

Our Urgent Need of Self-Awareness

Isaiah 1:1-31

September 8th, 2019

Intro

William Kilpatrick, a professor at Boston College, described a scene from one of his colleagues... He once asked members of his philosophy class to write an anonymous essay about a personal struggle over right and wrong, good and evil. Most of the students, however, were unable to complete the assignment. "Why?" he asked. "Well," they said – and apparently this was said without irony – "we haven't done anything wrong." We can see a lot of self-esteem here, but little self-awareness.

We need a sense of sin. Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist, said, "A diffuse and vague guilt feeling kills the personality, whereas the conviction of sin gives life to it."

We have an urgent need of self-awareness. We need a self-awareness that corresponds to reality. If we think we haven't really done anything wrong and we feel pretty good about ourselves, that's all fine unless God thinks we've done wrong. Conviction of sin becomes life-giving when it's from God and combined with His life-giving solution.

We see this in the book of Isaiah when it comes to the people of his day as well. What they urgently needed was self-awareness. They needed to see that they were waiting and suffering because of their refusal to live as God called His people to live. They were distorting justice, harming the vulnerable, and their worship of God was hypocritical. So God was getting their attention and Isaiah's job was to explain it to the people and to call them to see themselves accurately and get right with God.

We have the same need. We have an urgent need of self-awareness.

John Calvin said we need to know two things to make meaningful contact with reality. We need to know God and ourselves. A new self-awareness leads us by the hand to find God. The book of Isaiah can provide that for us now, even though we live 2700 years later.

1. Introduction and background to Isaiah (1:1)

a. "Vision" describes this whole, massive book

i. It looks at several horizons at once.

1. Just like you have probably experienced when you're outside in Idaho with mountains in the distance. You can see your immediate surroundings, the foothills, some larger mountains, and then sometimes an even larger range of mountains in the far distance.

ii. Isaiah speaks to the people in the city of Jerusalem in the nation of Judah in the 8th century BC. But the book starts to look beyond that as it moves along. It brings in the other nations around Judah. It looks ahead more than 100 years to their eventual exile in Babylon and return. It looks further to the Messiah, the suffering servant of ch 53 who wouldn't come for 700 years. Some passages even look ahead to the new heavens and earth God will create.

1. Barry Webb: "Here is a vision which is bound to deliver us from spiritual myopia and small-mindedness if only we can grasp it, or, better still, allow it to grasp us."

b. He locates his ministry during the time of these kings.

i. Quick overview: Saul, David, Solomon – SPLIT! 931 BC

1. Isaiah and Judah continue on parallel trajectories

a. until 722 BC when Israel is taken away into captivity to Assyria

2. Southern kingdom of Judah continues with some attacks and exiles until finally Jerusalem falls in 586 BC
- ii. These four kings are kings in Judah, the southern kingdom. You can read about them in 2 Kings 15-20.
 1. Assyria hung over them like a knife that could drop at any time during these decades, as well as some lesser nations.
 2. Uzziah and Jotham were mostly good, doing “what was right in the sight of the Lord” although they didn’t take away some of the place of false worship.
 - a. **2 Kings 15:2-5** He [Uzziah] was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-two years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Jecoliah of Jerusalem. ³ He did right in the sight of the LORD... ⁴ Only the high places were not taken away;
 - b. **2 Kings 15:33-35** He [Jotham] was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem... ³⁴ He did what was right in the sight of the LORD;
 3. Ahaz did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord (2 Kings 16:2)
 - a. **2 Kings 16:1-2** In the seventeenth year of Pekah the son of Remaliah, Ahaz the son of Jotham, king of Judah, became king. ² Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem; and he did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD his God
 4. Hezekiah was a great reformer. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord. We’ll see one historical narrative part of Isaiah focused on Hezekiah in chapters 36-39.
 - a. **2 Kings 18:1-3** Now it came about in the third year of Hoshea, the son of Elah king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz king of Judah became king. ² He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. ³ He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done.
 - c. Isaiah has 66 chapters.
 - i. Easiest to think of it in 2 main parts
 1. 1-39 are more immediate for the historical situation, more focused on judgment although hope sprinkled in.
 2. 40-66 are more future focused, more focused on hope and comfort, with warnings of judgment sprinkled in.
 - ii. Think of it like the breakdown of the Bible as a whole – 66 books total, 39 in the OT more focused on judgment with hope and comfort, 27 in the NT.
 - iii. Isaiah is a book of poetry in prophecy – poetry isn’t always easy to get. The meaning isn’t always lying right on the surface. Sometimes we have to think but there are diamonds under the surface of the language.
 - iv. It’s not necessarily in chronological order.

