

Title: “Decidedly bitter, deliciously sweet”

Purpose: To see the wonderful gospel emerge at the heart of a bitter courtroom scene where God’s people are accused and found guilty of terrible rebellion AND YET where we see the surprising sweetness of the gospel coming through due to the loving Father-heart of God

- Something decidedly BITTER
- Something surprisingly & wonderfully SWEET

Introduction

It was just 18 months back that **Adam Cudworth**, an enterprising 19 year old (**here he is**)- *****SHOW***** bought a £30 camera off ebay up and sent it 110,000 feet up toward the edge of space and took some pretty **stunning photographs**.

Here is just one that he captured showing the earth from space***** SHOW *****

Q. Why so worthwhile? Amazing vantage point

And what makes this sort of project so worthwhile is the immense reward that you get from such an amazing vantage point. The photographs are stunning, the perspective is truly so unique. it quite blows you away!

Now when it comes to taking snapshots *not* of the earth’s terrain but of the ENTIRE BIBLICAL TERRAIN:

- Q. Where can we go to do something similar?
- Q. Is there any place where we can plant our feet and survey the whole sweep of God’s purposes all at the same time?

Well, I think we can answer in the affirmative – and that place, that vantage point is right here before us in the book that we are commencing to study this morning - this very book of ISAIAH.

It is – a vision – that is the opening word on the scroll – “Khaz-own Yeshah-yahu Ben Amotz” – and this word VISION meant something essentially divine.

This word (khaz-own) turns up 35 times in the OT and its first use is at the start of 1 Samuel, there in the time of that old priest Eli – and we read:

(1 Sam 3v1) “In those days **the word of the LORD** was rare; there were not many visions.”

And this is what we are being treated to here throughout this long book. There is nothing which equals or even comes close to getting God’s viewpoint, his verdict on things from where He sees things.

Whetting your appetite

Let me just whet your appetite a little regarding this book of Isaiah, without going into too much detail – and I’ll give you 3 quotes relating to this book of Isaiah and just why it is an amazing book to read:

- “In many ways the book of Isaiah is the Bible in miniature. Like the Bible, the book has two major divisions, and like the Bible the main theme of the first part is judgment and the main theme of the second is hope. Beyond this, all the main themes of the Bible can be found in Isaiah.” (John N Oswalt – NIV application commentary introduction)

And this is a quite remarkable thing – Isaiah is clearly in 2 parts (partly because of these 2 clear parts, some have suggested that there were 2 Isaiahs – a proto Isaiah and then a deutero Isaiah) and the first part is 39 chapters (the same no of books that are in the OT) and then 27 in part 2 (the same number as in the NT) and the 2nd part starts with that great saying: “A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; ...” and that of course is where the GOSPELS kick-off with John the Baptist. And where does Isaiah end – well with: “the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me ... all mankind will come and bow down before me...” and this is so very reminiscent of how Revelation ends up as well.

You can see that this is hardly accidental in the whole scheme of God’s construction of Holy Scripture.

- “As for majesty – Isaiah has often been called “The Romans of the OT” – because like Romans it sets forth the case against sinners, unveils the wretchedness of the human heart and then wonderfully charts the way of salvation for Israel and for the whole world.”
- “What Beethoven is in the realm of music, what Shakespeare is in the realm of literature, what Spurgeon was among the Victorian preachers, THAT is Isaiah among the prophets. As a writer he transcends all his prophet peers; and it is fitting that he should stand at the head of the 17 prophetic books.” (Sidlow Baxter)
- “For majesty and versatility of expression as well as for brilliancy of imagery this prophet has no equal. In his book are to be found the most tender pleadings, the most vivid portrayals, the most touching parables, the most profound visions, the most startling prophecies, the most jubilant psalms of praise, the most graphic predictions of woe, the most cheering consolations, the most complete delineations of the coming, suffering, and the subsequent glory of the Messiah.” (Hendriksen)

I can truly say that I know that with Isaiah laid out on the table – we are laid up for of feast of God’s making.

Back down to earth

Well we have taken just a few moments to let ourselves get carried away to the heights – but we must come down to earth and let me do so giving you some things that we need to know from the opening verse.

Starting out – Verse 1

We have already spoken about this word VISION – and that is something very divine.

Who was this man Isaiah – because God chooses to reveal himself through real people most of the time – his name is Isaiah – which means something like: “The LORD is Salvation” – so a very apt name for someone who God is going to use to give a great vision of the GOSPEL there at the heart of the OT.

He was someone who was well educated and may even have been related to the Royal family. He lived in Jerusalem and ministered in the main to the Southern Kingdom.

