

# “Woe to the sinful nation....”

One Nation Under God: Week 3

Isaiah 1:4

Greenland: Sunday, January 15, 2017 – Dirk (Live)

Raymond: Sunday, January 22, 2017 – Dirk (Recorded)

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## Introduction

I don’t know how many of you have been to London, but, if you have been there for any extended time, you begin to get used to the fog.

Tech Note: Put up Slide #1: Opening – London Fog

One might even say that the city is famous for it. But in December, 1952 this fog took on a sinister twist.<sup>1</sup> For five days, lethal fog covered the city, causing the death of some 12,000 people and sending some 150,000 people to the hospital. And no one saw it coming. Its cause has long been a source of mystery and speculation.

Recently, however, Dr. Renyi Zhang lead a team of researchers that finally deciphered the chemical cause of the disaster. It turns out that sulfur dioxide, which is naturally present in fog, combined with nitrogen dioxide from coal-burning smoke in the city to form lethal amounts sulfuric acid. Without knowing it, people were inhaling invisible particles of this acid, causing sickness or death wherever the poisonous fog spread.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/science/2016/12/13/mystery-solved-cause-londons-1952-killer-fog-revealed.html?refresh=true>

Imagine that you were one of those London citizens...another normal, foggy day in the city, only now it has turned deadly. Little did you know that your environment has become poisonous. Normal has become toxic.

Tech Note: Take down Slide #1, now, and immediately put up Slide #2: Series Title – One Nation Under God?

In our series called, “One Nation Under God?”, we have been following the long story of God’s work, how he has been building His nation and His people. As American Christians, we have been looking for where we fit into this story, as we seek to serve both our God and our country. Today we face a critical stage in this reflection.

I believe that our country is currently enveloped in a spiritually poisonous fog. Every day, you and I are breathing in a spiritually toxic environment. But God’s ancient people also faced this challenge, and God spoke to them directly about how to confront it. As we return to God’s word, then, I want to ask the question:

Tech Note: Take down Slide #2, now, and immediately put up Slide #3: Today’s Question.

*How do we fight the fog?*

It might seem sometimes that we are powerless to face an invisible, yet toxic enemy, but God has not given up on us. He gives us a way forward, but it will require some honesty and some sober thinking, on our part.

## 1 A Father’s Plea

We return to God’s story today at a dangerous time. The nation of God has split in two: the northern kingdom, called Israel, and the southern kingdom, called Judah. While the people in the southern kingdom of Judah still worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem, things there were still unstable. Foreign enemies were threatening from the outside, and spiritual rebellion was spreading on the inside. In these tumultuous times, God sends a prophet named Isaiah to call the people back to their spiritual roots.

### 1.1 *Own the Problem*

We pick up the story in Isaiah 1, verse 1. The Divine King is addressing His nation, and the Heavenly Father is addressing His children:

Tech Note: Take down Slide #3, now, and immediately put up Slide #4: Own the Problem – Isaiah 1:1-4

*“The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the LORD has spoken: ‘I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.’” Isaiah 1:1-4*

A Father pleads with His rebellious children, urging them to own their own problem. He speaks in abrupt terms. He tells His supposedly mature children that they are dumber than oxen and donkeys. A bit harsh by today’s standards, perhaps, but you can hear the frustration in His voice. After all He has done for them, all the times He has delivered them, forgiven them, restored them, blessed them, still they reject Him.

So a Holy God has declared His own people a “sinful nation”, and He has pronounced “woe”, or judgment upon them. They are now treated as other nations are treated, as God’s enemies and not like His children.

Like other nations, then, they suffer the invasion of foreign powers. God is not protecting them. Look at verse 5:

Tech Note: Take down Slide #4, now, and immediately put up Slide #5: Own the Problem – Isaiah 1:5-6

*“Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness— only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with olive oil.” Isaiah 1:5-6*

This troubling image describes a rebel who has been whipped within an inch of his life. This whipping has come in the form of enemies, who have invaded, raped and pillaged their land:

Tech Note: Take down Slide #5, now, and immediately put up Slide #6: Own the Problem – Isaiah 1:7-9

*“Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers. Daughter Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city under siege. Unless the LORD Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.” Isaiah 1:7-9*

The image of whipping blends into an image of destruction and desolation. The invading armies have stripped their land. Jerusalem is here called the “Daughter of Zion”. She is left alone in a

desolate field, like a simple shed, like a city surrounded and ready to fall. Both the whipped rebel and the desolate city are drawing their last breath. The Holy City is about to suffer the same destruction that fell on the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God’s mercy alone stands between His people and their deserved judgement.