2. The tragedy of **rebellion**: “Alas, sinful nation” (1:2-9)

- a. Picture a courtroom drama. That shouldn't be too hard since every other tv show is about a courtroom.
- b. One role of the prophets in the OT is to act as God's prosecuting attorneys, bringing His charges against the people.
- c. All of creation is called to act as witness, as if creation itself should be shocked at Israel's rebellion. (1:1-4)
 - i. **Deuteronomy 30:19** "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,
 - ii. Ray Ortlund – It takes the heavens and the earth, it takes the entire cosmos, to witness the enormity of our offenses against God. How dimly we grasp the significance of our lives.
 - iii. Why is it such a big deal?
 1. Because God rescued them and brought them up as His children, His people.
 2. The warning comes in the context of relationship. They are his own people. And while the church and Israel are distinct, the banner over both is that they are the Lord's people.
 3. Even oxen and donkeys, not the smartest of domestic animals, know their owners and respond to them. But Israel, God's people, don't know or understand their Father's heart. That can be us. And by us, I mean people who say they have trusted in Jesus to save them and are gathering to worship. That's the parallel here and throughout the chapter. They are people who claim a religious heritage, they have an identity as God's people, and they gather for worship. This isn't a message for people “out there.” It's for us.
 4. We have an urgent need of accurate self-assessment.
- d. They have already started to experience the consequences of their actions (1:5-8)
 - i. Their unique promise as a nation as that God would bless them in the land as they lived in faithful obedience to Him. But if they didn't, they would suffer in the land or be taken out of it.
 1. These aren't random commands placed on them as if God is an angry tyrant or an unmovable force like gravity. He built His world the way He did because the moral laws reflect His own character. When we violate them, we experience natural consequences as well as His personal actions.
 - a. A nation that is corrupt, accepting bribes, distorted justice, and harming the vulnerable rather than protecting them, will collapse overtime. Is it God's judgment or the natural consequence of failing operate according to God's moral laws? Both.
 - ii. Their land was hurting in the ways described because God allowed the Assyrians to come against them. They were the tool of His discipline.
 1. **Isaiah 36:1** Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them.
 - iii. Ortlund – if your aim is to make yourself miserable, haven't you accomplished that by now? Wouldn't you rather start to heal?

- iv. Apart from God's preserving grace, we would relive the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. We are what they were. We deserve what they got. That's what God says. And the only reason we're still here is his overruling mercy saving us from ourselves. God is saying...
 - 1. **Deuteronomy 32:39** 'See now that I, I am He, And there is no god besides Me; It is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal, And there is no one who can deliver from My hand.
 - 2. This is the God we have to deal with. He can wound us, and he can heal us; but he would rather heal us. Will we come to our senses and turn to Him? Here is good news for wounded people: Jesus was wounded too. He was pierced for our transgressions...Is 53:5 Our wounds are healed by His wounds. (Adapted and summarized from Ortlund)
- 3. The hypocrisy of their **worship**: "Bring your worthless offerings no longer" (1:10-20)
 - a. Their response may be, "wait, wait, wait. We're not as bad as that! After all, we come religiously for worship. We appear before You! We bring sacrifices – rams, cattle, lambs. We keep the special days and feasts, just like you said to!"
 - b. God says, they are empty, literally "offerings of nothing" (worthless offerings).
 - i. Why? They have the outer form but have developed the mistaken idea that the thing or act itself is an act of worship, totally separate from what is going on in our lives.
 - c. Friends, we are in danger of this assessment as well. In worship, we still "appear before Him." The forms have changed. The sacrificial system was fulfilled in Jesus as the great high priest with the once-for-all sacrifice. But we still come before Him in worship. And there are certain forms we follow – we gather, we sing, we pray, we study the Bible, we stand, we sit, we give money. But it's not the forms that matter – how many songs, do we sing in the right key, is the Bible opened, how much time do we pray, do we give financially – all those activities can be good or they can be empty. What makes the difference?
 - i. Authenticity in our lives and worship.
 - ii. Israel was rescued out of Egypt and then given the law and sacrificial system.
 - iii. In the same way, we are rescued out of sin and its penalty, then with a new identity as His people we are freed to worship and live for Him.
 - d. God told them he won't listen when they pray because their hands are covered with blood (v. 15) and then need to "make themselves clean."
 - i. Lamey – Isaiah was not suggesting salvation by works. He simply emphasized the Lord's promise to cleanse those who come to him by faith and through the appointed way of sacrifice.
 - ii. **Leviticus 4:20** 'He shall also do with the bull just as he did with the bull of the sin offering; thus he shall do with it. So the priest shall make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven.
 - 1. That's what they were doing. Why wasn't it working. It was a game to them. They weren't being honest. The sacrifices were meant to reflect a heart of sorrow over their sin and desire for God to forgive them, not to soothe their consciences or bribe God to overlook their continued disobedience.
 - e. They are to take concrete, clear steps of repentance. And He tells them what that looks like. (1:16-17)
 - i. The true God is not like the capricious false gods of pagan mythology who threaten to doom people by an exploding volcano but leave them to figure out what they have done to displease him.
 - ii. He says, this is the problem – and he gives them 3 commands for reordering their personal lives.