We are told the scope of his ministry covering 4 different kings as listed: Uzziah (who is also called Azariah), Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. And from this we know that he was ministering in the second half of the 8th Century BC so approx.. 740 BC onwards.

And perhaps it is just worth saying that this was just at the point where a period of prosperity was going to move into a time of great austerity and political upheaval.

So not altogether very different from our own day.

Ok with that by way of introduction – let’s get right into our text:

A courtroom v2-3

Directly after this single verse introduction we really hit the ground running with some pretty powerful stuff:

Verses 2&3 “Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the Lord has spoken:

“I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”

Heaven and **earth** are being summoned to do **jury service** – it is a courtroom where **witnesses** are appropriate.

Reminder of Genesis

I couldn’t help but be reminded of how the Bible itself starts there in **Genesis chapter 1** and where we have God who speaks in a situation of CHAOS and bring ORDER to it:

(v3) “And God said: ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

Authoritative – undiluted “God-speak”

This opening in Isaiah has that same very authoritative voice sounding out – and there is something both **scary** AND (I think) very **exciting** about that.

We will be treated in Isaiah to a lot of “God speak” – unabridged and undiluted – the real thing – and I for one want to cultivate that reflex response to God such that I tremble at His word.

I don’t know whether I’m allowed to peak into the very last chapter of Isaiah – but there again God is talking once again about heaven and earth (I’ll read Verses 1&2):

(Isaiah 66v1-2) “This is what the Lord says: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is

the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the Lord. "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and **trembles at my word.**"

And as we commence these morning preaching through the first of the major prophets – Isaiah – I know that we will be taken to the heights and I pray that we will all tremble as we let God's word do its work.

Reminder of Deuteronomy

Now I said that this opening bit did remind me of **Genesis** but it also reminds me even more closely of a section there in **Deuteronomy chapter 30**. Let me read **Verses 19&20**:

(Deuteronomy 30v19-20) "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you **life and death, blessings and curses**. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

Q. What was it that God had set before them through his servant Moses?

Well the verses just prior to God calling heaven and earth to be witnesses, goes like this:

(Verses 16-18) "For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to **walk in his ways**, and to **keep his commands, decrees and laws**; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. **But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.**"

A calling to account

And so now God is calling his people to account. This is a day of reckoning where God as Judge is going to lay out the case.

And very clearly we see that there is a lot of pain and anguish.

Parents and the pain they feel

For those of us who are parents we long to see our children doing well. And for those of us who are Christian parents our greatest desire is that our children will follow us in our Christian faith and that they will turn out well, that they will be strong believers in their own right.

And I know that just mentioning this can bring much sadness in people's hearts because they know that perhaps one or more of their children are not walking well – in fact they may not be walking at all with the Lord and this is painful.

I guess it serves as a small amount of comfort to know that God Himself – the perfect parent – has children that are wayward – and that is what we see here.

Our structure

Let me explain where we are going from here this morning – and hopefully we will keep this pretty

simple.

I have just two points:

- POINT #1 – focuses on that which is: “**decidedly BITTER**”
- the SECOND POINT – moves across to something which is: “**surprisingly & wonderfully SWEET**”

So that’s where we’re going - #1 then:

1] Something “decidedly BITTER”

Something incredibly painful

Here in this courtroom scene the LORD brings out the first of **two charges**:

(Verse 2&3) “I reared children and brought them up, but they have **rebelled** against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”

Brute animals, beasts of burden – they know who their master is – and yet my people who I have nurtured and brought up and cared for they do not know me.

The opening charge is one of **REBELLION** - **Verse 4** fills it out:

Verse 4 “Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have **forsaken** the Lord; they have **spurned** the Holy One of Israel **and turned their backs** on him. “

Stubborn – gone their own way

The ox and the donkey are known for being pretty stubborn when they want to be but here God’s children are the ones who are very unfavourably compared to them – they are the ones that have, as an act of will, decided to go their own way.

They do not wish to accept the **AUTHORITY** of the Holy One of Israel, the One who chose them, redeemed them, gave them a land and made them a people, His people.

The problem of allegiance

Notice the title used for God in **Verse 4** – “The Holy One of Israel” – it is a very significant title – it is only used 30 times in the OT and 25 of these are in Isaiah, so you can see that this forms some sort of emphasis in Isaiah.

The fact that He is Holy, has an important ramification for all of His people and that is that we too must reflect that. We must show His character to the nations around us and in this way we are, if you like, Salt and Light and people from all other nations will be attracted to the LORD.

