

THE OFFERING OF OBEDIENCE

1 The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

²Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! for Jehovah has spoken. I have reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. ³The ox knows his master, and the donkey knows its owner's manger; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. ⁴Ah, sinful nation! You are a people loaded down with iniquity, an offspring who are evildoers, children who deal in corruption. They have forsaken Jehovah, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they have turned their backs on him. ⁵Why will you continue to be beaten?—[that is what is happening because] you persist in your rebellion. Your whole head is injured, and your whole heart is afflicted. ⁶From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness [of body], only wounds and welts and open sores that have neither been cleansed nor bandaged nor soothed with oil. ⁷Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire. Foreigners devour your land in your very presence; it is left desolate, overrun by strangers. ⁸The Daughter of Zion is left like a shack in a vineyard, like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege. ⁹Unless Jehovah of hosts had left us a very small number of survivors, we would have been like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.

¹⁰Hear the word of Jehovah, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹What does the multitude of your sacrifices mean to me? declares Jehovah. I have had enough of the burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened beasts. I do not take pleasure in the blood of bulls or lambs or goats. ¹²When you appear before me, who has asked this of you—this trampling of my courts? ¹³Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. [The observance of] New Moons and Sabbaths and the calling of sacred assemblies—I cannot [tolerate them]! Do away with iniquity and the solemn assembly! ¹⁴My soul hates your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts; they are a burden to me, I am tired of putting up with them. ¹⁵When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you. Even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood!

¹⁶Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds and remove them from my sight. Stop doing evil. ¹⁷Learn to do what is good. Seek justice, relieve the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. ¹⁸Come now, and let us reason together, says Jehovah. Even though your sins are as dark as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Even though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool. ¹⁹If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best that the land produces. ²⁰But if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of Jehovah has spoken it.

²¹See how the faithful city has become a prostitute. She once was full of justice. Righteousness used to dwell in her—but now murderers! ²²Your silver has become dross. Your choice wine has been diluted with water. ²³Your princes are rebels and the companions of thieves. Every one of them loves bribes and chases after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless, neither does the widow's case come before them [for a hearing]. ²⁴Therefore, the Lord Jehovah of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel, declares, Ah, I will relieve myself of my adversaries, and I will take vengeance on my enemies. ²⁵I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge your dross and

remove all your impurities. ²⁶I will restore your judges so it will be as it was at first, and your counselors like it was at the beginning; then you will be called, The City of Righteousness, The Faithful City. ²⁷Zion will be redeemed by judgment, and those within her who repent will be redeemed by righteousness. ²⁸But the transgressors and sinners will both be destroyed together, and those who forsake Jehovah will be consumed. ²⁹They will be ashamed of the sacred oaks that you have desired; and you will be disgraced because of the sacred gardens that you have chosen. ³⁰You will be like an oak whose leaf fades, and like a garden without water. ³¹The mighty man will become tinder and his work will be like a spark—both will burn together, and there will be no one to quench the fire. (Isa. 1:1-31)

A note on the Scripture text that accompanies each individual message: The *American Standard Version* and the *New International Version*, along with the original Greek and Hebrew, have been used in an effort to achieve the greatest degree of accuracy and clarity. Where words or phrases have been added to the original text in an effort to better express its meaning, those words or phrases have usually been indicated by means of [brackets].

Introduction

When John and Kay needed help milking the cows, their neighbors, Roger and Connie, responded to their call, even though it meant missing the mid-week service at their church.

This is how Kay tells the story:

Several years ago, when my husband John and I were still milking cows, we were dismayed when he came down with the flu a few hours before milking time. Our hired help had the night off and I knew I would be filling in. I phoned Katie, our teenage baby sitter, to see if she could care for our toddler. Connie, her mother, answered the phone.

When I explained our situation, she asked if we could use their help. Since they attended church on Wednesday nights, I was surprised at the offer. But I eagerly accepted and told her what time we started. As I hung up the phone, I wondered if Roger, her husband, would be there, since he was an elder and was expected to be present for all church matters.

But the whole family showed up on time.

By volunteering their help, this family ... cleared up the fog in my brain concerning a Scripture verse I had come across: "*Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice*" (1 Sam. 15:22.) I didn't understand the difference until I realized our neighbors had been faced with the choice of helping someone in need or attending church ... It wasn't hard for them to figure out what was most important to God.

Our friends were willing to get their hands dirty for the cause of Christ, even though those same hands could have been seen by many more people praying in church. They knew God would rather have them show love to others, thus obeying one of God's greatest commandments, than attempt to please Him by attending church. (*POWER*, 6/30/91, pp.4-5)

Now suppose that Kay had called you? What would you have done?

Here is the situation we find in the passage of Scripture presently before us: The people of Israel demonstrated themselves to be very religious—they would never think of missing a worship service of any kind for any reason—but their everyday lives were devoid of obedience to the LORD.

