Isaiah’s Antichrist Crisis

Isaiah 1.1-9

**Isaiah 1:9** 9 Unless the Lord of hosts Had left us a few survivors, We would be like Sodom, We would be like Gomorrah.

*Covenant Crisis*

The entirety of this book can be regarded as a massive treatise on covenant theology. God does not think upon His people but by covenant. When Israel, bound as it was to the old covenant at the time, forgets the Lord their God, it constitutes a total crisis of covenant. We may not know the details leading up the apostasy, or the key players involved, or all of the precise historical developments that gave rise to the their covenant treason, but we do know that in their present condition, during the prophet’s career, serious change needs to happen if Judah is to survive and their covenant status preserved.

This is why we can call the present passage, the introductory message of Isaiah, an Antichrist crisis; with the demise of the people, it appears that the promise of a messianic deliverer and His promised kingdom is also in jeopardy (cf. 33.17), and it is! If we don’t get past chapter one, we will not get to chapter seven:

**Isaiah 7:14** 14 “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

Because we are within the context of the covenant and because the central concern is one of covenant crisis, the opening of the “vision” begins with the language of a covenant lawsuit:

**Isaiah 1:2** 2 Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; For the Lord speaks, “Sons I have reared and brought up, But they have revolted against Me.

One of the crucial factors in interpreting a book like Isaiah is to bear in mind that God does not speak for nothing. In other words, everything in the book has purpose and meaning- *everything*. Here (v.2), the language of summoning “heaven” and “earth” is rooted in God’s covenant formulation when He constituted the nation of Israel, “the ancient nation” (44.7):

**Deuteronomy 30:19** 19 “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants,

**Deuteronomy 32:1** 1 “Give ear, O heavens, and let me speak; And let the earth hear the words of my mouth.

If heaven and earth was God’s way of establishing the covenant with His people, it is thus these very ‘witnesses’ that are invoked when the time to prosecute the covenant people comes:

**Psalm 50:4** 4 He summons the heavens above, And the earth, to judge His people:

The utilization of this formula however is not just metaphorical or hyperbolic, it aims at revealing the universal, sovereign, and indisputable purity of God’s prosecution. The heavens and the earth are the ‘watchers’ of all that happens and they span every realm and every nook and cranny of this universe and any other. It is God’s way of saying that Judah has nowhere to go, no one to appeal to that will somehow remove the prospect of God’s justice being meted out for those who have, “revolted against Me.” In the context of this covenant prosecution we also see what is at the very heart of God’s covenant dealings with man, namely a covenantal bond of communion, and intimate knowledge of God (cf. Ps. 25.14):

**Isaiah 1:2–3** 2 Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; For the Lord speaks, “Sons I have reared and brought up, But they have revolted against Me. 3 “An ox knows its owner, And a donkey its master’s manger, But Israel does not know, My people do not understand.”

Here the covenant bond is understood by the filial dimensions of the covenant as well as the intimate knowledge of Yahweh. Judah are God’s sons. They are the special covenant children of God. From the corporate angel, Israel as a nation is called God’s “son” (cf. Ex. 4.22). From the individual Israelite, the Jews were to be children of God and loyal to their heavenly Father (cf. 46.3-4). But this relationship, constituted on this filial love, was also built on a special intimate knowledge of God, “but Israel does not know” (יִשְׂרָאֵל֙ לֹ֣א יָדַ֔ע) This is a true crime given the fact that God has chosen the nation from all the nations of the world in order to make His own divine mysteries known to them and through those mysteries to know Lord himself. This is what distinguishes them as “My people” (עַמִּ֖י) (cf. Hos. 1.9f.):

**Psalm 147:19–20** 19 He declares His words to Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances to Israel. 20 He has not dealt thus with any nation; And as for His ordinances, they have not known them. Praise the Lord!

*The Chosen Nation Chooses Sin*

The essence of the present covenant crisis is moral and spiritual. It is not simply that the nation has failed to meet up to its covenant obligations; it has become ‘corrupt’ (שׁחת) with sin. This makes sense of course because all moral corruption is a transgression against God’s law and Israel has become identified with it. They are “sinful nation, People weighed down with iniquity, Offspring of evildoers” (1.4). The specifics of their sins are detailed later in the prophecy. In the next context (vv.10-15) Isaiah expresses God’s hatred for false worship, but in v.21f. he gives us a glimpse into the moral corruption of the nation:

**Isaiah 1:21–23** 21 How the faithful city has become a harlot, She who was full of justice! Righteousness once lodged in her, But now murderers. 22 Your silver has become dross, Your drink diluted with water. 23 Your rulers are rebels And companions of thieves; Everyone loves a bribe And chases after rewards. They do not defend the orphan, Nor does the widow’s plea come before them.

