

# The LORD calls His covenant children to repentance

Isaiah 1: 1 – 20

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Ps. 145: 1, 5

Ps. 26: 3, 4, 6, 7

Hymn 8: 2, 12

Ps. 106: 20 – 23

Ps. 25: 2, 4, 6

Scripture reading: Isaiah 1: 1 – 31

Text: Isaiah 1: 1 – 20

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The Lord said to Abraham:

“...I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless” (Gen. 17: 1).

Abraham was placed in a covenant relationship with God, and He had to walk before the face of God. That is: he had to live in the constant awareness of God’s presence. He had to live before the eyes of Him who sees all things; who knows the very thoughts and intentions of our heart. He was not to seek blamelessness in the eyes of men, but in the eyes of God, walking before **His** face.

Later, when the LORD revealed His covenant law through Moses, it was again clear that the worship which God commanded was spiritual:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart” – Deut. 6: 4 – 6.

He demanded a relationship in which they had to love and fear Him. Right from the start He was interested in their **heart and soul**. The law was never given as a set of outward duties as if there was any religion in these laws apart from a living relationship with the living God. Instead, the law spelled out the way of true life in communion with God, in accordance with **His** holiness and **His** righteousness. The whole covenant law demands a spiritual relationship with the LORD – a spiritual relationship that is characterised and determined by **His** holiness.

Yes, the religion that God commanded was, also in the Old Testament, spiritual.

But time and again the heart of the people departed from the Lord, so that all their religion became an outward show of religious activities. They still served the LORD with their mouth, while their heart was far from Him (Isaiah 29: 13). They still performed many religious activities, but not in spirit and truth.

Here in our text we find the same. Judah is very religious, but her heart has departed from the Lord. All her religion became nothing more than an outward show.

Like hypocrites do they were outwardly very pious in their sacred assemblies, and performed many religious activities, **but:** oppressed their neighbour during the week!

When they were finish with the worship service, they continued with their own life – a life in which nothing could be seen of God’s holiness. When the worship service was finish they continued with their ungodly life in which the righteousness of God’s law was totally absent.

Dear congregation, this disease is not something of the past. Our very own sinful nature, the sinful nature against which we have to fight all our life, which we have to crucify, is an active force within us to draw us away from the living God to idols. Our heart easily becomes exited by all that is fleshly and carnal, and we are inclined to follow after vanities. Even in our religion the simple Word of God has become to many a tedious and boring thing to hear Sunday after Sunday. Many look for something more exiting, and in the end all that excites them is the entertainment of the flesh – a worship service in which there are

many impressive religious activities going on (appealing to the flesh and impressive to man) while their heart has turned away from the LORD.

Isaiah chapter one is also relevant for the time in which we live. Let us then submit ourselves to the Word of the Lord and examine ourselves, for He is not addressing strangers; He is addressing His covenant children.

I proclaim God's Word to you with the theme:

## **The LORD calls His covenant children to repentance**

We will note...

1. Judah's stubbornness
2. Judah's hypocrisy
3. The Lord's promise and threat

In the first place we note...

### **Judah's stubbornness**

The name Isaiah means: Jahve saves. And indeed, in this whole prophecy the LORD reveals Himself to His covenant people as their Saviour; only in Him salvation is found.

"...All flesh shall know that I, the LORD, am your Saviour, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob" – Isaiah 49: 26.

"...You, O LORD, are our Father; our Redeemer from Everlasting is Your name" – Isaiah 63: 16.

It became clear, however, that only a remnant will be saved: only those who repent and turn to the LORD. **Their** sins He will wash away. Those who repent He will make as white as snow.

At the same time the LORD thunders against His stubborn people who refuse to repent, and threatens to devour them with the sword of His wrath if they do not repent.

Now, what is the context of our text? In what time did Isaiah spoke these words? And what was Judah's situation?

The LORD called Isaiah in the year that king Uzziah died (6: 1). That was about 740 years BC. And for more than 64 years Isaiah continued to prophesy during the reign of four kings of Judah. His preaching is directed to Judah and Jerusalem.

His ministry starts in a time of prosperity (2 Chron. 26: 5 – 15). Soon after he received his calling the political scene, however, starts to change with the rise of the Assyrians. The LORD created for Himself a mighty tool to punish many nations. Also Judah and Jerusalem would soon start to feel the rod of God's wrath.

But while Isaiah started to prophesy in a time of prosperity, our text seems to indicate the opposite.

“Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire...” – verse 7

This creates a question with regard to the exact time when the prophecy, here in chapter 1, was uttered. Were these words of our text spoken at the start of Isaiah's ministry, or to the end of his ministry?

Chapter 1 is a summary of the whole book, and Isaiah spoke these words to the end of his ministry, but this prophecy as we have it in chapter 1 was placed at the beginning of the scroll in order to serve as an introduction to the whole prophecy. And so, when we read chapter 1 we get a glimpse of the whole prophecy and of Judah's final deformation before the Babylonian exile. The LORD calls His covenant children to repentance, and right at the beginning of this scroll He gives us a glimpse of the final outcome: desolation and death for those who refuse to repent, but in His covenant faithfulness He will preserve a small remnant.

And thus we turn to these opening words of the prophecy where God, the Almighty, addresses the people whom He raised for Himself.

“Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: I have nourished and brought up children; and they have rebelled against Me...”

This introduction reminds us of the song of Moses where he says:

“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and hear, O earth, the words of my Mouth”  
(Deut. 32: 1).

It is as if the Lord enters with His people in a court case, and He calls heaven and earth as His witnesses. It is the living God, who made heaven and earth, who speaks. The Creator calls His whole creation to witness in the case which He has with His people.

He calls Himself “LORD” – in our translation LORD with four capital letters. That is Jahve. With this Name He revealed Himself to Moses when He said “I AM WHO I AM”. When He made Himself known by this name, He also gave an explanation of His name.

“...Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘Jahve, God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. **This** is My name forever, and **this** is My memorial to all generations” – Ex. 3: 14, 15.

God made a Name for Himself. He revealed His truth and faithfulness in His dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And He continued to reveal His truth and faithfulness when He called Moses to redeem His people from Egypt. He upholds His covenant; He does as He has promised to the fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His Name is Jahve, for He remains the same throughout all the generations. His truth and faithfulness is unchanging and unending.

He will not forget His people; He will uphold His covenant through all generations.

Therefore, in addressing Judah, He now calls Himself with this name: Jahve. And He calls them His children – verse 2. He adopted them as children when He made a covenant with them. He nourished them and brought them up as their Father.

Again, when He calls them in verse 3 “My people”, we are reminded of His covenant with them, by which He became their God and they became His people.

Thus you see that although the word “covenant” does not appear in our text, the whole content of the prophecy is that of the living God speaking to His covenant children. The whole way in which the holy God addresses these stubborn and rebellious people, should be understood in the framework of the covenant of grace which He has made with them.

He speaks to them as a faithful father would speak to rebellious children, unwilling to let go of them, speaking to their heart, but also threatening with the rod of His discipline.

In this context we hear Him say:

“I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me”.

He has indeed cherished them as beloved children and blessed them with every blessing. What else could He add to their wellbeing?

In chapter 5 Isaiah compares Judah with a vineyard and says:

“My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes. ‘And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done to it?’ – Isaiah 5: 1 – 4.

What more could the LORD have done for His people? He has done everything. He delivered them from slavery, He gave them a land overflowing with milk and honey, covered them with blessings, surrounded them with His goodness and care, nourished them as a Father, and brought them up with careful instructions. But they rebelled against Him.

This is what heaven and earth has to hear and witness. Nature itself witnesses against God's covenant people when they go astray, for even oxen and donkeys showed better understanding than God's covenant people!

“The ox knows its owner and the donkey its masters crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider.”

What does Israel not know? Israel does not know his Owner! And Israel does not know his Masters crib. They turned their backs on the living God who adopted them as children, and who fed them with the very best.

And what do they not consider? Jahve's goodness and care for them, the high calling with which they were called, the mercy of Jahve by which they were lifted up far above all other nations as the special object of His love.

They did not consider the blessings of His salvation.

Brothers and sisters, when we compare God's covenant people in the New Testament with His covenant people in the Old Testament, then we realise that the church of the New Testament has received even greater blessings. We are far more privileged than they were. To us the fullness of God's salvation has been revealed in Christ. The infinite measure of His blessings has become clear to us in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. If the Lord has raised Israel and cherished His covenant people in the old covenant – much more in the new! And thus we see how this prophecy applies also to us.

If Judah is charged for not acknowledging their Owner and Master, and for not considering the blessings of His salvation, how much greater our ingratitude if we would show less understanding than oxen and donkeys!

Do you know your Owner? Do you acknowledge the blessings of His salvation? Does your life testify of God's grace to you?

