

Title: Hope through Judgment  
Text: Isaiah 1.21-31  
Theme: restoration of glory  
Series: Isaiah #3  
Prop Stmt God will do what He must in order to cause his children to be faithful  
Aim: I aim to challenge my people to live in total submission to the authority of God.

Read Text:

It is a storybook theme. The spoiled young prince who is set to take the throne is not ready to rule. He sees leadership as power and opportunity to do whatever you want, whenever you want to whomever you want. From the Lion King, Beauty and the Beast to the modern rendition of Thor, each of these princes had to be humbled, crushed and almost destroyed so that they could understand the enormous privilege and responsibility of being a king or noble person. The only hope for them is to understand grace. Those who just can't wait to be king do not understand the weight of the crown. The true measure of one's leadership is seen in how well they care for those who have nothing to be able to give back in return.

For several hundred years, Judah thought that she was the best of the bunch. God had favored her because she was smarter, prettier, or stronger. Nothing of the sort was true, but Judah believed it anyway. It is rather shocking to be told one thing all of your life only to find out that it is not true. During the communist era in Russia, the people were told that life there was far better than elsewhere. They believed they had the best cities, the best technology, the best manufacturing and the best healthcare. It was stunning for the average citizen to realize how backward they really were. That is what this text is like.

The people of Judah had such high opinions of themselves. But like kids full of self esteem, but nothing else, the children of Judah were not what they thought themselves to be. A reality check awaited and the contrast is stunning. Instead of being faithful, they were whores. Instead of being righteous, they were murderers. Instead of being silver, they were dross. Instead of being pure wine, they were watered down. Their princes were rebels and thieves. The ones who were charged with defending the city were on the take, receiving bribes, padding their own accounts, and leaving the people exposed. Power is not given so that one can amass more power and enrich oneself. Power is to be used in order to protect those who do not have power.

In recent months, we have watched governments in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen go through the convulsions of revolution and rebellion. Story after story of leaders who have stashed wealth, abused their power, and crushed the weak gives the listener a sympathetic ear to those who overthrow the regimes. But now what? What kind of government or leadership will emerge? So often, those who have been abused, when given an opportunity for power, use it to abuse. Many of our local

governments are no different. What is it that goes on in the heart of a person who is in a position of power to think that he is above the law? Is that not the same thing as saying, I am above God?

I think that Nebuchadnezzar's experience is something that we are all tempted with. Think of this. One of the earthly marks of success is working in the corner office on the top floor. You get the best view. You get to look down on everything else. You get to see what is beneath you. David did that one day. He looked down on his city and saw a girl that he could use for his own desires. Nebuchadnezzar looked down from his palace and exulted in his power for having made all of this for his own glory. The seeds of that are in all of us. We don't have to have an actual palace; we'll use anything. It doesn't have to be the best office; we'll demand the best chair at the table or in the family room. We can create palaces of pride over just about anything. If our car is faster, if our lawn is greener, if our sound system is louder, if our TV is bigger, if our kitchen is fancier, if our clothes are trendier, if our hair is thicker, if our skin is cleaner, if our kids are smarter, if we have more kids, if we have kids, if we are stronger, younger, possess advanced degrees, if we are musical, if we are mechanical, if we are computer, linguistical - or whatever. We are capable of making an idol out of anything that has been given to us and use it in an attempt to find validation. Anything that you trust for your validation, for your happiness, even the approval of others is nothing more than a dead idol that will betray you. All idols betray. They promise you acceptance. They promise you pleasure. They promise you validation and worth. But, when you lean on them, they do not hold you up, but instead, they crumble into shards that will pierce your very heart. Trusting in anything for your security, your happiness, your validation apart from God (idolatry) is like drinking salt water. It looks like it will quench your thirst, but will only create more thirst. In contrast to the idols is God. He stands and he calls. He invites, because he alone can save. But, in order for Judah to come to that point, she, and every person who wants to make God his refuge needs to have a "come to Jesus" time, meaning, you need to face the truth about what you really are. The words in this text are, once again, strong.

### 1. **You are not what you think.** (21 - 26)

You think that you are a faithful city. Fact is, that is what you were designed to be. That is what you were for a brief period of time. But ever since then, you have been living off of the fumes of that day. You are not what you think. Don't lie to yourself by comparing yourself to others and thinking that you are not as bad as others. The truth is...you are a whore. I have chosen to treat this section in its own sermon because it is, I believe a lament. This verse begins with the same word that Lamentations does. It is the agonizing cry of woe by the prophet Isaiah. He is not the only one to lament. God grieves in this text as we will see.

#### A. **A Reality check** (21 - 23)

Wow, talk about a reality check! Now, I confess a bit of unease using language like that. I do not relish it but realize that if in my fallen-ness I am sensitive to this, how much must God be fundamentally offended by the unfaithfulness of his bride? He uses descriptive language because the nature of the sin is so shocking and so vile in contrast to the righteousness and purity of God. The relationship of God to his people was described (in v.2) as a parent to a child. That is close. Now, the language is that of a husband to a wife.

