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Sermon Notes

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An Anguished Father Deals with Rebellious Children

Isaiah 1:1-31

I. A God Who Speaks (vs. 2)

Isaiah 1:2 Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken

A. A River of Words But a Seemingly Silent God

1. 2006 Research indicates that people speak an average of between 6-9,000 words per day;
[<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/003420.html>]

Or perhaps as much as 16,000

Are Women Really More Talkative Than Men? *Brevia* Matthias R. Mehl,^{1,*} Simine Vazire,² Nairán Ramírez-Esparza,³ Richard B. Slatcher,³ James W. Pennebaker,³

Reasonable estimate = 10,000 words per person per day

Multiply that by the approximately 6 billion people who can speak and you have a total of as many as 60 trillion human words spoken per day

2. In an age of multimedia, with internet, cable TV, CNN, podcasts, etc., we are deluged by a river of speech
3. But we never hear the voice of God... God does not speak from a throne or from the sky; God seems to be silent

B. “He Is There and He Is Not Silent”

1. In 1972, Francis Schaeffer published a book with this title
 - a. He argued that the primary philosophical question facing the human race is this: why is there something rather than nothing
 - b. Schaeffer argued that the only possible final answer to this question is in a triune God who speaks, who communicated, who reveals Himself to us
2. We live in a vast, terrifying huge universe, the size and immensity of it matched only by the vast emptiness

One website, on the “Emptiness of Space”: “Now that we are sending spacecraft between planets, we need to better understand the scale of space: We need to develop a sense of emptiness. If we set up a scale model of our galaxy, and if Earth is 1 inch away from the Sun, then the nearest star will be 4 miles away. At this scale, Pluto will be about 3 feet away and the entire solar system would almost fit inside a person's outstretched arms.

Now at this scale the Sun would be a speck of dust less than 1/100 inch across. The Earth would be microscopic at 1/100 the size of the Sun, or about a ten-thousandth of an inch across. That's about the size of a bacterium.

Imagine floating in the darkness midway between the dust specks of the Sun and the nearest star. The dust motes are a couple of miles away. You probably wouldn't perceive them. You would think the universe was empty.

3. In this vast emptiness... is there a God?
4. Even more terrifying, on planet earth, when events seem to make no sense at all, when history depicts total irrationality, many people wonder if God is there at all
5. Isaiah begins with this astonishing statement:

Isaiah 1:2 Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken

C. God's Apparent Silence Misleading

1. To unbelievers

Psalm 50:16-21 But to the wicked, God says: "What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips? ¹⁷ You hate my instruction and cast my words behind you. ¹⁸ When you see a thief, you join with him; you throw in your lot with adulterers. ¹⁹ You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit. ²⁰ You speak continually against your brother and slander your own mother's son. ²¹ These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you.

- a. God's apparent silence when wicked people sin so grievously makes them believe there is no God, or that He likes the wicked things they do

Isaiah 57:11 Is it not because I have long been silent that you do not fear me?

- b. The fact that God seems to do nothing misleads some people into thinking there is no God
- c. Others, seeing God's silence in the face of such evils as the Holocaust and other great human sufferings, begins to alter their view of God: Rabbi Harold Kushner, viewing the atrocities of Auschwitz, said this:

I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters . . . I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason

In other words, to Harold Kushner, God's silence in the face of suffering must mean he is either not all-powerful or not truly loving

In May of 2006, Pope Benedict XVI, a German man who is now Pope, went to Auschwitz to address the depths of issues faced there:

``WHERE WAS God in those days? Why was he silent? How could he permit this endless slaughter, this triumph of evil?''

It is the inevitable question in Auschwitz, that vast factory of death where the Nazis tortured, starved, shot, and gassed to death as many as a million and a half innocent human beings, most of them Jews. ``In a place like this, words fail," Benedict said. ``In the end, there can be only a dread silence, a silence which itself is a heartfelt cry to God: Why, Lord, did *you* remain silent?''

2. To believers

- a. Psalm 73: the prosperity of the wicked
- b. Habakkuk: God's toleration of evil

Habakkuk 1:13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

- c. Job: deeply troubled by his own suffering and asking God to ANSWER HIM!!!

