



SUNDAY SCHOOL MINISTRY

Discipleship Plan

Year Seven
Isaiah Lessons
Part 2

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Lesson 5: Destruction Decreed Against the Self-Important (Isaiah 24)

Primary Verse: “When the report comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish over the report about Tyre. Cross over to Tarshish; wail, O inhabitants of the coast! Is this your exultant city whose origin is from days of old, whose feet carried her to settle far away? Who has purposed this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants were princes, whose traders were the honored of the earth? The LORD of hosts has purposed it, to defile the pompous pride of all glory to dishonor all the honored of the earth.” (Isaiah 23:5-9)

Teaching Text: Isaiah 23-24

Supporting Text: Isaiah 22, also see Isaiah 36:1-3

As the old saying goes, “All roads lead to Rome.” This idea was said to be a historical fact because the Romans designed roads, starting from Rome to the outer realms of their territories. But when it comes to sin, it may be argued that all sin leads to pride. In one way or another, so many, if not all sins, are linked to one thing: an over-appreciation for one’s own desires, ideas, and actions over the revealed desires of God exposed in His Word. An overriding allegiance to one’s own self-importance is a sure downfall (Proverbs 16:18) because, unless it is repented of instantly, it leads to sin.

Pride is not merely a problem for the unbeliever, but, is too often and too easily found within the borders of God’s covenant community. In fact, the Christian who believes him/herself immune to pride is probably suffering under delusions of *spiritual* grandeur. Whether they be leaders or followers, godly people must commit to self-examination and honestly evaluate motivations for personal and corporate actions. Moreover, God’s people need grace to act—radical action if necessary—to uproot the sin of pride’s poisonous fruit. God will certainly protect His own honor. Any who desires to steal it will render a costly accounting to Him.

Where self-sufficiency and self-importance are unbefitting among God’s people, that tag-team is the order of the day among the ungodly. Some are surprised to find that Isaiah, though being a prophet to Israel, has so much to say about foreign nations such as Tyre and others. However, God’s rulership is not restricted to Israel; therefore, He has everything to do with the rise and fall of nations everywhere on earth. As we see in Isaiah 10, pagan nations do not readily recognize God’s sovereign control over them. But, at the time of God’s choosing, He exalts one nation to execute His divine judgement to dethrone another.

Questions to Consider: How would you respond to someone challenging the relevance of knowing the geography surrounding the land of ancient Israel? What value is there in knowing about these long-since deceased empires? Consider the “big picture” and survey chapters 22-24 of Isaiah. Is there an overall pattern we can perceive in how God proceeds when it’s time to judge (there may be more than one)? Compare Isaiah 23:17-18 and 24:21-23. How are these passages similar? How are they different? How do these scriptures inform our understanding of the purpose and, ultimate, goal for God’s judgement?

Challenging the Class: God knows our actions and the motivations behind each one. We must not underestimate how deeply rooted the sinful proclivity towards seeking our own glory is. Be vigilant against it! Since nothing will keep God from establishing His kingdom on earth, we must decide whether we desire to be citizens of that kingdom or if we desire kingdoms of our own for Him to smash. Though the choice seems easy, when stated this way, how quickly we forget when we are gripped in the clutches of temptation! May the Lord grant grace for us to escape the sin of self-importance and to encourage one another to seek His glory and not our own.

Lesson 6: Life and Peace Decreed for All Who Trust in the Lord (Isaiah 26-27)

Primary Verse: “If favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn righteousness; in the land of uprightness he deals corruptly and does not see the majesty of the LORD. O LORD, your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it. Let them see your zeal for your people, and be ashamed. Let the fire for your adversaries consume them. O LORD, you will ordain peace for us, for you have indeed done for us all our works.” (Isaiah 26:10-12)

Teaching Text: Isaiah 26-27

Supporting Text: Isaiah 25

The book of Isaiah begins with an appeal or allusion to creation (1:2-3). The Spirit-inspired prophet calls his hearers to observe certain parts of God’s created order, with the hope of increased understanding of the overall message. God the Holy Spirit as the original source of word-based, special revelation (the Holy Scriptures) is also the Creator of the world in which the Triune God is generally revealed (Genesis 1:2, Psalm 33:6, 2 Peter 1:19-21). We are not surprised, therefore, to see that creation contains illustrations and metaphors for the illumination of what we have received as inspired texts. Consider one image in nature that serves as an analogy for how God works: the natural wildfire.

