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Text: Romans 9:14-29

Romans (58) **Election and Predestination (part 6)**

Let us turn once again to Romans 9:25ff. We have been addressing these verses in Romans 9 for some weeks. One of the reasons for the extended attention to these verses is because of the controversial subject of the passage, which is God's sovereignty in His election and predestination of His people unto salvation and His determination that all others would glorify Him through His judgment of them. This topic deserves and demands our thorough examination and clear understanding. A second reason for perhaps the inordinate amount of time that we are giving to this passage is the apostle's use of the Old Testament Scriptures to validate and affirm his teaching. This is coupled with the common misinterpretation of New Testament teaching regarding the purpose of God in history respecting the nation of Israel and its relationship to the church of Jesus Christ. We have seen through Paul's use of the Old Testament that God had foretold of His purpose of grace in history in this present age, in which He purposed that His people be comprised of both Jewish and Gentile believers. God is accomplishing His will in history as foretold by the prophets in order to glorify Himself through His saving His people and through His judgment and condemnation of His enemies.

More directly applicable for us today, we will have reinforced for us that the only ground of our acceptance and of God's acceptance of anything that we do for Him or offer to Him, including our worship, is due to the merit of Jesus Christ. For true believers in Jesus Christ, His blood "sprinkled" or applied to us and our works sanctifies everything about us and everything we offer to God. If it were not for His sanctifying what we do, nothing we do could ever please God. But thankfully, due to and through Jesus Christ, even our very simple and what we may deem flawed efforts to serve Him and worship Him are rendered not only acceptable, but beautiful and praiseworthy by God our Father.

In the immediate passage before us, Romans 9:25-29, we have been considering four Old Testament verses the apostle quoted in order to substantiate Paul's claims that this church age is the realization of God's plan and purpose in history. The first two verses, both from the prophecy of Hosea, foretold God's intention to call out His people from among the Gentiles. The second two passages, both from Isaiah, show that God had only intended to save some Jews, even a remnant of the Jewish people. Last week we considered the third Old Testament reference, that is, the first of the two verses from Isaiah, which is **Isaiah 10:22**. Romans 9:27 reads, "And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:

"Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea,
only a remnant of them will be saved,
²⁸for the Lord will carry out His sentence upon the earth fully and without delay."

This verse in Isaiah is within an oracle in which the prophet was foretelling God's judgment upon the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. God would first cause Israel to be attacked by its nearest neighbors, but then God would bring His big weapon of Assyria to accomplish the defeat and destruction of the nation. This, therefore, is the same judgment of God in history upon the Jewish people that Hosea had foretold in Hosea 1 and 2. And so, it was **Isaiah 10:22f** that the apostle Paul chose to cite as scriptural proof in Romans 9:27 and 28. By it he proved that God had purposed that only a remnant of Jews would embrace Jesus as their Messiah. God had reserved them for Himself. In other words, God had chosen them, elected them according to His free and sovereign grace that they would be saved through Jesus Christ.

We now arrive to the **fourth** Old Testament quotation of Romans 9:29. This reads, "And as Isaiah predicted,

'If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,

We would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.”

This is from the first chapter of Isaiah, **Isaiah 1:9**. Let us consider the context and message of Isaiah 1.

This opening oracle of Isaiah is a prophecy of God’s same judgment that the other three Old Testament verses quoted in Romans 9 addressed. God was about to punish Israel¹ in the eight century BC through His instrument of Assyria.² Isaiah was a prophet primarily to the southern kingdom of Judah, so this oracle is directly addressed to Judah and Jerusalem. The prophecy comprises the entire first chapter from verses 1 to 31.

