

A Study in Isaiah 3:9–15

The Look of Their Face — The Government of God — Oppression Judged

We are reading Isaiah chapter 3, beginning at verse 9.

"The shew of their countenance doth witness against them; and they declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not. Woe unto their soul! for they have rewarded evil unto themselves."

"Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him: for they shall eat the fruit of their doings. Woe unto the wicked! it shall be ill with him: for the reward of his hands shall be given him."

"As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O my people, they which lead thee cause thee to err, and destroy the way of thy paths."

"The LORD standeth up to plead, and standeth to judge the people. The LORD will enter into judgment with the ancients of his people, and the princes thereof: for ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor? saith the Lord GOD of hosts."

The Eyes of His Glory and the Look of Their Face

Verse 8, just before our passage opens, speaks of doings that were against Jehovah to provoke the eyes of his glory — a beautiful and remarkable expression. God has eyes, and those eyes are connected with his glory. His glory

is his nature revealed, and what those eyes see is measured against it. Verse 9 then gives us the look of their face, and the contrast is unmistakable. It would have been a good thing if the look of their face had been shaped by what is due to God and his glory — if it had expressed that submission, that shamefacedness which Scripture calls for. Instead the look of their countenance is itself a witness against them. There is impudence and forwardness written on their faces.

And they declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not. What happened in Sodom was utterly shameless. When the angels came to Lot, the men of the city revealed their condition very quickly. They did not hide it. A myth has circulated in some evangelical circles that the sin of Sodom was living luxuriously, drawn from one text that does mention their ease and abundance. But that is the logical fallacy of making the whole from a part. God did not overthrow those cities of the plain merely because the inhabitants were comfortable. There was a particular sin, the sin of Sodom — a departure from the divine order of marriage — which God judged. And Israel in Isaiah's day was declaring the same kind of sin openly, unashamed.

This connects with Psalm 2:2–3, where the kings of the earth take counsel against Jehovah and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. The bands are those things God has put around men for their stability and blessing — the institution of marriage between a man and a woman, the family, the ordering of society according to his mind. The cords are those things that connect man to God and his order. And the spirit of the age wants to snip both — to be free from every divine appointment. What we read in Isaiah 3 is the working of that spirit in incipient form. Its fullness belongs to the day of the Lord, which is the setting of these chapters.

The Government of God — Twofold Principles

Verses 10 and 11 illustrate the government of God with precision: Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him. Woe unto the wicked, it shall be ill with him. These two principles — the praise of them that do well, and the punishment of those that do evil — are exactly what Paul identifies in Romans 13:3–4 as the divinely intended purpose of earthly government: rulers are not a terror to good works but to the evil; he is the minister of God to thee for good; he beareth not the sword in vain. In Isaiah, the same principles appear in their spiritual form. Earthly government should be a reflection of God's government, however imperfectly it executes it.

The government of God is real and inescapable, even when earthly government fails. The editor of a newspaper was once sent a letter by a man in Colorado who had cursed God throughout the planting, tending, and harvesting of his field — and got a good crop regardless. He wrote to the newspaper to say so. The editor's reply was one line: God does not settle all his accounts in October. He does not settle everything immediately. A wicked man may prosper today and a righteous man may suffer today. But the government of God is not on man's timetable. He brings things to their proper end. The Lord himself is the supreme example: cut off, hidden in heaven, publicly unjustified before the world — and yet, waiting for the coming day when he will be vindicated before all. So it is with his people. We do not see the final reckoning now. But it is coming.

The blacksmith who told a visitor that he stuffed the iron in the fire, beat it with the hammer, and plunged it in cold water — and then pointed to the scrap box of worthless pieces — was illustrating the same truth. The iron pieces in the scrap box were not worked on. They were worthless. He was asking the Lord every day not to throw him in the scrap box, because every blow of the hammer, every plunge into cold water, was the Lord working on him for his good. In our circumstances of difficulty, the government of God is working for our eternal good. All judgment has been committed to the Son.

As for My People, Children Are Their Oppressors

Verse 12 is not to be taken literally — that actual children were governing Israel and actual women were ruling over them. What is meant is the character of those in authority. In Scripture, children represent those who are unsubject, given to whims and short attention spans, unreliable. Women, when used figuratively to describe a negative state, represent what is unsubject to God — the emotional, the impulsive, the governed by its own will rather than by divine order. The whole passage speaks of a disorder in the nation from top to bottom. Those in authority were acting in ways totally contrary to what their positions required, because they were totally unsubject to God themselves.

The end of verse 12 identifies the chief failure of government: they which lead thee cause thee to err, and destroy the way of thy paths. The true purpose of government is the exact opposite: to cause thee to go right, and to establish the way of thy paths. God gave government to man for man's good, after the flood — including the authority of capital punishment. Because fallen man, left to himself, brings himself into total ruin and disorder. If the blind lead the blind, both fall in the ditch. There is only one arrangement that works: the seeing leading the seeing. And that requires those in authority to have their authority from God and to use it for his glory.

It is instructive to compare verse 12 with verse 14. Verse 12 speaks of children and women as oppressors. Verse 14 speaks of the ancients and the princes whom the Lord will judge. The Lord did not go and address children and women about this. He went to the ones who bore the responsibility. The ancients and the princes were the ones who were really exhibiting the childish and insubject character of those described in verse 12. That is what they really were — not in age and position, but in their true moral character. And those are the ones whom the Lord will bring into judgment.

Psalm 118:8–9 is apposite: It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man; it is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes. Years of life ought to bring wisdom and a deepening trust in the Lord. But gray hairs and wisdom do not necessarily accompany one another. The scripture says of Ephraim: Ephraim is gray-haired, yet he knows it not. The accumulated years only add to his guilt, because they should have been years of growth and they were not. As one employer once told a job applicant who claimed twenty-five years of experience: he had one year of experience repeated twenty-five times. The ancients of the people were under a heavier judgment, not a lighter one, because of their years.

The Lord Enters into Judgment — Grinding the Faces of the Poor

The Lord standeth up to plead, and standeth to judge the people. There is a solemnity in that image. The Lord who has been watching — whose eyes of glory have seen all of this — now rises to plead and to judge. And the specific charge against the ancients and princes is both economic and personal: ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor? saith the Lord GOD of hosts.

Oppression is one of the things most strongly denounced throughout Scripture. God is the great giver — He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. And the creature He has placed on the earth becomes an oppressor. Those in positions of authority, entrusted with the care of the people, have turned that entrustment to their own enrichment. The poor have been crushed. And the title used at the end of verse 15 is emphatic: the Lord GOD of hosts. He is the commander of armies. He is the great one in charge. And it is against Him that these acts of oppression have been committed, because my people and the poor are his.

We should be very careful not to conclude from the fact that someone is being crushed that they must therefore be under the government of God in judgment. That would be a serious misreading. In this very passage, those who are grinding the faces of the poor are the ones under God's judgment, not those being ground. The Lord asks, What mean ye? He demands an account from the oppressors. The righteous who are being oppressed are told: it shall be well with him. It is the oppressors who must answer.

Verse 15 uses a title — LORD GOD of hosts — that magnifies the gravity of what has been done. All of this has been done under the watching eyes of the one who commands the armies of heaven. And Revelation 19 shows the final issue of man's failure with the sword: the sword placed in man's hands has been corrupted, but out of the mouth of the rider on the white horse goes a sharp sword to smite the nations. Man failed in the use of the sword; the Lord Jesus will take it up for God's glory.

Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him — for he that is the judge of all the earth is also the one who bore our judgment for us.