The Death And Resurrection Of Worship

**Isaiah 1:16–17** 16 “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, 17 Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.

“Worship wars” are nothing new today in the church and in those disputes what we are usually fighting about is the form, style and appearance of worship. Contemporary, traditional, a blend of the two etc. But as Isaiah teaches us here, we may have the most regulated style and traditional worship and yet have nothing but a gathering of perfunctory religion in the end, this is the danger and it is very real. Today if we are looking for quality worship, we are often looking in the wrong place. Instead of sampling the quality of a worship leader’s music on iTunes, we might want to inquire about their theology, their church, and favorite authors. Sometimes we can get a reflection of a person’s heart based on their activity on social media. I have often called for contemporary Evangelical artists to attach a doctrinal statement or confession to their music. What do they believe and what do they practice? What do their pastors say about their piety and their faithfulness to the church? What is lurking beneath the worship scene today in the Church is nothing less than syncretism, ecumenicalism, worldliness and blatant antinomianism. We need only survey the number of worship leaders who have openly either embraced and or supported the homosexual lifestyle and if they don’t outright embrace it, few well-known artists are willing to speak out boldly and clearly about. This is important and relevant because Isaiah is reminding us how and why worship dies among the people of God. Although there are some obvious differences between ancient Israel as a theocracy and the Church today, there are also some unmistakable points of contact and continuity particularly as we get beyond the form and function of worship and to the soul and essence of worship before God.

*Why Worship Dies*

When asking the question of why worship dies, it is not because the style is off, the quality of music is not talented or skillful, the church lacks zeal or passion; its because sin has gone unchecked and apostasy has broken out in the people.

Before a Church turns its back on Orthodoxy it first must turn its back to a proper doxology. In other words, it begins with losing sight of who God is, what He wants, and how we must live before Him. The operative word in this chapter is “rebellion” (v.2). It describes the state of Israel’s heart and gets to the essence of sin. Sin is rebellion against God and His rule and authority. The putrification of Israel’s sin has led to the perfunctory nature of Israel’s worship. The reason worship dies has been spelled out in the preceding context and is the result of Israel’s sin and apostasy. At the center of that apostasy is the despising of God’s holiness- the highest virtue of faith and worship. Holy worship is true worship (John 4.24), holy worship is sincere worship (2 Cor. 2.17), holy worship is contrite worship (Ps. 51.17; Is. 6.5; 57.15), and holy worship is a God-centered worship (Is. 6.3). Because such reverent, God-centered, and word-driven worship had dried up with Israel’s rebellion, the result of their false fire was rejected by the Holy One of Israel, the God of the covenant.

*When Worship Dies*

Several factors are involved when worship dies. God is not represented rightly by the leaders of the nation, God is not pleased with the offerings of the people, God is not revered in the holy places, God is not appeased by the offerings, and God does not listen to the prayers of the people.

*God Is Not Represented By The Leaders Of The Nation*

Exegetically, there is a play on words here with another reference to “Sodom” and “Gomorrah”, only here, God zeroes in on the leaders who are leading the nation. Much of the apostasy is owing to the decisions and the political maneuvers of the leadership of the nation. As will become increasingly clear, instead of trusting in the Lord to deliver and preserves their interests, Judah chooses to form wicked alliances with their enemies and syncretize with their pagan ways (cf. 2.8; 57.7; 65.7). This leads to the undermining of true religion in the nation and diminishes the purity of Israel’s worship. Here the prophet engages in shocking sarcasm. The leaders of Jerusalem have become “rulers of Sodom” (קְצִינֵ֣י סְדֹ֑ם) and the populace “the people of Gomorrah” (עַ֥ם עֲמֹרָֽה).

In God’s holy nation, the leaders were tasked above all with the spiritual health of the people. More than their economic prosperity, their national security, or their patriotic pride; the “rulers” (קְצִינֵ֣י) were tasked with maintaining covenant faithfulness so that it would go well with them in the land (v.19). Isaiah’s use of the term “instruction” (תּוֹרָה) is the *torah* by which Israel was to live. The rulers, teachers, and priestly class in the nation however in deviating from God’s law have steered the people into the ditch of ignorance and dead religion. Because the word of God was no longer central the worship of God was no longer tenable.

*God Is Not Pleased With The Offerings Of The People*

Ignorance gave rise to emptiness and rote religion. Israel was just keeping the motions of religions going but there was no meaning behind it, there was no heart in all that they did in all that they presented to the Lord and the Lord was no longer pleased, “What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” Says the Lord. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle; And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats” (v.11). The psalmist had long ago spoken of God’s disinterest in mere rituals and was always interested in the heart. In fact, in light of the developing context here in Isaiah, David’s song of repentance stands in total contrast, almost point by point, from that of Judah’s sins here:

**Psalm 51:14–17** 14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. 15 O Lord, open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise. 16 For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

Because this kind of heart was missing from the rulers, the people, God says, “I have had enough.” What a startling pronouncement by the God of heaven against His people on earth who were from all the people of the earth to be a light to the nations (cf. 42.6; 49.6; see also, 51.4-5; 60.3).

