. Today things are completely different." I would suggest to you that they are far from being very different and that we are somewhere in Isaiah 3 in the year 2019 here in London this morning.

But in preaching from this passage, I do want to, I suppose, list some dangers that I might fall into this morning and that we might fall into this morning if we're not careful, and I don't want that we should fall into these particular dangers. I'll be brief. There are three dangers that some of us, and I think me especially, fell that we could fall into. One of them is the danger of simply being nostalgic and saying, "It was better in the old days." If

only we could turn the clock back to some halcyon golden period, whenever that might be. There is the danger of being nostalgic. I began being nostalgic at the age of seven and I've never looked back, I mean, I've always looked back. But to be nostalgic is foolish and counterproductive. We can't do it. There's another danger, there's the danger of just ranting and moaning about our own pet niggles and complaints about present-day society, and have a kind of groan list of the things that we don't like about life today, whatever they may be. That would be an abuse of preaching. I'm not here to talk about my own pet hates and enter Room 101 and tell you what I don't like. It is the Bible that we must take as our only basis and authority and then apply it to today. There's also a third danger, the danger of preaching only a negative message which exposes all the problems, and there are many problems, friends, but leaves us with no solutions which leads us to despair and gives us no ground for hope. The Lord protect me and you from these dangers.

Let me just make one further point before I get into this text. Who are these verses addressed to? Are they addressed to the people of Jerusalem and Judah as a nation? As a political state? As a society? Or as, if you like, the church as a worshipping people? And the answer is not either/or it is both/and because the Old Testament church and the Old Testament state, the people of Israel and Jerusalem and Judah were made up of the same people and the application for us today is this: we are the church, we gathered here are the church of God, his people called from the world to belong to him, but we belong to the society in which we live. We are part of our wider society. We live in it, we contribute to it, and we are influenced by it, and this is the danger. The pressure for God's people to conform to the society around us has never been greater than it is today. Now that's a bold claim. It may be an over-bold claim but let's keep these things in mind as we look at this passage.

There are three areas of human life, public life, where God's judgment is being carried out in Jerusalem and Judah. Does history repeat itself? And all three of these begin with the letter "G," and the first of them is a big word this year and for the last three years, government. Government. The first one tells us that the Lord is taking things away from his people. He is taking away from Jerusalem and Judah, it says, support and supply, the bread and the water. Now I will take that this morning as being highly symbolic of the Lord taking away from his people those essentials that they need for a functioning human society. I'm not thinking this morning particularly about a lack of food, a lack of water, a lack of money, a lack of housing, a lack of clothing. They are other areas we could well address today but I don't intend to this morning. Instead, look with me particularly, please, at Isaiah 3:2 and 3 for this few moments because there the emphasis falls on the leading men in that society, "the mighty man and the soldier, the judge and the prophet, the diviner and the elder, the captain of fifty and the man of rank, the counselor and the skillful magician and the expert in charms." Who are these men? What are these men? They are the essential leaders of Jerusalem society. They are the men of office, of dignity, of nobility. They are charged with the fundamental defense and protection of that society with the great business of what we call government, and they are being taken away.

Now whatever your political persuasion may be and there are many political persuasions in this room which I believe to be a fundamentally healthy thing, but there are two

absolutely non-negotiable responsibilities of government. There are really only two absolutely non-negotiable responsibilities of government. The first is the defense of the realm against foreign attack, and the second is the administration of justice, maintaining law and order and peace within that society. If nothing else, those two have to stand. There are many other things that governments may do in education, in health, in transport, in finance, and so on, and most governments do these things, but these two have to stand, defense and justice, and this is the problem in Jerusalem in those days, the leading men responsible for defense and justice, the mighty men, the soldiers, the judges, the men of rank, God is removing them. They're not there anymore. Men say, "Do you remember 30 years ago we had great leaders, great captains, great soldiers, great princes, great judges? Where have they gone? They're missing."