The prophecy is set forth in the form of a court scene in which God has indicted Judah having broken its covenant with Him. God is set forth as both *a divine legal prosecutor* and a *divine warrior*. God had weighed the condition of His people and has found them guilty, and then after having fought against His people and defeated them, He is now giving them one last chance to surrender. If they refuse, they will be destroyed

In verses 2 through 4 we read of the **divine indictment**. **Verse 2** reads,

***“Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth!
For the LORD has spoken:
‘I have nourished and brought up children,
And they have rebelled against Me. . . .’”***

The opening words of this first oracle must be understood in the light of God’s covenant with Israel as recorded in **Deuteronomy 31:24-32:4**. The occasion was Moses rehearsing God’s covenantal relationship with the nation of Israel just before it entered the Promised Land under Joshua. It had been 40 years since God had delivered His people from bondage in Egypt. The first generation had died due to the judgment of God. Here Moses instructs the new generation of their relationship with the Lord. Let us read of this event.

So it was, when Moses had completed writing the words of this law in a book, when they were finished, ²⁵that Moses commanded the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying: ²⁶“Take this Book of the Law, and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there as a witness against you; ²⁷for I know your rebellion and your stiff neck. If today, while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD, then how much more after my death? ²⁸Gather to me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers, that I may speak these words in their hearing and call heaven and earth to witness against them. ²⁹For I know that after my death you will become utterly corrupt, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days, because you will do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your hands.” ³⁰Then Moses spoke in the hearing of all the assembly of Israel the words of this song until they were ended:

***“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;
And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.***

²Let my teaching drop as the rain,
My speech distill as the dew,
As raindrops on the tender herb,
And as showers on the grass.

³For I proclaim the name of the LORD:
Ascribe greatness to our God.

⁴He is the Rock, His work is perfect;
For all His ways are justice,

¹ Although Isaiah was a prophet primarily to the Southern kingdom of Judah, living in the city of Jerusalem, his prophecy would also at times encompass the northern kingdom of Israel.

² God first used Assyria to defeat and deport the inhabitants of the northern kingdom of Israel, then afterwards He sent Assyria into the southern kingdom to all but exterminate Judah, had He not spared for Himself a remnant i.e. King Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

A God of truth and without injustice;
Righteous and upright is He. (Deut. 31:24 – 32:4, NKJ)

This is a record of a covenant renewal ceremony, in which Moses rehearsed before the people the graciousness of God in having brought them into a relationship with Himself. God had been gracious to this people. He had “created” His people from one man, Abram. He had nurtured them to maturity. And now, His full-grown son, Israel, who had newly come forth from Egypt, was ready to receive his inheritance, the Promised Land. *Moses called upon the “heavens and earth” to witness the rehearsal of all that God had done for His son, Israel.*

When we return to Isaiah 1:2, we are to understand the message in the light of God’s covenant:

**Listen, O heavens, and hear O earth;
For the LORD speaks,**

The prophet began his opening speech in the style of Deuteronomy.³ God was declaring through Isaiah that this people had broken their covenant obligations to their God, and therefore they were incurring His wrath. Thus, judgment has been happening and it is now coming upon them in a more severe manner; the time of fulfillment of God’s wrath is at hand. God now calls upon the heavens and earth as witnesses for the prosecution as God indicts the nation as having broken its covenantal obligations. Moses had called upon them centuries before when the covenant was rehearsed before Israel upon entering the Promised Land. Here in Isaiah 1 God called upon the heavens and the earth to validate His charges against Israel, as they had witnessed of Israel through history. They had seen it all, from the days of Moses in the 15th c. BC to the days of Isaiah in the 8th c. BC. The Hebraist commentator, **Franz Delitzsch**, described Moses’ initial calling upon the heavens and the earth as witnesses to God’s gracious dealings with Israel.

