

# 1

## **Crisis in the church**

*Please read Isaiah 1*

We all live somewhere: in a certain dwelling, in a certain street, in a certain village, town or city. Knowing precisely where we live is important if we are to find our way about and get home again. Bible books have their ‘addresses’ too. The books of the prophets were written in very definite periods of church history; well-defined problems brought about much of what the prophets said. Isaiah, like all the others, preached his message in a historical setting. At certain points in this book we shall need to know the background in order to understand his message. The opening verse of Isaiah tells us that we need to engage in a history lesson! *‘The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah’ (1:1).*

### **Exciting times**

Isaiah lived in the capital city of Jerusalem in the southern

kingdom of Judah, with his wife and two children. There could hardly have been a more exciting time in which to live than the eighth century BC.

### **1. A time of war**

The ten northern tribes, collectively known as Israel, were about to disappear for ever by the onslaught of the mighty empire of Assyria, led by a succession of ruthless kings: Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727), Shalmaneser V (727–722), Sargon II (722–705) and Sennacherib (705–681). The first twenty years or so of Isaiah's ministry would see the northern kingdom dispose of six kings through internal squabbles; some reigns, like those of Zechariah, Shallum and Menahem, lasted only for a few months, and ended in bloody assassination.

Nor was Judah exempt from these things. The relationship between Israel and Judah was difficult and sometimes spilt over into outright hostility. In the reign of Amaziah, Uzziah's father and predecessor, war broke out between the two nations and Jerusalem was ransacked. Amaziah was taken captive by Israeli soldiers. The fact is that Amaziah had begun well, but became proud and boastful of his attainments (2 Chronicles 25:19). God showed him mercy. He returned and reigned with Uzziah for a while but was eventually assassinated, by his own people, at Lachish (2 Chronicles 25:27).

### **2. A time of political change**

Before any of the above happened, both Israel and Judah had known an Indian summer which had lasted for about fifty years and in which both territories had been free from large-scale aggression. This came to an end in 740 BC when King Uzziah died (6:1).

Uzziah (also known as Azariah) came to the throne at the age of sixteen. He was a good king, at least to begin with (2 Chronicles 26:4). But like his father Amaziah, Uzziah too became proud (2 Chronicles 26:16). We are never so vulnerable as when we believe we are strong in ourselves. It is written of Uzziah that when he ‘became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God, and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense’ (2 Chronicles 26:16). When he was discovered Uzziah ‘became angry’ (2 Chronicles 26:19), and was smitten with leprosy. Sin and guilt rendered him incapable of self-control. Uzziah, like Jeroboam I (1 Kings 13) offered incense upon the altar. His confrontation with Azariah the high priest, together with eighty other priests, makes dramatic reading. His internment and leprosy bear a sad testimony to the sins that can befall a man in his mature years.

The reign of Jotham, Uzziah’s son, was a good one (2 Chronicles 27). He was both a powerful military leader (like David) and a builder (like Solomon).

### ***3. A time of religious apostasy***

The reign of Ahaz (also known as Jehoahaz) stands out by way of contrast as possessing no redeeming feature at all! Like Manasseh (two kings later) he was faithless (2 Chronicles 28). He closed the temple, used temple money to pay tribute to Assyria and indulged in Canaanite religion—even to the extent of burning alive his own children in ritualistic fires. His reign marked the beginning of Judah’s downfall. God is faithful in every way. His holy character brings judgement upon Judah and ‘humbles’ them.

Desperate people do desperate things, and Judah was besieged by the northern kingdom of Israel in coalition with Syria and

driven to make a deal with Egypt to the south, as a means of withstanding the aggression of Assyria. There was nothing of faith in it and Isaiah said so (ch. 7). King Ahaz was not a man of faith and was judged for his unbelief. The northern regions ('Galilee', 9:1) fell in c. 734 and the rest of Israel in 722. Assyria was now at the gates of Jerusalem and the need for faithful leadership had never been greater. At such a time as this, God raised up one of Judah's best kings, Hezekiah.

#### ***4. A time of revival***

Hezekiah was the greatest king since David. During his reign Judah experienced both revival and renewal. The political and spiritual turmoil of the northern kingdom affected Judah also, and when Assyria came marching into Israel, taking villages, towns and cities with considerable ease, Judah feared the worst and panicked. The Assyrian threat is one that will occupy Isaiah's message for almost the entire first half of the book. The fact that we now know that Assyria would fall to Babylon without a fight before gaining its much sought-after prize of Jerusalem does not lessen the reality of the threat it posed to the Lord's people. Hezekiah was tempted more than once to counter the threat of Assyria by unfaithful means. It is to the considerable credit and faithfulness of Isaiah that Hezekiah was kept from doing what his sinful heart tempted him to do.

