

Rebellion and Rescue

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[0 : 0 0] Great. Please do grab a seat. Do grab a Bible as well if you've got one near you and keep it open in that first chapter of Isaiah that we've read as we look through this together.

Let me take you back very briefly as we begin to one of the most iconic films of the 90s. The opening scene of Terminator 2 with Arnold Schwarzenegger has this kind of dark landscape of burnt out cars, of scattered bones, kind of a robotic foot crushes down on a human skull.

You may or may not have seen that. It's really good. But anyway, if you're watching, you're left in no doubt kind of straight away. This is serious stuff.

You know, this is a serious film. Kind of get ready for what's to come in the next wee while. And I mention that because in some ways the opening chapter of Isaiah carries a similar sort of message.

It is this stark opening as we're given God's perspective on the world into which Isaiah is speaking. It is this pretty bleak picture highlighting rebellion against God and the judgment that he has promised.

[1 : 2 2] We've shown straight away that this is going to be a book that deals with some serious stuff and that we need to get ready for what is to come.

And yet even in these opening verses, even in this opening chapter, still there are these windows of hope through which the light is able to shine. And this is a passage, and indeed Isaiah is a book, which speaks about both judgment and salvation, which takes really seriously the problem of sin that we'll see exposed and laid bare in these verses.

The offense that that sin is to a holy God, but also alongside that offers hope in this holy God and how he deals with his people.

And really this opening chapter kind of flicks between these two big ideas. So we're going to look at it through those two lenses. Firstly, rebellion against the holy God, and then having dug into that, and that is kind of the bulk of this chapter.

That is mostly how Isaiah opens. But having seen that rebellion against the holy God, we'll then finish by seeing the rescue by the holy God, which is already being glimpsed, being promised at the start of this book.

[2 : 4 0] So that's the plan. If the first half or maybe three quarters of things are feeling a little bit heavy, that's okay. Like we said, this is serious stuff. And we want to feel the weight of that, not just skip over it.

But do stick with us to the end, because there is hope as well here, as we will see throughout this great book of Isaiah. So let me briefly pray, and then we'll get stuck in.

And Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word, the Bible. We thank you that it speaks to us today. We thank you that it reveals to us who you are. We pray that this morning and throughout these next couple of months, as we look through Isaiah, we would get a bigger and a better and a more accurate picture of who you are, and that we would be moved to worship you in response to that.

Please open our ears and our hearts and our minds to understand what it is you're saying to us now. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Okay, so first up then, as we said, rebellion against the Holy God.

That's kind of a big, overarching theme in this opening chapter of Isaiah. Let's get our bearings a bit in this book. Verse 1 of Isaiah chapter 1 introduces us to the book as a whole.

[3 : 52] We're told when Isaiah speaks, the reign of these four different kings who are listed there. But perhaps more significantly, more importantly, we're told who it was that Isaiah was speaking to.

It says that this vision is concerning Judah and Jerusalem. We're not going to dig into all the history of that just now. But what we do need to know is that the people of Judah and the place of Jerusalem are supposed to be God's people and God's place.

These are the particular people that God has committed himself to, has promised actually that he is going to bless the world through. Jerusalem is the particular place where God's king, the descendants of the great King David, were supposed to have sat on the throne and ruled with perfect justice.

And so that is what makes this rebellion against God that's going on here all the more shocking. This is who it is that is rebelling. Verse 2, the Lord has spoken. Children I have reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.

And you'll see throughout this chapter that the word the Lord, where Lord is written in little capital letters there. We've perhaps mentioned this before. That means it's translating the word or the name Yahweh.

[5 : 17] That is that the covenant name by which God had revealed himself and his covenant to his people. That reminder of the covenant relationship the people had with God.

At the very heart of which it said, I will be their God and they will be my people. God has promised that and God is keeping his part of the deal. But it's his very own people who are turning their back on him and that he's addressing through the prophet Isaiah.

And it's really important for us to grasp it as we look at this book. Because in our human nature, it can be really easy for us to hear the warning in passages like this and throughout Isaiah.

And simply to think, yes, those people out there, they are not relating to God as they should do. We can kind of wring our hands and say, isn't it terrible how the world is going nowadays?

And there will be sections of Isaiah which will be very much directed at kind of the world, at the nations. Showing that God is the God over all people. And that all people are both invited in and need to respond to him.

[6 : 29] But actually we see here that Isaiah's message begins with God's own people. To bring this into kind of New Testament language, our language. Isaiah here is speaking to the church, the covenant people of God.