In what sense he (Moses) invoked the heaven and earth, he tells us himself in Deuteronomy xxxi.28, 29. He foresaw in spirit the future apostasy of Israel, and called heaven and earth, which would outlive his earthly life, that was now drawing to a close, as witnesses of what he had to say to his people, with such a prospect before them. Isaiah commences in the same way (ch. i. 2a), simply transposing the parallel verbs “hear” and “give ear” (i.e. listen): “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for Jehovah speaketh!” The reason for appeal is couched in very general terms: they were to hear, because Jehovah was speaking... The time had now arrived for the heaven and the earth, which are always existing, and always the same, and which had accompanied Israel’s history thus far in all places and at all times, to fulfill their duty as witnesses, according to the word of the lawgiver. And this was just the special, true, and ultimate sense in which they were called upon by the prophet, as they had been previously been by Moses, to “hear.” They had been present, and had taken part, when Jehovah gave the *thorah* (i.e. Torah, or Law) to His people: the heavens, according to Deuteronomy iv. 36, as the place from which the voice of God came forth; and the earth, as the scene of His great fire. They were solemnly invoked what Jehovah, their Creator, and the God of Israel, had to say, and the complaints that He had to make.”⁴

What we have, therefore, is God the Prosecutor before the heavenly court, pronouncing the crimes of Israel (and Judah), calling upon the heavens and earth to affirm that they had witnessed the crimes and defections of His people.

We read God’s words in Isaiah 1:2, “*I have nourished and brought up children.*”⁵ The analogy of a father and his children is given. God had begotten Israel, its inception occurred with the Abrahamic covenant

³ “In the consciousness of his exalted position in relation to the history of salvation, he commences his opening address in Deuteronomic style.” F. Delitzsch, *Isaiah, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 7 (William B. Eerdmans, rep. 1978), p. 74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 75f.

⁵ I made nearly a wrong assertion last week in my notes. I had made this comment on the prophecy of Hosea 1:10: “By the way, this description of the people in Hosea 1:10 as ‘the sons of the living God’ is quite unique to the Old Testament

(Gen. 17:15ff.) God provided nurturing care throughout the years as He brought his son(s) Israel to maturity, eventually seeing His son come to manhood, when He brought him from bondage out of Egypt. God then gave to His son the inheritance that had been prepared for him, that being the Promised Land.

“I have nourished”, the Lord said, which speaks of having raised His children to be great ones in the earth. They were *“brought up”*, speaks of the dignity that He conferred upon Israel. It is as though God had given His son the best of education and culture. Israel was born with a silver spoon in its mouth. And later in Israel’s history, under the reign of kings David and Solomon, Israel lived up to His dignified calling, as one once described, *“ripe manhood, compelling respect from the other nations.”*

But how has Israel repaid her God? How has the child responded to its overseeing, gracious father? *“They have rebelled against me.”* **Here God stands as an Accuser, not speaking directly to Israel but as in a courtroom, the defendant sitting charged with a crime; God, the prosecutor is speaking to the jury and the witnesses, those being the “heavens and the earth.”** It is as though God were saying,

“You’ve seen it! You, heavens, were there beholding My graciousness. You have been observing all along, Oh Earth, my patience. But you have also seen their rebellion; I call upon you to say it is so.”

The Hebrew word translated as “rebelled” means to break off, to tear away. Israel is shown to have dissolved with violence and self-will the connection of parent and child. And so here in Israel’s sinful condition is displayed the nature of all sin as well as its result-separation from God Himself and His will.

In **verse 3** we see that the people of Israel is depicted as worse than dumb stock animals. *“The ox knows its owner”*; it knows who owns him! to whose will it should yield. *“And the donkey its master’s crib”*; even a donkey knows where his food comes from, who provides for him. *“But Israel does not know.”* Israel doesn’t have that much sense. It seeks its own will. Israel seeks his substance from other gods. And so, **the basic problem is set forth as ingratitude, independence, and self-will.** Israel both fell away from Him and rose in opposition to God.