We know the damage wildfires bring, but did you know the benefits of wildfire include:

- **Clearing the forest floor** - Debris and heavy underbrush can become so thick that fire is necessary to open the forest floor to sunlight. The remaining ash makes for natural nourishment of the topsoil, thus fertilizing remaining plant life.
- **Providing suitable habitat** - Small plants and trees are not the only kind of life in wildlands and forests. Paradoxically, when a fire removes compact masses of plants, it increases the water supply! This transition occurs because, with fewer plants absorbing water, streams are made fuller and enhance the environment for other types of plant and animals.
- **Killing disease** - More trees die each year from insect infestation and disease than from fire. Fires eliminate many kinds of parasitic life-forms that damage the part of a tree that delivers nutrients to roots and needles.
- **Creation of new plant generations** - Certain tree species *require* the intense heat, only a fire can bring, for their seeds to open. Many plants are covered with flammable resin to encourage fire. Incredibly, without fire, there are whole classes of trees that would merely die out because their seeds will never regenerate otherwise. (see https://www.fire.ca.gov/communications/downloads/fact_sheets/TheBenefitsofFire.pdf)

A chief word-picture for God’s judgement in Isaiah is fire, sometimes specifically in a forest (1:7, 5:24, 9:18-19, 10:16-17, 26:11, and 27:11). The overwhelmingly positive language in Isaiah chapters 25-27 come after the smoldering, fire-breathing condemnation found in chapters 22-24. These scriptures teach us that fires of God’s judgement for sin are a necessary prelude for the renewal of His land and people.

Questions to Consider: Why is talk of judgement so prevalent in scripture, but so sparse in popular Christian content, conferences, and media? How does Isaiah 26:9-10 explain the necessity of divine judgement and how it *benefits* those judged? How many verses use broad resurrection imagery in Isaiah 25-27? What other images can you find that are generally associated with the coming of Christ’s kingdom?

Challenging the Class: Embracing the judgement of God means embracing all of Who God is. God is good and so are His judgements, no matter how harsh they appear to us. Let us commit to trusting the wisdom of His judgements, lest we be guilty of assuming we can judge the Judge of all the Earth.

Lesson 7: A Hard Lesson for the Hard-Headed... and Yet, Grace (Isaiah 30)

Primary Verse: “And now go, write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever. For they are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the LORD; who say to the seers, ‘Do not see,’ and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.’” (Isaiah 30:8-11)

Teaching Text: Isaiah 30

Supporting Text: Isaiah 29, Deuteronomy 32:1-33

It's simple enough to agree with the statement, “Nobody's perfect.” Assuming we're talking only about fallen humans, that is true enough. It's one thing to be imperfect but trying. It's another thing to be imperfect but undisciplined in efforts to correct one's wrongs. However, it is altogether different to be imperfect and willfully walking into greater error. The scripture describes such persons as those who “add sin to sin” (Isaiah 30:1b).

Toward the end of Samuel's tenure as a judge in Israel, the people made it clear they intended to have a king “like all the other nations” (1 Samuel 8:1-7). The nation was taken in by a lie of their own making. They wanted to maintain the Lord's blessings while ignoring their clear calling to be set apart and holy unto the Lord Himself. Like many today, they wanted to have the benefits of God without any of the responsibilities of knowing and serving God. In their desire to be like the other nations, they also forgot their unique history.

Nations typically seek out allies and friends who suit their interests. They enter partnerships with those who share mutual interests and welfare. But how could Israel seek the help of her former enslaver? How could a nation seek freedom from the law of God but then seek to return to their historical house of bondage (Exodus 13:3, 20:2, Leviticus 26:13, Deuteronomy 5:6, 7:8)? How could the leadership of Israel seek covenant with a nation that God specifically commanded of them, “you shall not return that way again” (Deuteronomy 17:16)? Though these questions are daunting to explore, there are still more profound questions to discuss.

How patient is God? Why does God's wrath give way to lovingkindness when His people are neither loving toward Him nor kind to each other? Does divine grace know anything of embarrassment when disobedience only seems to multiply? How far is God willing to go to endure the sin of His people and restore them? In Isaiah, why is the rebellious son called out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1) saying, “I'm determined to do as I please” to the Father Who tells him, “But I am determined to sanctify you to my pleasure.”

Questions to Consider: Do certain sins carry greater weight and consequences than others? Given Israel's history, can we argue the dependence on Egypt for deliverance is worse than a dependence on some other foreign power or is it the same? Defend your answer. According to Isaiah 30:8-14, what essential element(s) of ministry will the rebellious most explicitly cry out against? What does the Lord prescribe for His sin-sick people? What blessings does He promise? How may we resolve the tension in v.18 where we are told of God's mercy and justice? How does God administer both for sinners?

