



“The LORD God Redeems”  
Isaiah 1:21-31  
September 11, 2022

This morning we continue in the prophetic book of Isaiah. As we do, we are going to see the redeeming power of the living God. To redeem is to pay the ransom price for someone in a desperate situation. That is that God saves us from the ruin of our foolish choices by getting personally involved, by doing a personal work, and by paying a personal price.

This morning we will see a dramatic example of this as the prophet sets our attention on the city of Jerusalem as an example of the work of God’s redeeming grace. Let’s start by reading through this portion of Scripture—this uncomfortable and confrontational and oh so very hopeful drama of redemption that is given to us in Isaiah Chapter 1 and Verses 21 to 31. Follow along as I read:

**<sup>21</sup>How the faithful city  
has become a whore,  
she who was full of justice!  
Righteousness lodged in her,  
but now murderers.  
<sup>22</sup>Your silver has become dross,  
your best wine mixed with water.  
<sup>23</sup>Your princes are rebels  
and companions of thieves.  
Everyone loves a bribe  
and runs after gifts.  
They do not bring justice to the fatherless,  
and the widow’s cause does not come to them.**

**<sup>24</sup>Therefore the Lord declares,  
the LORD of hosts,  
the Mighty One of Israel:  
“Ah, I will get relief from my enemies  
and avenge myself on the foes.  
<sup>25</sup>I will turn my hand against you  
and will smelt away your dross as with lye  
and remove all your alloy.  
<sup>26</sup>And I will restore your judges as at the first,  
and your counselors as at the beginning.  
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,  
the faithful city.”**

**<sup>27</sup>Zion shall be redeemed by justice,**

**and those in her who repent, by righteousness.**

**<sup>28</sup>But rebels and sinners shall be broken together,  
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.**

**<sup>29</sup>For they shall be ashamed of the oaks  
that you desired;  
and you shall blush for the gardens  
that you have chosen.**

**<sup>30</sup>For you shall be like an oak  
whose leaf withers,  
and like a garden without water.**

**<sup>31</sup>And the strong shall become tinder,  
and his work a spark,  
and both of them shall burn together,  
with none to quench them.**

Because the Lord of Hosts has spoken, we say, “Amen. May God bless the reading of His Word.”

I am not the biggest fan of classic black and white movies, so I have never seen the movie Casablanca starring Humphry Bogart. But I read about a scene in that movie this week. It was in a book by Pastor Ray Ortlund on Isaiah that has been a faithful guide to me as I have been studying.

Ortlund describes a scene in that movie when the customers at a place called Rick’s Café defied the Nazi bullies that were there. All of the customers, they stood up simultaneously to sing the French National Anthem, drowning out the patriotic Nazi song that a small group of thugs were singing. It was a moment when all of the people in that café really stuck it in the face of those Nazi guards.

But as I read, then later watched on YouTube, the most moving part of the scene is a brief moment when a French woman stood to sing with the others so passionately at the end of the song. The beauty of it is that earlier in the film, she had degraded herself by consorting with the Nazis. She was found hanging on the arm of a Nazi soldier as his date. But at that crucial moment when it counted, she turned, stood, sang, and she redeemed herself.

Brothers and sisters, the Gospel is all about redemption. As Brother Ortlund pointed out in his reflections on that scene in the movie, the Gospel is all about seeing people rise up from the wreckage of broken, rebellious lives to find new life in the power of the Risen Lord.

However, unlike Casablanca, the Gospel is not about any of us redeeming ourselves. Rather, the Gospel is all about sinners like us finding redemption in the power and in the grace of the Redeemer, the Lord, the Living God, who beckons us to new life by His grace. So it is a work that He performs for His glory and for the good of people like you and me.

This morning we have an example of redemption laid out before us as we have read. The City of Jerusalem is that example. Twice it is referred to as the faithful city, first in Verse 21 and then a second time in Verse 26. It is also referred to as Zion for the most prominent hill in the city, Mt. Zion, the Temple Mount itself, the place of sacred worship unto the Lord.

As we see at the very beginning of the text we read, it was at one time a glorious and faithful city as it alludes back to the reign of David, a man who was a man after God's own heart, and who was very well aware of his ongoing need of the mercy of the Lord. But as we look into the record of the city recorded for us in Scripture, the City of Peace became a place of unrestrained lust and greed. It was filled with violence rather than the peace that it was named for. But, even a city that has given itself to such immorality and corruption, can be made new.

