

A Stewpot Bible Study
Isaiah 1:1,10-20
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Welcome to A Stewpot Bible Study. If what you find here might be helpful for a discussion group, Sunday School class or other gathering, feel free to download it and tailor it to fit your needs.

There are many threads of scripture which weave their way into and through the tapestry of Stewpot's many ministries, one of which is Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; a passage which appears in the Jewish, Episcopal, Catholic, and Revised Common lectionaries, and which reads this way in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV):

¹The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah...

¹⁰Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

¹²When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more;

¹³Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation; I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

¹⁴Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

¹⁸Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

¹⁹If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;

²⁰but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

There is no one right way to undertake the study of scripture, but one approach which I have found helpful is a simple spiritual practice I call **ABAB**: looking **at** a passage of scripture (A), looking **behind** it (B), looking **around** it (A), and looking **beyond** it (B).

Let's ponder this passage from the book of Isaiah through that four-layer ABAB lens

1. Looking at:

To look at a passage of scripture is always the first and simplest step; looking at the words on the page to see what they say. To look at Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 is to see a passage of scripture in which God sounds angry at the people of God; so angry that God is reported to have said that God will not accept their worship (verses 10-14) or hear their prayers (verse 15) until they repent (verse 16) and begin to live lives of active empathy and compassionate solidarity (verse 17). That is some of what the words on the page say when we look at Isaiah:1, 10-20.

2. **Looking behind:**

After looking at a passage of scripture, it can be important to look behind it, to try to discover something of the context in which it was formed. In the case of this passage, we might find it helpful to look behind the words on the page to try and see when, and by whom, the book of Isaiah was written.

Much of the best scholarship we have suggests that our Bible book of Isaiah may be a composite of three parts, written across three centuries: Chapters 1-39, which may reflect the time in the history of Judah leading up to the exile; chapters 40-55, which may rise from the time when Judah was in exile; and chapters 56-66, which may emerge from Judah's life after the exile.

Perhaps it would be helpful to pause here to remind ourselves of some of the basic facts concerning "the exile." The exile is that long displacement of some of the people of God from their home in Judah to a roughly sixty-year exile in Babylon; a forced displacement which began in 597 BCE, and ended with the Edict of Cyrus in 538, a declaration which allowed the people of Judah to return to their homeland.

Judah was the name of the southern part of what is sometimes called the "Divided Kingdom." Prior to the Divided Kingdom, there was the "United Kingdom," that season in Israel's history which began sometime around 1040 BCE, and ended sometime around 930, when the kingdom divided, north and south; hence the name "Divided Kingdom," the northern territory keeping the name "Israel," and the southern region taking the name "Judah"; Israel making the city of Samaria its capital, and Judah keeping the city of Jerusalem as its capital.

The northern kingdom, Israel, was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. The southern kingdom, Judah, was conquered by the Babylonians in 597; the beginning of what students of the Hebrew scriptures call "the exile"; which is the context behind our passage from Isaiah chapter one, which belongs to the first part of Isaiah, Isaiah 1-39, which is generally believed to be a message to, and about, Judah before the Babylonian conquest and the exile.

In fact, the opening words of the book of Isaiah situate the prophet Isaiah in pre-exile 8th century BCE Judah, during the time of four of the kings of Judah; Uzziah, who is believed to have reigned over Judah from 783 to 742; Jotham, from 742 to 735; Ahaz, from 735-715; and Hezekiah, from 715 to 687. (As you may recall from your own life with the Bible, in Isaiah chapter 6, the prophet Isaiah will date the beginning of his prophetic career to the end of the reign of Uzziah; "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD high and lifted up...")

So, to summarize our look behind our scripture passage from Isaiah chapter 1: Our passage appears to belong to the part of the book of Isaiah which was written for the people of Judah before the exile, warning them of trouble to come; trouble which did, indeed, come in the form of the conquest of Judah by Babylon, and the subsequent exile to Babylon of some of the people of Judah.

3. Looking around

Having looked at and behind our passage from Isaiah chapter 1, let's look around it, and see where, and how, it may intersect some of the Bible's other verses and voices.