When I listen to the stories of a girl who was raised in an abusive, unloving, unstable home, where she, having no relationship with her father, was subjected to all sorts of men coming and going in her mother's life, where she was taken advantage of, and essentially left on her own to raise herself, now sells herself night after night. That's all she knows. That's all she believes that she is worth. I, like you have great sympathy. I want to see that girl loved, cherished, protected, affirmed, encouraged, provided for, prayed for, cared for and see her blossom. There's a big part of me that is inclined to think that if you do all of these things for this girl that she will become a beautiful person, a wonderful wife to someone and a great mom. All she needs is a different environment – right? That is what is so shocking about this text! We have empathy when a girl runs to the streets because the abuse is so bad. But, when a girl has the husband that all of the other girls can only dream about, and that girl sells herself in the streets, we are stunned. There is simply no category in our brain in which to put that.

Here, Jerusalem is not only representing the nation of Judah, but, the fact that the capital is focused on, reflects the fact, that this decay was at the highest levels of the government, and was in all levels of society. This was not just on the fringe, this condition was a spiritual epidemic.

Think about this with me. What are the governing rules; what are the core beliefs of a prostitute? 1) That which is sacred, that which is special, that which is private, cherished, and to be given only to one, is wasted and taken by many. 2) My value has nothing to do with me as a person, but only with my ability to perform. 3) I can be bought with a price. I am not worth much. Prostitution is not glamorous. Those involved in it, learn to separate themselves. They lose their wholeness. They lose some of themselves. Here, God is saying to his wife – “look at what you have become. You are not what you could have been. You are not what you think. You are not what you used to be. You are empty, broken, and all used up. You went after other gods, other lovers, other pleasures and they betrayed you. You gave them your soul and they had no life to give you in return. Now, understand, he uses sexual language to describe idolatry. Yes, they tend to go hand in hand, but the metaphor reflects on how the people of God have cheapened themselves.

You, who were supposed to be faithful, who was at one point full of justice, is now a whore. You, who used to have righteousness as your reputation is now full of murderers. Do you see the theme of devaluation? The lack of justice and righteousness comes when a people have devalued truth and people. Murder is the

devaluing of life. When you cheapen life, then you end up placing value on things that are not intrinsically valuable. Something is dreadfully wrong when those who are entrusted with leadership are the perpetrators of violence. (21b)

In its early days, communism had a Utopian appeal to it. There were many who were duped into believing that this was the way that society ought to function. Years ago, a certain German diplomat who had been very sympathetic to and very supportive of communism, suddenly turned against it. His daughter explained. She said, "...one night – in Moscow – he heard screams. That's all. Simply one night he heard screams." We know now, what those screams were, and that there were millions of others. Jerusalem, the city of song had become a city of screams. The rulers were "getting away" with murder.

v.22 – "Your silver has become dross." That which is supposed to be pure has become impure. The leaders here are portrayed as what used to be fine wine, but are no longer fine, aged, and valuable. Instead, they are watered down. They are cheap. V.23, the leaders do not respect their position. They do not respect truth. What is the difference between a politician, judge, police officer, or business person accepting a bribe and a girl prostituting herself? Nothing! Both are willing to sell themselves out and in so doing cheapen their lives and cheapen their position. Everything that really matters, like life and relationships is cheapened when God is marginalized. That is why those who are in positions of authority and even the culture of the people themselves do not concern themselves with justice for the orphans or care for the widows. Who cares what happens to those who have nothing to add to society; who have no one to speak up for them; who cannot add anything of value to my life, but who are perceived as needy? The way a people treat them, the way a culture views them tells you about the culture. Do you see why abortion is such an enormously important issue? Our acceptance of this murder for convenience is the formal endorsement of a culture of death, and cheapens all life. God is the maker, giver and ultimate lover of life. When we scar, deform, destruct and deny that which he has made and that which he loves, we invite the wrath of a judge that we cannot endure.

#### **B. From God's perspective (24a)**

"Therefore". Therefore – what? Because these things are going on, God is going to respond! God made promises to judge sin. If he does not make good on his promises to judge, then what good are his promises to save? Isaiah employs a three-fold description of God that adds to the intensity of what is about to be said.

- 1) The Lord – adonai, the meaning of this name is sovereignty.

He occupies an unparalleled position.

- 2) The LORD of hosts – Yahweh's armies.

Our God is not only sovereign, but he has millions of angels at his bidding, one of whom killed 186,000 Assyrian soldiers in a single night. This name combines the personal, covenant name that God uses with his people with his accessibility to the innumerable angels available to do his bidding.

- 3) The Mighty One of Israel – only heightens the intensity and increases the size of the threat.

The point is, you want to be on his side. He has no equal. So, when he speaks (declares) you had better listen, because it will happen.

