

Title: National Decay  
Text: Isaiah 3.1 – 4.1  
Theme: The folly of human dependence  
Series: Isaiah #6  
Prop Stmt. Be careful what you ask for, you may get it.  
Aim: I aim to help my people trust wholly in Christ!

It was Oct. 3, 2003. The Chicago Cubs were one victory away from going to the World Series for the first time since 1945 and game 6 was in Wrigley Field. Steve Bartman and two friends had seats next to left field. Many of you know the story. With one out in the bottom of the 8<sup>th</sup> and the Cubs leading 3-0, a fly ball is lifted toward left field that drifts foul near the stands. Just before it comes down into the glove of the Cubs left fielder, Moises Alou, Bartman reaches for the ball (along with a couple of others) and hits it, causing the Alou to miss it. The Marlins stayed alive and scored 8 runs that inning, won the game and knocked out the Cubs in the 7<sup>th</sup> game to move on to the World Series. Steve and his friends had even gotten a hotel room downtown Chicago to celebrate what they thought would be a great night in Cubs history. Instead, Steve's night of celebration turned on one foul ball that has in many respects, ruined his life. That which he loved became a curse of unimaginable grief.

Do you ever remember setting your heart on one particular gift that you wanted for your birthday or Christmas? As far as you were concerned, life would be complete if you only had that gift. Of course, on the other hand, you thought that life would not be worth living if you did not get it. But, once you got it, you found out, that it really wasn't as great as you thought. It doesn't just happen to kids though, does it? Some of you dreamed of having a cabin up north to which you could escape. You dreamed of relaxing weekends laying in a hammock while the sounds of nature envelope you. But the only sounds are those of your tools and the trips to the local hardware store as you now find that you just have another place to fix, maintain and furnish. So often, the very thing that we think that we want can become a weight, a trap, even a curse.

We ended last week with 2:22, "Stop regarding man". Stop thinking that people can come through for you. It is easy to look to people or things to save us, to give us happiness, security or validation. But, unless we look to God, the things that we look to save us will only curse us. In Isaiah's day, Judah was a nation, that at this point in her history, believed that she had no use for God. She had outgrown God. This arrogance sits at the very root of the problem. This chapter focuses upon the problem. Later on, Isaiah speaks to what we need. In the very last chapter we read these words: "*This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.*" (66.2) True humility is the recognition that God is the Sovereign, Infinite Creator who has the right and power to do what he deems best and therefore, the humble refuse to attempt to place themselves in his place. True humility means to know yourself as you are in the sight of God: a child of God. It means to know yourself in the plan of God and to see yourself as you are in the people of God; loved, treasured, forgiven and justified. Therefore, when you know this, you really have no need to draw attention to yourself. This indictment was written to a people who were big on image because they were empty.

Now keep in mind that while this was written to a nation, it was written to the people of God who comprised a nation. Therefore, while we can see some clear application to our nation (which I'll point out) the greater and more important application and challenge will be to us, the people of God. So here is the big idea. Most of the time, God gives a people, the kind of leader that they demand, or one who is a reflection of them. Watch this now. When you reject God, then you look for another god to give you what you want. So, you use your power, your voice, your vote to put into office a person who promises to give you what you want. But, what is he doing? He is telling you what you want so that he can get what he wants. And when he gets into office he acts like you. He uses his power, his voice, his vote to do what will best suit him. And when he does that, it is crushing for the people, unless of course you are on the inside. If you have connections to him and you are benefiting from his abuse of power, then enjoy it now, because God is going to stand up. And when God stands up, godless leaders are coming down. This text is mostly warning, with a hint of hope in v.10 for the righteous. Because even though they are affected by the sins of their fellow citizens, God has not forgotten them.

Read Text:

These verses paint a picture of a nation not only in decline, but already in decay. So, the three points of this chapter, reflected in the outline speak to the fact that the systemic problems and chaos in the country is not only inviting judgment on the land, but is itself part of the judgment that has already begun. Like the first 39 chapters of this book, there is a lot of warning here. I know that this is a tough chapter. But, in order for you to experience the fresh waters of grace in chapters 40-66, you need to understand how dry and thirsty we really are. We need to see how desperate our lives are without God. And this chapter speaks to a people who are trying to go it alone. Since verse 1 and the end of verse 15 have the same wording, it is easy to see that there is a division here. And since v.1 and v.8 begin with the same connecting word (like 2.6 and 2.15) I believe that these are indicators in Isaiah's thought. So the outline reflects that in verse division, but the outline is also set up to reflect the prophet's point of contrast. Instead of getting what God desires for you to have, when you ignore or marginalize God you end up with something so much worse. For example, when it comes to leaders...