By God's grace, through a process of repentance and renewal, Jerusalem can and will be redeemed. If that is the case for an entire city, it has to be the case for those who will populate it.

So, brothers and sisters, Verse 27 is really the heart of the oracles that we have read this morning. Verse 27 is the heart of the passage.

**<sup>27</sup>Zion shall be redeemed by justice,  
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.**

That is where the prophet Isaiah is taking us. He wants us, through the conviction of sin, to come to repentance. In repentance we are turning to the God in whom redemption is experienced.

To get us there, I wonder if you noticed that this prophecy comes in three sections. You will see in the ESV Bible that we use that there are three sections to this passage. There are three portions leading us to repentance, showing us all that the redemption of Jerusalem involves.

So first, we will see the city's idolatrous demise. This is put up to us like a mirror showing us to our sin. Second, we see the Lord's personal intervention. Third, we see the prophet's gracious warning, which is an invitation to repent. So first,

**To bring us to repentance, we are allowed to see...**

**1. The city's idolatrous demise (1:21-23)**

Starting in Verse 21:

**<sup>21</sup>How the faithful city  
has become a whore,  
she who was full of justice!  
Righteousness lodged in her,  
but now murderers.**

Isaiah used shocking language to get the point across. It seems that our brother Isaiah picked up right where our brother Hosea left off. Do you remember that from our study in Hosea in the month of August?

Here is a question for you and I don't want you to answer it out loud. I just want you to think about the answer. do you like it when the pastors at Bethel Grace repeatedly use the word *whore*? Would it help if I used the word *harlot* instead? Or how about prostitute or adulteress? Or for all this, adulterer? There are lots of things that I would prefer to talk about, brothers and sisters. Perhaps like a tooth extraction and its entire process!

I think I prefer to talk about that than whoredom, because it is uncomfortable and is unnerving and it is unsettling. And brothers and sisters, that is the point, is it not? It is to trigger discomfort so that we will come to our senses, and so that we will come to understand the reality of our sin before the eyes of the holiness of God.

Throughout the pages of Scripture, this language is used, not only in the Old Testament, but into the New Testament as well when the people of God commit idolatry and go after false gods. It is there in Micha Chapters 1 through 3. It is in James 4:4.

Just like a covenant is at the heart of marriage between a man and a woman, so is covenant, a sacred binding agreement, at the heart of our relationship with God. In the Old Testament, Israel was to be uniquely and intimately and singularly bound to the Lord.

He is the one who formed them as a nation. He is the one who delivered them from Egypt. He is the one who provided for them with tender affection. He is the one who had power to protect them. He is the one who promised to do so and proved Himself capable of doing so. So when they worshiped the gods of Canaan, it was like a person committing adultery and not just adultery, but prostitution.

Covenant remains at the heart of our relationship with Jesus Christ. He is the bridegroom and the church is the bride. We are joined together with Jesus in what the Scriptures call the New Covenant of grace—this relationship by which He binds us to Himself by His work of shedding His blood to cleanse us of our sin and bringing us to be born again. We are in covenant with Jesus by grace through faith. Guess what? Baptism and the Lord's Supper is symbol and sign, of the relationship that we are in with Christ.

Let's understand and make no mistake about it, spiritual adultery remains a great temptation for the people of God into the church age as well. What we find looking through the pages of Scripture is that idolatry occurs in multiple forms. There is more than one species of it.

On the one hand, there is crass idol worship, which is the worship of false deities that are represented by graven images. That kind of worship that is in view here and it is alluded to later in the text in Verse 29, where you have the language of the oaks that the people desired and the gardens that they had chosen.

It is not talking about something that you will see in Better Homes and Gardens. It is talking about so-called sacred oak groves, where they would establish these high places of worship to the fertility gods of Canaan, establishing graven images and planting gardens to consecrate them. And the people of Israel were going after them.

That is one species of idolatry, but we also find that idolatry occurs when we set our love on created things above the Creator; when we set our love on the things of this world, so that our devotion is to them above the Provider of the good things of this world. This also is idolatry.