Perhaps you sometimes wonder if the Bible has any relevance to today's situation. As I write these lines the ancient kingdom of Babylon (modern Iraq) is threatening to destroy Israel and bring the entire world into conflict. In Africa there are several bloody wars taking place. In Eastern Europe, political changes once thought unimaginable have taken place. And in my own province of Northern Ireland murder and political intrigue are features of daily occurrence. Isaiah lived through days when

nations were at war and fell, when kings were murdered, when tyrants threatened to destroy the world and when politicians were doing anything but asking for the Lord's help. Isaiah has a message for today!

### **Rebellion**

Isaiah's entire message is bounded, as between two book-ends, by the word '*rebelled*' (1:2; 66:24). Five times in this first chapter, God charges the Old Testament church with rebellion (1:2, 5, 20, 23, 28) and he repeats the charge on eleven other occasions.<sup>1</sup> Behind the accusation lies a history of unfaithfulness to God's covenant, his solemn promise entered into with his people. To understand this, we need to go back to the time of Moses and the calling of Israel to be God's covenant people.

After God had entered into a covenant with Moses on Mt Sinai, the people rebelled. An entire generation died in the wilderness. God led Israel on from Sinai as they journeyed through the wilderness towards Canaan. Just before they entered Canaan, a land given to Israel by God, a renewal ceremony took place on the plains of Moab (Deuteronomy 1:5). Moses reflected on the law, which God had given, in the hearing of a second generation (Deuteronomy 8:2–5). God had spoken! He had revealed how his people should live so as to glorify him. Not only that, but every day brought fresh glimpses of God's faithfulness and unfailing provision.

In an unforgettable moment the solemnity of what they were doing was reinforced. Blessings lay ahead for the obedient; but just as surely there were curses for those who did not obey (Deuteronomy 27–28). At the end of this ritual, Deuteronomy records that Israel became witnesses to this covenant (Deuteronomy 30:19; 31:28; 32:1). On the plains of Moab, Moses called upon 'heaven and earth' to testify to the truth of God's

warning. Here, in Isaiah, God calls upon them again to bear witness to the rightness of his accusation: *'Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth!'* (1:2). This is Isaiah's message to Judah: they have broken God's covenant (24:5). Watching a family break up is a very sad thing. God's *'children'* have rebelled: they are become by turn sinful, guilty, evil and corrupt (1:4).

If you are a Christian, but your life is not what it should be; if you have slipped into worldly ways; if your walk with God is not an obedient one, then be prepared for a stern rebuke and a call to repentance as you read Isaiah!

### **Hardness**

Isaiah describes Judah's condition by using the picture of a man who has been beaten almost to death, and yet wants more. He will not listen to the voice of rebuke and chastisement. Judah's heart is hardened.<sup>2</sup>

Behind these words lies the terrible history of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah (see chs 36–37). Jerusalem, though sorely threatened, remained unconquered. But almost everything else in Judah fell. The Taylor prism records that forty-six walled towns were captured, together with 'innumerable villages' and a fifth of a million people. Jerusalem was like a *'hut in a field of melons'* (1:8), or to borrow F. F. Bruce's paraphrase, 'a tool-shed in an abandoned allotment'.<sup>3</sup> They had come within an inch of the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, that is, of extinction! (1:9).

We are not to feel sorry for Judah. They deserved what they received, and more. They deserved to be judged more severely than Sodom and Gomorrah, because they should have known better. But they did not know:

The ox knows his master,  
the donkey his owner's manger,

but Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand (1:3).

Imagine the pain when a child grows up and turns on loving parents! This was what Judah did. All too often this is the sin that lies so close to our hearts.

Even at this early stage in Isaiah we are meant to catch a glimpse of Jesus! Using three particular words, Isaiah describes Judah's condition as 'beaten' (1:5), 'injured' (1:5) and full of 'wounds and bruises' (1:6). These are precisely the words used to describe what will become of the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, where Jesus in prophecy is said to have been 'stricken', 'smitten', and to have 'infirmities' and 'wounds' (53:4-5). Already, the divine substitute appears: Jesus, 'by whose wounds we are healed', is the burden of Isaiah's message.

