

I want to begin by playing a game of “Name That Nation”. I’m going to give you several characteristics and you think about who I’m referencing. This is a nation moving away from God. Its people are deeply divided. Many of its leaders are corrupt, and each person is pretty sure the other side is much worse. This nation is threatened by other nations that seek its destruction. And everyone seems to have their own idea of what’s true. What nation is that?

Well, if you said the United States of America, I would tend to agree with you. But the nation I’m also talking about is 8th century BC Israel. But seeing the similarities is good because the message God gave to Israel 2,700 years ago in the midst of all this means it’s relevant and timely for us today.

This morning we are beginning a new series in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. We’re calling it *Crossways*, and I’ll explain what that means throughout the morning. We are going to spend the time between now and Easter looking at the main themes of this book, including several weeks camped out in the magnificent chapter 53, and my hope is that you will experience God on Resurrection Sunday like you never have before.

Any time we study a book in the Old Testament, it’s good for us to know where it falls in the history of Israel. Without it, it’s very easy to lose the context. So this morning is going to be a little heady. Around 2000 BC, God called Abraham. His descendants spent 400 years in bondage in Egypt before the Exodus by Moses in 1446. 40 years later, they entered the Promised Land, Israel. After the time of Judges, God established King David’s throne around 1000 BC. He ruled for 40 years and was given a promise by God that someone from his line would sit on the throne and rule in peace and justice for eternity. Remember that, because we’re going to hear about that person again. After David died, his son Solomon ruled, but then things got dicey. Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, ruled arrogantly, put a heavy burden on the people, and they rebelled, resulting in the split of the northern ten tribes, which kept the name Israel, and the southern two tribes which had the name Judah. For 200 years, the nations co-existed antagonistically. Judah was ruled by a mix of good kings who pursued the Lord and bad kings who did not. The northern kingdom was ruled by all bad kings. And then, in the year 740 BC, King Uzziah of Judah died, and God sent a man named Isaiah, who was a resident of Jerusalem and whose name means “Yawheh saves”, to speak to the people of Judah.

Isaiah was a Prophet, someone who functions as God’s spokesperson and is commissioned by him to deliver his word, either to individuals or to groups. They are sent to confront what is occurring and give promises of what is to come. They were used by God to give his message before the Word of God was fully revealed in Jesus and fully revealed in Scripture.

The challenge with Prophets is understanding the who and when of their message. These promises or prophecies often had a near/far, already/not yet fulfillment. Many made reference to something that would happen to Israel imminently, many referred to the Messiah, fulfilled in Jesus at his first coming but not yet fulfilled in his second. Some prophecies belong to Israel specifically, some to everyone. One point I want to make clear: the USA is not the new Israel. Clarity will help us know how understand a prophet and how to live in light of his message.

For example: There's a horrific locust plague going on in the Middle East today. The prophet Joel speaks of a locust plague signifying the day of the Lord's judgment. Should we all brace ourselves? Or, many of you remember the sheer panic caused by the Y2K scare. All the computers were going to shut off. Planes would fall out of the sky. Commerce would come to a halt. We'd be in darkness. I went into a friend's garage in December 1999 and he had this giant blue contraption. I asked him what it was, and he told me his father-in-law was freaking out about Y2K and bought them a 500-gallon drum of drinking water.

That's why it's important for us to know what a Prophet says, who it is for, and when will it occur. Isaiah is no different. He makes promises specifically to Israel to be fulfilled in both the near term and far term. He also gives promises to all people for all time that we can put our hope in and live in light of. Some have been fulfilled, some will be fulfilled, and that's why Isaiah is so important for us even today.

The book of Isaiah has been called the fifth gospel and a mini-Bible. It has 66 chapters. The Bible has 66 books. Both have two sections. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah emphasize God's holiness, righteousness, and justice, Israel's rebellion, and need for restoration. The Old Testament, 39 books, speaks of God's holiness, righteousness, and justice, man's rebellion, and our need for salvation. The last 27 chapters of Isaiah emphasize God's glory and grace, provision through a Suffering Servant, and eternal peace. The 27 books of the New Testament speak of God's glory and grace, the Suffering Servant named Jesus, and eternal peace. Isn't God awesome? So while we are not the original recipients of this message, the book is as relevant today as it has ever been. In it we will see the holiness, justice, and grace of God, the unity of Scripture, and his unexpected plan of salvation. Today, I want to focus on three themes found in the book that will help us understand his message and give us framework for the entire series.

