HOW TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Isaiah 1:1–31

Key Verse: 1:18

“‘Come now, let us settle the matter,’ 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.’”

There are so many things we think we’re supposed to be doing to be good Christians. We tend to look at outer activities rather than the core—what should be motivating what we do. Today’s passage tells us what’s most important is having a real relationship with God. The story here is between God and the people of Israel, but it serves as a metaphor for what’s happening between God and each individual human being. As we go through today’s passage we want to think about why we even should have a relationship with God, what happens when we don’t, and especially, how we can get that relationship going, even though things between us and God may be pretty messed up. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Let’s look at verse 1. This verse introduces the book of Isaiah. The time frame of these kings was 740–686 B.C. So Isaiah was a prophet for 64 years. He saw many kings of Judah come and go, but he always pointed his people to their real king, God himself. This verse summarizes the entire book of Isaiah as a “vision.” It means that it came from God. God showed Isaiah what he thought not only of Judah and Jerusalem, but also of the whole world. God also showed Isaiah a vision of the future, a vision that culminated in the coming of Jesus. Look at verse 2a. Isaiah summons heaven and earth to listen to him. Why? He says, “For the LORD has spoken:” What he’s about to say is not his own opinions or perspective, but the very words of God himself.

It’s kind of a slap in the face. God's message is a rebuke. Read verses 2b–3. Who are the children mentioned here? They’re the people of Israel. God had been like a loving parent. He’d protected, provided for and trained them. But when they grew up, they rebelled against him. Their rebellion was sheer treachery. Imagine the most loving, caring, giving parent serving many children. Then the children grow up, the parent gets old and frail, and the children just rob the parent's bank account and dump her in a broken-down nursing home. If such a story would get into the news media, people would be enraged at such children. This is what God wants to evoke here. He goes on to mention two animals, the ox and the donkey. They’re not the cleverest animals. But even *they* know that their master and owner is their provider, and they know how to come back to him for care and security. God laments that his people Israel are more ignorant than an ox or a donkey.

So what are we supposed to make of this? It tells us that God is our Creator. He made us. Though we may’ve had human parents, God himself is actually the one who’s been providing for and protecting us all throughout our lives until now. He’s been training us in various ways for our good. Since God has been so involved in our lives, we should be able to recognize and acknowledge him. In fact, it’s only right that we should be in a relationship with God, after all he’s done for us. We wouldn’t even be alive without him. It’s only natural that we should appreciate our Creator and be loyal to him. How could we ignore the one who really reared us and brought us up? Yet we do.

We need to think about what it really means to rebel against God. Of course it can mean flagrant acts of defiance and blatant disobedience. But rebellion against God can also be very subtle. It can be as simple as ignoring God or neglecting him. It’s surprising that God’s own people Israel were rebelling against him. But it’s still happening; people who claim to be Christians, to believe in God, under all the layers of appearances and talk, can actually be rebelling against God. We rebel against God when we’re not sincerely seeking him, seeking to know and love him more, seeking to do his will ahead of ours. And we rebel against God when we try to play God, when we try to be the masters of our own lives and of others’ lives, if in our interior life everything revolves around us and our own glory. There are even people trying to do ministry who are actually rebelling against God. Today we should quietly reflect on ourselves and ask, “Have I been rebelling against God, and if so, how?”

Read verse 4. This verse is sort of like a death sentence to the nation. In Hebrew the language reflects that they’re “heavy” with perversity and great guilt. They’ve banded together in evildoing, and their very natures have become corrupt. And what's the source of all this? It all started when they spurned “the Holy One of Israel” and turned their backs on him. When people turn away from God, they cannot but become wicked and full of guilt. We can’t be good on our own. Read verses 5,6. Here Isaiah changes his tone and speaks not with a stern rebuke but as someone concerned for a sick and dying patient. All these wounds and sores came from their own rebellion against God. Outwardly the Israelites probably looked healthy and fine. But Isaiah was helping them see their true spiritual condition. People may think that acts of rebellion prove that they’re strong. But actually, rebellion against God makes us sick. And it doesn’t hurt God; it hurts mainly ourselves. It’s almost as though people in some twisted way *want* to hurt themselves, like cutters; they *want* to self-destruct. But it’s not what God wants for us. God doesn’t want to see us all beaten up and bruised and sick and in pain, because he loves us. But without a relationship with God, this is what happens to us—we get all beaten and scrambled up inside, really unstable and fragile. Read verses 7–9. These verses describe how God removed his hand of protection from the nation. When they chose to ignore him, God let them fend for themselves against their enemies, and their enemies quickly overran them and almost completely devastated them. We may think we're strong enough to take care of ourselves. But without God’s help, we’re all as vulnerable as a hut in a field of melons. It’s the first time in this book Isaiah mentions a group of people called “survivors.” Elsewhere he calls them “the remnant.” They're people who live through all the hardships and difficulties that come, but who remain because they come back to God and are loyal to him. It’s because of these people that God doesn’t give up on the human race. How precious the survivors are! Isaiah also mentions Sodom and Gomorrah. God totally annihilated them for their wickedness and rebellion against him. All the Israelites knew that famous story.

