

A Spiritual Health Check-up

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, good evening, folks. My name is Archie. For those of you who don't know me, I am one of the ministry trainees here. Can I encourage you to get your Bibles back open? We're going to read the second half of Isaiah chapter 1 from verse 18.
- Isaiah chapter 1 from verse 18. Come now, let us settle the matter, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow.
- Though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land. But if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.
- For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. See how the faithful city has become a prostitute? 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, partners with thieves.
- [1 : 0 9] 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. Therefore, the Lord, the Lord Almighty, the mighty one of Israel declares, I will vent my wrath on my foes and avenge myself on my enemies.
- I will turn my hand against you. I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. I will restore your leaders as in days of old, your rulers as at the beginning.
- Afterwards, you will be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion will be delivered with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness. But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the Lord will perish.
- You will be ashamed because of the sacred oaks in which you have delighted. You will be disgraced because of the gardens that you have chosen. You will be like an oak with fading leaves, like a garden without water.
- The mighty man will become tender, and his word a spark. Both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire.
- [2 : 3 0] Can I encourage you to keep that passage open? It's quite a long one. We're going to be jumping around quite a lot, so please do keep it open. I think that will help you.
- But for now, let's pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you this evening.
- Amen. You know, when you go to the doctor, I'm sure all of us at some point or another have had a checkup with the doctor.
- Imagine with me arriving for your checkup. You feel completely healthy. In fact, you've never felt better. To be honest, you don't really feel like you should be at the doctor at all.
- The doctor makes all her routine checks, does a couple of tests, and then she asks you to wait in the reception room for your results. In a similar sort of way, this chapter of God's word is sort of like a spiritual health checkup.

[3 : 37] And the people of Judah were heading into this spiritual health checkup as God's people, as his special possession. They thought that they were totally healthy.

But here's the question that Isaiah is asking of the people of Judah in this chapter. Are they as healthy as they think they are?

Are they really good with God? Imagine with me half an hour later, the doctor calls you back in and she has this awful, worried look on her face.

She sits you down and she lists this unimaginable cacophony of ailments. You have, she says, multiple cancers, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis.

Your kidneys are failing. And haven't you noticed that awful, massive, infected cut on your left leg? The people of Judah thought that they were totally good with God.

[4 : 42] But this chapter contains a deeply worrying diagnosis. And as we begin a new year, as we begin this series in this book, it is a brilliant question for us to ask ourselves too.

Are we good with God? If you're a Christian watching this this evening, then you know that you are God's child. You know the identity that Christ has won for you, utterly forgiven, invited into a loving relationship with your heavenly father.

But are we really good with God? Let's set the scene then. Have a look at verse one with me. The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

Immediate question. Where are we in Bible history here? Well, we're after Abraham. We're after Moses. We're after David. And it's after the kingdom of Israel has been divided into two.

There's the northern kingdom with its capital in Samaria. But Isaiah is writing to the southern kingdom here, the kingdom of Judah with its capital in Jerusalem.

[5 : 55] This is the part of the kingdom that remained loyal to David's line and to the promises that God had made to his people through David.

Promises that a rescuer would come through this royal line. This is the world that Isaiah is writing into for about 50 years, Isaiah writes, around the year 700 BC.

Let's get into this world then. Still in verse one. This book is a vision during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

What might it have been like to live in Judah at this time? Well, I want you to imagine with me living in a world of perfect peace and prosperity.

A world where wars have been fought and political divisions and unions have been made. A world where everything in history seems to lead up to this nation living in this place in perfect peace and prosperity.

[7 : 01] In some ways, that might not be that hard for us to imagine. We do, in fact, live in a world and a country not unlike that today. And that was a bit like the experience for those living under the reigns of Uzziah and Jotham, these first two kings.

These kings are described in 2 Chronicles chapters 26 and 27 as good kings. Not perfect, but pretty good. And theirs is a peaceful and prosperous world.

Now I want you to imagine living in a world where there is constant warfare. Constant allegiances being forged. Constant fear of being conquered.

I suppose in some ways that fear of destruction and constant pessimism, well, it might not be a million miles away from the year that we have just had. And Judah under Ahaz and Hezekiah was a bit like that.

Terrified of an increasingly imminent threat from an Assyrian empire's war machine. And Ahaz was a terrible king. The Hezekiah wasn't much better.