Challenging the Class: As we read more of Israel, do you find yourself? It is painful to confront images which speak of our rebellion. But if we fail to linger long on them, we will likely fail to exult in the degree of mercy and grace God extends, which ensures our repentance is possible and our holiness.

Lesson 8: Zion's Hope—The King in His Beauty (Isaiah 33)

Primary Verse: “Behold Zion, the city of our appointed feasts! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be plucked up, nor will any of its cords be broken. But there the LORD in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor majestic ship can pass. For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; He will save us.” (Isaiah 33:20-22)

Teaching Text: Isaiah 33

Supporting Text: Isaiah 31-32

The tumultuous relationship between Yahweh and Israel, specifically the Kingdom of Judah, has come to a point of crisis. Decades of dedication cannot dismiss centuries of stubborn sedition on the scales of divine justice. The God of their salvation, Who faithfully delivered on promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had forewarned through His servant, Moses, exile would be the fruit for seeds of unfaithfulness sown from generation to generation. Israel's failure to sustain and elongate seasons of revival through the means prescribed in Deuteronomy 6:10-25 produced children surrounded by the things of God, but without intimate knowledge of God Himself. These children grew into adults who were pleased to keep ceremonies, statutes, and sayings of God as mere trinkets of nostalgia. They were happy to selectively reminisce on a heritage in the Lord without sensing any obligation to be holy unto the Lord.

Assyria now loomed on the horizon, serving as the harbinger of all the disaster promised if God's people rebelled against Him. Assyria's ruthless ways were well reported; the historical record of their inhumane exploits has survived to modern day. The fear which gripped Judah was well-founded because, humanly speaking, there was no way to overcome a concentrated, sustained, Assyrian attack against them. Tragically, instead of turning to God in repentance, Judah considered Egypt the answer to keeping the nation God gave them.

It is possible to become obsessed with the “what if's” of history. If we are not careful, we can fall into the trap of considering all the ways Israel could have remained faithful, could have overcome the snares of idolatry, or how King so-and-so ought to have done better. These are not sinful questions, which can be helpful in detecting our own patterns of sin and even assist in battling against them since such errors are recorded for our benefit (1 Corinthians 10:1-13). However, the answer to the failures of God's people isn't in themselves; the answer is God! As it was then, so it is now, we rely on God to manifest Himself in power, holiness, and faithfulness to deliver us, not merely from external threats, but from the threat within - our own sin.

Questions to Consider: After condemning Judah's consideration of alliance with Egypt twice (Isaiah 30:1-5 and 31:1-3), why would Isaiah 33:1 be considered a relief to Isaiah's audience? How does 33:2 demonstrate the proper disposition necessary before we can expect the Lord to act on our behalf? Why is this request necessary even with the word of woe in 33:1? Isaiah 33:10 provides incredible hope, but in what context? Why does the Lord “arise?” Does any other passage of scripture come to mind when reading 33:14-16? How does 33:18-19 depend upon v.17?

Challenging the Class: Do you remember the three branches of U.S. government from civics class? Isaiah 33:22 should be a great reminder! The legislation, execution, and interpretation of God's law depends upon God, not upon us. What He has spoken is right, whatever He has promised is sure to pass, and understanding all or any of it requires His help.

Judgement on Shebna

“Indeed, the Lord will throw you away violently, O mighty man, and will surely seize you” (v. 17).

- Isaiah 22:15-25

We have before us a prophecy concerning two individuals, which is a rare subject in Isaiah, for he dealt mainly with nations as a whole. But in his case, God chose to bring to light broader principles by singling out a man who represented evil within the Jewish nation. The prophecy is against Shebna, an officer in the court of Hezekiah, a good and noble king. Shebna was a wicked, deceitful, and proud man who, as some Jewish historians maintain, conspired with Assyria in an attack on Jerusalem. Shebna probably was elevated to his position as household treasurer during the reign of Hezekiah's father, Ahaz.

The Lord saw Shebna's pride and wickedness, and He sent Isaiah to proclaim judgment on him. The main point of the prophecy was that Shebna would be brought down and another man, Eliakim, would be put in his place over the household. Eliakim was a servant of the Lord, faithful and trustworthy, and he would rise from a lower position to become a great officer in the court.

This probably seemed ridiculous to Shebna at the time because he believed himself rooted in his position. He even had a sepulcher hewn out for himself as a monument to his greatness. He was ambitious to be remembered and honored even after his death. Shebna was full of his own glory, but God was not impressed, and He would not tolerate a traitor in the midst of His people. He would replace Shebna, bringing him down from his lofty position to that of a scribe, and then eventually sending him from the country to die in a foreign land, alone and forgotten. Some Jewish historians believe Shebna contracted leprosy and was forced from the court and eventually from the nation because the disease was seen as a direct judgment of God. If this was what happened, then God's judgment was complete, for a “great” man was brought low without hope of redemption.