Hear how the LORD addresses His covenant children. He cries out:

“Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corruptors!”

This must have come as a shock to them. Were they not very religious? Look at all their worship services. Look at all their religious activities.

They boasted of being a holy nation, but **the LORD** calls them: a sinful nation.

They boasted of being innocent, but **the LORD** says: they are covered with guilt.

They boasted of being the seed of Abraham, but the LORD calls them: the seed of evildoers.

They boasted of being covenant children; the LORD calls them: children of corruption.

The charge is heavy and sharp, and contrary to all their boasting.

“They have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward”.

The Lord viewed them quite different than they viewed themselves.

Now, it is given as a summary of all their sins that they have forsaken the LORD. Yes, they still serve Him with much ado and with plenty of show, but their hearts have departed from Him – as we will see in a moment.

By calling Himself the “Holy One of Israel” He still joins Himself to them. They are called with **His** holy Name. They are **His** covenant children. But they have turned away from Him. They provoked Him, the Holy One, by their sins, yes, by their ungodly lifestyle while they pretend to be very religious.

Will the Lord, from His side, now leave them alone?

No, not quickly. He will first speak to them. Like a father addressing his rebellious son, He will call His church back to Himself. Before the judgment comes, He will call His people to repent, and He will do so with both promises and threats.

Our translation says in verse 5:

“Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more”.

It is however not a good translation of the text. The LORD does not ask them **why** they should be stricken again, but: **where**! What the prophet is asking them, is this:

“**Where** should you be stricken again, that you continue to revolt?

The meaning is this: that Israel has been stricken so many times that their whole body is sick, covered with bruises and infected sores. But since they continue to rebel, more stripes will follow – only, there is no place on their body that is not stricken already!

“...The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been closed or bound up, or soothed with ointment” – verses 5, 6.

The LORD has been faithful in chastising them. Like a faithful father He did not withhold His rod. He was faithful in beating them; so much so that He did not know anymore where to strike them next!

The one chastening of the LORD followed after the other, yet they still continued in their stubbornness.

The LORD gives a vivid picture of this. Strangers are destroying everything.

“Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire...”

Hardly anything is left. The destruction even reminds the prophet of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah – only with one difference: the LORD is still preserving a remnant for Himself. And He calls it “a very small remnant” – verse 9.

Even this “very small remnant” would have perished together with the rest, if it was not for Jahve’s mercy and faithfulness. Unless the LORD of hosts has shown mercy, no one would have been saved. If it was not for the Lord’s covenant faithfulness and mercy, He would have wiped out the church in the way that He wiped out Sodom and Gomorrah! For in spite of all her religious activities and religious show, the church has become a spiritual likeness of these worldly cities.

What then makes the difference between Sodom and the church? Only God’s mercy in preserving a remnant for Himself.

As the prophet Jeremiah also says:

“Through the LORD’s mercies we are not consumed...” – Lam. 3: 22.

The destruction would have been complete if the LORD was not mindful of His covenant with Abraham. In dealing with His church He continues to preserve a remnant, although it might sometimes be a very *small* remnant.

Dear congregation, if the LORD has dealt thus with His covenant people in the old covenant, will He not also continue to deal thus with His church in the new covenant? On the one hand we see the severe punishments of the LORD on those who harden themselves in sin. On the other hand we see His mercy in preserving a small remnant.

The fact that it is a *small* remnant should also teach us not to follow a crowd in doing wrong. Hypocrites are often proud of their numbers, while the true church is despised for her smallness. This has not changed in the new covenant. Christ still addresses His church as a *little flock*:

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” – Luke 12: 32.

The church is still called a little flock. And the new covenant still speaks of a “remnant” that will be saved, as the apostle Paul says:

“Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.” – Rom. 11: 5

While Judah continued in her stubbornness, the LORD stayed faithful to the word of His covenant, but it became clear that only a remnant will be saved – only those who would repent and turn to the LORD.

Brothers and sisters, the tragedy of this history is that Judah was, in the midst of all this, puffed up with pride. They treated the prophets of the LORD with contempt, and despised their warnings. Who are you, Isaiah, to speak thus to the children of Abraham! Who are you to address the holy nation of the LORD in this way! And thus they tried to kill not only Isaiah but also all the other prophets who called them to repentance.

Even in our own day, a faithful minister, who would dare to preach the Word of the LORD uncompromised, will not be popular.