And so as we gather together to work our way through this book, it's not about kind of throwing rocks out there at the culture or the things around us. It's actually about listening and taking on the challenge of what God is saying to us as we begin this book.

And now having said that, we need to make sure we don't swing too far to the other extreme. Because things at this point in history, the people of Judah and Jerusalem were at a completely low ebb, had completely rejected God.

That's what this passage is talking about. We're not a perfect church. Nowhere is. But I do believe most of us here are seeking, however imperfectly, to trust in God. We're confessing our sins.

We're putting our hope in the gospel. So we're not in entirely the same situation as Judah and Jerusalem, as Isaiah speaks this judgment over them. But we do want to take seriously that God is speaking this warning to his people.

[7 : 42] As we look at this language of rebellion and judgment, it's not supposed to bring us to despair this morning. But we do want to take seriously that it is a possibility.

It is a danger. It is a warning for those who claim the name of being God's people. So there's the who, I suppose we could say. Who is it here in rebellion against God?

Well, the shock is that it's God's own people, which makes it an especially bleak situation as we open up this book. But it helps us remember the kind of challenge and relevance of this book to us as God's people, the church, today.

So then what is the nature of this rebellion? And really throughout chapter one, we see that the kind of picture of this rebellion described at its heart in relational language.

We saw in verse two, it's pictured as children who've rebelled against parents. So they don't want anything to do with them anymore. The second half of verse four kind of highlights that idea of separation.

[8 : 44] They have forsaken the Lord. They have despised the Holy One of Israel. They are utterly estranged. Perhaps the strongest language of all in terms of this relationship breakdown is verse 21.

How the faithful city has become a whore. That shocking picture of adultery and unfaithfulness describing the people's dealings with God.

God's own people turning their back on relationship with him. And what is left is this kind of empty shell of religion. You see that described in verses 11 down to verse 15 if you have your Bibles there.

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices says the Lord. I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. And it continues through those verses.

Really God's saying, you know, why do you keep on coming before me? Why do you keep on going through all these religious motions? I've got no time for that. In, again, sort of modern language, this is God saying, you know, don't bother coming to church.

[9 : 54] Don't bother praying. There's no point. I don't want you to. That's a shocking and a surprising thing to hear, isn't it? Why is God saying that? Is that not what God's people are supposed to do?

Yeah, that's exactly what God's people are supposed to be doing. But they're to be doing this. Their worship is to be an expression of their relationship with him, not kind of a veneer, just a cover over their behavior that has no reference to him.

I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly, God says, verse 13. He's saying that that rejection of God, that refusal to live for him, and then coming and doing a few actions and claiming to worship him, cannot mix, God says.

And this falseness of their worship is revealed there by their actions. What does God say to them? Verse 17, learn to do good, to seek justice, to correct oppression, to bring justice to the fatherless.

Plead the widow's cause. That's how God has called his people to live. That was their side of the covenant that included looking after the lowest of society.

[11 : 08] But instead, everyone is simply looking out for themselves, their concerns, their comfort, their desires, their priorities. And then turning up at their weekly worship service, making their weekly sacrifice, and thinking, well, that'll be okay.

God will be happy with that. I've done my bit. I've ticked that box. And so the nature of this rebellion is the rejection of relationship with God leading to lives of empty religion, which bear little to no resemblance at all to what God says is important.

And again, this is so serious because, remember, it's happening among God's people. These are the people that God has put his name on.

These are the people who are supposed to be representing him. This is supposed to be, verse 21, the faithful city, the city of righteousness. The idea being that if you look here, look at this place, you get a glimpse of what God is like to attract people in.

And yet what do the nations around see as they look to Judah, as they look to Jerusalem? Well, they see, well, maybe this God can't really be that big or important.

[12 : 21] Can't be worth giving everything for because his people are turning their backs on him. Can't really give everything for themselves. Well, they see probably this God can't really provide much or be relied upon because the people are all having to be out there getting as much for themselves as they can.

