

UNDERSTANDING GOD PART 2: THE PERSONAL GOD OF SALVATION AND JUDGMENT

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I want to start today by affirming all of you. You're getting smarter. Well at least by the standards of IQ testing. It's known as the Flynn Effect, named after the researcher who identified the trend. His research showed that over the past 50 years the average American IQ has risen nearly 14 points.

This rise has left researchers and sociologists trying to hypothesize the cause of this progression. One theory has to do with the way our technology is shaping our minds. In one sense we might look at our screen-centered, fidget-spinner culture and conclude that our media fascination is making us less engaged, less involved, less cognitive of our world and our surroundings. However this theory looks at the rise in the complexity of thought our media is developing.

Movies are fighting to be more and more visually engaging. Writers are pushing more plot lines, twists, and converging narratives into our shows knowing that with Netflix, we are no longer satisfied to only find a show entertaining the first time. It must be able to withstand and engage our repetitive binge watching schedule. A recent 60 Minutes discussed the new phenomenon of "brain hacking" where app developers are hiring neuropsychologists and physicists to design apps which prey on our brains built in dopamine structure.

What is happening is that our brains are more and more challenged than they ever have been, and contrary to what we may think, our minds are not prone to passivity, but to complexity. Healthy minds are increasingly resolved and determined every day as they process the cultural stimuli that is being built up around us.

While these theories have fancy names and hi-tech tests, they are really nothing new. Nearly five hundred years ago, the Swiss Pastor, John Calvin, called our hearts idol factories. We are tinkers. This fits the Bible's description of our hearts, they are active and dynamic. Our hearts seek to worship, they seek to be satisfied, to make sense of our life.

The book of Isaiah is a historical and theological study of our heart's desire to build structures and solve problems. At the writing of this book God had revealed himself to this nation of Israel and promised to be their God and to make them into his people. He desired for them to be exclusive in worship, distinct in conduct, and pure in heart. Now shortly after the reigns of David and Solomon the Kingdom split in two, with Israel in the North, and Judah in the South. The Prophet Isaiah worked among the people in this Southern tribe of Judah. As we read about Judah, and it's central city Jerusalem, or Zion, we want to be aware of two simultaneous truths. The first is that we are reading the history of God's interactions with his people at a specific point in time. The second is that the New Testament and the gospel reveals to us that this national Israel was a foreshadow of the true Israel which was to come, that is the church of Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 12:22, the author says that in our salvation we have come to the true Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem. The church is God's new spiritual people.

So in a sense as we read the story of the Israelites in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, we are also reading our own story. The prophecies of Isaiah was a clarion call to a wayward people to understand God in a real way amidst an active culture. And for us this side of the cross, it is a unique and definite call to understand our own hearts by understanding the God who has set himself up as the redeemer of them through Jesus Christ.

As we look at Isaiah 1:21-31 today we are going to see the dangers of our heart's desire to run wild and build systems, and God's solution to set our hearts in the proper direction. God wants to take our passive tinkering and turn them in to conscious commitments. What we are going to see today in three parts is this: **Our God is**

personal in his redemption, and our sin is destructive in its personal rejection. If we do not see God rightly, then we will not understand God's redemption rightly, and we will spend our lives building systems and idols which will never actually solve the human problem.

Before we look at our text today I want to add some context as to what Jerusalem was supposed to look like. Jerusalem was a capital of Israel, it was the place where the temple stood, and was meant to be the center of worship and righteousness. Look at how the Psalmist describes Jerusalem in **Ps. 48:1-3, 12-14.**

In Jerusalem, and more broadly, in all of God's people, the world was meant to see the beauty and splendor of God. It was to represent God's gracious rule where the Lord was glorified and people were cared for with justice and kindness. But let us now look at the less than ideal language the prophet Isaiah uses in reference to Israel. **Is. 1:21-23.**

Where God designed his people to provide life, they now take life. Where God had desired his leaders to promote peace, they now commit treason. This passage describes a complete collapse of the nation in terms of its corrupt economy, corrupt society and corrupt government.

Isaiah looks at this and calls us to consider how this has happened. Here is God's chosen city, populated by God's chosen people, served by God's chosen prophets and yet they have systematically taken what God has desired and designed a government, economy and corporate morality which pursues the exact opposite.

Perhaps this is you today. Here you sit in church and yet you realize that your life, your values and your desires are so foreign to what God has commanded from you. Either through the passive and waning cultural Christianity, or a more active background, you have created a standard of living or morality which you feel you ought to live up to. The thought that we should pursue God, treasure a righteous life, or even serve others seems restrictive to what you value to be satisfying in your life. And perhaps you've asked yourself the very same question Isaiah is asking here, "How did I get here?"