God refers to them as *“My people.”* These were the covenant people of God. They were His possession. Yet they *“do not consider”*, says the Lord. Their sin was great in their refusal and neglect of the privilege that was theirs. *“They had counted the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the spirit of grace.”*⁶

In **verse 4** we see that Jehovah becomes silent (notice the end of quotation marks with v. 3). The prophet speaks in solemn agreement with the charge by giving **a seven-fold lament.**

(1) **“Alas, sinful nation”** -- The Hebrew word for nation is frequently used for the wicked nations; here without the definite article, thereby perhaps stressing Judah’s diminishment to the level of one of the heathen nations. Note, they had been called to be a “holy nation.” But they had not simply failed to achieve that status, they actually became the opposite, a “sinful nation.”

(2) **“A people laden with iniquity”** -- The responsibility was upon them. They were charged with insurrection and rebellion.

(3) **“A brood of evil doers”** -- They were guilty due to the guilt of their ancestors. Elsewhere they are described as the seed of the patriarchs, therefore blessed of God because of the promises they had inherited. Here, they are the seed of evildoers, therefore cursed of God because of the corrupt nature they had inherited.

Scriptures. God had regarded Israel the nation as a whole to be as His son. Also God had regarded the kings of Israel who were King David’s heirs to have been His (adopted) sons. But to speak of individuals who are in covenant relationship with God as a Father to His children, although a common image of the New Testament, may be (nearly) unique to the Old Testament here in Hosea 1:10.” Actually, there are several places in Deuteronomy in which the children of Israel are referred to or alluded to as God’s children. See Deuteronomy 14:1; 32:6, 18 but also here in Isaiah 1:2. And so, it is an unusual metaphor, but not unique to Hosea’s prophecy. I had covered myself somewhat by saying “(nearly) unique”, but at the time I was unaware of these references in Deuteronomy and had forgotten this reference in Isaiah 1:2.

⁶ To use a New Testament verse: Hebrews 10:29.

(4) **“Children who are corrupters!”** They were not simple guilty due to their ancestry, they are guilty in their own right. They were guilty due to their own deeds; they corrupt themselves and others as well.

Now, whereas the first four phrases describe *their condition*, the final three speak of their *specific offenses*.

(5) **“They have forsaken the Lord.”** The word for “Lord” here is YAWEH or “Jehovah,” the personal name of their covenant God (Exodus 6:2). They did not want to “know” Him.

(6) **“They have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel.”** The NIV reads, “They have spurned the Holy One of Israel.” Delitzsch translates it, “They have blasphemed the Holy One of Israel.”

(7) **“They have turned away backward.”** It was a revolt of words, feelings and conduct. The deliberateness of their rebellion is seen. They turned their backs upon Him and walked away, wanting no part of Him. And so, the indictment is presented. Judgment must surely come upon them.

The only thing that will save them from utter destruction is if the Lord takes the initiative. He purposes to show mercy so as to be disposed toward them; and He bestows grace so as to dispose them toward Himself. And so, this was the condition of ancient Israel, but it also aptly describes the condition of all mankind apart from a work of the grace of God in and through a Savior!

We then have the **desolate external state of the nation described (1:5-9)**. The analogy is given of a person who has been sorely wounded, a description of Israel due to Jehovah having afflicted him. Israel is shown to be as *a defeated warrior who had been fighting against God on the battlefield*. God through His judgment had beaten Israel down to a hopeless and helpless condition. It is as though God asks the question, “What more will it take to bring you to repentance, to a state of obedience?”

Verse 5 reads, *“Why should you be stricken again?”* There is nothing else remaining that had not already been smitten. What else is there? The purpose of the question seems to be an appeal by God for them to respond. “Why is it you don’t want this affliction to cease?” The Lord does not delight in continuing to afflict them. Yet it is said, *“You will revolt more and more.”* **The chastising work of God seems to have incited more rebellion rather than repentance.**