They see clearly this God doesn't really care much for the lowly, for the oppressed, for the widow and the fraudless because his people have no interest in the downtrodden either.

this rebellion is so serious because God's people that the billboard who were supposed to be displaying him to the world to attract others in are giving this false picture of him and one of the big questions of this book of Isaiah is how are these people now how is this bleak situation that it begins with with God's people and city far from him now how are they ever going to be able to carry out that role of being a light to the nations that they were called to be of attracting people into the true God how are these messed up people going to show the world that the beauty and the power of God now that's a big theme that we'll come to in this book as well but as we think about ourselves again what then is Isaiah's message to us at this point well I think it's this reminder isn't it it's this warning of the central importance of our relationship with God that rebellion begins in a breakdown of relationship with the one who made us with the one who loves us with the one who rules over us that we need to be aware of that danger in our lives and that we can so easily try and kind of cover that up with an empty religion that simply goes through the motions and it's really important to be clear what we're talking about here because empty religion the type of hypocrisy that that Isaiah is taking aim at here is not really clear is not coming to church even though you don't really feel like it empty religion is not you know maybe sticking to a routine of reading the bible and praying together even though you perhaps feel distant from God you know at those times when we feel maybe spiritually empty or at those times when we know we've messed up or we've not been doing as we should those are the exact times that we need to come more than ever before God in worship to help rekindle that fire Isaiah is not saying only come to

God once you've got everything sorted absolutely not I know what Isaiah is talking about is a whole life turning our backs on God no time for God the rejecting of God's priorities of loving him and our neighbor a life simply concerned about our own needs is the people who are living here in Isaiah's time and then thinking that because we tick some boxes for some religious activity that that is going to mean that we're all sorted with God that that is a way of living that represents God properly can we see that that just leads to the same issue as what was happening here in Isaiah that is God's people as God's representatives as the people the church that God has put his name on if we live like that then we are failing to give an accurate picture of what God is like instead we too could end up showing a picture of a God who doesn't really matter a God who doesn't really care about others a God who doesn't really make any kind of meaningful difference in our lives and when we're displaying that picture to the world why would anyone want to know more about that God and I think honestly this is good for us to kind of bear in mind this can especially be a danger or a temptation for a church like ours if we're honest here a majority of us live you know fairly comfortable lives and that's not to say at all that we don't have struggles each and every one of us all struggle in various different ways but but I suppose objectively speaking we could say that probably our homes our careers our lives are fairly comfortable for a lot of us the temptations that we face will look fairly respectable to kind of prioritize the the extension to the house or or really put our effort into you know what do people think about me and popularity or to make sure that our our kids get every single opportunity going and none of those things are bad things but there's the real temptation to have those as the the primary aim in our lives the number one investment of our energy and finance the thing that we talk about more than anything else and as soon as that is the case and as subtly as that can become the case and then suddenly we might start to find that actually we're not really distinct from the world around us at all and we can keep our kind of religious stuff going on in a corner over here but our priorities can be about ourselves other people don't get much of a lucky and especially uh the downtrodden those who don't have much to offer us in return and living distinctively for a holy god is even further down that list again we see the dangers that this reflects in our situation and it's important that we say here that we're not looking out i'm not looking out on a church full of people who've rejected god there is this difference we need to remember between us and the original audience of isaiah who are a completely low ebb in turning their their back on god and yet having said that we do want to take seriously how it's to god's people to those who are supposed to be representing him well that isaiah is speaking those messages we want to hear that warning as well that our whole lives would be given to the holy god this big god that the book of isaiah is going to present us with and then lastly still under this heading of rebellion against the holy god the final thing we see here that is is the result of that rebellion and the result as we see through these verses and really the reason these verses have this kind of serious tone that we've spoken about that the result ultimately is judgment god's judgment on those rebelling against him in these verses that we've looked

at that that judgment has already begun so verse seven for example and just down from there i think your country lies desolate your cities are burnt with fire in the covenant god had with his people in the old testament he'd promised that as they stuck with him he would protect them they he would be their god and they would be his people but also he promised that if they turned away from him that he would remove that hand of protection we see here that that judgment had already begun and it was supposed to kind of wake the people up it was supposed to help them realize things are not as they should be we need to turn back to god i mean that judgment there had already begun and that call to turn back to god comes from isaiah but there's also that that fuller judgment that is isaiah warns about that is still to come for those who persist in rebellion against god again some really stark verses here at verse 20 but if you refuse and rebel you shall be eaten by the sword for the mouth of the lord has spoken the final verse 31 and the strong shall become tender and his work of spark and both of them shall burn together with none to quench them here's where we come face to face perhaps with what we were talking about before that there will be parts of isaiah that will be challenging for us to hear or if you're not a christian parts that we'll look at which might just sound too much or that we might struggle to imagine how we could ever communicate this to our world in a way that makes sense or in a way that people would listen to why is it hard to hear why does it shock us even as people sitting in a church hearing these words well it's because for all of us our view of god is too small that ultimately we we can't really grasp how utterly holy and god and perfect god is which means how utterly opposed to sin and rebellion he has to be you know the author george bernard shaw once wrote this that god made man in his image and man has returned the compliment you know that idea that our picture of god is a god made in our image and as soon as that is our picture we start to think well how could god really be that bothered about the odd sin here and there how could god be that bothered about the things that i'm not really that bothered about and yet isaiah calls us back to remember that god is far beyond our our comprehension in terms of scale in terms of purity and the truth is as we see in this opening chapter that god takes sin incredibly seriously and that he will judge those who continue in rebellion against him and again one of our goals as we look through isaiah as it reveals the truth of god the almighty perfect holy god to us is that we would come to see actually yes this judgment is entirely the right response to a people who reject and rebel against him so as i opens with the people god's people in rebellion against the holy god we see how serious we see also just how outrageous that is and the dire consequences that leads to that god will judge the wickedness yes in our world but also in our church and in our lives as well a rebellion against the holy god and yet both in this opening chapter and in this book of isaiah as a whole as we've said that's not the end of the story because there is always this light of hope isaiah has these incredible kind of purple passages in them that maybe come to mind as you thought oh great we're we're uh we're looking through isaiah this will be fun and probably the last 20 minutes is not quite what you're expecting but isaiah always has these notes of hope