Our passage begins with a comparison of the people of Judah to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah: "Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!" (Isaiah 1:10) Needless to say, this is not the only time the words "Sodom and Gomorrah" will serve as Bible shorthand for impending judgement from God. To look around this passage of scripture is to see several other corners of the Bible where the phrase "Sodom and Gomorrah" appears, almost always, the way it does in Isaiah chapter 1, as a word of judgement. (Isaiah 13:19, Jeremiah 50:40, Lamentations 4:6, Amos 4:11, Zephaniah 2:9, Matthew 10:15, Romans 9:29)

And what was the guilt which made the phrase "Sodom and Gomorrah" synonymous with judgement? According to Ezekiel 16:49, it was a lack of empathy for, and solidarity with, those who were in need of help and hope, comfort and relief: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom; she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."

Which, apparently, was also the case in the land of Judah at the time of our passage from Isaiah chapter 1, because the only specific remedy the prophet Isaiah offers the people of Judah for their precarious position before God is for them to "seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow."

To continue looking around our passage from Isaiah chapter 1 is to see that this corner of the Bible is not the only place where God is reported to have elevated the necessity of justice and mercy above the significance of sacrifices and offerings. Even though God is the one who is reported to have made the liturgical rules for offerings and sacrifices (Exodus chapters 25-31, Leviticus chapters 1-10, Numbers chapters 15, 18, 19, 28 and 29), God is also the one who values acts of justice and mercy over sacrifices and offerings, which we see in Jeremiah 7:2-7, Hosea 6:6, Amos 5:21-24, and Micah 6:6-8, as well as in Psalm 40, Psalm 50, Psalm 51, and in Proverbs 21:3; but nowhere more clearly than in our passage from Isaiah chapter 1, where God is reported to have said, "I can no longer bear your sacrifices, and I will no longer hear your prayers...Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

4. Looking beyond

Having looked at, behind, and around our passage, let's look beyond it, to consider some of the ways we might apply it to our lives; a spiritual discipline we sometimes call "building a hermeneutical bridge," hermeneutics being the interpretation and application of scripture. To "build a hermeneutical bridge" is to build a bridge of meaning from the page to the world, from scripture to life, from there to here, from then to now.

Taken literally, our passage from Isaiah chapter 1 would mean that God will not join us in our worship until we join God in the world. But, to take the Bible literally is almost always to send the Bible on an errand the Bible was not written to run. Our calling is to take the Bible, not literally, but seriously; thinking, praying and walking in the Spirit, so that our reading of scripture becomes as inspired as Isaiah's writing of scripture. Taken seriously, in that prayerful, mindful, thoughtful way, our passage is a powerful reminder that God has a persistent, particular concern for those who are most voiceless and vulnerable, hungry and poor, and that God is calling us to join God in that persistent, particular concern. As one wise soul once said, "God has a preferential concern for the poor, not because they are morally superior, but because they are poor." In other words, God cares about human dignity, equality and justice; so much so that, according to our passage from Isaiah chapter 1, even the most beautiful worship, or faithful Bible study, is no substitute for meeting specific human needs with specific practical help.

To move that meaning beyond the Bible, across the hermeneutical bridge, from then to now and from them to us, might bring us, at last, to something like this: Whenever we sit down with and stand up for whoever in this world is most in need of help and hope, comfort and relief, a table and a friend, (see Isaiah 1:17) then we are in on what God is up to, and God is in on what we are up to.

Throughout the world, there are many beloved communities which seek to embody that kind of empathy for, and solidarity with, those who are most in need of help and hope, comfort and relief, a table and a friend. One of those beloved communities is Stewpot, where, each day, to the extent that we are able, we seek to embody the kind of intentional friendship to which we are called by our passage from Isaiah.

Some questions for conversation:

1. How would you compare our passage from Isaiah chapter 1 with the words Jesus is reported to have said in Matthew 25:31-46?
2. How would you compare our passage from Isaiah chapter 1 with James 1:27 and James 2:14-17?
3. How would you respond to this statement: "There is no 'social gospel'. There is only the gospel, and it is social."

4. Based on our passage from Isaiah, what would you say matters most to God?
5. What are some specific, practical ways we can live lives of empathy and solidarity with those who are most in need of help and hope, comfort and relief?
6. What are some of the ways Stewpot embodies the practical, specific empathy and solidarity to which Isaiah 1:17 calls us?