

Explore the Bible: God Confronts

August 18, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible Lesson for Sept. 6 focuses on Isaiah 1:10-20.*

While all Scripture is inspired by God and edifying for believers, the book of Isaiah indisputably is one of the “great texts” of the Bible. It is a sweeping, majestic epic of biblical prophecy, a theological masterpiece and a work of literary art. Isaiah also is one of the most-cited Old Testament books in the New Testament.

While the historical prophet Isaiah lived during the 700s B.C., the latter portions of this book address future generations during and after the Babylonian Exile. The beginning of Isaiah overflows with warnings of divine punishment, but the book ultimately concludes with promises of restoration.

One interpretive challenge facing Christian readers of Isaiah is the book’s use in the New Testament. The New Testament frequently presents Jesus and the Church as fulfillments of Isaiah’s prophecies, yet a close reading of Isaiah in its original context makes many of the New Testament’s citations appear to go beyond what the historical prophet could have meant.

However, if God is the ultimate author of Scripture, then there can be layers of meaning in the biblical texts which are not limited to what the original human authors may have intended. While we must discern and honor the original historical meaning of the biblical text, the revelation of God in Christ brings fresh insights to our reading of Scripture.

Enough is enough

The first half of our text, Isaiah 1:10-15, presents a bracing and terrifying warning of judgment to the people of Judah. God compares the people to those of Sodom and Gomorrah (1:10), referencing the infamously wicked people whom God destroyed in Genesis 19.

In verses 11-15, God goes on a tirade against the religious practices of the people. Their sacrifices, festivals and prayers are meaningless. God refuses even to listen to the people's prayers (1:15). What have the people done? What is Judah's great sin that has provoked the Lord to such wrath? God roars, "Your hands are full of blood!"

While many modern readers associate Sodom and Gomorrah with homosexuality, these cities' major sins actually were injustice and pride. The later prophet Ezekiel writes, "[Sodom] and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me" (16:49-50).

What is especially terrifying about these warnings is that God makes clear Judah's religious practices are pointless. No amount of religious ceremony or language can substitute for justice and humility. Even though this prophecy was originally delivered almost 3,000 years ago, it ought to land heavily on the hearts of God's people today. Our Sunday worship services, sermons, prayers, hymns and whatever else are pointless without justice and humility.

Moreover, Christians who defy government regulations on public gatherings and put other people at risk from COVID-19 simply for the sake of resuming "normal" worship services have their priorities backward. God does not want our worship services if they are hurting others, especially if there are creative alternatives to "normal" worship we could easily embrace.

The call to repentance

All hope is not lost, thankfully. Through the prophet Isaiah, God calls his people to repentance. His call is straightforward: “Stop it!” The people of Judah need no elaborate rituals to regain God’s favor, nor is their situation shrouded in mystery. They are sinning against God and neighbor, so they must stop.

What does repentance look like in practice? “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow” (1:17). Again, the fundamental problem facing Judah is injustice. The weakest and most vulnerable among them are being victimized by the most powerful, with no one offering protection or justice.

Much of popular evangelical piety in the United States is focused on matters of personal holiness, such as sexual morality or the consumption of illicit substances. But this emphasis on personal morality often neglects the social dimension of holiness. “Social justice” is not Marxist; it is biblical.

Hope and warning

Judah’s case is not hopeless. God reaches out to his recalcitrant people with an offer of healing, transformation and restoration. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (1:18).

God is not capricious or impatient; the Lord stands ready to forgive even the most hardened and cruel of sinners. Humility and repentance are the only prerequisites. And those whom the Lord has forgiven have not simply been giving a grudging “second chance.” God’s forgiveness is a thorough cleansing, a new beginning.

If the people listen to the prophet and return to God in repentance, they

will enjoy the covenant blessings outlined in Exodus and Deuteronomy (1:19). But if they refuse, they “will be devoured by the sword” (1:20). The final note of warning underscores the conditional nature of the promised reconciliation. Sincere repentance is necessary, and God will not wait forever.

Yet for those who sincerely repent of their sins, God offers a full pardon and a glorious transformation. Through Jesus Christ, these promises made to Judah long ago have been expanded to the whole world. All people who humble themselves before God and seek justice for their neighbor can enjoy the Lord’s promises of joy and reconciliation.

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