And we see the result in verse 4, it is boys who become princes, it is infants who become rulers. I don't think this is Bugsy Malone, you know, the film where every actor is played by a child? I don't think this is literally that everybody who is a governor or a ruler is under the age of 16. It means instead that God gives to his people rulers who are like children. They lack wisdom. They lack knowledge. They lack experience. They lack discretion. They lack self-control. They lack dignity. The noble and honorable office of ruler falls to those who have no conception of the honor and nobility of government.

And we see this again played out in verses 6 and 7. Look at 6 and 7 and there you have one man saying to his brother, "You be our ruler. You lead for us. Why don't you become our prince, our king, our governor?" He says, "No, I don't want to do that. I will not be a healer. You will not make me leader of the people." It's children at play. Nobody wants to be a ruler of a nation of a state like that. It's becoming ungovernable. It's like children getting tired of playing "I am king of the castle." You're the dirty rascal and the dirty rascals all become king of the castles eventually, don't they?

History repeats itself not just now but other times as well. If you're a student of ancient Roman history, some of you might be, a noble pursuit, the second century AD saw the Roman Empire reach its greatest extent and the men who were emperors in that second century were true statesmen of nobility: Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius. Long reigns. Peace. Justice. Pax Romana. Roman roads. A governable entity. They were years of splendor for Rome. The following century, the third century, corruption and violence and rot set in, it became like horse trading, a succession of worthless individuals became emperors for a few years or a few months or a few days until they were knocked off or killed or assassinated or deposed. You can read your history, you can read your Gibbon or whatever it might be.

Does history repeat itself I ask you today, and I'm not being party political, not here anyway. Next door, I'm very party political but you can talk to my children about that but maybe you shouldn't. Does history repeat itself? Where are the mighty men? Where are the men of rank? Where are the statesmen of our time? What's going on in our government? In other governments? Adult politicians often speak and act like children and this week probably more than ever before we have seen a child acting and being feted and fawned over as if she were an adult politician, Greta Thunberg from Sweden, 16

years of age, accorded the status as if she were some kind of world ruler or even some heavenly messenger. Government in the hands of children both literally and metaphorically. Where are we going? Where are we?

My second "g," it links on from my first one: generations. Look at verse 5 with me, "And the people will oppress one another, every one his fellow and every one his neighbor; the youth will be insolent to the elder, and the despised to the honorable." I don't want to sound like some old foggy here this morning, I want to come from God's word as I preach this morning but what do we see here in verse 5? We see a bitter, angry and divided society but especially we see this insolence, this rudeness, this arrogance from the younger generation to the older generation. The word for "insolence" could be translated "boisterous; angry; or stormy." The young here are storming against their elders. There is a lack of honor. There is a lack of deference. There is a lack of respect. The young just shout down their elders and say, "You don't matter. We don't care about you. You've got nothing to say to us. Who are you anyway?" That's the sense of it.

It's a complete overturning, friends, of what the Lord intends for society. It's a complete reversal of the way things ought to be. Leviticus 19:32, the Lord commands his people and says this, "You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD." Isn't that interesting? You shall honor elderly people and you shall fear your God. These are linked together. What is our God called in some parts of the word, in Daniel 7 for example? He's called the Ancient of Days. He is of eternal existence and life. We honor our eternal God. Therefore, says God, we honor the older man, the older woman. We rise in their presence. We esteem them as people of advanced years. It's an outworking of the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you." In other words, if a society is to have longevity, if it's to last, there must be this honoring of the older generation by the younger.

What's it like in Britain in 2019, in London in 2019? What do we notice? What do we see? What are the trends? Where is the current flowing? Is it flowing in a healthy direction? If you watch, as I do, for my relief from time to time, CBB's or rather CBBC, I should say. Sorry to insult you there, children. CBBC television drama. The impression has been gaining on me for some time that in many tv dramas for children, the adults, the parents and the fathers in particular are very often portrayed as hopeless, ineffective, silly buffoons. Not always but sometimes, increasingly. And the children and the girls in particular are portrayed as clever and so sophisticated and so confident. Now I'm just observing. Maybe that's the way it really is. Maybe most men and fathers in this country are silly buffoons. Maybe they're not, though. Maybe there's a spirit at work, a destructive spirit at work that is causing that to become fashionable to be portrayed in that way.