- [8 : 11] And so in the background of this book is this big question. In the peacetime or under the pressures of war, where are these people going to put their faith?
- Will they put their faith in themselves? In the nations and gods around them? Or will they put their faith in the covenant God who has made promises to and through them?
- The first five chapters of this book then, we get a sort of general prophetic pronouncement of where Judah stands spiritually and where they are headed physically under these four kings.
- And it's not pretty. It doesn't look as though they are going to be good with God. Have a look for a picture of that with me at verse 6 of chapter 1.
- From the sole of your foot to the top of your head. In other words, in all of you, there is no soundness, only wounds and bruises and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil.
- [9 : 28] This is not a positive diagnosis. They are seriously injured and without first aid. No hope of healing. They've had their checkup with the doctor.
- The results are in and it really doesn't look good. If you read on in verse 7, they are totally destroyed by foreign nations.
- And then in verse 8, daughter Zion, that is Jerusalem, is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city under siege.
- This is all that's left, like a ramshackle shed left in the middle of a field, unsteady, insecure, swaying dangerously in the wind.
- And this is the promised land. This is the covenant blessing from God. And now it lies in ruins. This is where they are spiritually.
- [10 : 30] And this is where they are headed physically. God, through Isaiah, is saying to Judah, check yourself. Are you good with God?
- And I think it's really easy for us, isn't it, to look back on them and think, how stupid. These were God's covenant people. They had been promised that they would be God's people, in God's place, under God's rule and his blessing.
- And that is exactly what they are. And yet still they have turned their back on him. How stupid. But I wonder, if someone was to look back on us, God's people in this particular place and time, what diagnosis would they give?
- For the people of Judah, Isaiah gives two devastating diagnoses that we'll see in this chapter. Broken relationship and broken religion.
- But he also prescribes the remedy. A brilliant restoration. So let's begin by examining those diagnoses. Here's the first, the broken relationship.
- [11 : 48] Three different pictures God uses to describe the brokenness of this relationship. The first, have a look with me in verse two. I reared the children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.
- I went through a bit of a rebellious stage as a teenager. I liked to do precisely the things that I knew my parents did not want me doing. I'm sure many of us went through a phase like that.
- If not, maybe a friend or a sibling who did. But what is being described in this verse, this is not that. The sort of rebellion described here, it's not a phase.
- It's more of an, I wish you were dead. A wholehearted walking away. The second picture of this broken relationship comes in verse three.
- Have a look at verse three with me. The ox knows its master. The donkey, its owner's manger. Even the obstinate ox knows who he belongs to.

[12 : 55] Even the daft donkey knows the hand that feeds him. But God says still in verse three, Israel does not know. My people do not understand.

These people no longer know or understand the God who created them. The third picture then comes a little later in the chapter.

Verse 21. Come to verse 21 with me. See how the faithful city has become a prostitute. Jerusalem has become like a woman selling sex on the street corner.

She has abandoned her husband in search of someone new. And the people have abandoned their God and gone after other gods in his place.

And do you see the result? Still in verse 21. She was full of justice. Righteousness used to dwell in her. But now murderers.

[13 : 59] And at the end of verse 23. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless. The widow's case does not come before them. Where once there was justice rooted in love.

There is now murder rooted in hatred. Their rulers have become rebels, thieves and lovers of money.

The most vulnerable in their society. The orphans and the widows have been totally neglected. It's the sort of behavior summed up back in verse four.

Sin, guilt, evil and corruption. This is the result of their turning their backs on him. The result of that broken relationship.

This is a people who had all the privileges of being God's chosen nation. And individually and corporately, they have turned away from him.

[15 : 03] And when hearts turn away, behavior is never far behind. Their rejection of God has led to this slow drift into personal sin and societal injustice.

And now, we are not Judah. This chapter, it was not written to us. But it is God's word. There is no doubt that it was written for us.

And God has not changed. God is still faithful to his covenant promises that have been graciously extended to us in Christ.

And human nature has not changed either. We are still prone to turn away from him. So we too can take this opportunity to ask, are we really good with God?

How's your relationship with him? When's the last time you prayed to him? Do you desire to grow more like Jesus every day?

[16 : 15] Or have you made peace with some sin in your life? Are you excited about salvation, about what it means for you? And are you looking for opportunities to share that good news with those around you?

Are you hungry to hear from God through his word? Do you seek to uphold godly justice in your life, in our community and in the world around us?