[23 : 08] that run uh that run uh throughout it that actually god will not forget god will not give up on his people and now having seen a rebellion against the holy god we now finish with rescue by the holy god and we see that despite people's rejection of god it is not too late for them god in his infinite kindness will provide a restoration do have a look down at verse 18 come now let us reason together says the lord though your sins are like scarlet they shall be white as snow though they are red like crimson they shall become like wool and see that how god does not downplay the people's sin in the slightest but still he promises that cleansing forgiveness restoration is possible that the crimson stains that the filth of our life the things that we look back on with pain and shame and that show up all the more clearly as we come to see them in contrast to the perfect holy god that actually those marks can be forever washed clean bleached purest white so that we can know god and as his people represent him once again in response to our rebellion god offers rescue and how does that happen well verse 27 perhaps sums it up best for us it is through redemption and repentance zion shall be redeemed by justice and those in her who repent by righteousness that that redemption there zion is redeemed that is god's work that is god's initiative it's the language of of buying his people back there is this purchase to be made a price to be paid how will god do that well again the rest of isaiah is going to fill out that picture of god redeeming his people but we know ultimately that our redeemer is jesus christ that that is god speaks through isaiah and isaiah looks ahead and makes these promises we have seen the fulfillment of those promises in the gospel of jesus into the new testament the the apostle paul writes of jesus that in him we have redemption through his blood the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace that we have been redeemed as jesus has died in our place that his blood might wash us clean of all our sins we stand here today as the church knowing that god has carried out this rescue not because of we did not because we deserve it but because as paul writes and as isaiah will make abundantly clear according to the riches of his grace that love he has for us that we could never earn or deserve god invites us back into relationship with him even though we've turned our backs on him time and time again and our response to that then is repentance as it says to turn back to god to accept his forgiveness and give everything again to the holy one that doesn't mean that we become perfect and we'll always still make mistakes but those who repent receive that that righteousness that it speaks of in that verse that perfect record of jesus christ and so are able to live not a not a false religion not a surface veneer but a wholehearted a full-blooded life committed to the holy god who has graciously rescued his people through jesus christ this opening chapter as we've looked at it it challenges us doesn't it it warns us to look out for areas of rebellion within our

lives it warns us of the danger of having god kind of on the shelf as it were and yet for each and every person here who has trusted and is trusting in jesus has repented and turned back to him this passage is shown as the great rescue that is ours in christ and that relationship we have and are called to live out in response to his holiness and to his love for us and this message is this passage this chapter is good news for god's people and yet it would be wrong of me not to finish as this passage finishes and really verses 30 verse 31 offer that real clarity that it is salvation or judgment and actually that warning that if you're here and you haven't made that decision yet perhaps you've been kind of in and around church things for ages maybe as long as you can remember and yet actually as we see in the people of judah here it's kind of going through the motions you've not yet personally responded to this holy god and the rescue he's provided through jesus it would be wrong of me not to highlight the real warning here that isaiah highlights of judgment for those who remain estranged from god and that there could be nothing more eternally serious and yet also to see that that message of judgment is a message of hope because god has redeemed his people god has provided that way back to him through jesus for all those who repent that call not to put that off any longer to get right with the holy god to enjoy his promises of good for those who trust in him our human tendency always is this rebellion against the holy god seeking to go our own way thinking that we know best and yet the certain hope of the bible is rescued by the holy god rescue through jesus christ for all those who see their need of him and turn to him and live in response to that great love that he has shown us let's let's pray together you you you you you