I. **You have Boys instead of Men.** (1-7) (effect and cause)

This is describing the imminent collapse of society with verses 1-3 portraying God as the one who wreaks havoc on the nations source of food, water and even internal structures of leadership and organization. There is much cause and effect in these verses, but God is the One who ultimately ensures that. The wording "support and supply" is an idiom, that is, it is a saying in Hebrew that refers to every support and every supply, every resource, every plan, and every contingency is in view. The society is experiencing a meltdown of catastrophic proportions and it is reflected in the most basic things that people need for survival; bread and water. Why is it, that what you sow is what you reap? Is it just because? No, it is because God is just.

Some of you are aware that North Korea is experiencing another food shortage that has potential for catastrophic consequences. The same thing happened in Pol Pot's regime, and in just about every brutal dictator who has reigned. It's like God says, "Ok, you think you are God? Make it rain. Make the crops grow. Feed your people. Let's see you do it without me." 10 years ago, one million people died in N. Korea due to a famine. We may be seeing a repeat.

The collapse of a society is more than the agriculture and economy. The collapse is seen in the very structures of the culture itself. When a society turns on God, it loses its great men. Instead of men for kings, instead of men for examples, instead of men for honor, for duty, for bravery, for honesty, for integrity, for sacrifice, for loyalty, there are boys whose creed is: everyone for himself. The language of verse two shows how this affects every level: military, political, religious and craftsman. When every man is for himself, bribes, corruption, graft is all in play. And that is how you destroy a city, a people and a nation. The result was chaos. When leaders do not look out for the people, then the people look out for themselves – that is called anarchy.

There is generational dishonor (5b), moral dishonor and political dishonor. Notice how pitiful verses 6 and 7 are. In the absence of any good men to lead, the people grab a guy and try to thrust him into the position of being a leader because he owns a coat. That not only speaks of the poverty of the people, but it speaks of the fact that there is no good leadership pool from which to select. And look at what he is being asked to rule over (7); "this heap of ruins." But even this is something that this guy is not willing to be part of. He is not qualified to rule even over that! That is how impoverished the leadership pool is. In conversations with pastors and leaders from around the country, I am convinced that one of the most challenging issues facing our churches is the lack of good male leaders. Guys will come out of the woodwork to play on the softball teams, but learn the Word? Follow the Word? Love the Word? Teach the Word? Lead their family? Serve the church? Part of the dynamic is complicated by how leaders are generally treated.

We have a taste of this in our country. The relationship between leaders and people is generally toxic. When a man or woman runs for office, that person and his/her family becomes subjected to terrible abuse. That means that many competent and honorable people refuse to run for office because of the toll that it will take upon the people they love. When honorable people refuse to run, then dishonorable ones will. The disrespect and dishonor that seems to be in the air that we breathe can easily jade us about all leaders, even in the church. Beloved, here is an area, where we can shine, like lights in this dark world. We can be encouraging, respectful, thoughtful and sensitive about those in leadership. Remember, that in the church, it is ultimately God who calls people into these positions. It does not take much effort to ridicule or be cold toward leaders. We learn that from our world. What our world needs to learn from the church is how people can love, support and communicate with humility and joy. Judah had no incentive to love and support their leaders. The scene resembles something out of an apocalyptic movie. But what we have already read only gets worse.

## II. **You have Plunderers instead of Providers.** (8-15) (cause and effect)

Verse 8 and the first part of verse 9 speak of a people who publicly defy God. In spite of the fact that they have stumbled and fallen, they are without remorse. While this could certainly refer to one who is drunk, this could also be a reference to the fact that these people have begun to drink of the cup of God's wrath and are already staggering because of it (8-9a). The contrast continues. In the face of his glorious face, that is, his glorious presence (temple), these people are insolent. Their faces are hard. Their words are bold, brazen, arrogant, and unrepentant in their sinfulness. Their speech is not only suggestive in innuendo, but is blatant in its description of sin. These verses describe people who are proud of their sin, who boast of their wickedness, who are shameless and without guilt for their defiance.

