The Woes of Sin

Isaiah 5.8-23

This passage constitutes a dire warning in the life of Judah’s history; a time when God was warning the nation of the impending whirlwind of corruption brought about by their sins. The language of “Woe” (הוֹי) utilized six times here is used by the prophet convey the reality of judgment but also, and probably by design, to show the people just how much they ought to concern themselves with the holiness of God. The oracles of “woe” in fact do not end with the warning of the nation but with the prophet’s own experience as Isaiah is caught up in the Spirit, into the glory realm of the upper register of the highest heaven, there before the throne of God, in the vision of the heavenly royal court, Isaiah sees just how Holy the Holy One of Israel is and declares to himself, “woe is me” (6.5). Only then does the prophet himself realize just how heinous sin is, the very thing Judah is losing sight of. Isaiah five lays out the ways in which God is rejected by His people Israel.

There are four critical lessons for us to learn here if we desire to take heed to the warning of Isaiah for our own lives. These are captured in Isaiah’s indictments of Israel’s sins and the consequences of the Chapter arise as a result of these detrimental sins. Isaiah here reminds Judah, that “those who forsake the Lord will come to an end” (1.28). From its historical context, to its theological foundation, its disregard for judgment and its hostility to God; Judah’s sins have left the nation thin, spiritually and socially anemic, empty, confused, disgraced and full of wickedness and injustice which will culminate in its inevitable exile (5.13). Isaiah is here reminding us precisely where the ancient nation went astray.

*God’s Deeds Are Forgotten*

**Isaiah 5:12** 12 Their banquets are accompanied by lyre and harp, by tambourine and flute, and by wine; But they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, Nor do they consider the work of His hands.

Because Israel forgot God’s great deeds throughout redemptive history, they lost sight of where they fit into God’s story. The same is true of us. We will lose our historical footing if we lose sight of all that God has done not only in history but especially as it relates to His Son in His life, death and resurrection. The Historicity of Jesus’ matters most, not in defending the historical claims of Christianity in apologetics, but in reminding us of the fact that we are living in the “fullness of the times” in the last days (cf. Gal. 4.4; Heb. 1.1-3; 9.26; 11.39-40). Here Judah has forgotten that very thing. Instead, the nation has become enthralled with itself. Rather than marveling at God’s redemptive power, His “deeds” (פֹּ֫עַל), the people become narcissistic- oriented toward themselves. They rejoice in the work of their own hands. They are content with their on entertainment, their own songs, their own skill and the abundance of their own wine. *Wine*, a symbol of messianic fullness (cf. John 2.1-11); here becomes a symbol of Israel’s self-reliance, self-focus and hedonistic ecstasies.

This self-absorbed madness has made the nation materialistic and greedy (5.8). But their greed will be their demise. In their abundance they will lack, in their accumulation they will lose, and in their drunken debauchery they will stumble before their enemies (5.26ff.). When Israel forgets the deeds of the Lord, they lose sight of the fact that God is Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. Furthermore, when you lose sight of God’s terrible deeds in creation and in redemptive history, you lose sight of the fact that God is also the sovereign Consummator of His kingdom resulting in doubt and confusion with no eternal vision. Later, Israel will go so far as to mock God (5.19). They have become like the scoffers that Peter warns against:

**2 Peter 3:3–7** 3 Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, 4 and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.” 5 For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, 6 through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. 7 But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

In forgetting the past, the wicked mock the future. This is what the people have become. They are sitting in the seat of scoffers!

*God’s Knowledge Is Discarded*

**Isaiah 5:13** 13 Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge; And their honorable men are famished, And their multitude is parched with thirst.

Closely related to the first mistake, not only does Israel forget they also forsake or better yet, they disregard the knowledge of God. Of course, God’s great and mighty deeds are close at hand, within the grasp of the people. Afterall they have the Law (cf. Ps. 147.19-20). However, because of their spiritual blindness and rebellion, they no longer regard the word of the Lord and the knowledge of God has come to mean precious little. They have been so disenchanted with religion, that the knowledge of God is no longer treasured and the result is a haunting biblical illiteracy. The people don’t know their bibles and they don’t care. But this was not without its detrimental effects. The lack of the knowledge of God is first a disgrace. It is that which characterizes the wicked those who are not in covenant with God (cf. Gal 3.8; 1 Th. 4.5; 2 Th. 1.8). This disgrace was seen all the way up the chain of command in the nation so that even the “honorable men are famished.” Steeped in their ignorance, even the noble, the person of repute, the military commanders, the politicians, the religious leaders, the intellectuals, artists in the nation are in a state of spiritual starvation (cf. 3.1-4).

The imagery here is very power as Isaiah moves from the abstract to the concrete. From the nation’s lack of knowledge to the nation’s lack of vitality. They will come to know the dreadful words of the prophet Amos who foretold of such times:

**Amos 8:11–12** 11 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “When I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, But rather for hearing the words of the Lord. 12 “People will stagger from sea to sea And from the north even to the east; They will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, But they will not find it.

Isaiah uses the metaphors of the body for the realities of the soul. In reverse, we have so much for our own instruction. If being devoid of the knowledge of God leads to being “famished” and “parched with thirst,” then, being filled with the knowledge of God leads to a spiritual hydration that should leave us full and satisfied in the depths of our souls. The application here is simple; know the word, know the Lord and you will have manana from heaven, you will have living water (Jer. 2.18ff.)!

*God’s Righteousness Is Avenged*

**Isaiah 5:16** 16 But the Lord of hosts will be exalted in judgment, And the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness.