Isaiah also begins to delineate the wild ramifications of their sins. All that was once good and right is now reversed. Because of their sin, their world is turning upside down and their covenant privileges have been inverted. They are no longer the *chosen* nation, they are now the “sinful nation” (ה֣וֹי׀ גּ֣וֹי), they are no longer people who know the Lord (which is the essence of the covenant, cf. Ps. 25.14) they are “People weighed down with iniquity” (עַ֚ם כֶּ֣בֶד עָוֹ֔ן), they are no longer children reared by God they are now the ‘seed’ of “evildoers” (זֶ֣רַע מְרֵעִ֔ים) and “sons who act corruptly” (בָּנִ֖ים מַשְׁחִיתִ֑ים).

In the midst of this covenant lawsuit, Judah is made to understand that they are guilty not just because they have broken a rule here or there or because they have broken with tradition or upset their parents; the lawsuit consists of offending *God* directly. That after all is what all sin is about, offending an Almighty God with whom we must reckon (cf. Ps. 51.4; Jer. 2.13). The nature of the crisis intensifies the more we look at it from a God-centered point of view. Judah “abandoned” (עזב), “despised” (נאץ), and “turned away” (נָזֹ֥רוּ אָחֽוֹר) from God. These words emphasize the nature of the covenant. A covenant essentially entails a high level of commitment. This makes the abandonment particularly hurtful because they were meant for each other. They have despised God which means they have treated him with contempt as if God were the one guilty of something. This is true serpentile sin. They have turned away from Him which has the connotation of being estranged from God, like the Gentiles who do not know God, Israel is “far off” and dead in trespasses and sins (cf. Eph. 2.1-12).

Israel’s covenant treachery does not reach its ultimate offense until we consider *who* they have forsaken, namely “the Holy One of Israel” (אֶת־קְד֥וֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל) (a phrase probably coined by the prophet). But at the same time that this should draw up the great loss and forfeiture of Israel’s privileges it should also bring into view the dread of having now to deal with this unrelentingly holy God that is. The only thing Israel’s sin has done is that is has ‘stirred up the hornet’s nest’ of God’s wrath and indignation for sin and sinners.

As the chosen nation chooses sin, they have preferred the profane over the profundity of God, the emptiness of dissipation over the foundation of life, the cesspools of sin over fullness of joy. Jeremiah speaking in unison with Isaiah echoes the same sentiments:

**Jeremiah 2:12–13** 12 “Be appalled, O heavens, at this, And shudder, be very desolate,” declares the Lord. 13 “For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, The fountain of living waters, To hew for themselves cisterns, Broken cisterns That can hold no water.

*The Devastation Of Sin*

As a result of Judah’s apostasy, God confronts the people with their depravity and consequences of sin. Isaiah uses two metaphors to illustrate Judah’s condition. Isaiah speaks of a sick *man* and a sick *land*. *First*, he compares Israel to a wounded man without remedy. When Isaiah says, “where will you be stricken again” he is exposing the people to the folly of Israel’s self-inflicted wound. It is a vicious cycle, the more they rebel the more they will afflict their own body. What Isaiah is saying is that the spiritual crisis of the nation is systemic. It has affected the leaders (v.10, 23), the religious people (27.8), the judges and soldiers (3.2), down to the common man on the street (2.9); everyone is sick with sin (cf. Jer. 17.9). Sin has mutilated the people but even though one would think ‘enough is enough’ Isaiah’s point is that even though Israel’s is beaten beyond recognition they still do not seem to have had enough.