Israel’s condition is then graphically described. God had been fighting against Israel and now Israel is lying on the battlefield mortally wounded with God standing over him. The prophet recites the extent of the injuries that had been inflicted upon Israel by God. *“The whole head is sick”* (perhaps “every head”). This “sickness” is due to the stroke of a weapon in battle rather than a disease contracted. The description is as one mortally wounded in combat. We read, *“And the whole heart faints.”* The wounded soldier is now near death; a lack of strength now exists. And in **verse 6**, *“From the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in it.”* There was no portion of the body that had not been inflicted, God had struck them severely, repeatedly, and in diverse ways. *“But wounds, and bruises and putrefied sores; they have not been closed or bound up, or soothed with ointment.”* Although these injuries had been inflicted fairly recently, the body had remained untreated; no care had been given to facilitate healing. The wounds had not been squeezed so as to remove the putrefaction, or treated with medicinal oil. So their injured condition was a prolonged one with no relief or comfort.

Next, the *analogy of the wounded body* is explained in **verse 7**:

**Your country is desolate,
Your cities are burned with fire,
Strangers devour your land in your presence;
And it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers.**

These descriptions depict the curses that God had promised would come upon them if they refused to obey His commandments.⁷ The enemies of Israel are not identified specifically here; they are simply referred to as “strangers.” The “overturning” speaks of total upheaval, as when Sodom was “overturned.”⁸

And **verse 8** reads,

**So the daughter of Zion is left as a booth in a vineyard,
As a hut in a garden of cucumbers,
As a besieged city."**

This is a reference to *Jerusalem*. It alone remains. God had preserved it within ravaged Judah. It was the last stronghold, the last vestige of security, yet unsmitten by the Lord. The imagery is of a field that had been harvested, the guard hut is no longer needed. Jerusalem which once stood as a defense and stronghold for Judah now stands as overlooking a ravaged country; there is nothing left to guard. We read,

**Unless the Lord of hosts
Had left to us a very small remnant,
We would have become like Sodom,
We would have been made like Gomorrah. (1:9)**

Jerusalem is all that is preserved within ravaged Judah. It is a *remnant*. God in His mercy had spared the city for His Own Name's sake.⁹

Now, what is a remnant and what is God's purpose in preserving Himself a remnant? *A remnant is a small portion of what had existed formerly, preserved by God in order for a new beginning to occur.* Like a sprout is taken from a vine to be grafted to another, the original vine is afterwards destroyed. But in a sense the former vine lives on in the sprout. The preservation of a remnant provides for the promises of God to be fulfilled. He is able through the remnant to be true to His promises.

Note that the prophet uses the plural pronoun “we” in 1:9. He was also an object of God's mercy and grace. **It is this verse that the apostle Paul used in Romans 9:29.** The remnant consisted of those relatively few number of Jews who came to Jesus Christ of which Paul was one. Just as God promised here in Isaiah 1 that He would only save a remnant of Jews through His mercy and grace, Paul declared in Romans 9 that this is what God was doing through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He was only saving a remnant. That is why more Jewish people did not believe on Jesus Christ; they were under God's wrath and God chose not to save them, except for a remnant. He chose to have mercy upon those He determined would receive His mercy.

Let us continue to consider Isaiah's prophecy.

Well, how does one reverse this situation? How does one recover oneself from the destruction experienced thus far, and the utter devastation that will come if the trend is not reversed? Or, How can we, as believers, recover out of a backslidden condition? We see in verses 10-15 that **their current type of worship was no remedy (1:10-15)**. The possible means at Judah's disposal are considered in vs. 10ff, but each one is dismissed as inadequate.

We read in Isaiah 1:10a, **“Hear the word of the Lord.”** This “word” is the immediate message of verses 11-20. The meaning of “word” carries the idea of “instruction.” When a man sins, a degree of ignorance overtakes him. If he will receive the instruction, God gives to him a word to recover himself from his error. And so, we have a summons by God to hear His word. In 1:2 the “heavens and earth” were called on to “hear”, now the people are bidden to listen.

⁷ Cf. Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 38.

⁸ Cf. Amos 4:11; Isaiah 13:19; Jer. 50:40

⁹ Cf. Deut. 16:16; 26:1, 2.