Then the prophet gets to heart of the matter. The cause of all this disaster can be traced to a problem with their worship. Look at verse 10:

Tech Note: Take down Slide #6, now, and immediately put up Slide #7: Own the Problem – Isaiah 1:10-15

*“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah! The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?’ says the LORD. ‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood!”* Isaiah 1:10-15

This is the real cause of the poisonous fog in which they live. Their view of worship is far too narrow. Somehow, they convinced themselves that worship was only what they did at the temple, what they did on the Sabbath and other holy days. And because they believe this lie, God does not even acknowledge them as His children. He calls them Sodom and Gomorrah.

There was nothing wrong, of course, with the rituals and ceremonies themselves. God had in fact commanded His people to keep these regulations in the Law of Moses. But still there was something missing.

Let’s pause for a moment to ask if we, as the new people of God, have this same problem. We appreciate everyone who attends here on Sunday, or listens to one of our broadcasts, but we need to warn you that this is also a dangerous place. By being here, you may be tempted to believe that you are somehow different than the people out there, who haven’t chosen to join us. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

When I come into this place, I realize all too well that, in my heart, I am far too much like the nations around me. I have evil thoughts and desires, just like they do. In and of myself, I am just as unloving, just as hateful, just as self-centered as they are. Which is why I need to come here in the first place. I need God’s Spirit to speak to my messed-up head and heart.

Here is the root cause of the poisonous fog. We who claim to follow God forget how much we really, really need Him to cleanse us. So, to fight the fog, we must first own our own problem. In fact, this is one thing that truly distinguishes us from the people around us. We admit that we are fatally poisoned by sin, and we desperately need the help of our healing God and Father.

## 1.2 Own the Solution

And if we are willing to own the problem, then we can also begin to own the solution. Look at verse 16:

Tech Note: Take down Slide #7, now, and immediately put up Slide #8: Own the Solution – Isaiah 1:16-17

*“Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” Isaiah 1:16-17*

Washing was a major part of worship at the temple. The people had to be clean, the priests had to be clean, the sacrifices had to be clean, even the utensils used in the sacrifice had to be clean. All this washing on the outside reminded the people that they must also be clean on the inside, because they worshipped and served a holy God.

But somewhere along the line, the people had separated the outer washing from the inner washing. They performed a religious washing of the body, but their inner life was still polluted, and this pollution showed up in their evil actions. God is telling them to connect these two points again.

What they do at the temple ought to make a real difference in their entire society. Rather than simply being religious people doing religious things on religious days, God’s people should be reflecting His values all the time, wherever they go. God wants His people to take their worship into the streets. They must:

Tech Note: Take down Slide #8, now, and immediately put up Slide #9: Taking Worship into the Streets

- Do Right
- Seek Justice
- Defend the Oppressed
- Take up the cause of those without parents
- Plead the case of the widow

I wonder if the people of God are seen this way in our nation. Or is the church known mostly by what we oppose, whom we object to, judge or condemn. Perhaps our voices are so loud about

some subjects that we are not truly heard on others. Maybe we need to consider a change. Maybe our speeches, our conversations and our social media posts ought to move in a new direction. Perhaps we ought to focus on what the prophet highlights here: issues surrounding justice, oppression and care for those who face steep challenges in our culture. These seem to be values at the center of God’s heart.

So to fight the fog, we must first own our part of the problem. We must constantly remind ourselves that we need to God to cleanse us. And then we must begin to own the solution. We must take our worship into the streets, reflecting God’s heart in a messed-up world.

And here’s the good news. If we are willing to do our part, God has promised to do His part. Look at verse 18:

Tech Note: Take down Slide #9, now, and immediately put up Slide #10: Own the Solution – Isaiah 1:18-20

*“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. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.’ For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*  
*Isaiah 1:18-20*

In the end, God must do His part, because there is only so much we can do. We cannot change a person’s heart and soul. We cannot remove all the sinful pollution that has filtered into our system from the very day that we are born. We have been inhaling sinful desires and instincts since the day we took our first breath. But God can cleanse, and He is willing to cleanse. He is willing to start again.