Have you ever smelled flesh that has decomposed? That is what our conversations are like to God. But, when you are in the midst of it, like the frog in the kettle, you don't realize how bad it has become. We are saturated with sinful speech. Talk radio and other outlets use perverse language as a regular part of the conversation. Movies, songs, comedians, "adult cartoons", commercials all contribute to a general desensitization of standards of decency and appropriateness. Isaiah knew. His response is seen in the middle of v.9. "Woe to them!" He is anguished. He knows that they are going to face a devastating response from God. By the way, when we get to chapter 6, and study Isaiah's vision of the holiness of God, instead of saying, "Woe to them" he says, "Woe is me."

But right here, right in the midst of this warning of the impending judgment of God is this word of hope. God is saying, "Tell the righteous that their faithfulness will be worth it. Tell the righteous that I know them. This is the first time in the book that we find out that there is a faithful few who remain true to God. Sometimes the prophets refer to these as the remnant. That term is not used here, but that is what they are. God is saying to tell them that I have not forgotten about them. You may feel like an island in your family. You may feel like a freak at work or at school because you don't laugh at the jokes and cooperate in the schemes to cheat or get invited to the parties. That's okay. You are paying it forward. What you sow, is what you will reap. And it works two ways. It works for the faithfulness of the righteous and it works for the wicked who are convinced that they can sin and get away with it.

Vs. 10-11 summarize one of the major themes of the Bible. God knows the faithfulness of the righteous. The benefits of your faithfulness and perseverance are usually not immediate, but they are guaranteed. God also knows the ways of the wicked. He knows the secrets. He sees what you hide. Just because the consequences are not immediate do not mean that God has ignored them. Sin is like a boomerang. It comes back, only worse.

Leaders are supposed to provide for their people, but these are plunderers. The language of v.12 speaks of those who rule as oppressors, "infants" even, that is spoiled ones who demand their way. "And women rule over them." This could be a simple observation of the fact that the land was void of good men. It could also speak of the kings, who in keeping with the nations around them kept harems of women for their pleasure, only to

discover, like a Jezebel, that these women manipulated their opportunities of power and influence to carry out their own agendas.

At this point in Isaiah's description, the scene is pitiful, but the wicked are still ruling. So much of this sounds like the administration of the former mayor of Detroit. He attracted a number of shameless characters who preyed upon the people by using their positions to cut deals, demand bribes, and cover-up the truth. Some of it has come out. It was a sad day when the mayor went to jail. It would have been a thousand times worse if he hadn't.

But, we not only have a dearth of good politicians, we have a dearth of good elders and leaders in churches. It is very common for a pastor to look the other way when a wealthy member is living in sin because he does not want to lose their offerings. It is so easy for people to assume that the church functions on the basis of a good old boys club because that is how the world does it and sadly, sometimes the church does as well. Beloved, we are called out of this world. Our decisions and deliberations are to be governed by God's Word and directed by his Spirit and purposed by us as a people who really care that God's character be put on display through our gospel-driven unity. Sadly, the nation of Judah looked no different than their world. God was about to respond. (13-15)

These verses describe a courtroom, where God enters as the judge. He calls to account the elders and the princes. Their abuse of the people, and particularly the poor is the focus of his questioning. "What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding (like a millstone) the face of the poor?" declares the Lord God of hosts. Any boy who abuses a girl, any husband his wife and kids, any boss, who abuses her workers, teachers to a student, owners to employers, politicians who steal from the people, pastors and elders who pillage the sheep will all face the Lord God of hosts and be called to account. In that day, the truth will come out. Is there anything that you think you can do that will not be discovered? God sees, God knows and God comes! And the result of it is seen.

### III. **You have Shame instead of Beauty** (3.16 – 4.1) (consequence)

The daughters of Jerusalem, speaking of the young girls were obsessed with fashion, beauty, clothes, and jewelry because they were haughty. They dressed and walked in a way in order to be noticed. If you were walking down the street and some guy came up behind you and stuck a gun in your back and demanded your wallet, he would be demanding that you give him something that does not belong to him, but he is going to take it by violence instead of doing the right thing and working for it. When a girl dresses in order to be noticed, it is like walking into a room with a gun and demanding that all the men give her something (attention) that does not belong to her but that she is going to attempt to take it by force instead of being affirmed by character and spirit. I fully understand that our world does not get it. In our world, beauty is power and we are taught to leverage it for all its worth. The girl who's got it, is supposed to flaunt it. Got what? She's got skin that makes a promise, a tease, a lure. But, that's all she's got. That's it. And she only has value until the next girl comes along who is younger, leggier, or even more shameless. Have you ever noticed that those who dress in order to make a statement have nothing to say?