How can our life slowly become built around constructs and sin which we would never willingly seek to establish? Isaiah gives us the source of this corruption in **Is. 1:21.** The faithful city has become the whore. This is where we see our first point today: **The Personal Offense of sin.**

You see to answer the question of why our hearts pursue and build superstructures of sin we must look at what our chief sin is. The hearts of Israel, and the hearts of each and everyone of us at one point in time were unfaithful. Unfaithful to what? To morality? To economic principles? To one another? Is it an unfaithfulness to ethics or social codes which demarcate Christians from non-Christians? No. It is an unfaithfulness to God. They had become unfaithful to God himself.

God was meant to be their lover, he was meant to be their husband, their Lord, their caretaker, and they rejected him. But this is where the picture gets muddled, because their rejection is subtle. We saw last week that God looked at their sacrifices with detest, yet who was it that required their sacrifices? God. So when they went to sacrifice, it was in some degree done with an awareness of who God was. Yes, these people built idols, but in their idols they saw new ways of understanding and experiencing God. They even participated in pagan fertility cults, performing lewd and adulterous acts with prostitutes in order to gain forgiveness from some sort of god.

They were holistically theistic, meaning they acknowledged a god, they even performed many of these things in the name of the God of Israel, and yet the God of the Bible is repulsed at their actions. Why? Because the people had failed to hold central the personal God of the Bible. They had generalized God, and in so doing they attempted to create and define God on their own terms instead of knowing and loving God on his terms. This view of God is a popular one in today's Western world. However, God is not an impersonal idea to be grasped or a force to be appeased, but a person to be known and worshiped exclusively.

I think for many of us we have a tendency to lack right affection for God because we too have stripped God of

his personality. We do not see him as intimately zealous for our hearts. This is hard for us to understand because we have depersonalized the most intimate relationship we have with humans.

Isaiah uses an illustration of sexual infidelity to describe the rebellion of God's people. The unfortunate reality is that this description is not nearly as shocking as it should be in our own hearts. The availability of pornography in our day has deadened us to the intimate and personal role of sex between a husband and a wife. Sex has become impersonal, it depends less on the participants and more upon the feeling. It is not so much a celebration of a relationship, but instead a quest for personal gratification. Like food, or water, sex is merely a basic need of the human.

But this too is a dangerous commitment of a wayward heart. It's a good we've made into a god. God's intimate design for sex as a unique celebration of covenantal love between a husband and a wife is a shadow of the exclusive and unifying love God desires for his people. A high view of sex, both in its severity and in its joy, is meant to foster a high view of God and the beauty of his redemption. Look at the way in which Paul ties the personal nature of God to the personal nature of sex: **1 Cor. 6:15-20**.

The God of the Bible is the God who created humanity. He designed it and declared that it was good, but that goodness was directly related to the relationship he had with them. He created us so that we might know him, and in knowing him we might have a clear view of life, joy, love and worship. But instead sin corrupted this plan through our poor choices. Instead of daydreaming of ways in which God might satisfy us, our zeal for that intimacy searches for that satisfaction in sin. And this is the adulterous rebellion of the human heart. This is the source of all of our sin. This is the root of all of our suffering: that we have rejected God.

So what is God to do? Will he sulk like spurned lover? Will he look for someone else? Is there hope for the faithless city? Isaiah will continue as he provides us with our second point: **The Personal Solution for Sin**.

Look with me at **Is. 1:24-26**. You see Judah's apostasy wasn't simply a theological failure. It was the breach of a covenant. In the same way adultery violates the covenant of marriage, spiritual idolatry violates God's covenantal law. Because of this there is retribution. In fact far from sulking like a sullen lover, God looks at this idolatrous people and says, "I will get relief from my enemies, I will avenge myself from my foes, I will turn my hand against you." Faithlessness takes exclusive lovers and mangles them into loathsome enemies.

Three times God invokes his own name in giving this warning so as to establish the vast superiority and effortless capability he possesses to carry out this judgment. I the Lord, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty one of Israel will come against you.

Were this to be the case we would stand no chance. This would be justice and it would be effortlessly effective. But in the same way our offense is personal, so too is God's justice. It would have been just for God to wipe out this rebellious people. It would have been just for God to effectively destroy us in our unbelieving treason. And yet God's personal concepts of mercy and judgment intertwine at this point, and it does so in the metaphor of refinement.