This passage reminds us that God is in control of everything, and though it might seem as if wicked men will never be removed, He can bring them down in a moment and replace them with His good and faithful servants. This was what happened in Judah. A wicked man was removed from office and a man after God's own heart was put in his place. We need never fear that prideful men will truly succeed in their quests for power, for the Lord will judge them for their crimes.

Coram Deo

Read Luke 1:52. Who is in control of promotions and demotions? Think of the political and ecclesiastical leaders in your nation. Which of them are humble men? Which are proud and self-serving? When you think of these men and their evil actions, take comfort in the passage from Luke, as well as the passages below.

Passages for Further Study

1 Samuel 2:7

2 Kings 18:37–19:2

Psalm 75:7

Proverbs 29:23

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A Wrathless God Has Victims

Thursday, 01 Mar 2018

Jason Micheli

Like many upper-middle-class mainline Protestants, I've long taken issue with the concept of divine wrath, believing it to conflict with the God whose most determinative attribute is goodness itself. Whenever I've pondered the possibility of God's anger, I've invariably thought about it directed at me—I'm no saint, sure, but I'm no great sinner either. The notion that God's wrath could be fixed upon me made God seem loathsome—more demiurge than God.

I've changed my mind about God's wrath. Actually, my friend Brian Stolarz changed my mind. When reflecting upon the category of divine wrath, I no longer think of myself, but rather Alfred Dewayne Brown, Brian's client.

Brian spent ten years working to free an innocent man, Alfred Dewayne Brown, from death row in Texas. Despite a lack of any forensic evidence, Dewayne had been convicted of killing a policeman in Houston and was sentenced to be executed by the state. Brown's IQ of 67 (the value designated for mental handi-cap) was "ginned" up to 70 by the state doctor in order to qualify him for execution. The evidence that could have proved his alibi was hidden by prosecutors and only discovered fortuitously years later by Brian. Dewayne was released by the state in the summer of 2017 and now has a civil rights case pending to seek restitution for the injustice done to him.

I've worked in a prison as a chaplain and interacted with prisoners in solitary and on death row, so I've developed a good BS radar. Dewayne is unlike the prisoners I've met. My immediate reaction from my short time with him was how difficult it was to understand how anyone could believe that he committed the crime of which he was accused. I was also overwhelmed by Dewayne's expressions of forgiveness for those who had wronged him—crooked cops and lawyers, a prejudiced system, and an indifferent society. "I've forgiven all that," he said.

Here's the crux of the matter (and I use that word deliberately): Dewayne is allowed to express forgiveness about the crimes done to him. But, as a Christian, I am not so permitted. Neither are you. If we told Dewayne, for example, that he should forgive and forget, then he would be justified in kicking in our sanctimonious teeth.

In *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), Fleming Rutledge points out that we commonly suppose that Christianity is primarily about forgiveness. Jesus, after all, told his disciples they were to forgive seventy

times seven (Matt. 18:21, KJV). As he hung dying on the cross, he petitioned for the Father's forgiveness toward those who crucified him. Forgiveness is cemented into the prayer he taught his disciples. However, to reduce the message of Christianity to forgiveness is to ignore what Scripture tells us transpired on the cross. The cross is more properly about God working justice.

The most fulsome meaning of *righteousness*, Rutledge reminds her readers, is *justice* understood not only as a noun but as an active, reality-making verb. *Righteousness* often sounds like a vague spiritual attribute, but the original meaning couldn't be more this-worldly. Justice, don't forget, is the subject of Isaiah's foreshadowing of the coming Messiah (Isa. 9:6-7; 61). *Justice* is what Jesus chooses to preach for his first sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-19).

To mute the message of the cross into a platitude about forgiveness is to sever Jesus' sacrifice from the Old Testament prophets who anticipated and longed for an apocalyptic invasion by Yahweh, and to suggest that his work on the cross was done to accomplish something other than the biblical record indicates. It's not forgiveness *qua* forgiveness we see, says Rutledge, but God's wrath poured out against sin and upon the systems (Paul would say "the powers") created by sin. On the correspondence between sin as injustice and God's wrath, Rutledge cites Isaiah's initial chapter:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt-offerings...bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.
...Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes! I will turn my hand against you.