But, here, God is saying that all of the beauty, the fashion, and the treatments that are designed to make one appealing are going to be stripped away, like a veneer. And underneath, the scabs, the disease, the true self will be revealed. This prophecy was sadly fulfilled in the Babylonian exile, in the Roman invasion, even in Hitler's death camps. Perfume was replaced by the stench of rotting flesh. Belts that accessorize outfits are replaced by ropes. Beautiful hair settings are replaced by baldness, and the scalps will be marked by ringworm, psoriasis and cellulitis. The very things that these girls would be horrified by, are what they are. Their robes are replaced by sackcloth and their once beautifully conditioned skin is branded by their owner.

When I first started to go to Russia, there were virtually no older men in the churches. Part of this was because Russia lost, it is believed, between 20 - 27 million people during WW2, with over 11 million of them as soldiers. We lost just over 400,000 in that war. Russia lost over 60x that amount. Russia was devastated. At the time, no one on the outside knew how badly. Stalin kept that secret fearing that if others knew how desperate he was and how vulnerable to attack, that it would happen. It was like a generation was wiped out. There were so few men that family life and the birth rate seriously suffered.

Those who are not taken into slavery are left in a country, where most of the men have been killed by war or disease. These women who once used their beauty to allure men, are now in such desperation, that seven of them will approach one man begging to be taken into his home. Their shame has been exposed. The cities are destroyed, the families are wiped out, the structures, traditions, and all marks of education and sophistication are leveled. It is a devastating picture of a people who trust in their own power and, in the end, are powerless.

Conclusion:

Why does it come to this? Here is the difficult truth. God is absolutely righteous. His purity is white hot. His eyes see through everything. No one can stand on their own in His presence. And the day is coming when we will stand before him. So, what God does, is he provides immediate consequences for our sin so that we will know about the eternal consequences. The temporal judgment of God is a kindness and mercy that is intended to wake you up before you confront the King face to face when your eternal sentence is handed down. Let the judgments of God, do what they are intended to do. Let them drive you to Christ. Let them drive you to the only shelter, the only refuge that will keep you safe in the storm. And this is what I want to leave you with.

This chapter talks about the day when God strips away all that a person trusts in and reveals the nakedness of their soul. The truth about you and me is that we are fragile people who try to cover it up with elaborate disguises. None of which can stand before the eyes of God. We deserve to be humiliated because we are sinners who have gone our own way. We deserve to be exposed for what we are. We deserve to have our scabs, our sores, our failures, and our hypocrisy all laid bare before all to see. We try to make up excuses, but we have no defense. But this is not the end of what God says. The One who

is devastatingly just, is overwhelmingly merciful. We haven't read that part in Isaiah yet, but we will. And when we do, we are going to find out something that is so amazing and so astounding, that all you can do is open your arms wide and let it rain down on your dry soul and that is this. Instead of having our transgressions, iniquities, sins and chastisements made public before the world, God sent his own Son to this earth to become a man. And as a man, he bore our grief. He carried our sorrows. He was esteemed as being stricken. He was considered as being cursed by God, because He was cursed by God in my place. In my place condemned he stood. He was wounded for my transgression. Christ was bruised for my iniquity. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace! And with his stripes we are healed. We who deserve to be humiliated because of the truth of our sin, turn to Christ and see that he has already taken all of our humiliation when he died oppressed, forsaken, naked, afflicted, like a lamb to the slaughter, like a violent criminal suffering a capital sentence. He died exposed. He died under judgment so that you can face your Maker, unafraid.

One day you will stand before God either as one whose life is laid bare, or one whose life is hid in Christ. Exposing your need and confessing your sin to God brings you a cover in Christ that will never fade. Covering your need and disguising your sins brings you an exposure that is devastating in its judgment. Before that day, come to Christ. Come to Christ and live.