It is in this setting that the prophet Isaiah is called to bring the word of the LORD to the people of Judah, a people who demonstrated themselves to be very religious—they would never think of missing a worship service of any kind for any reason—but their everyday lives were devoid of obedience to the LORD. This was a condition the LORD finds to be intolerable.

When the LORD looks at our lives, what does He find? A life characterized by the offering of obedience? Or a life filled with religion, but devoid of obedience? Because anything less is intolerable to the LORD, let us be sure to present unto Him the offering of obedience.

I. Present the Offering of Obedience, ...Or You will Incur the LORD's Discipline (Isa. 1:1-9)

In verse 2 the LORD protests against an incredible expression of ingratitude: *"I have reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me."* How would you feel if, after raising a son or daughter from infancy—staying up throughout the night when he was sick, working hard to provide food, clothing and education, trying to give him what would make him happy—he or she were to rebel against you, ignoring your counsel, defying the rules of your house, showing no sense of respect or obligation to you? Such is the way that Old Testament Israel responded to the LORD their God.

Do we act like this towards the LORD? In our daily life, do we ignore His counsel, failing to seek His will through prayer and from His Word? Do we ignore the LORD and find that all our time is preoccupied with our own pursuits—we have no time for devotions, all our time is engaged in making a living and enjoying our own recreations? Do we consciously defy His rules—idolizing our possessions or sports or relationships; entertaining lustful thoughts and practices; harboring bitterness; practicing dishonesty; coveting what rightfully belongs to our neighbor?

In verse 3 the LORD protests against an incredible expression of spiritual ignorance: *“the ox knows his master, and the donkey knows its owner’s manger; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”* Unlike Old Testament Israel, let us appreciate the fact that our life is totally dependent upon God—a fact to which both the Apostle Paul and the Apostle James testify:

... he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else ... in him we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:25b, 28a)

Now listen, you who say, Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money. ¹⁴Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that. (Jam. 4:13-15)

Let us appreciate the fact that we owe our allegiance to God. Such is the case because He is our Creator and we live in His world: *“The earth belongs to the LORD, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; ²for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters”* (Psl. 24:1-2.) Although more, as a Christian, He is our Redeemer and He has purchased us with His own blood: *“Do you not realize that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You do not belong to yourself; ²⁰you were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God with your body”* (1 Cor. 6:19-20.)

May we be conscious of the fact that in a relatively short time we will be called to stand before Him and give an account of our life. As the Apostle Paul informs us, *“we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad”* (2 Cori. 5:10.)

In verse 4 the prophet identifies these people as *“a sinful nation”* (or, *“a sinning nation.”*) *“Sinning”* is the adjective that most accurately describes these people; they are devoted to the practice of their sins; they love their sins more than they love their God. What would be the adjective that most accurately describes your life or mine?

These people are further described as *“an offspring who are evildoers.”* The text literally reads, *“an offspring of evildoers”*—but this does not mean that they are the children of evildoers. On the contrary, they are the children of godly forefathers, but, unlike those forefathers, they are a generation of evildoers. Can you look back to a godly grandfather or grandmother? Or to a godly father or mother—they feared God and loved Him, they were devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ their Savior? Now look in the mirror. Do you see a reflection of those godly forefathers in your life? Or do you see in yourself the opposite of what they were?

Isaiah goes on to describe them as *“children who deal in corruption,”* or, *“children who act destructively.”* By their lifestyle of sin and disobedience they are bringing destruction upon themselves. That which Moses had foresaw was now coming to pass:

“I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn from the way I have commanded you. In days to come, disaster will fall upon you because you will do evil in the sight of Jehovah and provoke him to anger by what your hands have made” (Deut. 31:29.)

Their sin is described as personal transgression against the LORD Himself: *“they have forsaken Jehovah, they have despised the Holy One of Israel.”* We must realize that when we break God’s commandments we are in effect smashing those tablets of the law right in front of His face. The moral law of God is an expression of His character, and to break that law is not merely to violate an abstract code of conduct, but to defy and offend the Person of God Himself? Compare this present passage of Isaiah 1:4 with Isaiah 5:24,

... they have forsaken Jehovah, they have despised the Holy One of Israel (Isa. 1:4)

... they have rejected the law of the Jehovah of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel (Isa. 5:24)

Finally, their relationship with the LORD is described as one of estrangement (*“they have turned their backs on him.”*) Their is spiritual indifference, aloofness, withdrawal, all potentially leading to a divorce from the LORD—may this never be a description of our spiritual condition!

If your son or daughter treated you in this way, how would you feel? What would you do? The human reaction: “This behavior is intolerable! Strong disciplinary action must be taken!” The LORD’s divine reaction is the same. Verses 5-6 picture a man being flogged for his transgressions, yet he defiantly persists all the more in those transgressions; consequently, there is no relief from the discipline that is being administered to him.