**Hear the word of the Lord
You rulers of Sodom;
Give ear to the law of our God
You people of Gomorrah.**

In verse 9 the prophet had said that had it not been for the mercy and grace of God, Judah would have been annihilated as had been Sodom and Gomorra. The implication in verse 9 is that Judah deserved to be judged as were those cities. In verse 10, however, the prophet became direct in his charge, he addresses Judah as “Sodom and Gomorra.” There is nothing “holy” about the earthly city of Jerusalem; spiritually it is as Sodom (Rev. 11:8). The only holy Jerusalem that exists this side of the eternal state is the New Jerusalem, which is all those people saved through Jesus Christ and will be seen in the new heavens and new earth when God Himself will build that eternal city in which His people will dwell forever.

What were the principal sins of Sodom? Ezek. 16:49 outlines (1) pride, (2) sensuality, and (3) mercilessness. And so, God’s covenant people were now regarded as no better than Sodom and Gomorra, which were utterly overthrown.

Notice the parallelism in verse 10: “Hearing the word of the LORD” is the same as “giving ear to the instruction of our God.” The prophet was calling on the people to hear the Torah as it should have been understood.

Now the rulers and the people thought they had known the Law, but what was their error? They read the Law and practiced the external notions (rituals) prescribed by the Law, and thus applied the promised blessings of the Law to themselves. But they neglected the “weightier” matters of the Law and failed, therefore, to apply the warnings and cursings to themselves. This message was preached by our Lord to the Jews of His day and could quite easily be preached to the churches of this day.

And what were they being called upon to heed? What were the people’s true needs?

- (1) Purification from sins
- (2) Active obedience to their God
- (3) Love one toward another

Notice in **verse 11** that they were religious people. There was **no lack of ritual** or liturgy (“multiplied” sacrifices).

**“To what are your multitude of your sacrifices to Me?” says the LORD.
‘I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams,
And the fat of fed cattle.
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
Or of lambs, or goats.”**

These practices were of no value to them at all. Now, of course the prophet was not hostile to sacrifices in and of themselves. Had their hearts been right, the smallest of sacrifices would have been accepted, even a pair of turtle doves. But when there is not a broken heart, when there is no repentance, when there is no faith, God says, “*I have enough*”, literally, “I am full.” Here, God says that He is “full” of their sacrifices; they have become distasteful to Him. They mean nothing to Him.

They thought they were pleasing God in their worship, but in actuality their so-called worship was aggravating their condemnation. God says in **verse 12**,

**“When you come to appear before Me,
Who has required this from your hand
To trample My courts?”**

To come into the temple was to come into God’s presence. God had come to regard them as trespassing on territory uninvited. They thought they had divine sanction for what they were doing! He had never granted

them permission to approach Him on these terms. They thought they were worshipping when in actuality they were desecrating the Lord's house, depicted here as "trampling His courts." There are people gathering in places all over the world today assuming that they are "worshipping" God and that God is pleased with them for what they are doing. Unless they are in Jesus Christ and their worship is sanctified by Jesus Christ, their so called worship is aggravating their condemnation before God.

He commands them to stop their practices. It was aggravating their condition. **Verses 13 and 14** read: **"Bring no more futile sacrifices."** This is a reference to "oblations" which were mainly meal and vegetable offerings which were to be offerings expressing gratefulness to God for His graciousness and provision. **"Incense is an abomination to Me."** What was to be an odor of sweetness ascending up to God, God now regarded it as an odious stench due to their corrupt lives and hearts. **"The new moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies--I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred assembly. Your New moons and your appointed feasts, My soul hates; They are a trouble to Me. I am weary of bearing them."** The throngs, the large gatherings were more than God could stomach; they were many in number but empty in spirit. God expressed His attitude toward their meetings:

- (1) His soul hated them;
- (2) The meetings were a time when He was burdened;
- (3) He was weary of enduring them

All the while they thought that they were right with God and everything that they were doing was a cause of His delight and they were the objects of His favor. There are some mega "churches" meeting today that are causing God to be weary with them and which are stoking the fires of His judgment that will one day come upon them.