Sin has rendered us crossways with God. Isn't that a fun way to start? Well, that's where Isaiah starts because man's problem, since the Garden, has always been the same. Disobedience ruins everything and puts us in opposition to God.

[Isaiah 1:2-4] ² Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: "Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. ³ The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." ⁴ Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.

Isaiah refers to God as the Holy One of Israel, the first of 26 instances. Holy means God is wholly other, perfect in all ways, and uncompromising in his standards. But when Isaiah shows up on the scene, Israel is in great defiance. They have turned their back on God and are said to have forsaken and despised him. Paul picks up on this in Romans 5 when he says we were enemies of God. Sin offends God's perfect character and causes us to be estranged from him. What naturally follows from God's holiness is his justice. He will not ignore the violation of sin.

[Isaiah 5:25-26] ²⁵ Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them, and the mountains quaked; and their

corpses were as refuse in the midst of the streets. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. ²⁶ He will raise a signal for nations far away, and whistle for them from the ends of the earth; and behold, quickly, speedily they come!

God's judgment of their sin will be the invasion of foreign armies who will defeat and exile the people. The Assyrians will vanquish the Northern Kingdom in 733 BC and Babylon will rise to global dominance and defeat the Southern Kingdom and deport their people starting in 605 BC.

I know this is a tough place to start but we have to begin here because, if we don't get this, the rest won't make any sense. Isaiah doesn't give us the option of hearing the good news or the bad news first because, unless we understand the bad news, we won't care about the good news. The Bible says the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and the wages of sin is death. That fear comes from recognizing God's holiness and understanding the consequences of violating it. Until we get that we won't recognize our need for forgiveness and the solution God provides will appear unnecessary.

We live in a world that says there are no absolutes, and everyone has their own truth. Some say God is love but love often means "indifferent", that God doesn't mind what you do with your life. But that's just not true. Obedience is a sign of faith that our Creator has established standards in life that honor his holiness and are given for our flourishing. When we violate those standards, and we all do, we separate ourselves from him and are in need of forgiveness.

The Cross is the way God makes it right. Our problem has always been the same, and so has the solution. Isaiah will go on to say that God will provide the solution. But before he does, he will first confront those trying to provide their own.

[Isaiah 1:12-14] ¹² "When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? ¹³ Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

Some Jews recognized the problem and thought following rules was enough. They offered sacrifices in an attempt to make them ceremonially clean, but their heart was not right. God is not satisfied by ritual. He is satisfied by a repentant heart that turns back to him in faith, acknowledges wrongdoing and offense, and seeks the forgiveness that only he can provide.

We do this ourselves. I know of no one who is living out the sacrificial system, but most Christians I know have, at times, struggled with doing enough to please God or make up for our shortcomings. There is a pervasive belief in the world that, if we are good enough, we're good. God will be pleased. But "I'm a good person" or "I did it right" is not convincing or satisfying to a holy and just God. So God waves his hands and calls a meeting to get real with us.

[Isaiah 1:18, 27] ¹⁸ "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 like crimson, they shall

become like wool...²⁷ Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness.

God says let's reason together. He's telling us to take a deep breath and really come to grips with our condition. Our sin is so deep and so pervasive that we have been stained by it, and no amount of scrubbing will get it out. There is a spot on one of my kitchen counters that has been stained by some kind of ink, and even though I scrub and scrub, it's still there. That's the effect of sin on our soul. We can scrub all we want by doing good things, but the stain will remain. We need a different solution, and that solution is to come to grips with our condition, repent and turn back to God, throw ourselves on his mercy, and seek his forgiveness.

When we do, the stain of our sin will be washed away. It will be like wool, white as snow. God will forgive and redeem those who turn in repentance to him through an act of righteousness that satisfies his justice. The solution isn't in ourselves. The solution we're looking for is God.

As we continue through the rest of the book, Isaiah begins to tell by whom it will be accomplished. In chapter 9, he says "**For unto us a child is born, to us a Son is given...and he shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...The zeal of the Lord will do this.**" Isaiah is speaking of the Messiah, the one who will come through the line of David to make all things right, to establish peace and justice and righteousness for eternity, but the way in which he will accomplish this is most unexpected.