### **Self-righteousness**

Several times the prophets engage in a sustained outburst against formal, empty religion (1 Samuel 15:22; Jeremiah 7:21-23; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8, and here in Isaiah 1:10-20). When it comes to worship, there comes a time when God's patience runs out. On the eve of Jesus' death, the Saviour boiled over with righteous fury at the travesty of commercialism in the temple and the self-righteous attitude of the Pharisees (Matthew 21:12-17; 23:1-39).

Religion had several features in Isaiah's day: first, there were the '*offerings*' (1:11, 13). These were the daily services which involved animal sacrifices. They were obviously kept punctiliously! Then there were the festivals, or '*convocations*' (1:13). There were the '*assemblies*' (1:13), a bit like our rallies and conferences. The traditional gatherings laid down in the law

were not enough. They had to devise additional ones. Finally there were times of public prayer (1:15).

What was wrong with all these? Nothing at all! But here they give God no pleasure (1:11). The sound of these folk coming to the temple is likened to that of a noisy rabble (1:12). Their offerings are '*meaningless*' (1:13). God '*hates*' their conferences (1:14); and he refuses to listen to their prayers (1:15).

Do not misunderstand Isaiah, for he is not saying that God hates Old Testament worship. After all, this pattern had been laid down, more or less, by God himself. No! God hates this particular worship by these particular people. Why? The answer is given in verse 17 (and repeated in 1:23):

Learn to do right!  
Seek justice,  
encourage the oppressed.  
Defend the cause of the fatherless,  
plead the case of the widow.

If there is one thing that a close study of the prophets will tell us, it is that true faith will manifest itself in deeds of faith. For Jesus it was a matter of everyday gardening: a good vine will produce grapes (John 15).<sup>4</sup> If some branches seem to be reluctant to do so, a gardener worth his salt will cut off those branches and burn them.

Be honest! What do the words 'do right' and 'justice' say to you? Perhaps you think of the 'social gospel', of folk who have very little time for personal issues of faith and repentance and what they would call 'pietistic' religion and who instead concentrate entirely upon the effect of the Christian message upon society. There is no doubt that this was once very fashionable, particularly in the early part of the twentieth century.

Evangelicals have been quite right to mistrust a Christian message which does not first of all seek to make sinners right with God. But have they been right to forget about the social implications altogether? The prophets would say, 'No!' 'Let justice roll down like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!' (Amos 5:24). The world can never be changed unless the gospel is preached. But that does not mean that Christians are to be indifferent to social and political matters. Christians should be concerned about the oppressed and downtrodden. Some, it is true, have taken the gospel and made it to mean something different. To get involved in liberation movements in the Third World is to preach the gospel, they say. They are wrong. But that does not mean we are to be unconcerned about the oppressed. During the revival of the eighteenth century that swept through Britain under the preaching of men like George Whitefield, John Wesley, Howell Harris and Daniel Rowland, the effect was that thousands were converted. In turn these converted Christians reformed prisons, infused clemency into penal laws, abolished the slave trade and gave leadership to nationwide education of children.

### **Let's talk about it**

God has presented his case against Judah: they are rebels, hard-hearted and self-righteous! What comes next is a wonderful demonstration of the grace of God. He calls upon Judah to 'reason' with him (1:18). There are two distinct components here: *God's invitation to talk* and *his offer of mercy*.

Have you noticed how people will talk about anything except their relationship with God? In the part of the world where I live elaborate rituals have to take place before politicians can feel free even to sit down and talk. They must first engage in 'talks about talks'. God is anxious to get down to business straight

away. He wants to talk about his charges against Judah and see whether or not they are fair. It is not that there is any doubt about their accuracy; he simply wants Judah to admit it.

At the very start of the book, it is as though Isaiah is saying to us, ‘When did you last talk to God about your sin, about God’s threat to punish it unless it is atoned for by Jesus Christ, or about heaven and hell? If you go on ignoring the problem for ever, you may find it is too late to talk!’

God’s invitation to talk is accompanied by a word of grace. In unforgettable terms he uses the violent picture of a murder:

Though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red as crimson,  
they shall be like wool (1:18).

‘Scarlet’ and ‘crimson’ are the colour of blood on a murderer’s hands (cf. 1:15, 21). You may recall how Lady Macbeth’s conscience at the murder of Duncan caused her to sleepwalk at night. Wringing her hands in a gesture of washing, she lamented: “Will all the perfumes of Arabia not cleanse this hand of mine?”<sup>5</sup> Death is an appropriate metaphor; it is the wages of sin (Romans 6:23).