The problem is that very often we do not like to fall in line with God and His demands. We shrink back at His demands that we must submit to Him. We want to live our own lives without reference, without submission to Him – **we want to be FREE AGENTS** in virtually all departments of our lives.

To give this something of a NT ring to it – Paul says in his letter to the Colossians:

(Col 2v6) “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him...”

When we came to faith we received Christ Jesus – and we would no doubt openly acknowledge that we received him as Saviour – yes he saved me from my sins.

BUT and here is the problem:

- Q. Did we also accept Him as Lord?
- Q. Has He really got AUTHORITY over us such that we subject ourselves now to Him and pay Him our full allegiance?

For these Israelites God says: “you have rebelled, you have turned your backs on me, you have spurned me!!”.

- You might say: Q. Well how can I know?

Q. Are you functionally calling the shots in your life OR is God functionally calling the shots?

We must not kid ourselves at this point – because you know GOD IS *NOT* TO BE MOCKED – he knows the extent to which you are *ENTIRELY SUBMITTED TO HIS BIDDING*

- where you live
- where you work, the career that you follow
- the level of obedience that you operate on – especially for all the commands of God that don't suit your taste or fit your personal agenda
- the standard of living that YOU decide is the minimum that you would ACCEPT as OK!

Let us *not* kid ourselves about calling Christ Lord – this is territory where the rubber hits the road, where God separates one from another, there are many for whom Jesus is Saviour only BUT CERTAINLY *NOT* LORD!! – **Saviour & Lover YES – Saviour & Lord NO!!**

How painful God finds this

Just try and imagine how painful this is for God to have his very own children in the dock before him.

And that pain is not merely the pain of rejection that God feels (even after all that He has done for them).

But **Verses 5-9** show us that some of that pain is coming from watching them hurt themselves over and over again.

A boxer punch drunk ***** Psalm 51 the bones you have crushed *****

It is like watching a boxer who is punch drunk but who is still carrying on getting blow after painful blow.

They have brought down on their heads such a lot of punishment (as God had clearly warned them) that only God's mercy has prevented them ending up as Sodom and Gomorrah (cities that were completely wiped out).

Sodom, Gomorrah theme continued

The Sodom & Gomorrah theme is taken on a stage further from **Verse 10** onwards where this title is sarcastically applied to them and where we learn that they are doing something just as utterly offensive as these 2 notorious cities.

They are engaging in heaps and heaps of religious activity!!

You would think that religion is what God wants.

Q. Surely God is pleased when I come to church isn't He?

Well that depends – what matters to God is not that we put on a really good religious show. We can all do that pretty easily can't we.

We get our mask out of the wardrobe on a Sunday morning, get out our smiles and of course we can smile on a Sunday morning, because once we've done our dues, we can come back home, have a slap-up lunch AND here's the wonderful thing – the rest of the week is ours to do whatever we like with!!

The letter of James in the NT expresses this pretty accurately – and it really fits the pattern here very closely:

James 1v27 "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. "

We are not left in any doubt as to how God feels about their religious performances:

(Verse 11-14) ""The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; **I have no pleasure** in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, **this trampling of my courts?** Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is **detestable to me.**

New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— **I cannot bear your evil assemblies.** Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become **a burden to me; I am weary** of bearing them."

It really does make you stop and think about what we do in our "religious observances" – are they just ritual, are they just a sign of a deep rebellion within – a refusal to bow our lives before the Holy One of Israel.

Very bitter

So as you can see the court case it a pretty ugly one and God is bringing serious charges – I did say there were **essentially two charges**:

The second one comes out in **Verses 21 and following** where we have a lament – let me read to **Verse 23**:

(Verses 21-23) "See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness

used to dwell in her— but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case does not come before them.”

A time of affluence

As I indicated at the beginning, just prior to Isaiah starting his ministry – during the reign of King Uzziah, who was in many ways a very good king (but who lost his way at the end and finished off his final years with leprosy), Israel had known a time of prosperity.

There had been a power vacuum and so in that brief moment of political respite on the world stage Israel had made good and had strengthened its own position.

Of course times of prosperity can be very revealing – and for God’s people this had not shown them at their best – in fact they had PUT A PRICE ON JUSTICE – you could buy the decisions that the judges would give – everyone had their price.

(The prophet Amos – a contemporary of Isaiah – has this theme of widespread **INJUSTICE** as one of the **KEYNOTES** of his book).

And so God now calls them **HARLOTS** – they are those who are being **TOTALLY UNFAITHFUL**.