Christianly speaking, forgiveness is a vapid, meaningless concept apart from justice. The sacrifice of the God-Man on the cross is a sign that something in the world is terribly wrong and must be put right. The sin-bred injustice of the world requires rectification (Rutledge's preferred translation for *righteousness*). Only God can right what's wrong, and the cross is how he has done it. God pours out himself into Jesus, and then on the cross, God pours out his wrath against Jesus and on the sin that nailed him there.

The Crucifixion

by Fleming Rutledge

We can begin with the oddity of the universally recognized signifier, “the crucifixion.” It will help us to understand the uniqueness of Jesus’ death if we can grasp the idiosyncrasy of this manner of speaking. There have been many famous deaths in world history; we might think of John F. Kennedy, or Marie Antoinette, or Cleopatra, but we do not refer to “the assassination,” “the guillotining,” or “the poisoning.” Such references would be incomprehensible. The use of the term “the crucifixion” for the execution of Jesus shows that it still retains a privileged status. When we speak of “the crucifixion,” even in this secular age, many people will know what is meant. There is something in the strange death of the man identified as Son of God that continues to command special attention. This death, this execution, above and beyond all others, continues to have universal reverberations. Of no other death in human history can this be said. The cross of Jesus stands alone in this regard; it is *sui generis*. There were many thousands of crucifixions in Roman times, but only the crucifixion of Jesus is remembered as having any significance at all, let alone world-transforming significance. Excerpt taken from Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 3-4.

Summarizing the prophets’ words of divine wrath in light of the cross, Rutledge writes: “Because justice is such a central part of God’s nature, he has declared enmity against every form of injustice. His wrath will come upon those who have exploited the poor and weak; he will not permit his purpose to be subverted” (110).

Despite the queasiness God’s wrath elicits among mainline and liberal Protestants, how could one think of Alfred Dewayne Brown and not hear the above lines as good news? Brown’s story emphasizes the problem with the popular disavowal of divine anger, which is that what we (in power) find repugnant is a source of hope and empowerment to the oppressed peoples of the world. The wrath of God is not an antiquated belief to be explained away; it is the always-timely good news that the outrage we rightly feel over the world’s injustice is “first of all outrage in the heart of God.” Wrath is not a contradiction of God’s goodness but an integral part of it.

Rutledge shows us that the biblical picture of God’s anger is different from the caricature of a petulant, capricious god that is frequently conjured when divine wrath is considered. “The wrath of God,” she writes, “is not an emotion that flares up from time to time, as though God had temper tantrums; it is a way of describing his absolute enmity against all wrong and his coming to set matters right.” Understood rightly, it’s actually the non-angry god who appears morally distasteful, for “a non-indignant God would be an accomplice in injustice, deception, and violence.”

I can't help but wonder if we prefer that god—the passive accomplice to injustice—because, on some subconscious level, that is what we know ourselves to be: accomplices to injustice. I did no direct wrong to Dewayne Brown, but on most days I'm indifferent to others like him on death row. The inky facts of injustice are all over my newspaper, but I don't do anything about it. I try not to see color, even as I neglect to see it through the prism of the cross. I'm not an oppressor, but I am most definitely an accomplice. Odds are, so are you.

Perhaps we find the concept of a wrathful God so threatening because we know that the Bible's ire is pointed at the indifference of the masses every bit as much as it is toward hands-on oppressors. As Rutledge points out: "In the Bible, the idolatry and negligence of groups en masse receive most of the attention, from Amos' withering depiction of rich suburban housewives (Amos 4.1) to Jesus' lament over Jerusalem (Luke 13.34) to James' rebuke of an insensitive local congregation (James 2.2–8)" (122).

As Brett Dennen puts it in his song "Ain't No Reason," slavery is stitched into every fiber of our clothes. We're implicated in the world's injustice, even if we like to think ourselves guiltless. Rutledge believes this explains why so much of American popular Christianity projects a distorted view of reality (by "distorted," she means sentimental). Our escapist mentality protects us not just from the unendurable aspects of life, but also from the burden of any responsibility for them. Such sentimentality, however nostalgic and sweet, has its victims—they have names such as Alfred Dewayne Brown.

Having a friend like Brian and having met someone like Dewayne, I'm convinced we risk something precious when we jettison God's wrath from our Christianity. We risk losing our own outrage. Actually, it may have been Fleming Rutledge who changed my mind:

If, when we see an injustice, our blood does not boil at some point, we have not yet understood the depths of God. It depends on what outrages us. To be outraged on behalf of oneself or one's own group alone is to be human, but it is not to participate in Christ. To be outraged and to take action on behalf of the voiceless and oppressed, however, is to do the work of God. (132)

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