Do you know the comfort, conviction and closeness of the Holy Spirit in your life? See, when our hearts begin to turn away from God, it is not long before these things begin to follow.

But it is with hearts turning to him that we start to desire to see growth and that we see fruit in our lives. So, are we turned away or turned towards tonight?

Are we good with God? Let's turn then to the second diagnosis from Isaiah. Broken religion.

[17 : 30] In verses 11 to 15. Have a look there with me. Did you notice in those verses, they're doing all the right things?

Sacrifices, burnt offerings, religious feasts on all the right days, praying and with hands raised. Aren't these exactly the sorts of things that God has asked of his people?

And yet, do you see what God says about this religion? What are they to me? I have more than enough. I have no pleasure. I cannot bear.

I hate. I am weary. I hide my eyes from you. God wants nothing to do with this broken religion. Yeah, they're doing all the right things.

But their hearts are far from him. See, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament was supposed to be rooted in faith. The sacrifice is only meant to point to what God was going to do.

[18 : 37] They were not a means of rescue in themselves. And his people were offering the sacrifices without faith in the promises.

And more than that. And the key here, I think, is at the end of verse 13. Have a look at that with me. It says, I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.

I think the ESV translates this really helpfully. It says, I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. In other words, I cannot deal with your hypocrisy.

I have had enough of you swanning into my temple and doing all the things and yet living lives of iniquity, of sinful immorality. Have a look at verse 15.

I think verse 15 says something similar. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I'm not listening because your hands are full of blood.

[19 : 38] You are hypocrites, making a show of prayer while carrying the guilt of sin stains on your hands. Do you know, we get that word hypocrites from the ancient Greeks.

It's what they used to call actors because actors used to wear these masks on stage. And then it came to mean basically pretending to be someone that you're not.

And that's what God hates. Hypocrisy, pretending to be good with God. That is broken religion. And so what are we saying?

Is church bad if you're not on fire for God? Should you avoid it if you're not perfect? Well, I think these verses speak quite particularly into our time today.

When church has gone online, when we can do church from the comfort of our own living room. There is, I am sure, a danger that our congregational worship becomes more and more the consumption of a performance and less and less a community of people seeking to worship God together in faith.

[20 : 51] Now, I know that many of you are watching this from home and long to gather together. I know that it has been desperately hard for many not being able to do that for so long.

And that is exactly how we should feel. For now, we are all at home. But do we long to gather together as a church? Or are we happy sitting at home on the sofa consuming the content?

No different, really, to the Netflix show that's going to come on next. See, you don't need to be perfect to take part in church. But please don't just consume the content to pretend to be something that you're not.

Don't come along simply to mask your sin and your shame. But do engage with church, whether you're a believer or not, because church is not what we do to save ourselves.

It's where we come to see what God has done to save us. And that brings us to the prescribed remedy, to the brilliant restoration.

[22 : 04] See, we've seen the broken relationship and we've seen the broken religion. But here's the big question. What is God going to do about it? He's made all these promises to his people.

Promises through Abraham that they would be a blessed people. Promises through Moses that they would be a holy people. And promises through David that they would be a people with a perfect king.

These are the great covenant promises of God. But his people have turned away from him. What's he going to do? What is he going to do about it? Well, he begins in verse 16 by saying, clean up your act, doesn't he?

In verse 16, repent, turn back to God, seek justice, care for the vulnerable. And this is going to be the evidence of the brilliant restoration. But how is it going to happen?

Well, have a look at verse 18 with me. This is probably one of the most loved verses of Isaiah. Verse 18. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow.

[23 : 11] Though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. I used to live in the countryside. It's where I grew up. And I used to love the snow.

But see, living in the city, well, snow is pretty rubbish here, isn't it? It gets disgusting so quickly, that horrible brown slush at the side of the road. Imagine trying to turn that horrible brown slush back into brilliant powdery white snow.

You couldn't do it, could you? Or have you ever stained a white woolen jumper with raspberry sauce or with red wine? Vanish Oxy Action can spend as much as they like on their ad campaigns.

I am telling you that a proper red stain in a white woolly jumper isn't going anywhere. But that's the promise here. Not through willful obedience and religious observance.

Instead, God says, if you would just turn to me and let me wash you, then you will be clean. White as snow. White as wool.

