

**SESSION OBJECTIVE: ISAIAH 26:20-21**

To consider why some Old Testament verses do not apply to our modern context.

Looking for Answers

Written into the fabric of our humanity is the need to find answers for life's most difficult circumstances. Some of the questions that have been constant throughout this COVID-19 pandemic are: "Where did it come from," "Why is this happening," and, "How do we stop it?" Many have attempted to answer these questions in a



variety of ways. Some have suggested it was a mere biological disaster. Some have posited it is an engineered virus that was either purposefully or accidentally leaked. Still, others have sought to answer these questions spiritually, suggesting that God is perhaps punishing humanity for the myriad of sins we are all guilty of.

One of the most popular suggestions comes from the Bible, specifically, the Old Testament. I have seen Isaiah 26:20-21 passed around by a number of people, and been asked several questions regarding it, and so I figured this week would be as good of a week as any to address it head on. I will say up front (SPOILER): This is not a passage about what is happening right now. We will walk through why that is the case in this session, and perhaps learn a couple of important truths regarding our (the church) relationship with God.

Examining the Text

Let's look at the text before we jump in. It reads: "Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by. For behold, the LORD is

coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain.” The point of this passage as it has been used recently is to say that God is telling believers (“my people”) to shelter-in-place (“enter your chambers, shut your doors behind you, hide yourselves”) in order to avoid becoming sick with COVID-19 (“the fury”), and that all of this is happening because God is causing it (“the LORD is coming out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth”). It seems all-too coincidental for it to not be about this, right? The Bible, after all, is prophetic. Why can’t we confidently say this is about the current pandemic we are experiencing? Let us count the ways! But first, the context.

Examining the Context

The prophet Isaiah prophesied in the 8th century B.C. to both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Isaiah’s aim is to turn the people away from their sin (as is the case with most prophets) lest they fall under the judgment of Yahweh (as is the case with most of the Old Testament). You can see a cycle that repeats over and over again throughout the Old Testament with the people of God that goes something like this: “God blesses the people, the people rebel, God judges the people, the people repent, God blesses the people,” and on and on. Isaiah finds himself in a time when people are rebelling, and God is about to judge them.

Isaiah’s prophetic ministry covers a great scope of time, however, and so looking at the immediate context of this chapter is helpful. No specific sins are mentioned here, but in the following chapters Judah is condemned for entrusting themselves to Egypt during the Assyrian attack (Is. 30:1-5; 31:1-9). This resulted in God becoming angry, specifically with king Hezekiah (2 Chr. 32:25). Hezekiah was the one who made the final decisions as the monarch and thus was responsible for the direction of the nation at large. Because of Hezekiah’s sin, the people he was responsible for would suffer too. The judgment of God was unleashed on Judah by means of the Assyrian attacks. God withdrew His protective Hand from Judah, and allowed the Assyrians to carry out His judgment on His people for a time.

Chapter 26 was actually not the first warning they received, and even prior to chapter 26 God said that this time of Divine punishment would not last forever. If you go all the way back to Isaiah 10:25, you find: “For in a very little while my fury will come to an end, and my anger will be directed to their destruction.” Already, God was saying that the very instrument He would use to carry out His punishment would soon after be destroyed, and that is exactly what happened. God allowed the Assyrians to run rampant for a time as an act of discipline on the people of God, and then He eventually turned against the Assyrians and laid them to waste (Is. 37:36). The turning point was Hezekiah’s confession of his pride and sin (2 Chr. 32:26), and thus God promised to deliver him (Is. 38:6).

An examination of the rest of Isaiah along with the portions of 2 Chronicles that covered Hezekiah’s reign indicate that this passage in chapter 26 very clearly pertains to Judah and the coming Assyrian siege. Remember that every line of Scripture was written for a specific purpose. Through study, our job is to try and determine what that purpose is. Then, and only then, can we make the applications to our modern context. So, what’s the application?

Applying the Text

So, now that we've answered what the text means, the next question we have to answer is: "Can we apply this text to our modern context?" The answer is no, and for at least two reasons.

THE CHURCH AND ISRAEL

In order to apply this passage to our modern scenario, there are some connections that must be made that are problematic. For one, "My people," must now be connected to the church, not Israel. This creates considerable problems that we don't have sufficient time to explore in one session. The covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel is special, and unlike any other covenant relationship in the Scripture.