In light of foreign armies sent as God's judgment, we might expect to see a Messiah who commands armies and slays enemies. But chapter 53 tells of a much different Messiah. Isaiah says he will be marred beyond recognition, despised and rejected by man, that upon him is our chastisement that brings peace, that by his wounds we are healed. It was the will of the Lord to crush him...The enemy this Messiah is ultimately sent to defeat is sin itself.

It has been said many times that the Old Testament God is the God of wrath and the New Testament God is the God of grace. The book of Isaiah shows that couldn't be further from the truth. In the midst of all this talk of the problem of sin, there is a promise. It is a promise that says God will ultimately deal with this issue himself. There is indeed wrath to be poured out, but God will provide the one on whom it will be poured. He will satisfy his holiness and justice by taking the problem of our sin upon himself. It is a promise for everyone.

This message can render us crossways with the world. Our problem has always been the same. God's solution has always been the same. And God's way of communicating that solution has always been the same: through faithful followers of his, sharing the good news of God's salvation. But that message isn't always accepted, and it can put us in opposition to an unbelieving world. We know Isaiah was overwhelmingly rejected by his people. Some responded, but most did not. In fact, church tradition says that when Hebrews 11 references the faithful follower of God who was sawn in half, that was Isaiah. Who's in!?!?

The message of Isaiah, especially chapter 53, is a stumbling block for many. For Jews, their majestic and triumphant Messiah is going to be rejected and put to death? It doesn't make sense! Throughout the years, it's been documented that Jewish reading calendars skip over Isaiah 53,

and a recent survey found that 81% of Jews were familiar with Moses but only 28% were familiar with the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. It's also a challenge because when you compare Isaiah 53 to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' passion and crucifixion, it's hard to argue.

For the rest of the unbelieving world it's not well-received because grace is offensive. If you are a follower of Christ and a recipient of God's grace, you love grace! But if you are not yet a follower, grace can be an insulting message. It tells someone they are so offensive to God that they can't make up for it themselves. Instead, someone had to die in their place to make it right.

Rejoice in the means of your salvation. As we recognize God's holiness, how offensive our sin is to him, we remember what he did to pay for it. We'll spend the majority of this series in Isaiah 53. It is a graphic description of what Jesus did on our behalf to satisfy the holiness and justice of God, to take us from estranged to reconciled, and to give us new life that we simply could not have on our own. We look at the season of Advent is the season of preparation for our hearts heading into Christmas. I pray as this series takes us into Easter, that every heart would prepare him room, and that we would be changed and drawn ever closer to our Savior as we remember what he has done for us.

Respond with compassion for the world. We do live in divided times, and those of us who follow Jesus are becoming less popular by the day. Our instinct to get defensive, combative, and resentful can be strong. But, as you rejoice in the means of your salvation, be reminded that you were in the same condition as all those people before God got a hold of you. I mentioned last week that I was going to officiate the memorial service of a good friend named Jerry Ferguson. I had the opportunity to look through his pocket-sized copy of the Psalms and Proverbs and, on one page in the margin, Jerry had written "Have compassion for people because God had such compassion on me." It's my prayer that all of us would have that attitude.

Reveal the good news with hope. There are few things that strike fear in the hearts of most Christians like sharing our faith does. We don't want to be rejected, accused of being hateful, close-minded, or intolerant, or suffer as a result of our faith. But remember this: results are up to God. Isaiah didn't change the minds of a lot of Jews, but some turned back. Most kept on in their disobedience and ultimately God judged them by having them exiled to Babylon. But Isaiah pressed on with hope, and you and I can do the same; not hope in your clever ability to share the Gospel and close the deal, but hope in a God who has been at work since the beginning, and using average folks like us to draw people to himself. You faithfully share what Christ has done for you. God will take care of the rest.

In the middle of Luke 4, Jesus has returned home to Nazareth, and he went to the synagogue, took the scroll of Isaiah and read what we know to be chapter 61. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...He has sent me to proclaim good news to the captives." He then gave the scroll back, sat down, and said "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." It was his first drop-the-mic moment. He was saying the problem is real, but the solution is here. The Messiah, the Suffering Servant Isaiah wrote about 700 years ago is now standing in your presence. And he is here with us today. Let us rejoice and worship over the next eight weeks and let that good news flow from our lips to those who do not know.