Job 30:20-22 I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me.²¹ You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me.²² You snatch me up and drive me before the wind; you toss me about in the storm.

- d. Many Psalmists: Why, O Lord, are you silent???

King David: Psalm 13:1-3 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?³ Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.

But creation SPEAKS of God

And in the Bible GOD HIMSELF SPEAKS TO CREATION

Isaiah 1:2 Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken

D. By His Word the Universe Exists

1. It was by WORD that God created the universe

Psalm 33:6 By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.

2. God's first action in the Bible is creation; God's second action is speaking... and it seems it was BY SPEAKING that the creation occurred

Genesis 1:3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

3. The universe SPEAKS of the existence and power of God

Psalm 19:1-2 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

E. “He Has Spoken Through the Prophets”

1. God's own voice spoke the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai
2. The sound was so terrifying that the people begged God to speak to Moses instead
3. Thus was instituted the office of prophet
4. Isaiah was a prophet, who spoke for God

F. God’s Word Accomplishes What God Intends

1. God never speaks a word in vain
2. Later in this same book He will make that plain
3. In Isaiah 1, we learn that God is speaking to the human race
 - a. Speaking of His own nature as a God of holiness, of love, of power, of righteousness, of wrath, and of beauty
 - b. Speaking promises of eternal life
 - c. Speaking threats of eternal condemnation
 - d. God summons the earth to come listen to His words

G. A Heavenly Court Trial

1. When God gave Israel its Law under Moses, he promised them blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience
2. In the Book of Deuteronomy, three times he calls heaven and earth as witnesses

Deuteronomy 30:19 This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live

Deuteronomy 31:28 Assemble before me all the elders of your tribes and all your officials, so that I can speak these words in their hearing and call heaven and earth to testify against them.

[The Song of Moses] Deuteronomy 32:1 Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.

3. Now that Israel has so completely broken the covenant, and God is exiling ten tribes to the Assyrians, and will soon exile the rest of the nation to the Babylonians, he is assembling the court of the universe so that He can press His case against His own people

II. A God Who Judges His People (vs. 2-9)

A. The Heartbreak of Rebellion

Isaiah 1:2 "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.

1. Like an anguished father of wayward children
2. Many imperfect fathers in the Bible... and in life
 - a. Godly Noah had ungodly Ham, who mocked him in his drunkenness
 - b. Godly Abraham had mocking Ishmael
 - c. Godly Isaac had godless Esau
 - d. Samuel's sons rebelled and did not follow the Lord
 - e. David's son, Absalom, rebelled and sought to take his life and his throne
 - f. Yet all of these godly men were still sinners... one could still say the rebellion of their children was caused by their own sinfulness
 - g. Every parent dreads the possibility that their children will be rebels... many Christian parenting curricula promise complete freedom from teen rebellion if you only follow their ways

h. However, when the children do rebel, the parents will rightly admit, “I was not a perfect father” or “I was not a perfect mother”

3. Only perfect Father in history: God

4. And yet: rebellion anyway!!!

B. A Sinful People Called Out

Nothing concealed that will not be exposed; Prophetic task: call a spade a spade
Isaiah is called upon to declare the wickedness of God’s own people and to make it clear

1. Rebellion against God (vs. 2)

2. Ignorance of God

Isaiah 1:3 The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

3. Forsaking of God: vs.4

Isaiah 1:4 They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.

4. Active patterns of sin

Isaiah 1:4 Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption!

Isaiah 1:16 Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong

5. Violence

Isaiah 1:15 Your hands are full of blood

Isaiah 1:21 murderers

6. Sexual immorality

Isaiah 1:21 See how the faithful city has become a harlot!

7. Injustice

Isaiah 1:23 Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts.

8. Oppression of the poor & needy

Isaiah 1:23 They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them.

9. Theft

Isaiah 1:23 companions of thieves

10. Idolatry

Isaiah 1:29 "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.