But while Judah was boasting of her innocence, and in her stubbornness rejected all the admonitions of the prophets, the LORD reveals to them their foolish hypocrisy. We note that in the second place...

## **Judah’s hypocrisy**

The difference between Judah and Sodom, was not that Judah had less guilt, but that a remnant of Judah would be saved.

“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah: To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to

Me?, says the LORD. I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats”

He places Judah on the same par with Sodom! And he addresses them as people of Gomorrah! In order to remove the mask of their hypocrisy and to reveal the gravity of their sins, He now calls them to listen to the law of God. As a faithful interpreter of God’s law, the prophet will now show to them the plain and *real* purpose of worship and sacrifice. The sacrifices prescribed by the law were never intent to be an outward duty only. The LORD has no pleasure in all their sacrifices while they refuse to obey His Word. As the prophet Samuel has said before:

“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” – 1 Sam. 15: 22.

When the prophet Isaiah says that the LORD has no delight in the multitude of their offerings, he is not abolishing the Law of Moses. These offerings were indeed prescribed by the LORD, and Judah had to bring them with dedication, but they should be brought with the purpose that has been revealed in the law.

These ceremonies were shadows pointing to the salvation that God would provide in the Saviour that would come. They were pictures of the way in which God would atone for the sins of His people. And the sacrifices of thanksgiving were to be brought with a sincere heart, calling on the name of the LORD in truth. These sacrifices were only shadows and instruments to aid Israel in their worship as they were taught by these to look to the LORD for forgiveness of sins and salvation. And thus all these sacrifices were to be accompanied by faith and repentance.

The Jews were greatly mistaken to think that holiness consisted in the outward performance of these ceremonies. As hypocrites do, they performed these outward duties with great care without understanding what they do or why they perform them, as if their religion was simply to go through the motions of these ceremonies and rites. And then they thought themselves to be the most devout of all men, and were puffed up with pride!

Without faith and repentance all their religion and all their sacrifices were nothing else than abominations to the LORD.

Brothers and sisters, how did you come to the service this morning, and why did you come?

Did you come with eager expectation to hear the Word of the LORD; to hear and to obey?

Did you maybe come merely because you **had** to come, to perform your religious duty?

What would then be the difference between your church attendance and the sacrifices of Judah?

Let us be quick to profit from this exhortation. Let us not worship the Lord out of mere tradition, and go through all the motions **while our heart has departed from the LORD**. The LORD calls us, also this morning and as often as we go astray, to repent of our sins and to return to Him, and to call on Him with all our heart.

Or else, according to verse 12, our gatherings in His house will only make the carpets dirty!

“Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies – I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them” – verse 13, 14.

One has to imagine how shocked they were to hear this. This was all their boasting. Were they not proud of all their religious activities? And were they not a holy nation. Did all the promises of salvation not belong to them? And were they not very religious? Look at all their sacrifices? Just look at the enthusiasm of their worship service! Count all their church-activities!

But then the prophet comes with the proof of their guilt. Their deeds testify against them. They do not show mercy to the poor; justice is lacking in their dealings with their neighbour, they run after unjust profit. **Therefore** all their religion is condemned as hateful and detestable. Their walk of life did not match the boasting of their mouth. With their mouth they confessed the Lord, but with their ungodly walk of life they renounced Him.

No matter how many prayers you pray, and no matter how long you make your prayers, I will not listen, says the LORD. I will hide My eyes from you. And the reason? Your hands are full of blood.

Now, we must not think that these religious men were indeed killing each other with violence. Yes, in certain cases that might have happened, but when the prophet accuses the whole nation of having hands full of blood, he speaks of the way in which they oppress the poor. This was a common way of speaking amongst the prophets, to describe the oppression of the poor as shedding blood. Whether you murder someone with a knife, or craftily deprive him of his income, makes no much difference.

“Business is business”, they would say, and try to make as much profit as possible; not caring for the interest of their neighbour. No one cared for the need of his brother.

And thus, laying His finger on their covetous heart and merciless dealings with their neighbour, the LORD exposes their hypocrisy when they come to worship Him in holy assemblies!

We learn from this that no worship can please God, unless it proceeds from a pure heart and a clean conscience. The LORD is indeed near to those who call on Him, but only those who call on Him in truth, as David has said:

“The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth” – Ps. 145: 18

After exposing their sins in this way, and calling it by the name, the LORD now proceeds to call them to repentance:

“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow”

Now, someone might say that this is Armenian! How can the prophet command them to cleanse themselves and to produce the fruit of repentance? Is it not God alone who can do this?

