

# GOD'S VISION FOR HIS PEOPLE

Isaiah 1:1–2:5

Key Verse: 2:3

**“...and many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”**

Do you ever wonder, “How does God see me? And what does he want for me?” We all worry about what people think. We see life from our point of view. We get engrossed in what we want. Honestly, with such habits, we can’t see clearly. Today the prophet Isaiah proclaims how God sees his people, and what God wants for them. It’s not what people of his time saw or wanted to hear. At first his words seem hard to understand, applicable only to a situation long ago. But in his words we find how God wants to help his people in every time and place. Let’s reflect on how God wants to help us, and especially, what his vision for us is.

To begin, let’s look at the context. Isaiah is one of the major prophets of the Old Testament. He begins by saying that God gave him a vision (1:1). A vision sounds inspiring. But a vision also can be disturbing. In Isaiah’s book these visions come in a pattern. First he addresses the darkness he sees, then suddenly he describes a hope that far outshines it. We see an example of this pattern in today’s passage. And the constant, throughout all Isaiah’s prophecies, is the reality of God. More than in any other place in the Bible, Isaiah calls God “the Holy One of Israel” (1:4; 5:19,24; 10:20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19; 30:11–12,15; 31:1; 37:23; 41:14,16,20; 43:3,14–15; 45:11; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5; 55:5; 60:9,14). No matter how corrupt the world is, our living God is the Holy One. Though we’re so sinful, our holy God wants to make us holy, so that our relationship with him can be restored. For this reason, the book’s main message is the hope of the Messiah’s coming. In fact, his coming is our only hope, and the hope of the whole world. Isaiah describes the Messiah’s coming with some of the most beautiful words in the Bible. Because of the coming of Jesus our Messiah, we all have hope.

Another theme in Isaiah is “the city.” He’s talking about the city of Jerusalem, also known as “Zion.” In today’s passage alone, the word “city” appears three times (1:8,21,26), “Zion” three times (1:8,27; 2:3), and “Jerusalem” three times (1:1; 2:1,3). Why focus on this place? It’s not just because many people are there. Jerusalem was the capital city of Judah, the tribe of Israel through which God passed down his covenant promises. Also, Jerusalem was where God led David to build his temple. The Book of Isaiah proclaims God’s hope for Jerusalem. God is going to make it a city of holy refuge (4:3–6), a city of joy (35:9b–10), a city of his majestic presence (33:20–22), a city of worship (27:13), a city where the afflicted of his people can go (14:32), a city of God’s salvation (26:1; 28:16; 46:13;60:14,18; 52:7–10; 62:1), a city where God reigns (24:23; 52:7). These descriptions of Jerusalem give us a glimpse into God’s vision for what his church can be. Ultimately they point us to the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city (Rev3:12; 21:2,10ff.), our eternal home (2Co5:1; 2Pe3:13).

God is determined to accomplish his great vision. But to do so, he has to deal with reality. And this is how the book opens. Verse 1 briefly mentions the time setting. Isaiah served through the reigns of four kings of Judah. It was a time when Israel was divided and when the Assyrian Empire invaded and destroyed the Northern kingdom. Isaiah's focus was on the Southern kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem. In total, Isaiah served for over 60 years, during a period of many ups and downs. But God's vision never changed.

Isaiah begins with a pronouncement from God. Read 1:2. God is calling all heaven and earth to witness what has happened. It's a brief summary of Israel's history. God called Israel out of Egypt to be his own children. God was like their parent, nurturing, protecting and disciplining them, pouring himself into them so that they could be strong and even great people. But after all that, they abandoned him. They didn't want God himself; they wanted his blessings. It wasn't just a foolish choice: it's called "rebellion." This word "rebel" is repeated in verses 2,5,20,23 and 28. In our culture, rebellion is glamorized. For some people, rebellion is a constant mental reflex. But against our loving God, rebellion is the essence of wickedness. Read verse 3. Here God adds that rebellion against him is just plain ignorant. Even animals are more appreciative of their owners than humans are of their Creator.

Read verse 4. It's good to think about each of these words. The first word is "Ah!" Isaiah isn't judging; he's grieving. The other words he uses are intense: "sinful," "iniquity," "evildoers," "corruptly." "Laden with iniquity" means "heavy with guilt or perversity." "Deal corruptly" literally means "to cause trouble" or "to ruin." To "forsake" the Lord means simply to "leave" him. Isaiah puts it even more strongly: "...they have despised the Holy One of Israel." In 5:24 he says, "...they have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel." "Despised" implies they've "provoked" God's anger (1:4, KJV). These people had the greatest privilege to have the Holy One of Israel as their God, and to have his word. But they ended up despising him. Probably they didn't think they were despising God, but in their behavior, they were. Finally there's the expression "utterly estranged," which means they no longer felt close to or affectionate with God; their relationship was totally broken. Verse 4 ends on this tragic note.

Isaiah expresses his grief further. Read verses 5–6. He's describing a body that's been beaten up so badly, so diseased, there's no healthy part left. It's all symbolic of their spiritual condition. Outwardly they probably looked just fine. But inwardly they were devastated. And they're no victims. They're so sick, so damaged, so busted up inside, frankly because of their own rebellion against God. The last part of verse 6 suggests a compassionate longing to provide them some relief and comfort. But it also implies they're refusing any help.

So what's this telling us? It's saying God wants to help us see ourselves honestly. We may think we're doing fine but be totally unaware of what's going on within us. It's true not only medically but also emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. If we're always trying to avoid anything uncomfortable, we won't "go there." It's called "living in denial." How can we know our real condition? The Book of Isaiah tells us we need to come into God's holy presence. This is what happens to Isaiah himself in chapter 6. He's been grieving over the condition of his nation and people. But in God's holy presence he cries out, "Woe is me! For I am lost..." (6:5a) In God's holy

presence Isaiah finally can see his own true self. To see ourselves rightly, we also need the help of God's word, which is like a mirror (Jas1:23–24). Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." In other words, God's word helps us look deep within. Sometimes his words can seem so hard, so disturbing, but they are necessary for our healing. To see our real condition we also need the help of people around us. Those who love us will have the courage to tell us the truth about ourselves. But the Bible warns us this has to be done not self-righteously, but with a spirit of gentleness, watchful self-reflection, and humility (Gal6:1).

We want many things. We all want to be happy and comfortable. We want our ministry to be revived. But to God, what we really need first is to see our true selves. It's part of God's love for us. It's his divine discipline that brings real inner change, healing and growth. We may choose to learn the hard way, which can take a long time. Or we can open ourselves up to God as we turn to him through his word. Psalm 119:130 says, "The unfolding of your words gives light..." "Unfolding" can also mean "opening" or "entering." Not only do we need the Bible explained to us, but also we need to open up to it, let it in. There are many kinds of discipline or training in life, and in Christian life as well. Discipline is never pleasant but painful (Heb12:11). Sometimes we even confuse discipline with legalism, thinking it's not necessary. But God's discipline through his word is actually his grace. In the lyrics of the famous hymn "Amazing Grace": "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." God in his grace, with his word, helps us see how sinful we really are. This teaches us to "fear." Only then can we experience God's grace more deeply and be healed. Training to know God's grace is best, and most fundamental. It makes all other training look superficial, or only leading to self-righteousness. In light of this, let's pray we all may focus on honest, personal Bible study. And let's pray we may develop a safe environment in our church where we can be lovingly honest with one another, so that God's grace can become real to us all.

In verses 7–9 Isaiah describes what happened to the nation when they abandoned God. It became "desolate," "devoured by foreigners," and nearly as corrupt as Sodom and Gomorrah. It was shocking. In verse 10 he rebukes both the "rulers," or leaders, and "the people." In verses 11–15 he especially rebukes their religious activities. It's sobering. We think our strict adherence to religious activities makes us more righteous in God's sight. But God doesn't see it that way. Sacrifices, offerings, even faithful Sunday attendance, can mask what's really going on inside. Through religious rituals people have always tried to manipulate God to make them healthy, wealthy and wise. It's a deception. To God, such activities are "an abomination," he "hates" them and "cannot bear" them. What does God really want? Read verses 16–17. What's he talking about here? It's repentance (1:27). We can't just say "I repent"; we've got to take action. We've got to take our sins seriously. We've got to learn to see our sin the way God does. We've also got to start caring about what God cares about, which is justice, and, the needy. Such real repentance makes us more like God. Amazing.