Deuteronomy 32:8-9 says, "When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, He fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage." God divided up the world and all of the people in it, but Israel belongs to Him. It is true that the Gentiles *become a part of* Israel (Rom. 11), but it is spiritual Israel, not the physical nation that Paul is talking about (Rom. 9:6-8). There are a great deal of issues in applying the blessings and curses of the nation of Israel to the church. Beyond that, the church is not a nation. Every tribe, tongue, and nation will eventually be represented in the church, a claim that the nation of Israel could never make (Rev. 7:9). Beyond the continuity issues, there is the problem of ascribing a disaster of any kind to the judgment of God.

GOD IS PATIENTLY ENDURING SIN WITHOUT JUDGMENT

The second connection that must be made if we apply this Isaiah passage to our modern context is that of the reason behind why COVID-19 exists: God's judgement. In the Isaiah passage, if the application is made, the fury unleashed upon the people of the earth is the wrath of God on sin. Of course, every natural disaster produces some dimwitted preacher who says it was God's wrath, but is that really the case? Romans 9:22-24 puts it this way: "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?" What Paul is suggesting is that in this time, while God desires to show his wrath against sin, He is patiently withholding it in order that His grace may be given to us who believe. In this time, God disciplines us as a loving Father disciplines His children, but it is not wrath (Heb. 12:4-11). There is, however, coming a day when the wrath of God will be poured out (1 Thess. 1:9-10). Because of this, we cannot say that God is pouring out His fury in the form of a virus.

Final Thoughts

It's tempting to pick out verses like this one and make the application. Trying to make sense of tragedy and disaster in a world governed by a benevolent and grace-filled God is difficult for us to understand, and verses like these attempt to make them simple. "We are bad, God is mad, and He is punishing us for it." While we are sinful, and God's wrath does burn against sin, God has also provided the perfect sacrifice in His Son Jesus Christ to undo His wrath against us and mend our broken fellowship with Him. In Christ, both His perfect justice and perfect love are on full display. Instead of applying a passage like Isaiah 26:20-21 (incorrectly) during this time of panic and uncertainty, it would be better to consider the promise of Romans 8:28-30. God *can and will* make this very bad season something *good for those who love Him*. Already, we are seeing that happen. People are reconnecting with the church, Christians are connecting for the first time to Bible study, and the Gospel is more readily available on social media than it has ever been. We should be weary and aware of the bad things happening, but not at the expense of denying the good as well. If you want an

explanation for why bad things happen, look no further than Genesis 3; if you want an explanation for why good things still happen in spite of sin, look no further than the grace of the Lord Jesus.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Isaiah 26:20. What are the people commanded to do? Why? What is coming? How is it described?

2. Read Isaiah 26:21. How does verse 21 describe God and what He will do?

Day Two

1. Read 2 Chronicles 32:26. What did Hezekiah do specifically? What was the result?

2. Read Isaiah 37:36. What happened to the Assyrians? What did God do to them?

Day Three

1. Read Deuteronomy 32:8-9. What did God divide up? According to what did He divide them up (Note: The ESV is the translation I am partial to here)? Who is Yahweh's portion? What does that mean?

2. Read Hebrews 12:4-11. How does God deal with our disobedience currently? In your own words, describe what these verses are saying.

Day Four

1. Read Romans 9:22-24. Why is God not pouring His wrath out in this age? What is He doing in the meantime? Read 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10. Will He pour His wrath out again?

2. Read Romans 8:28-30. What will God do for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose? Write down the promises in this passage.

Week 4 Discussion: All Things Together for Good

The promise of Romans 8:28-30 is shocking. That all things, even the worst things, could be somehow worked together to bring about good things is hard to imagine when you are in the thick of those worst things. However, it's the promise of Scripture, and one that we can hold fast to in a time of great uncertainty. Talk as a group about how you've seen this play out in the different phases of your life: Emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

1. Icebreaker: How hard has this shelter-in-place been for you? What sort of struggles have you faced? Be honest and transparent.
2. What good things have you seen come from this in your physical life? (Examples: exercises, daily walks, yard work, housework, home projects, etc.)
3. What good things have you seen come from this in your emotional life? (Examples: quality time with family/spouse, reading, self-care, etc.)
4. What good things have you seen come from this in your spiritual life? (Examples: bible study, giving, sharing your faith online, etc.)
5. Challenge: Write down something you're thankful for every day in each of these three categories, and then share them the next time you meet together. Continue doing this every week until the shelter-in-place has come to an end. It's easy to be negative right now; it takes intentionality to be positive.

Takeaways:

1. Isaiah 26:20-21 was written to warn Judah to repent and the reference of God's fury was about the imminent threat of the Assyrian army.
2. God is withholding wrath in this age of grace, but will one day pour it out again in the second coming of Christ.

PRAYER REQUESTS: