

## *As White as Snow*

### **Isaiah 1:10-20**

Wayne Eberly

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Nineveh was a great city, but it was full of wickedness. The stench of their sinfulness was so great the sickening aroma rose up to God and God was deeply offended. He called the prophet Jonah and said, “Go to that great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” Now many of us know Jonah did not exactly leap at the opportunity, but he eventually made it to Nineveh, and indeed, it was a great city. To tour the great city took all of three days. Jonah rolled up his sleeves, took a deep breath, and started preaching hellfire and damnation. “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”

Nineveh was the capitol city of Israel’s enemy, the Assyrians. Assyria had taunted and teased Israel, battled against them and caused great harm and general chaos. So as the story of Jonah unfolds you can just imagine the people of God leaning in to see what will happen to that wicked city Nineveh, against whom judgment has been proclaimed. “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” You can just imagine their eager anticipation. Will it be a flood that sweeps those vile city streets clean? Will it be the fiery sulfur that consumed that den of iniquity known as Sodom and Gomorrah? Will it be the ten plagues that plagued the mighty Pharaoh until he relented and released the Israelites? Will the earth split open in an enormous hole that swallowed up Korah in the days when he rebelled against the Lord and his anointed one Moses? Or maybe it will be like the time the Lord sent a fire down that burned up the rabble who complained one too many times. Get the marshmallows. There could be a raging fire and we’re gonna watch those Ninevites get burned to a crisp. Jonah is walking around that great and greatly corrupted city of Nineveh proclaiming judgment. “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” All of Israel leans in, they are on the edge of their seat. They are craning their necks to see this great act of destruction that will bring their heartless enemies to their knees.

But just when the time is right for God to drop the hammer on the Ninevites, they repent. When God saw their repentance God had compassion upon them and he did not destroy them. God forgave them. Everyone was leaning in, they had their marshmallows ready to roast on the flames of the fire that would lick those miserable Ninevites and God relented. God had compassion. God forgave the people. We don't know how the whole population of Israel responded to this story, but we do know how Jonah responded. He was upset that God showed compassion and forgiveness to the Ninevites. He was disappointed and let down that God did not bring judgment and destruction and desolation. That is what Nineveh deserved. Anything less than judgment left an unsatisfying taste in the mouth of Jonah.

If you can imagine yourself being part of a gallery watching paying rapt attention to the drama in Nineveh, you are primed to participate in the great drama that plays out in the first chapter of the prophet Isaiah. Some commentators liken Isaiah to a courtroom scene, where God is making a case against a people who have failed miserably in terms of being faithful to God. These sinful and rebellious people have already experienced judgment, as we are told their country is desolate, their cities burned with fire, their fields stripped by foreigners and laid waste by strangers. (Isaiah 1:7) And now the depths of the degradation are brought before them. And an audience hangs from the rafters of the balcony to watch this courtroom drama play out.

As the case is made, you get the sense that God is absolutely fed up with the actions of the people. God even invokes the name of Sodom and Gomorrah against those who are being called to account. God examines their worship life and finds all their sacrifices have left an unpleasant taste in his mouth. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings...I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats...You trample my courts. Your offerings and incense are detestable to me." (Isaiah 1:11-13) Although we have since moved beyond the sacrifices outlined in the Old Testament, many scholars

believe the problem here was not the animal sacrifices, but the way the sacrifices were being performed and the heart with which they were being offered. The people were simply going through the motions, or worse yet, their belief in the majesty of God had shrunk to such a small scale that they thought of worship as a mere transaction. We offer our gifts, you forgive our sins, and we all leave worship happy.

But God is no small God. You might be able to appease a small God with small acts of worship. But this God is mighty and majestic, and when he sees small worship he is deeply offended. How does God know this is small worship? The people leave worship as if everything has been taken care of, as if the transaction is complete and now they can continue with life as normal, not as life lived in the shadow of the Almighty. If this had been true worship they would have left worship seeking justice, encouraging the oppressed, defending the cause of the fatherless and pleading the case of the widow. Instead, after conducting their worship service in the presence of a small God, they went out and acted as if God was not present in the world, especially in the faces of the weak and vulnerable. They trampled on the weak and vulnerable.

Once again we lean in from the rafters, paying rapt attention to what God will do. But there is one important difference between the scene in Isaiah and the scene in Jonah. In Jonah it is the enemy who is being judged. It is the Ninevites, the Assyrians. In Isaiah it is the people of God. It is the Israelites. We might even imagine it is us, the ones called and claimed by God. God is making a case against his holy people, and the verdict is you have not been very holy. You have been weighed in the balance and you have been found wanting. Charge after charge piles up. And with bated breath we wait to hear God's judgment. In the case of Nineveh we might have prayed that God would pour out his judgment. Now, when we realize we are being called to account, we are praying fervently that God will be merciful. We are praying that God will pardon our sin. We are praying that God will forgive us for our transgressions.