After so much relentless rebuking, suddenly there's a change. Read verse 18. This verse helps us understand God better. Though he punishes his people for their rebellion, he longs to

restore a relationship with them. He's not just exercising his authority; he says, "Let's reason together." It means, "Let's talk this out," "Let's talk to each other." Though they're so sinful, God is still willing to talk with them. He promises: "...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow..." In their time, scarlet or crimson dye was impossible to wash out. God is using vivid imagery to show us the nature of our sin. Sin still stains us so deeply we can never wash it out. And, though we may not see it, the stain of our sin is as vivid as the color red. Yet in his grace God can wash it all out completely, turning it snow white. It means God's grace not only removes our guilt but also totally purifies us. It points to Jesus our Lord. He shed his blood on the cross so that all our ugly, filthy sins can be forgiven, our record can be wiped clean, and we can be totally purified. Isaiah 53:5 says, "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." This is how much God loved us. Our sins make us feel utterly hopeless. But if we would just turn to our Lord Jesus, he can forgive and heal us completely. This is the point of God's training, to help us experience his healing grace in Jesus. Apostle Peter wrote, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ..." (2Pe3:18). Are we growing in his grace, letting it really heal us?

After offering us his grace, God says one thing more. Look at verses 19–20. Spiritually, God is giving us only two options here. Either be willing and obedient, and taste God's goodness, or continue to refuse and rebel, and be eaten by the sword. God is telling us here that we can't abuse his grace. After receiving his grace, he wants us to become willing and obedient. This needs to be our new life direction (Ro6:17–18).

In verses 21–31 Isaiah goes on to describe the corrupt state of Jerusalem. God wanted this city to be faithful, just and holy, like him. But due to its idolatry it had become like a whore. Again Isaiah is using a really strong word, to wake his people up. He says their city is full of murderers, thieves and bribes (21,23a), watered-down compromise (22), total indifference to the needy (23b), and later refers to their shameful lusts (29–31). Verse 25 uses the words "smelt away." Smelt means to heat up in a furnace for metals. God is promising that through his red-hot discipline he would purify them and restore godly judges and counselors to lead them (26a). Interwoven with his rebukes, God still has vision for them.

Then, at the beginning of chapter 2, Isaiah turns to another vision, which is simply stunning. Read 2:2. Here, "the mountain of the house of the LORD" refers to the temple in Jerusalem. In ordinary people's minds, the temple was on Mount Zion. What does it mean that this temple mount will become "the highest"? In ancient times people would worship their gods on certain mountains. It speaks to how people have many ways to climb up some kind of mountain, to escape the world's problems or save themselves. God's mountain becoming "the highest" refers to Jesus, who, through his death and resurrection, became our true temple (Jn2:19–22), and the way back to God for all peoples on earth. This is why it says, "...and all the nations shall flow to it." Jesus said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (Jn12:32). He does this through his church. What a beautiful vision! This is God's vision for us. God wants us to see this vision and live with this vision. When we come to Jesus, both personally

and as a community, he builds us into God's household, a holy temple in which God dwells by his Spirit (Eph2:19–22). This is what makes us a blessing in the world.

Isaiah continues. Read verse 3. "Many peoples" around the world can find hope in God through a community of his people who've been changed by the grace of Jesus and gather to worship him. When new people come among them, they're taught God's true ways and learn to walk in his paths. It's a reference to Bible study. God wants to develop a church community focused on learning from the Scriptures who he really is, and on obedience to him. No more hypocrisy. No more faking. No more darkness. It's mind-blowing that such a spiritually devastated city could become such a spiritually bright and healthy place for all kinds of people. It's possible not through our efforts, but only as we grow in the grace of Jesus.

And such a church is not an ingrown place. The greatest part of God's vision is in verse 3b: "For out of Zion will go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem." God's vision is to send people out to spread his word all over the world. We see this in the New Testament Book of Acts. In it, God scatters his people everywhere to spread his word (Ac6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20). What's the biggest problem in the world? There's poverty, corruption, injustice and deception, to name just a few. But the biggest problem is ignorance of God's word. People tend to know it only in bits and pieces. They exaggerate the parts they like or don't like, for their own agenda. Without God's word, we can't know the truth. We don't know God. We can't have real hope or vision. So we live in various levels of despair. God wants us all to know him, which is why he's given us his word. [picture of the bible] All his words in the Bible point us to Jesus (Jn5:39–40). Let's pray that our church may be a place where we all grow as good students of the Bible, who can rightly handle it (2Ti2:15) and share it with others, pointing them to Jesus.

Isaiah concludes with the impact the spread of God's word can have. Read verses 4–5. God's word brings peace, both in our personal relationships and among enemy nations. Only as God's word grows in us can we stop fighting each other. Only God's word can help us walk in the light of the LORD. It's the light of his grace, the light of his vision, the light of his word. May God help us accept his word that shows us our sin and points us to the grace of Jesus. May God help us live with his great vision for us. May God help us grow in his grace so that he can use us in these dark times to spread his word to all the nations.