That is what Paul was talking about. Do you remember way back when we studied Colossians? Speaking to the church of God in Chapter 3 after rejoicing that they were the ones raised up in Christ, Paul said:

**<sup>5</sup>Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. <sup>6</sup>On account of these the wrath of God is coming.**

So there is this deep longing for things and experiences in this life that can become idolatrous according to Scripture in Colossians.

I don't know how many of us Western American Christians are tempted to go and worship images to Baal and Ashereth or Dagon, or these kinds of graven images but maybe there is some temptation with this kind thing. I praise God for the Indian brothers and sisters in our midst who had Hinduism in their backgrounds, with all of the graven images to all these false deities

But let's understand idolatry also occurs when we have devotion and affection and pursuit of earthly things above the One who gives good gifts on earth. It could be the relentless pursuit for more and more and more money that crowds out our worship and service unto the Lord. It could be the yearning to have the dream house, or an awesome truck, or to excel in sports in real life on the field or on the video game, so that these things becomes our passion.

We love earthly things above the Giver of all things. Every gift on earth ought to be a call to worship, ushering us back and helping us magnify the Lord. But we become so consumed by earthly things. Worshiping the gifts above the Giver. This is idolatry. In reference to all of this, the Bible uses the language of harlotry when the people of God go after these things above the Lord.

Moving on in Isaiah, we see the repercussions of this idolatry all throughout this passage. It is an exaggerated and impure love of material things that is at the core of it. We see what that releases. This passage goes on to say:

**<sup>21</sup>...Righteousness lodged in her,  
but now murderers.**

**<sup>22</sup>Your silver has become dross,  
your best wine mixed with water.**

**<sup>23</sup>Your princes are rebels**

**and companions of thieves.  
Everyone loves a bribe  
and runs after gifts.  
They do not bring justice to the fatherless,  
and the widow's cause does not come to them.**

So we have these people. They are positioned with power and authority to help the vulnerable and to keep good order in society, and they are consumed with greed. They are partners with thieves.

These men did not love mercy, they loved a bribe. They did not run after the fatherless to help and protect. They ran after gifts that would end up in their house. The cause of this did not even enter into their hearing because the widow did not have any money to give as the bribe to get into the courtroom. There was all of this materialistic greed which really is at the heart of idolatry. We see all of this happening.

I was thinking about another movie. This text says that they love a bribe. One of the movies that I did see in my childhood was called *Vacation* with Chevy Chase. It's kind of racy so I don't think I can recommend it to you. Chevy Chase played a man named Clark W. Griswold. There is a scene in the movie where he drove his station wagon off the road into the desert.

Making a long story short, the station wagon was totally thrashed. They found a garage that had a mechanic and was the only auto shop within hundreds miles. The mechanics barely got the station wagon running. Then it was time for Clark W. Griswold to pay up. He pulled out his wallet and asked how much he owed.

The mechanic stopped, looked at Griswold, and asked, "How much do you got?" And Clark W. Griswold responded, "What do you mean, how much do I got? How much do I owe you?" So the mechanic wanted to take Griswold for all that he had. Then Griswold responded, "Absolutely not! I am going to call the authorities." Then the mechanic's partner pulled out his wallet and showed his badge. He was the authority!

That is what was going on right here. There was corruption in the authoritative structure of society. And that is what materialism leads to—this love of things. Instead of loving God and using things to bless people, we love things and we use people to get more of them. It was so corrupted.

If this touches a nerve with us and touches our sense of righteous indignation, how much more the Living God who is holy, holy, holy? Now we can look at all of this and say, "Shame on those reprehensible people." But let's understand that this is what is living in us all. We have all had this kind of greed and the tendency of using people to get what we want in our lives. This was just filling the city of Jerusalem; filling the City of Peace. It had become a place of greed and violence.

So we continue and see how Isaiah sought to bring us to repentance. We see next,

## 2. The LORD's personal intervention (1:24-26)

We see the Lord's personal intervention upon all that He was seeing in Jerusalem. This next oracle begins with these words:

**<sup>24</sup>Therefore the Lord declares,  
the LORD of hosts,  
the Mighty One of Israel:  
“Ah, I will get relief from my enemies  
and avenge myself on the foes.**

Now we see Isaiah mounting divine titles on top of each other. He is the Lord Adoni, which means sovereign. He is Yahweh, the covenant God who dispatches angelic armies. He is the Mighty One of Israel, and here we are being reminded that God is God and God has been God. He always will be God, and even if God is being patient with sinners, nobody is getting away with anything. “I will get relief from my enemies,” that building sense of indignation will be released. The wrath of God is coming. This is taught all throughout the span of Scripture.