[24 : 20] See, while the world says that you've got to pay the price for your contribution to sin and injustice, instead, God says grace. He offers us grace.

Free and utterly undeserved restoration. It's brilliant. It's God that's going to do it, not us. But how? How is he going to do it?

Well, have a look at verse 24 with me. I will vent my wrath on my foes and avenge myself on my enemies. I will turn my hand against you.

This is how. See, God is love. It's who he is. And when love meets evil, it responds with perfect wrath.

If you've ever loved your parents, your husband or your wife, your children, then you know what it is to feel this. That red flare inside you as you respond to injustice against those that you love.

[25 : 24] Love without this is not really love at all. But God's love does not result in a fly off the handle in the heat of the moment sort of wrath, but a perfect tempered and calculated wrath with a purpose.

And that purpose is described in the rest of verse 25. Have a look at that with me. Literally, I will take the worthless stone away and leave only the precious.

I will remove those who contribute to evil and injustice. And I will remove the evil and injustice in those who turn to me in repentance and faith.

I will make them clean. But there is more than being made clean in this restoration. In verses 26 to 28, we see where it's all headed.

Really, where the whole story of the Bible ends up. From verse 26, let me read. I will restore your leaders as in days of old, your rulers as at the beginning.

[26 : 40] Afterwards, you will be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion will be delivered with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness.

No longer the prostitute city. No longer a place of injustice and evil. Instead, God is creating something new.

A place of righteousness, where hearts have turned back to him, restored relationship. And a place of faithfulness, a people relying on him and not their own good works.

That is restored religion. A new Jerusalem, where God has made his people good with him. Brilliant restoration. But the question still remains, doesn't it?

How? How is he going to do this? And that question is bubbling away in the background of this entire book. How do we get good with God?

[27 : 44] And the tension continues to wind. And then finally, in chapter 53, the people of Judah are told that the coming servant was pierced for our transgression.

Crushed for our iniquities. That the punishment that brought us peace was on him. And by his wounds, we are healed. God's wrath falling on someone else in their place.

And it was by faith in this promise that Judah's relationship and religion were going to be restored. Faith that God was going to do something new.

And he did do something new. In Jesus, the suffering servant. At the cross is where God's wrath came.

Not with a sword in his hands, but by nails in his hands. See, the gospel is the answer to both the relationship problem and the religion problem.

[28 : 48] It's where we are invited into this relationship with the Father. And free from the empty religion of self-reliance. This is how Paul can describe us as citizens of heaven.

The new Jerusalem. And this is where our own spiritual health checkup has to land. It has to land at the foot of the cross. Are you good with God?

Well, in one very important sense, if you have put your faith in Jesus, then you are good with God. Spiritually, it's as though we've had our checkup with the doctor.

It's as though we've been diagnosed with a huge list of seemingly incurable diseases. Mostly hidden, but some that we can see if we look in the right place. And it doesn't look good.

But the doctor says, trust me. I have the remedy. It's a bit like that because God offers grace and mercy in the face of our sin.

[29 : 52] An offer to anyone who will come to him and seek to live in relational righteousness through Jesus. And can I just say, if you're still watching this, if you've made it this far and you're not a Christian, there is a wonderful promise here.

That though we, like Judah, have walked away from the God of this universe, he came to earth as a human being, lived an absolutely unique life, died an awful death on a cross, and three days later smashed the grave to pieces and came back to life.

And he did that so that people like you and like me, though we had turned away from him, might be invited to turn back. And so please come as you are, warts and all, and be pointed to that forever perfect and ultimate sacrifice of Jesus.

And so now for all of us, as we do turn and confess that our hearts are not naturally turned to him, and as we put our faith in him, our broken relationship and our broken religion have been brilliantly restored.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for making a way for us to be restored to you.

[31 : 25] Lord, thank you for the promises that you make in your word. Thank you that we have seen them fulfilled, and that we can trust that they will be ultimately fulfilled in our lives too.

Lord, we are so sorry for having turned away from you. We're so sorry for the way that we have contributed to that broken relationship, and for the way that we have treated our faith and this religion in such a way that it has been broken too.

And so, Lord, I pray that you would, by your spirit, enable us to turn back to you, to put our faith in the cross, in what you've done for us in that place through your son, that our relationship with you and our religion with you might be brilliantly restored tonight.

In your son's precious name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[32 : 51] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Even if you're unminded Jonas. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.