### C. **Who is (will) responding?** (24b – 26) (ends with hope)

ah – hoy (oiy) This is a gut-expression. It means woe, agony and anticipates deep sorrow. But here, it is God who is saying it. And he is agonizing and grieving over the fact that his justice will get relief from his enemies. Now, why is he agonizing over this? The fact is, his enemies and his foes are his own people. (24b) But then in the midst of this warning, we read that God is going to bring judgment on his people for their idolatry and rebellion in order to remove it from them. In v.25 he uses the verb, “turn”. The same Hebrew verb is used in v.26 and is translated “restore.” The turning of God’s hand against his people is for their restoration. Their only hope is through judgment – why? God is holy. God is righteous. God cannot tolerate sin. If anyone is going to live in the presence of God, something has to be done about the offensiveness of their sin. God cannot let sin go unpunished and still be righteous. Neither can he set aside his righteousness. It is what He is.

The judgment, the pressure, the exile, is going to be grueling. The only hope for these people is if they are emptied of everything. So, then we begin to see what God is doing. His power to judge, his power to condemn, his power to destroy is without equal. It is unstoppable. So, when we read of Judah’s rebellion and ongoing rejection of God, we assume that God is going to use his power to destroy them – which he could, which would be his right. But he doesn’t! Instead of unleashing his power, like the bursting of a dam, or the terror of a tsunami, his response is measured, focused, specific because it is intentional. God is never out of control – ever! Now, since his wrath and power has no equal, recognize that his wrath and power that is measured, still, in the moment is overwhelming, but God measures it out so that it will accomplish his desired effect. What is that effect? What is that goal? God’s goal is NOT to destroy, but to recreate!

“and will smelt away your dross...” – how do you do that? Smelting is accomplished by heating up to high temperatures. That is the way the impurities (the alloy) are removed. The heat and intensity of persecution will purify those who respond to it with humility. But look at what God promises (v.26). I will restore your judges...and counselors (which speaks of justice being restored) and then you will “be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.” (cf. v.21) God is going to remake his people, so that they will become what he intended all along.

So, did it work? Did the judgment, the persecution, the pressure, the devastation, even the exile from the land work? Well, it at least seems that Baal worship was finally removed from the land. But, full restoration did not take place because full repentance never lasted. So, God sent a Redeemer. The emphasis on “justice” and “righteousness” is intentional. The only way that people can be restored is through perfect justice and perfect righteousness. Perfect justice demands that sin be punished. Perfect justice demands perfect righteousness. And we do not qualify. And dare not pretend that we do. God sent Christ, who alone is perfectly righteous. Who lived as our representative and died as our substitute. Our response to the reality of our condition is to repent! And, our response to the reality of our sufficient Redeemer is to believe!

## 2. **You have a choice.** (27 – 28)

The fire of persecution will destroy the unrepentant, but will purify the humble. God cannot sit idly by without responding to the sins of his people. If he does not make good on his promises to judge, then what confidence do we have that he will make good on his promises to save? The text is clear. God is going to shake the world of Judah. This shaking, like an earthquake will level everything to the ground. Isaiah is saying that both groups will face the same fire, same pressure, same situation, but there will be a different outcome.

You can be part of the people of God who go through the refiner’s fire but who are purified for it, or you can rebel and face his fire without a shield. V. 27 speaks to the hope that there is for the true people of God, who are seeking to be faithful in the midst of those who call themselves the people of God but who are not. This verse shows the relationship between what God will do, and what people are responsible to do. God will ordain that his fire will purify the humble. But in order for that to take place, we must be counted as one of the humble. The call is to repent. Repentance is what unleashes hope in judgment. It is only until we humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God will he lift us up. But this is our only hope.

## 3. **There is no life apart from God.** (29 – 31)

In these last few verses, Isaiah exposes the end result of idolatry. The reference to oaks is probably a reference to the sacred groves of the Baal and Ashteroth fertility cult. The absurdity of viewing the oaks (and surrounding area) as being sacred is as bizarre as viewing the idols themselves carved out of the tree as being sacred. To reject the God who made the trees in order to follow the trees, is absurd – but it happens all the time. The gardens, the high places (as the OT calls them) were the places of mystery, places of idolatry that promised unbridled pleasure that helped you become in touch with the divine. Idolatry is a religion of make-believe. It is fictional. Idolatry is the systematic organization and naming of the sins and evil desires of the human heart in an attempt to make them valid. Good is presented as boring, while evil is portrayed as attractive, alluring, charming and the means by

which spiritual advancement is experienced. But, it is a lie. The oak tree's leaves wither. The garden of the gods has no water. It is a mirage and a fraud. There is no power

God chose Judah and Judah turned around and chose a tree – great! What you worship is what you become. When you worship something that is not real, you become less real. When you worship something that is dead, you become empty, dead, or dying. You become a machine; less than human. That which has been created is dependent upon the Creator. The creation cannot give you life. When you depend upon that which itself is dependent, you are even more dependent. There is no reality in false religion. There is hype, ceremony, tradition, emotionalism and promises, but no reality. Like a garden without water, whatever is planted is doomed to wither and die. You cannot reject God without accept something else, you will surrender yourself to something or someone one – what is it going to be?

I'm a fool for Christ – whose fool are you?