The people are corrupt, like impure silver, so they will be thrown into the furnace. But instead of destroying the whole lump, God seeks instead to purify it. He wants to take what is lost, and redeem it. What lacks value, and make it precious. The very same judgment which God pours out on his faithless city is the very same mercy which will produce a righteous city. This cannot be done by some impersonal force, but only by a personal God who is able to uphold mercy and justice at the same time.

For the people of Judah, as we will see, God is going to bring punishment and fire in the form of Babylon. They will be captured, they will be carried away, but in this purging, God will preserve his remnant which will praise him. From this remnant we will see the likes of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. Judges and counselors who are beacons of faithfulness to God among the nations. As the book of Isaiah unfolds we will see these judgments and restorations predicted in great detail.

But also for us, we see our own judgment and mercy. For the physical nation of Israel the furnace of Babylon would destroy those who lacked faith, but for us it is the furnace of the cross where our faithlessness is melted away in the person of Jesus Christ. God's justice is not blind for it sees our sin through the lens of Jesus' sacrifice for it.

The personal God who rises up in judgment against his erring creation is also the personal God who executes salvation through judgment for all who believe in him. God's judgment of our sin in Jesus produces in us hearts which rise in the righteousness of Jesus: **2 Cor. 5:21**. Judgment was the result of our personal rebellion against God, but salvation was God's personal provision to sinners in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah says that two things contribute to the faithful and righteous city, the first is the removal of dross, this happened through Christ's substitutionary role on the cross, but Isaiah also says there must be new counselors set up. Note the role Jesus applies to the Holy Spirit in **John 14:26**. In his redemption God graciously deals with our past while at the same time securing our future.

The problem with impersonal and disconnect views of God is that it allows our hearts to determine the problem and spin our own solution, or dictate how we think God should act. This means that the consistency of our god is based on our own mental fortitude.

Look at **Is. 1:27**. By righteousness (that is a legal term for what is right) and justice we will be saved. These things cure culture, restore hearts, and sooth wounds. But this justice and this righteousness have to have a basis. For if we are left to find true justice or true rightness on our own, we will fail because our hearts are not very consistent. We ebb and flow. Even if we were to take basic thoughts about God and attempt to build out his righteousness and his justice without attempting to understand these things through the lens of Jesus, we will end up off base.

Case and point, under the Jim Crow laws in the South, some court houses in North Carolina had a Bible for white people to swear on, and another one for black people to swear on. Lest they touch the same surface. Here in the court house of justice, and on God's book of righteousness we see the explicit failure which comes when we try to understand these two things apart from God. God's personal salvation eliminates national exclusivity, God's justice levels the pride of humanity, and God's mercy beckons all to come to him through faith and repentance. If we want justice and righteousness we must have a consistent model of it.

I would like to propose to you the God of the Bible who is consistent in redemption and wonderful in his appeal to a broken and wounded humanity. Where the surprising thing about him isn't his judgment, for that is deserved, but his mercy, for this is unmerited. To know this God is to realize the foolishness of our adulterous hearts.

In conclusion I want to point out the final emphasis of Isaiah's message: **The Personal Punishment of Our Sin. Is. 1:27-31.**

Let us remember that this message is going to a people who all identify as God's people even if their hearts are far from him. The same is true for us today as God's spiritual people. In this room are the two types of people Isaiah just described. There are those who will respond to God with repentance and faith. These will be the ones who are saved. But there are also those who will, in subtle, but resolved ways continue to reject God and will face eternal punishment.

Isaiah's language here is that of humiliation. There are those who find redemption in God, and there are those who place their faith in idols, achievements, community, or wealth. Those who hope in these latter things find utter shame at the end. In the things in which they hoped, they will one day be ashamed. In the objects which so stoked their affections they will one day be humiliated. In the castle of what proved to be their protection they will ultimately find their destruction. To you in here today, I want to offer you the forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

We will either be redeemed by God's personal provision in Jesus, or our personal commitment to sin will lead us to hell. Only a right understanding of who God is will help our minds understand these choices. As C.S. Lewis says in, *The Great Divorce*, "No natural feelings are high or low, holy or unholy, in themselves. They are all holy when God's hand is on the rein. They all go bad when they set up on their own and make themselves into false gods."

Dear church, let us turn from our passive commitment to sin and instead renew our hearts by knowing and structuring our life around the personal God who so loved us so that we might be his people and he our God. Let us repent of the ways in which we have viewed God as an impersonal force, or a bank account where we must balance good and bad. And let us turn back to the one who has made us faithful and righteous in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Our God has shown us himself by showing us his son. His has called us his bride by redeeming us through the cross. Let us fix our minds on him and establish his mind as the basis of our life.

I want to close by reading the words of Jesus as our prayer and our hope for a renewed vision and a restored heart: **John 17:24-26**.