Yes, God alone is able to work repentance in our hearts, and He alone is able to work the fruit of repentance in us, yet He directs His word to the sinner with these words: Repent, and you shall live!

God’s sovereign grace does not exclude the call to repentance. Nor shall we hide behind our inability, but in faith respond to God’s calling.

Defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. With these practical examples their sin is all the more exposed.

As long as the exhortation remains general, hypocrites feel themselves safe behind their masks. But with these examples the mask is torn away. Men seldom defend the fatherless or plead for the widow, for how can these poor people pay you back for your labour?

Judah no longer upheld justice for the sake of justice, but like greedy wolves each one preyed on his neighbour. It was the fatherless, the poor and the needy that suffered most under the greediness and injustice of men who made a good show for outward religion.

Well, dear congregation, the LORD has instructed His covenant people beforehand:

“You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; **your** wives shall be widows, and **your** children fatherless” – Ex. 22: 22 – 24.

The LORD Himself will act as their defender. This is a rich comfort to all God's children who suffer under oppression. The LORD will be our avenger. Though proud men disregard us, the LORD takes care of us. He will defend the cause of the fatherless and the widow.

But do you see what standard for holiness the prophet has in mind? He holds them to no other standard than that which has already been revealed to them in God's law. The prophets did not add to the law, neither did they detract from it, but applied God's law to the lives of His people in their own situation. The prophets did not come with a new doctrine, but acted as faithful interpreters of the law, applying God's law to the heart of His people.

Their exposition of the law of the LORD was within the context of the covenant. It is the covenant law of the LORD, containing the whole doctrine of life, all the promises in Christ, and also the threatening of the LORD to those who disobey.

And in this way all the prophets spoke.

When the LORD exhorts His people through the prophet Malachi to remain faithful to Him, He simply says:

“Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded Him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgements”.

Whenever the prophets called the people of Israel to repentance, it was a call back to the LORD and to His law, accompanied with the promises and threats of the LORD.

And so we see it also here in our text. After exposing their sin, and calling them to repentance, the prophet proceeds with promises and threats. We note that in the third place...

## **The promise and threat of the LORD**

“Come now and let us reason together”, says the LORD, ‘though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if

you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword'; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

The prophet makes clear that all the blame for their miserable state lies with them. Their own stubbornness and unrepentant heart prevents them from receiving all the blessings of the LORD.

The LORD stretches out His arms to His rebellious children. He offers them complete forgiveness of all their sins, if only they would repent and turn to Him.

It is not God who refuses to be reconciled to them, but they refuse to turn to Him.

It is of their own accord, and not by compulsion, that they continue to provoke the anger of the LORD. It is the wickedness of their own heart that hinders them to receive all that the LORD has promised them in Christ. God is by nature kind and merciful, and nothing hinders His covenant children from freely receiving His goodness and mercy, except their own blindness, ingratitude and enmity.

Yes, the people of Judah, for the greater part of them, showed less understanding than oxen and donkeys, not acknowledging their Owner, nor considering the blessings of His salvation.

But, on His part, the LORD continues to uphold His promise:

"If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land..."

The prophet shows that true happiness consists in obedience to the LORD, and that the misery of those who depart from the LORD is caused by nothing but the hardness of their own heart.

On the one hand He draws them with the promise of complete forgiveness of all their sins, with full abundance of life and all His blessings; on the other hand He draws them with warnings and threats. But with both hands He draws them. Both the promise and the threat of the Lord have the purpose to draw the rebellious child back to God.

We are drawn by His promises, and grabbed by His threats.

Let us believe His promise, and fear His threat. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Brothers and sisters, what is the message of our text? Are we commanded to pull up our socks and to save ourselves? No, far from it! We are reminded of the mercies of our Owner, who cherishes us as His beloved children, who blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Believe the gospel of His salvation, and repent; for He, your Father and your LORD, is calling you.

Let us learn from oxen and donkeys, for they know their owner and their master's crib. And when we turn to Him, let us not serve Him with an outward show of religion, but in spirit and in truth. Let us acknowledge Him as our Owner, the One who bought us and made us His own; our Master who feeds us with the very best. Let us acknowledge Him not only with our mouth, and not with an outward show as hypocrites do, but let us with heart and soul repent of our sin, and turn to Him.

With these promises and threats the LORD, your Father, is calling you.

Amen.