Then Isaiah gives them another shocker. Read verse 10. He’s saying that even these people and their leaders are just like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. They *thought* they were God’s people, that they had some kind of righteousness. But in God’s sight they were basically no different than the wickedest people imaginable! Read verses 11–15. On the surface the Israelites seemed very religious. After all, they gave God a multitude of offerings, didn’t they? They came to the temple supposedly to worship God. They burned incense to represent prayer. They strictly kept Sabbaths and meetings and all kinds of conferences, and some of them spread out their hands and offered many prayers. But God said he hated it all, that he was burdened by it all, and that he wasn’t even listening! News of this must have hit them like a ton of bricks! They thought they’d been earning God’s favor with all this religious activity, that surely they’d be blessed by God for all they were doing. But it was just the opposite. Why was God so displeased? He says in verse 15b, “Your hands are full of blood!” What does it mean? It means that despite all their religious activity, they’d been doing evil to their fellow human beings. They’d been guilty of hurting, oppressing and neglecting the needy. They thought their hands were squeaky clean, and prayerful, but to God, they were full of blood. Read verses 16,17. Here God says what he really wants is not sacrifices, assemblies and superficial prayers to manipulate him to get blessings, but real repentance, and real concern for the most vulnerable people. This tells us that we can’t really worship God without serious and sincere repentance. We can’t please God when we ignore justice and when we ignore the people God himself is most concerned about. Most of all, God wants us to have a real relationship with him. He wants that more than anything else we can do. We can start that relationship, no matter who we are or how bad or hypocritical we’ve become, if we start repenting before God, if we start taking our sins against God seriously. If we don’t do that, we’re making having a personal relationship with God impossible for ourselves.

Read verse 18. This is probably the most stunning verse in the chapter. In fact, it’s one of the most memorable verses in the whole Bible. After describing all the people’s wickedness, sins and hypocrisy, God seems to do an about-face. He’s suddenly willing to bring all this hostility to an end. He’s willing to take these very sick, guilt-ridden, sin-prone people back to himself. In fact, he’s willing to wipe everything clean. It’s like he’s willing to expunge their criminal record and cancel all their debts. The colors “scarlet,” “red” and “crimson” hark back to the mention of blood-guilt in verse 15. To God, the guilt of their sins was as intense and as obvious as the color red. But God was willing to make it as white as snow and as wool. What does it mean? The very nature of snow and of lamb’s wool is to be the color white. They don’t need any assistance to be white; it’s in their essential nature. Here, white represents purity. White people shouldn’t misunderstand. God was offering to not only take away the guilt of their sins but also change their very natures to be pure. And it means God isn’t even going to remember our sins anymore. This is what God’s forgiveness does.

How does God take away all our guilt and even change our very nature? God made peace with us through the shed blood of Jesus on the cross (Col1:20). Even though we’re guilty sinners deserving of wrath, we’re justified in God’s sight, not by what we do, but by believing in the blood of Jesus (Ro3:25; 5:9). Even though we were once far away, we’re brought near to God through the blood of Christ (Eph2:13). After sinning, people suffer from a guilty conscience and try to suppress it through sinning more boldly, and often through abusing drugs and alcohol. Some even see a psychiatrist and take medication to alleviate this deeply disturbing guilt. But the blood of Jesus cleanses our consciences of all our guilt and enables us to start serving God (Heb9:14). As we studied recently, 1 John 1:7 says, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” A relationship with God is possible for weak, broken, sin-sick people through the blood of Jesus, if we’re humble enough to accept it and depend on it daily.

God is ready to forgive, but we have to do our part. So he gives us two options. Read verses 19–20. After receiving God’s forgiveness, we need to continue to live in a relationship with him that’s willing and obedient, not reluctant and rebellious. The last part of the chapter (21–31) goes on describing the tragedy of Israel’s corruption. They lost their spiritual integrity and sense of justice. But God would discipline, purify and restore them in righteousness. Especially he’d show them how shameful their lust and pride are before him.

Today we learned how important it is to have a real relationship with God, and how we can do so. May God help us come to him in sincere repentance, and have humble faith in the blood of Jesus. May this real relationship heal us.