So it is that we come to verse eighteen in chapter one, and God, the one making the accusation, the one building the case against us, summons us to draw near. “Come now, let us reason together...” There we are, faced with a mountain of evidence that convicts and condemns us, and God says, “Come, let us reason together...” We can tell where this is headed. The evidence is clear. We have failed. We have sinned. We have fallen short. And instead of praying for God to pour out judgment and light the fire of vengeance, we are pleading and begging and crying for mercy. “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.” Despite all the charges piled up against us, despite all of our failures and shortcomings and faults and blemishes and selfishness and pride, despite the evidence that convicts us and should have condemned us, God acts to forgive. God acts with mercy. God acts with compassion. God acts with grace. God acts with love. Though our sins are like scarlet he makes them white like snow.

We who were leaning in and watching with rapt attention, riveted by this great court scene, when we hear the verdict of forgiveness, our hearts and souls are filled with relief and gratitude and joy. Our slate has been wiped clean. We have been set free from the sin that has so easily entangled us. We have been given a new beginning. We are not chained to the past or doomed to repeat our failures. Life opens before us as an opportunity to live into the fullness of God’s kindness and compassion, God’s goodness and God’s grace.

But we do well to remember this is not a transaction. We do not enter the courtroom guilty, pay a fine, and leave exonerated. We do not offer a series of confessions and leave our sins at the altar. This is not a transaction, where we do this and God does that. This is a transformation. God takes what is dead in sin and by his forgiveness and mercy and love and grace brings new life so that we might live in new ways. The mercy God shows, the forgiveness, is intended to transform us that we might live into the fullness of a right relationship with God...and a right relationship with our fellow human beings. The words that pointed out our failures in the first chapter of Isaiah are also words

that herald God's call upon our lives as those redeemed, those bought back at a great price. "Stop doing what is wrong, learn to do right. Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." The story does not come to an end when our sins which are like scarlet are made white like snow. Now that the old is gone, the forgiveness begs for a new beginning and a life lived in new ways.

My friend who is a pastor has a little trick. He has some paper called something like flash paper. When he throws the flash paper in the air it catches on fire and burns up. It completely disappears. It is really cool trick and everyone oohs and aahs when he does it. He talks about sin as being something that God makes vanish. I once stood before a group of kids and did a children's sermon. I had a glass container that was filled with water that was crystal clean. Then I poured some red dye in the water and before you knew it all the water was filled with shades of red. Then I stirred the mixture and the red disappeared. The water had bleach in it. God makes our sin disappear. Just like a science experiment.

Come, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet I will make them white like snow. How does God forgive sin? Is it a magic trick? With the courtroom filled and people hanging from the rafters and leaning over the rails, does God do a magic trick? Poof! Your sins are all gone. Does God conduct a science experiment, stirring carefully as the red stain disappears? Ooh...aah...wow.

No. God doesn't forgive sin by magic and he doesn't forgive sin by conducting a science experiment. On a day when the crowds were leaning in, hanging from the rafters, crowding the sidewalk and spilling onto the streets, a solitary figure was lifted up onto a cross, a symbol of suffering and shame. He was nailed to that cross. On that cross he was taunted and teased and abused and accused. On that cross he suffered and he bled and finally he died. No magic. No experiment. No chemical reaction. Just a man hanging in pain.

But the man was Jesus, and Jesus was the Son of God. The bible uses numerous images to tell us what Jesus did for us on the cross. His death was a sacrifice of atonement...atonement is that profound image of sin being covered over and carried away by a scapegoat. In his death Jesus became our Passover Lamb, the lamb being sacrificed so God would pass over the ones who had the blood on the doorframes of their houses. His death proved God's love, in that while we were still sinners, still part of that angry mob calling for Jesus to be crucified, Christ died for us. We hear that Christ died once and for all, the one who was righteous for we who are unrighteous, and the purpose was to bring us to God. In Christ Jesus God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us. We struggle to understand and we struggle to appreciate the incredible gift that was given when Jesus died on the cross. But this we know. Our sins were once red like scarlet, and through Jesus Christ they have become white as snow. We have been forgiven. It is not a transaction, where we do this and God does that. It is a transformation. As Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live. Christ lives in me." We have been forgiven. We have been given the gift of a new beginning. "Therefore, I urge you, my brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your act of worship." He died for us, so let us live for him.