*God Is Not Revered In The Holy Places*

By necessity, this text builds one point upon another as the logical sequence of sin. Because the leadership was compromised, the whole body is sick. The offerings became and offense and therefore, the people profaned the holy places, “who requires of you this trampling of My courts” (מִי־בִקֵּ֥שׁ זֹ֛את מִיֶּדְכֶ֖ם רְמֹ֥ס חֲצֵרָֽי). The “courts” (חֲצֵרָֽי) of the Lord are here associated with the temple (cf. 2 Chron. 29.16; Ezek. 9.7; 10.4). Here the Lord is asking the rhetorical question to confront Israel with the prospect that God is no longer obliging the nation to bring such sacrifices to the temple because He would never request such false ritualistic religion in the first place. This brings up the question of the sacrificial system itself. Why did God desire such sacrifices in the first place? These sacrifices and offerings were part of Israel’s national identity as a kingdom of priests (cf. Ex. 19.6; Hos. 4.6), a people who were to be devoted to the worship of Yahweh, the true and living God. These sacrifices were ultimately typological aids for the people in order to give the people visible tokens of faith. Like circumcision however, these external rites were merely symbolic of a greater reality, a greater sacrifice, a greater atonement provided in the blood of the Lamb of God. This is what Hebrews calls the “time of reformation”:

**Hebrews 9:6–10** 6 Now when these things have been so prepared, the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle performing the divine worship, 7 but into the second, only the high priest enters once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance. 8 The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing, 9 which is a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, 10 since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.

Remarkably, that word, “reformation” (διόρθωσις) has the idea of making a necessary correction. The present covenant crisis that Isaiah is prophesying about will only truly be corrected by the entrance of a new and better covenant in Christ who offered a better blood built on better promises (Heb. 10.19ff.).

*God Is Not Appeased By The Sacrifices Of False Worship*

Because such sacrifices under the present apostate condition of Israel only serve to agitate God, they no longer provide the ceremonial cleansing they were designed to do. In fact, the whole worship experience of the nation has been polluted by sin and sacrilege. What was meant to be pleasing to God is now only “worthless” and abominable to God. All of their festive calendar meetings have become only occasions of heaping up wrath not offering up praise. Israel was called to sup with God (cf. 25.6). But in their rebellion their “appointed feasts” (מוֹעֵד) have become the meals of debauchery and gluttony. *Through sin, the most sacred things become the most defiled things*. Raymond Ortlund writes:

“Let’s ask ourselves, what do we think is unbearably repulsive to God, to his very soul, right down to the depths of the Divine Being? We might answer, hard-core crime, the exploitation of children, terrorist mayhem—that sort of thing. It might not occur to us that what the soul of God hates and is burdened and wearied by is the worship we offer him, if we are not in repentance.” (Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 36).

*God Is Not Listening To The Prayers Of The Apostate*

It may not appear at first glance why this final verse here is so damming; but when we consider that prayer is the last lifeline of the worshiper we can see the gravity of this verse. Even if the temple should be destroyed, a person could still pray, even if we are crippled and incapacitated, no one can take prayer away from us, even if we are the shyest person in the church and are not good with our words, in the secrecy of our hearts we can talk with God in extensive conversation and find consolation there. Whether we are afflicted, sick, downcast, depressed or dejected by our trials, whether we are forsaken by our friends, our spouses, our family and people in the church, we still have prayer. But Israel’s sin and apostasy has eliminated the lifeline and God has turned a deaf ear to their prayer, “So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen” (v.15).

In the end this perversion of worship is actually an inversion of the gospel. It is to put the gospel “on its head.” Of course through the gospel we have shepherds who are to faithfully lead the flock of God (Jer. 3.15), we can now offer up sacrifices of praise that are acceptable to God (Heb. 13.15-16), the Church becomes the temple where God dwells in the hearts of His people by faith (1 Cor. 3.16), propitiation has been made by the blood of the Lamb so that we are cleansed and justified in His sight (Rom. 3.25), and the result is that we have a High Priest who forever lives to make intercession for us so that we can have unbroken communion with God (Heb. 7.25). The death of Israel’s worship becomes the occasion for a greater way, a new and living way whereby we may boldly approach the throne of grace through Jesus Christ (Heb. 4.15-16; 10.19ff.).