In verses 7-8 the actual means of discipline/punishment is described, it is foreign invasion: *“your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire, the Daughter of Zion is left like a shack in a vineyard* [i.e.; a makeshift shelter for the caretaker], *like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege.”* We must understand that when we go against God it will go hard for us, and there will be no relief unless we repent and submit to Him. Consider the case of the Prodigal Son:

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his

stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷When he came to his senses, he said, ...¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ...²⁰So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. (Lk. 15:14-17a, 18, 20)

If your life is devoid of obedience, you are forsaking the LORD's calling and you can expect to incur His disciplinary action, note Revelation 3:19, *"All those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. Therefore, be earnest and repent."* Let us present unto the LORD the offering of obedience, so that we do not incur His discipline.

II. Present the Offering of Obedience, ...So that Your Worship will be Acceptable to the LORD (Isa. 1:10-15)

In verse 11 the LORD declares that He has had enough of the hypocritical worship of these people. He poses the question, *"What does the multitude of your sacrifices mean to me?"* At this stage it appears that Old Testament Israel was offering an abundance of sacrifices unto the LORD in an attempt to appease Him, with the hopes that He would deliver them from the foreign invader who was laying siege to their land. But their life continued to be devoid of obedience.

The LORD goes on to declare, *"I have had enough of the burnt offerings of rams."* Note: The burnt offering was intended to represent the offering up of the worshiper's life unto God. Here were a people offering merely the symbol of devotion, rather than the wholehearted devotion the LORD requires and which is His due. The Lord Jesus summed up our spiritual duty in these words: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind"* and *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (Matt. 22:37-39.) The LORD further informs Israel, *"I do not take pleasure in the blood of bulls."* This is the very truth He had impressed upon them earlier in their history through the ministry of the prophet Samuel:

Does Jehovah delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams—²³for rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. (1 Sam. 15:22-23a)

In verse 12 the LORD demands to know, *"Who has asked this of you—this trampling of my courts?"* Now the LORD Himself has required that His people appear before Him in worship: *"Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD God"* (Ex. 23:17.) But worship that is devoid of obedience, and divorced from a life of devotion, the LORD views as a *"trampling"* of His holy courts. We must soberly be aware that if we enter the house of the LORD to offer Him worship, while refusing to render obedience unto Him in our everyday life, our act is looked upon by the LORD as a profaning of His sacred house.

In verses 13-14, employing the strongest terms the LORD denounces such “worship.” *“Stop bringing meaningless offerings!”* Such worship neither pleases nor honors God; it does not win His favor. *“Your incense is detestable to me!”* *“Incense”* with its fragrant aroma represented prayer, but prayer divorced from obedience becomes *“detestable”* to the LORD—like the stench of an open garbage can on a hot summer day. Note Proverbs 28:9, *“If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable.”* The LORD goes on to declare, *“the calling of [sacred] assemblies—I cannot [tolerate them]! Do away with iniquity and the solemn assembly! “Solemn assemblies” and “iniquity” are two mutually exclusive things; when such assemblies are mixed with iniquity those assemblies become repulsive to the LORD.*

Let us present unto the LORD the offering of obedience, so that our worship may be acceptable and pleasing to Him.

III. Present the Offering of Obedience, ...as a Right Response to the LORD’s Counsel (Isa. 1:16-31)

The people of Israel have been bringing to the LORD the multitude of their sacrifices. Now, to their shock and dismay, they discover that the LORD rejects all that they are offering Him. What counsel does the LORD now give His people?

In verses 16-17 the LORD gives the counsel to cease from sin and to practice righteousness, a righteousness that consists of *“justice”*—fairness and integrity in our business dealings and our personal life. Justice is more precisely defined in the following statements: *“relieve the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow”*—the LORD is referring here to social justice. Note the LORD’s counsel given in Micah 6:8, *“He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? [He requires you] to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”*

In verse 18 the LORD graciously extends the offer of forgiveness to those who have offended Him but who now return to Him: *“Even though your sins are as dark as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”* Based upon the atoning sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah, the LORD extends to us this assurance: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 Jn. 1:9.)

But, as verse 19 indicates, the LORD promises His mercy and blessing only upon the condition of our submission to Him: *“If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the best that the land produces.”* Note: This is not a self-manufactured obedience that produces salvation; on the contrary, it is the fruit of salvation and new life in Christ.

In verse 20 the LORD warns of His judgment against those who persist in their transgressions and rebellion against Him: *“But if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of Jehovah has spoken it.”*

Let us present unto the LORD the offering of obedience, as a right response to His counsel.

Conclusion

As the LORD looks upon your life and mine, to the degree that He finds compliance with His holy will—a compliance produced by the Holy Spirit—may He grant His blessing and comfort and further growth in grace. But to the degree that He finds conformity to the ungodly state of Judah as described in this passage, may He bring conviction, accompanied by the grace of repentance and restoration.