This may represent sacred groves where idolatrous orgies and pagan worship was held; worship of the Baals and Ashtoreths; secret high places where filthy pagan rituals occurred

11. Cloaking all of this: religious hypocrisy

C. God's Active Judgment Against His People

Isaiah 1:5-7 Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. ⁶ From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness-- only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil. ⁷ Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.

1. God pleading with them as a father who must take His children to the woodshed

2. Nation depicted like a body that's been run over by a chariot

Famous chariot race in Ben Hur: Messala's chariot flipped over and he was dragged by his own horses, then trampled by another four-horse team and run over by a chariot.

3. Obviously no endorsement of child abuse... but yet there is an astonishing severity of God's discipline described here

a. This is the very thing God promised would happen to them if they violated the Covenant of Moses

b. Their crops would fail, the pregnant women would miscarry, the livestock would die from plagues

c. Especially, God would send invading armies to ravage the Promised Land and reduce the people to bondage

4. Hebrews 12: God disciplines His children

5. Also: God judges His people, because "Not all are Israel"

6. God's usual pattern of disciplining His sinful people: an invading army of pagans... in this case, probably Assyria
7. Only Jerusalem left unconquered

Isaiah 1:8 The Daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege.

- a. Vivid imagery of the aloneness and peril of the city of Jerusalem
- b. Typically picturesque language by Isaiah... the invading Assyrians had conquered just about the entire land
8. This judgment from God was a clear fulfillment of the curses that He threatened against Israel in Deuteronomy if they should disobey the covenant

Deuteronomy 28:49-52 “The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you do not understand... They will besiege all the cities throughout the land the Lord your God is giving you.”

9. God was faithful to what He had threatened
- D. Yet in Wrath, God Remembers Mercy

Isaiah 1:9 Unless the LORD Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.

1. In wrath, God remembered mercy

Habakkuk 3:2 in wrath remember mercy.

2. The people deserved to be entirely wiped out... in many ways they were no better than Sodom and Gomorrah... and Isaiah actually compares them to Sodom

Isaiah 1:10 Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

3. Assyria was certainly strong enough to conquer Jerusalem
4. But God miraculously spared Jerusalem under godly King Hezekiah
5. This remnant was chosen by grace, sustained by grace, saved by grace
6. They are a picture of all of us chosen for salvation in Christ
 - a. Paul quotes this in Romans 9 to speak of the remnant of Jews who had become Christians

- b. This remnant is God's gracious faithfulness to his promises to Abraham

III. A God Who Despises Religious Hypocrisy (vs. 10-15)

A. Formalism, Religiosity, and Hypocrisy on Display

1. The machinery of the sacrificial system kept right on running; so also the religious festivals and New Moon feasts... like some kind of mindless machine
2. There was an endless parade of Jews bringing a countless number of bulls, sheep, goats, and other animals to sacrifice
3. Josephus estimated that over a quarter of a million lambs were sacrificed at Passover time... a veritable RIVER of blood
4. God calls it a "trampling of His courts"
5. But the real issue was that they were maintaining the FORM of religion, but their hearts were idolatrous and far from God
6. They were doing all this evil day after day, but they continued to offer the sacrifices prescribed by the Law of Moses
7. Malachi tells us their attitude was terrible:

Malachi 1:13 And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the LORD Almighty. "When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD.

B. A Traffic in Wickedness

1. Basic mentality: "How much does this sin cost? I'll buy it!!"
2. As though the blood of bulls and goats could actually pay for human sin
3. Medieval Catholicism: indulgences reduced forgiveness of sin to a commodity that you could purchase with money

C. God's Utter Revulsion at Formalism and Hypocrisy

1. The multitude of the sacrifices (the sheer quantity of them) **means nothing to me**
2. **No pleasure** in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats
3. Feasts and religious festivals were **detestable** to God

4. He states that He **cannot bear** their evil assemblies
5. He says **My soul hates** your religious gatherings
6. They are like some crushing **burden**
7. He says He is **weary of bearing** them
8. Even their prayer life is detestable to God!!