Mingled with this sober warning, there is also grace.

**<sup>25</sup>I will turn my hand against you  
and will smelt away your dross as with lye  
and remove all your alloy.**

So this process of judgment and purification is coming, and the Lord will personally carry it out with His own hand. God is declaring here His intent to refine His people in a way that is very similar to the way a precious metal is purged in a smelting pot with the chemical cleansing agent called lye.

I read about this in the Life Application Bible. This process, it says, involves melting the metal in the skimming of the impure dross. It is the skimming and skimming of the impurities until the worker can see his own image in the liquid metal. So it is this process of refining that the Lord is speaking of in the context of Old Testament Judah. This had in view that Babylonian captivity that was to come.

But the Lord was making this declaration here that is awesome. He was saying, “Even in the midst of all of the impurities of this city, I have industrial strength cleansing agents to take you through. In the end, all of the idolatry will be wiped away. All of the false leaders who will not repent will be removed.”

**<sup>26</sup>And I will restore your judges as at the first,  
and your counselors as at the beginning.  
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,  
the faithful city.”**

So what we see is that there is the work of redemption and purification that the Lord is going to carry out. God will bring judgment on the heads of some and He will bring a process of purification to others but through this process of repentance and renewal and judgment, the city will be born again.

With the language here in Verse 26, we see how the portion of Scripture we have been in thus far has gone full circle, because in Verse 21 it was the faithful city that became a whore that is a faithful city once again, truly and deeply.

Here in Verse 26, that word *afterward* is important.

**<sup>26</sup>...Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness**

Here through the prophet Isaiah, the Holy Spirit is drawing the camera lens back, giving us a wide panoramic scope. When he said this, this looks back to all of the disasters of Old Testament Israel and it looks through even the failures of the church in the New Testament. It also looks forward to the vision that God is working out, where Jerusalem, the abode of God and His people, will truly and deeply be a faithful city.

This is going culminate first in the one-thousand-year millennial reign of Jesus Christ. That is what I believe as far as my eschatology goes. It is that King Jesus is going reign on this earth as the victorious last Adam, undoing everything the first Adam caused. And this earth is going to blossom and we are going to live in Edenic conditions here on earth, centered in Jerusalem where Christ Jesus is going reign. Those redeemed by Jesus will reign with Him.

However, that is just like the honeymoon because what we see in Revelation Chapters 21 and 22, is that the eternal state is going to come and there is going to be a new heaven and a new earth and at the center of it all, there is going to be the new Jerusalem, totally purified and transformed; truly and deeply the City of Shalom. Do you hear it in the title? Jeru-shalom!

So this is the picture that is being laid out in this prophetic vision. Now, each succeeding generation must take heed to:

### **3. The prophet's gracious warning (1:27-31)**

It is a warning and it is bold and it is confrontational, but there is grace. May the Spirit of God give us ears to hear and hearts to receive, for it says:

**<sup>27</sup>Zion shall be redeemed by justice,  
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.  
<sup>28</sup>But rebels and sinners shall be broken together,  
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.**

Consumed with what? Consumed with fire. From here the prophet went from Verses 29 through 31 to describe the fire hazard of unrepentant idolatry and sin. This passage goes on to

depict those places of idolatrous worship, where there were so-called sacred oaks and gardens that were built around idols—these places that the people desired and chosen.

**<sup>29</sup>For they shall be ashamed of the oaks  
that you desired;  
and you shall blush for the gardens  
that you have chosen.**

As I read this, I see that we are all eventually going to come a place where we blush about our idolatrous desires. That will either happen through contrition in the process of repentance, or it will come at the time of judgement. But that time will come.

This passage goes on to compare those who worshipped under the oaks as oaks themselves. Each person practicing idolatry. Each person not being in the place where they are calling upon the Lord for forgiveness and new life; where they are persisting stubbornly in their sin. Those practicing it will be like a dead oak receiving no hydration, no living water. We see it here in Verses 30 and 31:

**<sup>30</sup>For you shall be like an oak  
whose leaf withers,  
and like a garden without water.**

The leaves wither like a dried up old garden and the practice of idolatry and ongoing unrepentant sin ultimately is going to be the match that will set it all ablaze.