1. Stop – decisive abandonment of the old life
 2. Learn – development of a new mind
 3. Seek – setting new objectives and priorities conformed to the Lord’s stated will
- f. And then he includes one of the most famous expressions of grace in the bible.
- i. (Oswalt) Their sins are scarlet, red as crimson, the color of blood (which their hands are figuratively covered in according to v 15). We have reached a point of crisis. But at the very point when judgment is expected, grace intervenes. The divine judge reasons with the accused, and makes an offer which is truly amazing in its generosity: nothing less than total pardon (18)!
 1. Freely offered on one condition – they must cease their rebellion.
 2. This isn’t salvation by works. It is simply a recognition that their hypocrisy must not continue.
 3. Oswalt – all the rhetorical language of the prophets, urging people to obey, is in opposition to any position that God’s forgiveness can ever be experienced apart from a disposition to obey Him.
4. The corruption of their ***character***: “Everyone loves a bribe” (1:21-31)
- a. Moves from their worship to some specific indictments of their leaders.
 - i. Their rulers are “rebels” who love bribes (v. 23)
 - ii. Rather than defending the orphan and widow, the most vulnerable in their society, they don’t listen to them and look for bribes instead.
 1. Bribery and injustice stifle an economy and a people. One of the fundamental responsibilities of government is justice.
 2. How we treat the most vulnerable who cannot profit us reveals what we really think about justice.
 - b. But there is hope sprinkled in here as well.
 - i. They are described as “silver that has become dross” (v. 22), but He will turn his hand against them and smelt away their dross and remove their alloy (v. 25).
 - ii. He will restore their judges and counselors and they will be called the city of righteousness.
 - c. Isaiah points ahead to the ultimate hope –
 - i. What will He do to clean us (v. 16)? How can He make our sins white as snow (v. 18)?
 - ii. **Isaiah 53:5-6** But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. ⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.
5. Self-assessment
- a. Do I take my ***sin*** as seriously as God takes it?
 - b. Am I guilty of ***empty*** worship?
 - i. Do I go through the motions?
 - ii. Do I ignore God or live in ways that I know are wrong all week and then sooth my conscience by coming to church?

- iii. The issue isn't sin, it's unconfessed sin, ignored sin, downplayed sin.
 - iv. He invites sinners to come. He says He will take our sin that like scarlet and make it white as snow.
- c. Have I ***repented*** in clear and simple ways?
- i. Repentance involves changing my mind about who is God around here.
 - ii. Repentance is a gift from God.
 - iii. **Luke 24:46-47** Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
 - iv. **Acts 11:18** When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads* to life."
 - v. **Acts 20:21** solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.
 - vi. **Acts 26:20** but *kept* declaring both to those of Damascus first, and *also* at Jerusalem and *then* throughout all the region of Judea, and *even* to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

Join us on a journey through Isaiah this fall for the next 11 weeks.

How many chapters are in Isaiah? 66. How many would you have to read each week to finish it in 11 weeks? 6. That's one a day, with one day off or a day to catch up.

Read or listen to 6 chapters per week. Each Sunday I will pick something out of those chapters to preach from. I won't cover all 6 chapters. So this week, read chapters 1-6. Next Sunday I might preach on something out of chapter 2 or 5. I might preach on the famous call of Isaiah in ch 6.

Pick up a booklet in the lobby.

It will explain the plan. Give you a schedule to follow.

Provide some intro notes to the book.

Give you an outline for the book.

Provides space to write.

Can you come without reading? Of course. You won't even have to sit in the corner. I won't assume any background info. But if you do read, I think you'll get more out of the series and you'll probably come with more expectation on Sundays.



1

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13



14