*How Worship Is Revived*

Of course, this scathing condemnation of the nation’s worship is not to suggest that a righteous Jew in the covenant would have to wait 800 years to be able to worship God and love God. But the corporate dimensions of worship would not see its worship restored until the arrival of new covenant and the out-pouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2.14ff. cf. Joel 2.28ff.). If true worship in the people of God is to be revived two things would come to pass; the removal of sin and the restoration of reason.

*Worship Revived Through The Removal Of Sin*

*First*, God calls on Israel to undergo ceremonial cleansing. The densely sacrificial nature of this passage suggests that Isaiah is thinking cultically, according to Levitical law and Levitical imagery. Like Arron and the priests, Israel is being called to undergo a priestly cleansing which was customarily performed at the tabernacle, later temple, in the laver containing water for cleansing. Moses, Aaron and the priests after them were to wash or die (cf. Ex. 30.17-21; 40.30-31)! In calling for this sort of cleansing, God was also calling His people back to the primitive stages of the covenant to renew their covenant commitment to God. It was, to use the language of the NT, a call to “do the first works again!” But still, this cleansing imagery ultimately points us forward to a greater ‘laver’ were we are washed under a better covenant

**Titus 3:5** 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,

When Judah under the old covenant underwent this kind of repentance, it would have indeed entailed the practice of such external instruments as were associated with the temple and Israel’s cultic life; but the faithful did so by faith, trusting not in the brass laver itself but in the cleansing power of God’s grace realized in and through their messianic hope (cf. 1 Cor. 5.7). When that happened, their motives would be realigned and justice resurrected and worship restored, “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, 17 Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow” (vv.16-17). What this shows us is that what God is looking for in all this is the heart of the worshiper to be in tune not the fine tuning of all our formalities, traditions, and rituals.

*Worship Revived Through The Restoration Of Reason*

*Second*, just as worship cannot be restored unless first there is a removal of sin, true worship is also subject to the will of God. In regeneration, our heart and mind is subdued to obey the will of God. This is the obedience of faith Paul speaks about in Romans (Rom. 1.5). Israel being unclean can no longer reason with God. Herein lies another layer of God’s grace. God is inviting these rebels into His counsel, “come now, and let us reason together” (לְכוּ־נָ֛א וְנִוָּֽכְחָ֖ה). Of course, the dialogue that God summons us to is nothing less than the counsel of the gospel, “Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool” (v.18). The reason theologians speak of the gospel in the OT is because of passages like this. It shows us that, like Paul, Isaiah is telling us that God saves us while we are helpless, powerless and at enmity with God:

**Romans 5:6–11** 6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. 11 And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

The gospel is further elucidated here in the prospect of *reward*. Afterall, the gospel sets forth not only the promise of forgiveness but the promise of beatitude, of blessing and fullness. Isaiah uses the imagery that has become to Judah at this point only a distant dream, a mirage beyond their grasp because of the flood of tribulations brought on by their sins. Canaan seems unattainable at this point, and it is, at least in their own strength and based on their own righteousness. Yet if we learn anything about redemptive history is that ‘what is impossible for man is possible with God’ (cf. Gen. 18.14; Lk. 1.37; also, Hos. 1.7). He is the God of the impossible because He is the God of all grace who shows forth His covenant mercy which endures forever (Ps. 118, 136). As Hebrews says, we are given the same good news today. And like Israel, if we would “eat the best of the land” (ט֥וּב הָאָ֖רֶץ תֹּאכֵֽלוּ) we must “consent and obey” (אִם־תֹּאב֖וּ וּשְׁמַעְתֶּ֑ם) by faith.

The gospel is rightly called the “good news” because of the word’s etymology and that is what we see being preached, “the good news” (e.g. Acts 14.7, 15, 21). We also are often told that the bad news comes before the good news and yet, the good news is good not only because of what it promises us but because it originates in the person and work of Jesus Christ so that the good news is also simultaneously the announcement of the consequences for rejecting that news. That is what Isaiah is doing here, “But if you refuse and rebel, You will be devoured by the sword.” Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (v.20). Fullness or futility, grace or wrath, life or death, heaven or hell. This is Isaiah’s way of saying with Jesus, ‘repent or perish.’ Repent to your everlasting joy or rebel to your eternal ruin. For Israel this was true in a two ways. They saw it historically through the adversity of their enemies and spiritually through the hardening of their people. And yet the prospect of reward is great, they would “eat the best of the land.”

This phrase represents to us who are in Christ, and to the sinner who would trust in Christ, the promise of spiritual safety, security, and sweet refreshment in Jesus Christ. He becomes our fountain of life, our refuge in the storm, our shade in the desert, and our joy unspeakable full of glory! In Him is life! The land was ultimately the place of Sabbath rest and through the gospel, what we will find, is that though the remnant may be exposed to many dangers and evils, Jesus is our great Sabbath rest who takes us to the high country of the heavenly Jerusalem.