In their failure to appreciate God’s historical deeds, they also failed to appreciate that God is the Avenger of all forms of wickedness be it from enemies of God’s people, like the Egyptians, or the enemies within God’s people as with those who will go into exile. This will be seen in the fact that just as God will judge His people through the affliction of the Assyrian invasion from the North and Babylon (vv.26-30; 14.1-6); God will also then turn to judge the weapon of His wrath:

**Isaiah 10:5** 5 Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger And the staff in whose hands is My indignation,

**Isaiah 10:12** 12 So it will be that when the Lord has completed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, He will say, “I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness.”

**Isaiah 10:24** 24 Therefore thus says the Lord God of hosts, “O My people who dwell in Zion, do not fear the Assyrian who strikes you with the rod and lifts up his staff against you, the way Egypt did.

As Isaiah has already pointed out, in the end, it is the Lord ‘alone’ who will be exalted on that day (2.11). To show the extent of this judgment, Isaiah foretells of the time when even the wealthy elites of the nation will undergo such a desolation that their homes and land will become the dwelling of “strangers” and the pasture of the lambs, “Then the lambs will graze as in their pasture, And strangers will eat in the waste places of the wealthy” (v.17). Of course, this is but a parable of what is really to come. Judah languishing in Babylon, their homes and country reduced to a waste place is but a brief historical monument of judgment- a judgment which will be ultimately realized at the end of the age when once again and for the last time, the Lord will be aroused to vindicate His righteousness:

**Hebrews 12:26–29** 26 And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.” 27 This expression, “Yet once more,” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

We would do well to point out the present tense here, our God *is* a consuming fire. This is exactly what Israel forgot. Sure, His wrath came in the Garden, at Babel, during the Flood, at the Red Sea and on Carmel; but are we really going to see any wrath today? What *is* God now? You would think based on popular opinion and your typical sermon today that God is more like a big counselor in the sky- a life coach, but not “a consuming fire.” As far as Israel was concerned, God was there but was pretty much silent and indifferent to their personal lives (cf. Ps. 94.7). But if Isaiah teaches us anything about God is that the holy transcendent One is imminently near to us to bless or to judge:

**Isaiah 57:15** 15 For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite.

For human beings, the transcendent nearness of God is both a comfort and a crisis. This was no different for Judah. Either God would come near to bless them, protect them, deliver them, and preserve them to the end or He would visit upon them judgment for their sins. This crisis is nothing less than the crisis of faith. Man’s greatest dilemma relieved only through the gospel. As Paul would say, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6.23). As Young put it long ago:

“When men see the righteous punishment of sin they will acknowledge that God is truly holy, truly divine. In the day of judgment all will confess that God is God; some from a willing heart, some from compulsion. May our acknowledgment and confession of Him come from a heart that loves Him for the manifestation of His righteousness in the punishing of our sins in Jesus Christ.” (E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, *Vol. 1*, 2016).

*God’s Grace Is Abused*

**Isaiah 5:20** 20 Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

As we think of the revelation of God’s judgment, the crisis that erupts is either going to lead us in the direction of the gospel where our curse has been borne, or it will lead us to the unbearable burden of the Law where man must remain in sin and guilt (cf. Gal. 3.12, 24). In the interest of exegesis therefore, the actual situation during the prophet’s time was very bleak. Faith was scarce. God always had a remnant but as it is consistently portrayed in the book, the remnant was at times reduced to a smoldering stump as the nation sees increasing corruption and catastrophe (6.13). These circumstances have been brought on by the nation’s overwhelming stubbornness and their brazen invitation of sin into the soul of the society (v18ff.). In refusing to repent the only thing left was for the nation to undergo the full inversion of sin where ‘evil is good and good is evil.’ In fact, they not only labored to ensnare themselves in sin, they do not fear God in the midst of their sin and even taunt God and His judgment, “Who say, “Let Him make speed, let Him hasten His work, that we may see it; And let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near And come to pass, that we may know it!” (v.19).

When God is forsaken, as we have seen, His deeds are forsaken (v.12), His knowledge is disregarded (v.14), His righteousness is avenged (v.16), and finally His grace is abused (v.20). But in the abuse of God’s grace, man is simultaneously given over to his sinful devices. This last section exposes the detrimental effects of sin and sin’s deceitfulness. What began as individual “chords or falsehood” develop into “cart ropes” in other words, strong enough haul in any sin and thick enough so that they cannot easily be cut. The NT gives the same woes of sin, the progression of sin, the deceitfulness and trappings of sin:

**James 1:13–15** 13 Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. 14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. 15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

Notice that sin has almost replaced the sinner, “sin… brings forth.” This is not to deny the guilt of the sinner but to illustrate the radical nature of sin. Its almost as if what James is saying is that what we begin sin will finish. It will always run its course and its course is set on death (Rom. 6.23a). Just when Israel had thought that they had completely redefined the world in their own God-rejecting, God-minimizing, God-ignoring image; their world would come crashing down. Here in lies sin’s irony; everything sin promises is the very thing it will take away. The reversal of Israel’s fortune is captured by v.24 where the whole nation, in the pursuit of sin, rots from the inside out as they are reduced to dust.

We are so desperately in need of this message today. Like Israel if we become forgetful of God’s glorious deeds, neglect God’s glorious word, ignore God’s glorious vengeance, and abuse God’s glorious grace, we can come to despise God’s glorious presence (3.8). But, through humble contrition, a teachable spirit, and fearful obedience we can come to praise the deeds of the Lord, and take full advantage of knowledge of God seeking to really and truly advance in grace and knowledge of God, and never lose sight of the Day of the Lord, the Day of reckoning (cf. 2 Cor. 5.10), we will, to the degree that we do this, ‘keep ourselves in the love of God’ and flee from the woes of sin.