Isaiah 1:15 When 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;

9. UTTER DISDAIN for their religion

Application

How tragic is this lie that Satan foists on us in every generation: that God should be honored by anything we do for Him; that mere outward shows of religion will satisfy His burdensome demands

Even in Baptist Churches; some people think that simply being a member of the church, coming occasionally, serving on some committee, attending some of the functions will be “enough” to get them into heaven

Religious formalism is a plague all over the world: in Greece and Russia, many nominal Orthodox people think their salvation is guaranteed by birth and baptism into the Orthodox religion; so also in predominantly Catholic countries; in America, the Bible belt suffers from this kind of deception

God HATES heatless, machine-like, formal religion that is a hypocritical mask covering up all these sins

Isaiah 29:13 The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.

IV. A God Who Pleads with Sinners (vs. 16-20)

A. A Call to Come

Isaiah 1:18 "Come now..."

1. This is a command to draw near, to come close to God
2. Their sins have made them distant from him, their idolatry has put an infinite gap between them... but now God beckons them to come near to Him

3. The Hebrew word is a common one, implying motion, coming from a distance to sit at the negotiating table with Almighty God

B. A Call to Reason

Vs. 18 "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD.

1. The Hebrew word is rich: as though God were welcoming some kind of debate over their sin
2. He is opening up a line of communication... but urging them to use the God-given reasoning powers with which He endowed them at creation
3. Sin is UNREASONABLE... absolutely insane!!
 - a. It produces corruption and misery
 - b. It results in estrangement from God and enslavement to ever-increasing wickedness
 - c. It stores up and ever-increasing sense of future doom on Judgment Day
 - d. It is the ultimate tyrant, seeking to destroy our very lives
 - e. Conversely, God is the most delightful being in the universe...
 - f. In His presence is the fullness of joy!!
 - g. “Come, now, let us reason” means let us talk about all this
4. Thus the conversion process begins with a sinner coming near to God and reasoning with Him
5. Prodigal Son:
 - a. Rebelled against his father; turned his back on him and left; wandered into a distant country, squandered his father’s money on sin; famine came, starving, feeding pigs for a job

Luke 15:17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!'

- b. Here is the INSANITY of sin... and the beginning of salvation; reason returns

C. A Call to Repentance

1. The call is not to more and more religion; more and more sacrifices; more and more observances

2. No, the call here is to repentance

Isaiah 1:15-17 Your hands are full of blood; ¹⁶wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, ¹⁷learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

3. This is the only certain proof of repentance: a changed life: STOP DOING WRONG; LEARN TO DO RIGHT

4. Notice the social aspects of the repentance: justice for the poor and needy

D. A Promise of Total Forgiveness

Isaiah 1:18-19 "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 as crimson, they shall be like wool. ¹⁹If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land

1. No matter how filthy your sin is, no matter how ruined your life, even so, God is calling you to come close and receive full cleansing, full purification, full forgiveness
2. White as snow... a picture of total purity, of perfection in God's sight
3. "Willing and obedient" implies a complete change of personal disposition toward God... no longer idolatrous, lustful, rebellious; now you are willing and obedient
4. Rich banquet of heavenly life: "You will eat the best from the land"

E. A Warning of Total Destruction

1. Along with this incredibly gracious promise of full forgiveness and restoration comes a warning to those who reject it

Isaiah 1:19-20 If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; ²⁰but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Isaiah 1:27-28 Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness. ²⁸But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the LORD will perish.

2. "Perish" we understand now means not just slaughtered by the Assyrians or the Babylonian; but it means perishing eternally in hell

V. A God Who Works Salvation and Threatens Judgment (vs. 21-31)

A. Total Purification Offered... but HOW?

1. The people are pictured as completely sinful and completely defiled; dripping with blood
2. They are told to “Wash and make themselves clean”
3. They are told to become as pure as snow and clean wool
4. BUT HOW CAN THIS BE DONE?
5. What can wash away our sins? How can a sinner be made pure in God’s sight??

B. Complete Righteousness Predicted... but HOW?

Isaiah 1:26-27 I will restore your judges as in days of old, your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City." ²⁷ Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness.

1. “Righteousness” = being perfectly just in the sight of Almighty God
2. It means to stand before His pure eyes blameless and pure on Judgment Day
3. God says here He will make this sinful people RIGHTEOUS again
4. He speaks of them being “REDEEMED with JUSTICE”
5. How can it be? How can such a filthy, adulterous, selfish, unjust people get anything but the just penalty for their crimes?