We read on in **verse 15**,

**"When you spread out your hand,
I will hide my eyes from you,
Even though you make many prayers,
I will not hear.
Your hands are full of blood."**

Even their praying was an abomination to God. He covered His eyes and stopped His ears. When prayer is offered from an unsanctified heart which has no intention of changing, then prayer becomes repulsive to a holy God. Prayer is a spiritual sacrifice, and no sacrifice was being received by God from this people. Jesus Christ alone as our mediator renders our prayers acceptable to God our Father.

Now, what may we say of these things? The worship of one who is outside of Jesus Christ is not received by a holy God. People need to be aware that this is how God regards them when they are without a Savior. Their prayers, apart from a petition for mercy and cleansing, are odious to Him. A holy God cannot and will not have dealings with a sinner who purposes to persist in his sin. But lest we let ourselves off too lightly, we, too, as professing believers of Jesus Christ, have a solemn responsibility as individuals and as a church to live holy lives before our Lord. There are church services being conducted in this world today that are beset with sin. What does our Lord Jesus think of our church services, our assemblies, our prayers, our spiritual sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving? Not much more than what is outlined here if we are not living rightly before Him.¹⁰

We next read of **God's call to repentance (1:16, 17)**. We have eight admonitions in these two verses. The first three concern the removal of evil, the last five, concern the performing of good.

(1) "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean." They were to put away their sins which they had heretofore indulged. They were to deal with past deeds.

¹⁰ Consider the message to Thyatira in **Revelation 2:19-23** and the word of **2 Corinthians 6:14-18**.

- (2) *“Put away the evil from your doings from before My eyes.”* They must cease doing their present evil deeds.
- (3) *“Cease to do evil”* -- They are commanded to purpose not to continue in evil deeds in the future.
- (4) *“Learn to do good”* -- They are to live a godly, righteous life.
- (5) *“Seek justice”* -- They must deal justly with regard to right and wrong
- (6) *“Rebuke the oppressor”* -- They are to be faithful in punishing evil doers
- (7) *“Defend the fatherless”* -- The defenseless are to be defended.
- (8) *“Plead for the widow.”* -- They were to see to it the needy were assisted.

We then read of God’s **promise of cleansing and restoration (1:18-20)**. It is in the midst of this very awesome, if not threatening passage we have one of the golden texts of Scripture. It depicts God’s grace in a grand and glorious fashion. Verse 18 reads,

**“Come now, and let us reason together,
Says the LORD,
Though your sins are like scarlet,
They shall as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They shall be as wool”**

What could they do? Here they were: guilty, they were all but destroyed. They had no means remaining whereby they might initiate or effect reconciliation. But God comes to them and offers the way of peace. He can do something for them that they cannot do for themselves. And so it is always the case, it is God who comes to the sinner. He bids the sinner to approach Himself but it is going to be on His terms.

Now notice, and this is very important: the **offer of cleansing** of verse 18 is linked with the **message of repentance** in verses 16 and 17. There is no promise in the Old Testament or the New Testament for forgiveness of anyone who refuses to turn from and forsake his sin! Consider the message of Peter in Acts 3:18: *“But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He hath fulfilled. Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away.”*

Here is how **Charles Spurgeon** described the need for repentance for forgiveness to be received:

“If we believe in the holiness of God, we cannot be forgiven if we continue to sin and refuse to repent of it. We will reap the consequence of our obstinacy. According to God's infinite goodness, we are promised that if we will forsake our sins, confess them, and by faith accept the grace that is provided in Christ Jesus, God is "faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." But, as long as God lives, there can be no promise of mercy to those who continue in their evil ways and refuse to acknowledge their wrongdoing. Surely no rebel can expect the king to pardon his treason while he remains in open revolt. No one can be so foolish as to imagine that the Judge of all the earth will put away our sins if we refuse to put them away ourselves.”¹¹