Behind this entire opening chapter lies the image of Deuteronomy 30, where Israel were witnesses to God’s covenant. In words reminiscent of Deuteronomy 30:15–20, God’s offer of mercy is couched in terms of blessings and curses. Those who obey God’s invitation will be blessed (1:19); but those who remain hardened and stubborn will be destroyed (1:20). Jesus echoed the same warning to the Jews of his day who did not believe his testimony: ‘I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me... But do not think I will accuse you before the Father.

Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set' (John 5:43, 45).

**Warning!**

Things were not well in the church of Isaiah's day. God's bride had become a *'harlot'* (1:21). As in an earlier day, so now, the glory has departed (1 Samuel 4:21). Instead of reflecting the beauty of the Lord, she was mirroring the marks of the beast (see Revelation 17). The prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, says much the same thing, summarizing the church's condition thus: 'You who hate good and love evil' (Micah 3:2).

What has already been traced in 1:2–17 is now underlined: God's Old Testament church had no love for spiritual things—a fact portrayed by its utter lack of concern for social justice (1:23, cf. 1:17).

When Christians grow cold and formal in their faith, they can expect to be chastised (Hebrews 12:7–13). Indeed, it is part of the New Testament's use of the book of Isaiah to show that Jesus, too, was chastised by the Father: chastised, that is, for no sin of his own, but in our place as our substitute (Isaiah 53:10, 12; Acts 2:23; Romans 8:32). We are to 'consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men...' (Hebrews 12:3), recalling that the same Father is using the same method with us. Rebellious Christians can expect to pass through the Refiner's fire (1:24–25). *'I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities'* (1:25).

A former minister in Belfast, greatly used by God and much loved, used to say to his congregation: 'We become agitated when the foundations are shaking beneath us, and at such times we turn to God for help and reassurance, only to find that God is the One doing the shaking!' This is Isaiah's message, too.

The love of God is holy and his justice is tempered with mercy. God's enemies can expect no mercy if they remain impenitent. They will be destroyed (1:24). The Lord's people, however, can expect to be redeemed, though the dross must first be removed (1:27). The judgement falls upon believer and unbeliever alike. But for the unbeliever there is no hope: *'But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the Lord will perish'* (1:28). Using the metaphors of *'oaks'* (1:29) and *'gardens'* (1:30), suggesting by turns man's strength and works, Isaiah predicts their complete downfall: the tree had no leaves and the garden no water: *'Both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire'* (1:31). Right at the beginning of this prophecy is a warning to the impenitent sinner which, later, will toll as a funeral bell: *'There is no peace for the wicked'* (48:22; 57:21).

These are only general statements so far; they will become explicit as we study Isaiah further. Behind these warnings of chastisements, as we shall see, lies the coming of Assyrian and Babylonian forces to destroy Jerusalem and take God's people into captivity. This would mark Israel's lowest point in all her long history. Already the theme is set: the church has become apostate and God is angry. There is a course which leads to restoration and it lies in the way of repentance. Failing this, there is no hope, *'but only a fearful expectation of judgement and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God'* (Hebrews 10:27).

But all is not lost. God's judgements are tempered with mercy; and blossoming from this chapter are indications of the righteous rule of the Messiah, pictured in terms of the justice that prevailed in David's day—restoring the judges as in the days of old (1:26). Jesus will introduce the *'City of Righteousness, the Faithful City'* (1:26). What could not be found in Isaiah's day—

justice and good counsel—will be found abundantly in him and the church which mirrors him.

Facing difficulties as we do, we are like the disciples in the upper room to whom Jesus said, ‘You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand’ (John 13:7). The Refiner’s fire is not pleasant (Hebrews 12:11), but it is necessary. Our task is to trust him and pray, ‘Lord, give me grace to turn away from the cold indifference that marks too much of my life and produce in me the fruits of righteousness.’ At the very start of this prophecy, Isaiah has set the tone of his message which prevails to the very last page. There is abundant hope for repentant sinners and it lies in the provision of a suffering Servant who takes the sinner’s place, thus providing a way of redemption. Trusting Jesus for our pardon and deliverance is the only way to be safe from the wrath to come. Those who despise this message—and there were plenty who did in Isaiah’s day (cf. 53:1) as there are today—can expect no mercy. Unrepentant sinners will find no cause for joy in this book!

### **Summary**

God is about to take Judah, his apostate church, and shake her. It will prove a devastating experience; but for those who heed his offer of grace and mercy, it will prove a blessing. God desires to revive and reform the church.