C. Rich Restoration and Reconciliation Promised... but HOW?

1. God here speaks of Jerusalem as becoming a perfect city in which He will dwell and delight in a pure and reconciled people
2. But this seems absolutely impossible... the people seem to delight in wickedness

Isaiah 1:21-23 See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her-- but now murderers! ²² Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. ²³ Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; 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.

God threatens them with judgment... with BURNING (more clearly understood as hell)

Isaiah 1:31 The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark; both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire."

How can such a people be redeemed? How can they be transformed? How can they be saved? How can they escape the wrath of God they so richly deserve?

D. Isaiah's Answer: In Christ Alone!

1. ONLY IN CHRIST can any of this happen
2. Christ is the perfect sacrifice, whose blood actually can cleanse the guilty, defiled conscience and make it whole again
3. In the cleansing fountain of Christ's redeeming blood, our filth and sinful wickedness can be cleansed
4. In Christ alone we can wash and make ourselves clean
5. In Christ alone, we can stop doing wrong and learn to do right
6. In Christ alone, we can stop bringing meaningless sacrifices... He alone can shut down the machinery of empty religion and bring it to a complete stop
7. In Christ alone, we can learn genuine concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan
8. In Christ alone, even though our sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow and as pure as wool
9. In Christ alone, can God make wicked sinners like us righteous in His sight; and through His death on the cross, the penitent ones will be redeemed WITH JUSTICE
10. This entire chapter just aches and yearns for Jesus to make it a reality
11. COME TO CHRIST TODAY

VI. Applications

A. Come to Christ

1. We are every bit as filthy as the Jews of Isaiah's day!
 - a. We are an angry people, murderous in our hearts if not in actual lives
 - b. We are a rebellious people, throwing God's laws behind our backs—keeping some of them but ignoring others

- c. We are an ignorant people, not giving ourselves to study of Scripture and of God's ways
- d. We are rebellious children, turning away from our Father
- e. We are like a harlot: delighting in worldly pleasures, sexually immoral, greedy, lustful, yearning for what He forbids
- f. We are a religious people: thinking our church attendance and good deeds in the outwardly Christian way can save us
- g. We are covered with sin too... and the call remains for us to hear

Isaiah 1:16-19 wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, ¹⁷ learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. 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 as crimson, they shall be like wool. ¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land

B. Delight in the Perfect Righteousness of Christ

1. Christ is the perfect sacrifice
2. Christ is the perfect wisdom of God
3. Christ is the cleansing fountain
4. Christ is the “best of the land”... He is the feast
5. Worship Him; give him thanks
6. Go over Isaiah

C. Draw Near to God; Reason with Him

1. If you are trapped in patterns of sin, let God speak some reasonable words to you
2. Sin is your bitter enemy; your secret sins are a burning infection in your soul
3. Come near to Christ and let Him cleanse you from all defilement

D. Repent of Religious Formalism

1. Baptist formalism is as repugnant to God as Jewish formalism
2. Are you just going through the motions in your Christian life?

3. How is your worship? Is it hot and passionate and rich? Or is it cold and lifeless?
4. How is your prayer life? Is it richly blessed by God or does God hide His eyes from you because of unconfessed sin?

E. Develop Deep Concern for the Poor and Needy

1. We are surrounded by spiritual and even material poverty
2. Durham is rife with single mothers, gangs, drugs, violence, and the effects of sin
3. Are we not called to do something about that?
4. Isaiah is filled with concern for the needy... how is your heart?

F. A Message of Encouragement to the Parents of Rebellious Children

1. God understands! He is the only perfect Father that ever raised children... and He says they rebelled against Him
2. We are imperfect parents, and we ought well to repent of our sins in parenting
3. But realize, the rebellion of your children is not your fault... it is theirs
4. And realize... God specializes in redeeming rebellious children, calling them back to a life of purity and holiness
5. Trust him! Lay your broken hearts before Him and realize... He is their real Father, not you! Let Him call them back to Himself