This is often the case with our sin. Is it any wonder that the NT gives us the hermeneutical basis to move from the sins that affected the nation of Israel to the sins that still plague us today in order to teach us to avoid the same pitfalls that we see before us here in this prophecy (cf. 1 Cor. 10.6, 11, 18). Without a doubt, there is a heart of wisdom to be gained by looking to the example and the failures of Israel for our own walk with God here and now. Israel’s sin has not only affected the people personally, it has devasted the land, the culture, the society as a whole:

**Isaiah 1:7–8** 7 Your land is desolate, Your cities are burned with fire, Your fields—strangers are devouring them in your presence; It is desolation, as overthrown by strangers. 8 The daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, Like a watchman’s hut in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.

Judah, the promised Land, Canaan, that which was to be a type of the heavenly City of God, has become a howling wasteland (cf. Jer. 44.6; Lev. 26.33). What is introduced here in terms of desolation becomes a crucial theme for Isaiah serving not only to show us the consequences of sin and covenant breaking but as the necessary precursor for the sovereign grace of God who redeems His people from destruction:

“This desolation is accomplished on orders from God. It is done by the rampaging armies of the nations, but also by relaxing the ordered forms of creation and society that hold back the chaotic forces. Rains are withheld and the earth shakes. The results are hunger, flight of entire populations, devastated cities, and vacant villages.” (John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, Revised Edition., vol. 24, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 2005), 78.).

Ultimately the language of Isaiah is meant to paint the picture of the impending doom brought on by these “rampaging armies” (i.e. Assyria, Babylon) until Israel will see such destruction as is only fitting for the chaotic language of de-creation. This radical undoing of the Genesis order is thus code for the coming cataclysm upon the nations. First they will be God’s instrument of judgement (10.5), then they will be the object of God’s judgment:

**Isaiah 34:13–15** 13 Thorns will come up in its fortified towers, Nettles and thistles in its fortified cities; It will also be a haunt of jackals And an abode of ostriches. 14 The desert creatures will meet with the wolves, The hairy goat also will cry to its kind; Yes, the night monster will settle there And will find herself a resting place. 15 The tree snake will make its nest and lay eggs there, And it will hatch and gather them under its protection. Yes, the hawks will be gathered there, Every one with its kind.

The whole earth will succumb to God wrath such that the city of man will become “the city of chaos” (24.10) which is the vocabulary of Genesis and creation showing the need for a new creational event! Of course, this is the constant refrain of the book. We see that the wages of sin is death that sin leads to ruin, and ruin to devastation. The whole earth groans under the tyranny of sin and death (cf. Rom. 8.20ff.). The only thing that will bring true lasting relief is redemption. And so, repeatedly in the book, Isaiah sees not only destruction and ruin but deliverance and redemption. Isaiah sees not only a land ruined by man’s corruption but a land beyond this world ushered in by a great cataclysm of the Day of the Lord (Is. 4; 65.17ff; Heb. 11.13-16).

*A Ray Of Hope*

Out of the dismal chaos of Israel’s sin and the darkness of corruption comes a ray of hope. This ray of hope is a graphic portrayal of Judah being brought back from the brink of destruction where destruction and desolation would have had the last word. With this ray of hope, Isaiah demonstrates God’s covenantal interest above His judicial recompense. If God would move out only in the interest of His justice, then mankind would be lost, God’s word fallen, and the promises abandoned. But *grace* not wrath has the final word in God’s dealings with His people. But the outworking of God’s marvelous matchless grace is quite contrary to the way Judah might have suspected. He does not deal with them kindly because of anything in them. He does not show mercy because of anything good in us (cf. Rom. 4.1-5; Tit. 3.5). It is not on the basis of any hereditary purity that motivates God to intervene in the present crisis. He is motivated on the basis of the same motives that formed the ancient nation in the first place- sovereign love, sovereign grace, grace alone:

**Deuteronomy 7:7–8a** 7 “The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers”

God’s motives being rooted in His eternal love, His sovereignty and covenant faithfulness is thus setting forth a redemptive-historical principle here, namely that as He promised in the covenant of grace first revealed in Gen. 3, God has determined to save a people for himself through *faith*! Thus, it is those who are of faith who are the descendants of Abraham (cf. Gal. 3.29). This principle accounts for both the destruction of the rebellious and the deliverance of the repentant. What Judah was living through here and now in the context of Assyria and Babylon was programmatic for redemptive history from Genesis to Revelation. God was laying down a paradigm of salvation and judgment in the faithful deliverance of a chosen remnant. If He does not save a remnant by faith, they would have all become like the rest, “Unless the Lord of hosts Had left us a few survivors, We would be like Sodom, We would be like Gomorrah” (v.9).