I love this about our God. He is constantly willing to re-create us. Yes, we fail. Yes, we fall short. Yes, we make mistakes. But God says He will start over with us. We are no longer owned or dominated by our past. We may have to deal with the consequences of our past, but God has handled the guilt of our past, the shame of our past, the feelings of failure about our past. When God decides to cleanse and recreate us, we no longer have to be like we were. God promises to change us.

## 2 A Father’s Resolve

### 2.1 Trust God’s Righteous Judgement

But make no mistake, there is a hard edge to this cleansing. God has resolved to cleanse His people, and He will settle for nothing short of victory. Rebels will be left to the whims of the invading enemy forces. Look at verse 21:

Tech Note: Take down Slide #10, now, and immediately put up Slide #11: Trust God’s Righteous Judgement – Isaiah 1:21-23

*“See how the faithful city has become a prostitute! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her—but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, partners with thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case does not come before them.” Isaiah 1:21-23*

Have you ever looked at a picture of yourself and thought, “Do I really look that bad?” Joe Sommers and I have been recording our Essential Truth videos for release later this year, and I find that it is much harder than it looks to talk to a camera. By far the most painful part of the process is having to watch the video afterwards. I tried to get Joe to install lenses that will make me look better and sound smarter, but he tells me there is only so much we can do, given the quality of the talent he must work with. Unfortunately, the video tells the truth, even if it doesn’t match my own vision of what I must look or sound like.

God will not allow us to believe a lie about ourselves. We must learn to trust His righteous judgement. Perhaps we can fool ourselves into thinking that we are not quite as bad as the nations around us, but that false assumption will get us killed. It’s a poisonous fog that will destroy us. According to the standards of God’s holiness, we are, in ourselves, prostitutes, murders, thieves and rebels.

## 2.2 Trust God’s Fierce Love

Which is why God is resolved to go to work on us. Look at verse 24:

Tech Note: Take down Slide #11, now, and immediately put up Slide #12: Trust God’s Fierce Love – Isaiah 1:24-31

*“Therefore the Lord, the LORD Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel, declares: ‘Ah! I will vent my wrath on my foes and avenge myself on my enemies. I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. I will restore your leaders as in days of old, your rulers as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City. Zion will be delivered with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness. But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the LORD will perish. You will be ashamed because of the sacred oaks in which you have delighted; you will be disgraced because of the gardens that you have chosen. You will be like an oak with fading leaves, like a garden without water. The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark; both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire.’” Isaiah 1:24-31*

The cleansing power of fire is a theme often repeated in scripture. It burns away everything that is temporary and impure, leaving only what is eternal and pure. If we genuinely want to fight the spiritually poisonous fog of our culture, we are going to have to trust God’s fierce love. We are going to have to let God purifying fire go to work on us.

But what does this mean really, practically? Let me make a few observations.

First, we need to know that fire is God’s last resort. Even as He gives this message to the prophet, He hopes that people will hear the message and change their direction. He hopes to avoid the coming disaster, when the enemies will bring the destruction that is otherwise certain. God takes no pleasure in disciplining His children. He would much rather they listen, confess, and change.

Before the fire comes to our lives, will we hear the message of change. Sin always leads to death. It is a spiritual law that God has put into place, and we have no power to change it. And God’s fierce love will not allow us to escape forever. At some point, God will turn on the lights and our secret sins will be exposed. I have seen it happen over and over again. God has issued the warning. Will we take it seriously, or must He allow for the raging fires to expose our impurities?

And, here is the good news. It’s not too late to change. There is a way out of the fog. God’s fierce love has not given up on us. He promises victory to those who will do their part. If we will confess our sin and our failures, He will provide His cleansing. He will give us a new beginning. He will recreate us in the righteous image of the holy Son of God Himself. The fog will be lifted, and we will breath the pure breath of God’s own Spirit.

Let’s pray.

Tech Note: Take down Slide #12, now. Praise Team can come onto the platform as I begin the prayer. After the Praise Team leads the final song put Slide #13: Next Steps.