The people of Israel were to turn from their sin. If they would but do so, and look to God’s mercy, they would receive the cleansing that comes from Him. *“Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be white as snow.”* Rather than wearing robes of righteousness, they were wearing garments as though they were dripping with blood. Their sins were of such a nature that they were visible before all. But God could remove them, and in the place of their sin righteousness would be seen. God declared, *“Though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.”* They were clothed in double-stained woolen garments that could not by human means be made white again. There cleansing would have to be a work of grace. It would take great grace to transform these sinners into saints. God had come to them. They did not merit His favor, nor did they deserve it. God is free to bestow or withhold mercy. They deserved His wrath and it was their portion, but God chose to have mercy on them.¹²

¹¹ Charles Spurgeon, *All of Grace* (Eerdmans), p. 100.

¹² Cf. Exodus 33:19.

Now again, this is a great text of Scripture, and one of the most frequently used of the Old Testament. But I wonder if because the context of the chapter is neglected, the tone of the text is missed. God is not in the posture of begging this people to let Him bless them, hoping somehow they would be moved to respond to Himself. It is as though He were helplessly standing by wringing His hands wishing and longing for their response to His invitation. The context suggests a different tone:

The people had revolted against God and so He had come and fought against them and brought them low. Here they were lying on the ground, mortally wounded, having been utterly defeated. They were near death, and now it is as though God were standing over them with a sword poised to make the final blow. And then He says, “Come on now fellows, let us be reasonable, surrender now, and I will have mercy on you; otherwise its over!” This is not *so much a plea* as it is an *ultimatum*.

That this is so may be seen in the **verses 19 and 20** that immediately follow:

**“If you are willing and obedient,
You shall eat the good of the land;
But if you refuse and rebel,
You shall be devoured by the sword’.¹³
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”**

“*For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*” You can cut it in granite; it will come to pass.¹⁴ And so, the importance of obedience is stressed and the serious consequences of their refusal to respond are laid before them.

Actually the oracle of judgment is not over, it continues on in the following verses, but we get the message. Mankind has the ability to resist and rebel, but He has no ability to recover himself. God through His grace must work in the hearts of His people so that they would be willing and able to respond to Him.

Throughout the first portions of the prophecy of Isaiah we read of God’s judgment against Judah and Israel in a number of contexts. The nation is shown to have been a wayward son, a rebellious servant, a sinful nation.¹⁵ The prophet sets the stage in doing so, however, of the glorious news of another Servant of the Lord who would come and die on behalf of His people to pay for their sins and thereby restore them to God (Isa. 42:1ff).

What may take to heart as we close today? First, let us affirm that though we may seem to be few in number and influence, we are blessed beyond comprehension that our God in His free and sovereign grace to be the recipients of His salvation in Jesus Christ. Second, let us understand that all of the words of God’s assessment and judgment of apostate Israel as well as that of the Assyrians reflects how God views all who are outside of Jesus Christ. God regards them as His enemies, against whom He is fighting. They will all be vanquished one day and rug before His judgment. The only escape for fallen humanity is to flee in repentance from sin to pace faith in God’s only provision for salvation from sin, Jesus Christ the Lord. Lastly, let us affirm that all we are, all we do, all we offer to God, must be through the merit of Jesus Christ’ life, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and intercession for us. Praise God for His unspeakable gift of His Son, Jesus Christ.

¹³ Notice the play on words in v. 20: you can either “eat” of the land or be “eaten” by the sword.

¹⁴ If we had time we would consider the importance of the spoken word in the ancient world and how it was believed that words could not be recovered or retracted; e.g. Jephthah and his daughter.

¹⁵ Cf. Isa. 42:18-25.