Justice is something that is institutionally close to God’s heart – as Jeremiah says (9v24):

“...let him who boasts boast about this: that he **understands and knows me**, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, **justice** and righteousness on earth, **for in these I delight**,...”

So I think that we can see BOTH:

- how dire is the judgement that comes from the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, the Righteous Judge against his people
- AND the great PAIN that God feels for them

And it is right here that we come across something very surprising and really wonderful:

#1 then – Something “decidedly BITTER”

but now:

2] Something “surprisingly and wonderfully SWEET” (Verses 18-20)

And we are looking at these 3 verses from 18 through to 20 - let me read them:

Isaiah 1 Verses 18-20 “Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” **For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.**”

Sudden change of tone (v18)

To be honest you really wouldn't expect this sudden change of tone at **Verse 18**. God has authoritatively summonsed them – they have received from the Almighty Judge the official **subpoena** telling them to attend the High Court.

And then they have been judged and found guilty on two counts of REBELLION.

And just as they all stand to hear the summing up and to receive the sentencing – they hear they are dumbfounded by these opening words:

“COME NOW LET US REASON TOGETHER...”

One of the things we find time and again in Isaiah is that even though there is CLEAR SIN and APPROPRIATE JUDGEMENT – there is always another voice that will emerge, a voice that speaks of HOPE.

Notice here how it is a certain hope, one that is in the future:

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

There is no maybe, or possibly about it:

- YES – your sins are scarlet, YES they are red as crimson
- BUT – they will be white as snow, THEY will be like wool

Q. Have you ever wondered why it is scarlet, red and crimson? Q. Why not black?

I don't think for a moment that this is merely accidental:

- THINK OF – the red heifer for example in Numbers chapter 19 – this was the animal whose ashes were used for the special water of cleansing
- THINK OF – the scarlet wool that was to be thrown onto that whole burnt offering (which was to be uniquely conducted outside the camp) of the special red heifer

Right away, before even we have got out of the first chapter of Isaiah we are getting our first glimpse of the Messiah – the one who is to come who will make this UNLIKELY TRANSFORMATION – A REALITY.

Against the background of sin, rebellion and of a Holy God, a Righteous Judge – we have hear the IMPASSIONED PLEA of a FATHER, he comes to reason with them – there is a tangible anguish in all of this – you hear the word WHY? repeated again and again – rather like we get in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel – same appeal again

We have a Heavenly Father whose love is so deep and which cannot be quenched or erased that even further down the line – he speaks these words through Ezekiel (and I'm sure you'll see how similar they are, how much anguish there is):

Ezekiel 18 verse 30-32 “Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you

die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!”

Personal appeal

Q. Is God appealing in the same way with you right now?

Maybe you are coming under the conviction of sin and you are sitting there not so very comfortable – God is nailing you – it’s nothing that other people are aware of – but YOU KNOW IT – and HE KNOWS IT.

AND – not only that - He is letting you know that this appeal has got your very name written alongside it in the margin of God’s bible.

You are beaten up!

The truth is (and nobody else perhaps is awfully aware of this) that you and your life is somewhat beaten up, you are bruised and battered, you have open sores from your wilful walking before and largely away from God.

Why! Says God Why! – It makes no sense.

The OPTIONS

And Verse 19 & 20 give us the options – and there are two:

- FIRST – “if you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land...”

That is my promise –says the Lord – I guarantee it – it’s what I said before, it’s what I’ve said all along – and it is still true, right now.

Take it – trust me!

- SECOND OPTION (v20) – “but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.”

It’s the old old story – as it was from the mouth of Moses

Deuteronomy 30 verses 15&16 “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.”

The Lord has spoken – x7 in Isaiah

Seven times we have this “Imperial phrase” – “The LORD has spoken”

And in this opening chapter it comes twice:

Verse 2 “Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.”

(v4) “ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt...”

AND THEN AGAIN at the end of this remarkable expression of the GOSPEL HEART OF OUR GOD – (and that’s why we have called this morning series: “The GOSPEL according to Isaiah”) – we have the same DEFINITIVE and AUTHORITATIVE expression – **“For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”**

CONCLUSION

The question this morning is Q. Which pill will you take?

- ONE is truly bitter – and you know the reason we keep taking it is because we sugar-coat it will “empty religion”.

Q. Does that sound like you?

- ONE is truly sweet – and it comes as that invitation “Come now, let us reason together says the LORD...”

Jesus’ blood has perfectly matched the crimson of your sin.

He is the spotless Lamb of God whose white wool was shorn for your perfect covering.

BITTER or SWEET – take His invitation & let your reason fall in line with His – to His glory and your good.
AMEN