I've had a few discussions with fathers in recent weeks and I've heard dads make comments like this, "When I was a boy, I used to respect my father but my son doesn't respect me. When I was young, I wish I could plug into my dad and have something that he had. I wanted to be like my dad. His approach to life, his wisdom was something I wanted for myself." Do boys say that about their dads today? Do girls say that about their

mums today? Oh, that they would. There's nothing more symptomatic of a dysfunctional and disordered society than this inversion of the generations, the youth being the drivers, the shapers of society and its attitude, the so-called wokeness, you might come across that word that is at large in today's society, while their elders are regarded as irrelevant, unsophisticated, boring, no good for anything, with nothing to pass on to the new generation. Does history repeat itself? I'm describing Isaiah 3 there as I'm thinking about our present society.

These are hard things to say. I've felt great opposition this week in preparing this sermon but it's on my heart to say them this morning and I want to come to a final point, the third "g" which is gender. And from verse 16 right to the beginning of chapter 4, the Lord is dealing with the women of Jerusalem and Judah. It is referring, "the daughters of Zion" means the women of Jerusalem, the women of Judah. And the key verse is verse 16 itself, "Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet." The women of Jerusalem almost 3,000 years ago were guilty of a haughty arrogant spirit. The verse, the passage here says a great deal about their clothing, their finery, their jewelry, but it's not having a go at those things in and of themselves, it's rather saying the attitude is at fault. The spirit is haughty and it all comes to a head in the first verse of chapter 4, chapter 4, verse 1, "And seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, 'We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes, only let us be called by your name; take away our reproach.'"

Now what is all this a picture of? The picture of seven women overpowering one man because all the men are taken away. Where are they? Are they slain on battlefields? Are they in prison? Are they ill? Are they at home? Have they just disappeared to some other place? But the picture of seven women overpowering one man is a graphic image of how the God-ordained structures in the society that God has planned and built are being overturned. In this Jerusalem society, we can see the women rule and the women rule over the men, but it was never meant to be that way from the beginning. Man was made first, and the woman to be his helper. The order matters and here it's being turned upside-down and I ask once more: does history repeat itself?

We haven't got the time to go over recent history but I could read out a number of words from 50-55 years or so of British history really starting in the 1960s which answer this question, and between them they demonstrate a revolution, an explosion in attitudes and perceptions about gender, about male and female, about sexuality, marriage, divorce, homosexuality, gender, transgenderism, and that's only the tip of the iceberg and, God willing, I want to come back to some of these things over the weeks which lie ahead. These things are heavy upon my heart and I'm sure upon many of your hearts.

These women in Jerusalem, their haughtiness, their pride, their arrogance, it is re-echoed today in the increasing agitation against the good created order which God established in the beginning. And let me make this point: this haughty spirit is no longer found in a tiny if vocal minority, it is becoming increasingly mainstream, especially in a big city like London, and it is a spirit which tragically infects many churches, including churches

which call themselves evangelical, and our church is always in danger of being infected by the spirit of the age. Someone said in a conference a few weeks ago, whoever marries the spirit of the age will become a widow in the next age, and that's absolutely true. But there's more to it than that. The spirit of this age, the spirit of the daughters of Zion in Isaiah 3:16 and onwards is a spirit of rebellion and destruction. It is an attempt to destroy the good foundations that God has laid.