From this verse we observe the following points. *First*, this ray of hope is owing to God’s sovereign power as “the Lord of hosts” (יְהוָ֣ה צְבָא֔וֹת). Bearing in mind that this title is meant to covey something of God’s power. Power to defeat His enemies and power to deliver His people. *Second*, God’s power is *redemptive*. Here we could say, God graciously saves the nation from itself. The Lord of “hosts” is also the Lord of salvation. That is the final purpose of redemption; to save a people from themselves and for himself. He saves us from our sins and from the wrath incurred by His grace and for His glory. God’s grace here of course seen from the fact that He does not need to save anyone and yet, He does. *Third*, the permanent state of redemption is in keeping with best of His kingdom not with the worst of mankind i.e. “Sodom” and “Gomorrah.” This is what it meant by God saving the nation from itself, not that God’s judgment is not the final punishment, but here in keeping with the prophets imagery, Israel’s sin and apostasy is cast in the language of the most scandalous of all people, “Sodom” and “Gomorrah” cities upon which descended the wrath of God from heaven in the form of fire and brimstone (cf. Gen. 19.23f.).

But there’s more to the story than what happened in the 7th century B.C. There is the eschatological horizon of prophecy— that which went beyond the prophet and the people at that time. The key is in the word, “survivors” (שָׂרִיד). This eschatological horizon is the redemptive-historical fulfillment of this original historical event; an event that becomes typological of a greater deliverance, a greater preservation, and a greater redemption than the bringing back of a “few survivors” from Babylon, the redemption of the true and final messianic *remnant* (cf. 4.3; also, 6.13; 10.20-23; 11.11-16; 37.30-32; 49.5-6, 14-21; 51.1-3 *passim*). Thus, Paul the apostles sees in this vision a typological event that points to the very climax of God’s redemptive purposes in Christ:

**Romans 9:27–33** 27 Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved; 28 for the Lord will execute His word on the earth, thoroughly and quickly.” 29 And just as Isaiah foretold, “Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, We would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah.” 30 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; 31 but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. 32 Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, 33 just as it is written, “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.”

When God appeared to Isaiah in the vision of Chapter six, He revealed to Isaiah the totality of His redemptive purpose, veiled and shrouded in symbolic mystery as it was but nevertheless God did point him forward towards His future messianic plan to save a people for himself by faith (cf. Rom. 9). So, Isaiah speaks of a “stump” (מַצֶּ֫בֶת), and “holy seed” (זֶ֥רַע קֹ֖דֶשׁ) that becomes the occasion upon which Paul builds his theology of election in Jesus Christ (6.13b; cf. Rom. 9-11). The “stump” (Is. 6.13) of Isaiah becomes the “root” (cf. Rom. 11.16ff.) of Paul.

They are both speaking of the same *tree* of salvation. What then comes into view from this Isaiah-Paul connection is nothing less than the inter-testamental gospel Jesus Christ! God’s redemptive purpose can withstand the apostasy of the typological nation (cf. Heb. 4.). The antichrist crisis is quelled by an act of sheer sovereign grace. But even as Isaiah himself will go on to show, such grace is not arbitrary or erratic, but part of God’s eternal plan and purpose the purpose and plan, that in order to fulfill it in order to make redemption certain, would demand the death of the Savior. In order to restore our covenant bond with God, He would have to be cut off, in order for covenant breakers to become covenant children, the true Son of God would have to spill His priceless blood for us (1 Pet. 1.18-19).

The wonderful thing about Isaiah’s vision is that it moves like the gospel. Throughout the book the prophet takes us from the thick clouds and darkness of sin and despair to the bright and blazing beauty of the gospel light. For Isaiah, the “Holy One of Israel” is good. He is kind and longsuffering not desiring that any of His sheep would perish but that all would reach repentance. Isaiah’s ray of hope is our hope, His gospel is our gospel, His Savior our Savior, and His God is our God. This is why Peter can say, we speak our common salvation (1 Pet. 1.10).

I have decided to follow Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back.

The world behind me, the cross before me;
No turning back, no turning back.

Though none go with me, still I will follow;
No turning back, no turning back.

My cross I’ll carry, till I see Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back.

Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
No turning back, no turning back.