**<sup>31</sup>And the strong shall become tinder,  
and his work a spark,  
and both of them shall burn together,  
with none to quench them.**

Did you notice that through the prophet, a warning was being issued? And through the pages of Scripture, it is certain that Hell exists, with all of the same certainty that Heaven does.

So, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, for the name Isaiah which is akin to the name Yeshua, which means the Lord saves. Back to the heart of this passage:

**<sup>27</sup>Zion shall be redeemed by justice,  
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.**

Understand that repentance is the intimate companion of faith. It is the work of the Holy Spirit bringing us to humility about our sin. And it is a change of heart that leads to a change of direction—a turning to the Lord from sin and self-righteousness to the only one who can save, the Lord.

To those who repent:

**<sup>27</sup>Zion shall be redeemed by justice,  
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.**

This brings us to an important question. By what righteousness are we going to be redeemed? This verse says that we are going to be redeemed by righteousness.

Now, brothers and sisters, I have assurance in my heart that by the Spirit, I am man redeemed. But I'm not redeemed by my righteousness. I can tell you that right now. Is it by my righteousness that I am going to be redeemed, or is it by your righteousness that you are going to be redeemed?

Later in this book, Isaiah famously appraised the righteous deeds even of God's people. He even drew in some of the language of the passage we just read. Isaiah Chapter 64 and Verse 6:

**<sup>6</sup>We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.**

So there is an appraisal of our righteousness. Our righteousness is like a polluted garment. So bring them all together, behold the righteousness of the people of God is a big old pile of garments that are stained and soiled by human discharge of various sorts. That is what is in view here.

Praise God that the Spirit is at work within us, but so often there is still so much self in the things that we do to serve. It is not by our own righteousness that we are going to be redeemed. We don't redeem ourselves. But Verse 27 says:

**<sup>27</sup>Zion shall be redeemed by justice,  
and those in her who repent, by righteousness**

We need to repent of our own self-righteousness and turn to the one who is righteous. And praise God, there is a righteous one spoken of in Isaiah. His name is Yeshua. He is the Messiah. He is the true Israel. He is the true servant of God, described in vivid detail throughout this book, and in that sacred 53<sup>rd</sup> Chapter, His atonement is described where He is shedding His blood and pierced and a sacrifice for the sins of His people.

In this chapter as the saving grace of Jesus beckons the bride into His favor at His expense, we see these words. Isaiah Chapter 53 and Verse 11:

**<sup>11</sup>Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,  
make many to be accounted righteous,  
and he shall bear their iniquities.**

So joined to the doctrine of redemption, which is the people God being purchased out of dire circumstances, even in the Old Testament it is joined to its comrade and close friend in the doctrine of salvation, which is justification—sinners being declared righteousness by the righteous gift of another.

So in real life, we sin our way into bondage and condemnation. We create the condition where we literally deserved judgment and Hell, but what did the Lord do? He came to get us out of our trouble at His own expense. He came in Christ to absorb within Himself the consequences that our sin set in motion.

Christ was hung on a tree, crucified after living a perfect life of holiness and love. There He was nailed to the cross for His beloved; for His bride; for the prodigal bride that we heard about in recent weeks, to wash them, to cleanse them, to pay the price for His church's redemption, to bring us into the fullness of His grace and to bring us into an everlasting state in an eternal City of Peace, where we totally belong. Where we totally fit in. Where we are positioned rightly, because Jesus cleanses us through and through by His blood.

Jesus covers us in His righteous gift. He produces repentance in us. He helps us to see the beauty of life as God has designed it to be. We grow in this throughout this life because once we are purchased by Him, we belong to Him, brothers and sisters. He helps us to grow in His ways and someday He is going to come back to this earth and the mortal body that you are struggling with now that is still infected by sin even as one forgiven, it is going to be replaced with a new, permanent, everlasting, indestructible, glorious body like the body of the Risen Redeemer.

We will be raised to life redeemed to never, ever sin again, and living forevermore in the perfect City of Peace. This is what Jesus does for us. The Lord saves. That might end up being the conclusion to all of these sermons. The Lord saves!

Let's pray.