

Isaiah 9:13–10:4 — Wickedness Burneth as the Fire

Internal Demoralization, Social Dissolution, Unrighteous Decrees, and the Day of Visitation

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:18–10:4

“For wickedness burneth as the fire: it shall devour the briars and thorns, and shall kindle in the thickets of the forest, and they shall mount up like the lifting up of smoke. Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts is the land darkened, and the people shall be as the fuel of the fire: no man shall spare his brother.

And he shall snatch on the right hand, and be hungry; and he shall eat on the left hand, and they shall not be satisfied: they shall eat every man the flesh of his own arm. Manasseh, Ephraim; and Ephraim, Manasseh: and they together shall be against Judah. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.

Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed; to turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless. And what will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation which shall come from far? to whom will ye flee for help? and where will ye leave your glory? Without me they shall bow down under the prisoners, and they shall fall under the slain. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.”

The Structure of Four Paragraphs

The four paragraphs of Isaiah 9:8–10:4 have a strong moral thread running through them, each following on from the one before. The first (vv.8–12) showed external enemies as the consequence of Israel’s proud independence from God. The second (vv.13–17) showed the internal demoralization and hypocrisy that left them vulnerable: blind leaders, lying prophets, every mouth speaking folly. The third paragraph (vv.18–21) shows the fruit of that moral corruption in the body politic: wickedness consuming itself from within, man turning against man. The fourth (10:1–4) shows the culmination in governmental corruption and the coming day of visitation. All four end with the same refrain.

The Luke 13 passage illuminates the pattern: the Lord asked about those Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices — an external foe — and about those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell — an internal collapse. He drew the same moral lesson from both: except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. External enemies and internal decay speak the same message. Both call for the same response.

The Third Paragraph (vv.18–21): Wickedness Burns as a Fire

Wickedness burning as a fire is a vivid and exact image. Fire among briars and thorns — the character of the people themselves — consumes its own fuel. It kindles in the thickets of the forest and mounts up like lifting smoke. The wrath of the Lord does not need to introduce some entirely external agent at this stage; the wickedness within the people becomes its own consuming fire, and through that fire the wrath of the Lord is exercised.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes, viewing things from under the sun, advised: be not over-righteous, but also be not over-wicked — be moderate in all things. This is the philosopher’s reasoning: extremists get hurt. But here in Isaiah the result of wickedness is not the moderation of some natural equilibrium. Wickedness burns. It devours. It leads not to a stable plateau but to the darkening of the whole

land, to the devouring of one another.

No man shall spare his brother: the kindness that one might expect, even under the law, to be shown to a fellow Israelite is gone. He snatches on the right hand and is still hungry. He eats on the left hand and is not satisfied. He eats the flesh of his own arm — the arm that should have been strong enough to provide is eaten up by the same wickedness that produced the famine. Manasseh against Ephraim, Ephraim against Manasseh, and both together against Judah. The nation tears at itself. This is what wickedness produces when left to itself. The notion that men unrestrained will arrive at a natural harmony, the noble savage in his peaceful village — this side of Eden, it has never been true. Men left to themselves have always ended in corruption and violence against one another.

This section looks forward to the Great Tribulation. Those who live in the dominions of the Antichrist during that time will not experience prosperity and peace. The moral corruption within will express itself in exactly what these verses describe — wickedness burning and devouring, men turning on men, brother against brother (Matthew 24:10). The famine conditions of verse 20 parallel the seals of Revelation. The march of wickedness is not productive for the good of man; it only turns man against man more thoroughly.

Eli's Day as a Picture

The days of Eli provide an instructive picture of what the darkened land looks like. The lamp of the tabernacle was going out. Eli himself was blind. He was unable to discern Hannah's prayer and mistook it for drunkenness. Samuel heard the Lord call three times before he recognized whose voice it was. The ark was taken into battle as though it were a magical talisman, not as the dwelling place of the living God, and the great shout of the people when it arrived in the camp turned out to be hollow noise. The two sons of Eli were killed; the ark was taken. These were not merely physical conditions but moral ones — the lamp going out,

the dimming of eyes, the confusion of things holy with things common. The land is darkened, and the people shall be as the fuel of the fire.

The Fourth Paragraph (10:1–4): Unrighteous Decrees and the Day of Visitation

The final paragraph of the series moves from social dissolution to governmental corruption. Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees. Judges and legislators who write grievousness — who turn aside the needy from judgment, take away the right from the poor, make widows their prey, rob the fatherless. The internal corruption of the third paragraph has now expressed itself in the formal machinery of government: the people appointed to restrain evil and praise them that do well are now using their authority to oppress the very ones whom God has specially marked for care.

This is the pattern that sin follows from the inside out. In the first paragraph, pride and independence of God. In the second, hypocrisy and false leadership. In the third, wickedness burning and men devouring one another. In the fourth, the formal structures of government have been captured by this corruption and are now actively writing oppression into law. When those with judicial power are beholden to the corrupt, what they issue are unrighteous decrees. The Lord charged the Pharisees with consuming widows' houses while maintaining their pious exterior. Widows were their prey then too. The pattern is as old as human government.

The question God puts to such people is devastating in its simplicity: “And what will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation which shall come from far? To whom will ye flee for help? And where will ye leave your glory?” The question assumes that the day of visitation will come. God has visited this earth in judgment before — the flood is the great historical demonstration of it, and men are willfully ignorant of it (2 Peter 3:5). Peter connects that past intervention

with the coming one. Before the new heavens and earth, the Lord will come to reign and set things right. All the wickedness built up through the four paragraphs of these chapters will be visited in righteousness.

Where Will You Leave Your Glory?

The last line of verse 3 is worth dwelling on: “Where will ye leave your glory?” The devil loads people with various glories — the glory of position, of wealth, of power, of worldly achievement. These are the rewards of living according to the four paragraphs: the proud independence, the hypocrisy, the devouring of one another, the unrighteous decrees. And then the day of desolation comes and the question is: where will you leave your glory? You cannot carry it with you. You cannot store it somewhere safe. You have to abandon it.

The contrast for the Christian is striking. Our glory is safe above, in Christ, at God’s right hand. If disaster or catastrophe came and we had to flee from everything — house, account, possessions — where would we leave our glory? We would leave it in heaven where it already is, because it is not something that can be lost in the flight. That is the difference between having treasure on earth and treasure in heaven; between the glory that Satan gives and the glory that comes from being in Christ. It is much better to have Christ as our all.

All four paragraphs end with the same word: for all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still. This is what God’s patient dealing looks like. His hand is stretched out not only in smiting but in appealing — still waiting for the turning that the people will not give him. He sends a word to Jacob and it lights upon Israel. He smites, and they do not turn. He stretches his hand out still. The door of blessing for Israel is in the last verse of Lamentations: “Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned” — the acknowledgment that the turning must come from him, and the prayer that he would do it.

Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.