I'm coming to a conclusion now. What can we do? How can we resist and oppose this spirit? Well, you may have noticed that I did not start to read at the beginning of chapter 3 but I read from the final verse of chapter 2 and that verse says, Isaiah 2:22, "Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?" Why does it put it like that? Why say "man in whose nostrils is breath"? You think about the resonance of those words and they take us back, don't they, to the very beginning, Genesis 2, where God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, and the man we are told in chapter 2, God breathed into that man's nostrils the breath of life. That's the sense of it. What does it mean? It's not talking about man being here today and gone tomorrow, a breath here and he's gone the next day, it's rather saying this: we owe our life and our existence to the God who made us. Man is derived from God. Man depends on God for everything. Apart from God, you and I are all dead and empty shells, apart from the one who gives us life.

God gives us the breath of life. You know what happens when the breath of life leaves a human being, don't you? The heart stops beating. The circulation of the blood ceases. The body is dead and begins to decay, and that dead human body can do nothing to revive itself. The breath of life is gone and the body has become a corpse and, my friends, it's the same in human societies. When any human society cuts itself off from the word of God, from the wisdom of God, it starves itself of all spiritual, moral, life-giving and health-giving oxygen. That society dies. That society decays. It breaks down. Order and beauty is broken down. You read with me that latter part of chapter 3 and there was a time in Jerusalem where the women and they're not condemned for this, but the women of that society, they wore their jewelry, they wore their finery, they wore their splendid clothes, but when society begins to break down, then everything that is good and noble and beautiful and attractive and ordered about it starts to rot and decay, and then you have instead the rottenness, the rope, the baldness, the sackcloth and the branding, and unless the Lord of Hosts is with us, friends, and this is an unscripted thing I'm saying, it's my own view on this matter, unless God is with us, we are going that way as a society now. We are well down that road already and chaos and confusion and anarchy will be the only results.

I'm not saying that things have never been this bad before. I don't know. I can't give an answer to that. But for us the only solution, the only firm foundation that we can build is found here in Isaiah 2:22, stop regarding man. Stop looking for human solutions. Stop thinking that some human ingenuity is going to turn everything around. Stop thinking that politics will fix everything. Stop imagining that economics will bring about a transformation. Stop presuming that education is going to make everything come right. Stop looking for solutions in technology whether it's 5G or whatever it might be. It's not

going to fix the basic human problem. No man-made solution will ever work. We must come back to the word of God.

And I'll finish by saying this. You might say to me this morning, "Since November, Paul, you've been preaching evangelistic sermons. You were in Mark 8 and then you're in John 18, John 19. What happened to you? What's gone wrong? We don't want this. We want to hear about Jesus." I want to tell you about Jesus. I will tell you about Jesus but there's a sense in which we need to do a little bit of pre-evangelism, we need to go back to lay the right foundations. There's never been a more pressing or urgent time for us to do that than it is today. And what do I mean by the foundations? We need to go back in a few weeks to the beginning of Genesis again, it seems to me. We need to see what God has done. We need to see what God is like, who God is. We need to know who we are as his creatures. We need to know what male and female mean. We need to know what marriage is, what work is, what the Sabbath is. We need to know what the earth is. We need to know what's happening to our environment, whose it is. We need to know where we came from and where we're going. We need to know why we go wrong. We need to know the answers to all of these things. I can easily presume that everybody here will give all the right answers to all those questions and get a series of ticks and say, "You're all sound. You understand perfectly." That is a dangerous assumption to make. And then, you see, when we understand what God has done from the beginning, the foundations that he has laid, then we see the state we're in, the ruin we're in, the hell that people are hurtling into all around us and some of you are hurtling there as well, and then we see that Jesus Christ is the only solution, the only Savior, the only answer.

Foundations. "Whoever listens to my words," says Jesus, "and does them is a man who builds his house on the rock," and you know what happens to that house when the rain comes, don't you? It stands firm. It doesn't fall down. But if you are building on a foundation that is decidedly unstable and dodgy and undermined, fear when that storm comes. Great was the fall of that house. We build on the right foundation when we come to the word of God and when we are moved by the Spirit of God, and when we hear the word of Jesus Christ our Lord and our Savior. Bear with me. Come with me. Come and hear what God's word says over these next few Sunday mornings as we look at these themes together.

Let's pray together now.