

Text: Isaiah 22:1-14

Title: "The sin that has no atonement"

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: Israel is one of our nation's great allies in the cause of Western ideals of freedom and capitalism. Their help has been critical for our national security. The Abrahamic Covenant clearly singled out Israel as the source of the promised descendant of the woman Eve, in whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, correcting man's fall into sin in Genesis 3. This descendant of Abraham is Jesus Christ. Peter preached repentance to Jerusalem, the city that had rejected her promised Messiah. They had demanded His crucifixion with a denial: "We have no king but Caesar."

This rejection of God's promised Messiah was not Israel's first, however. Rejection had begun many years prior under the reign of Israel's judges and kings. That history, especially severe in the northern kingdom, devolved to the point of no return under the Judean reign of Manasseh, the last king of Isaiah's lifetime. Tradition names Manasseh as responsible for the prophet's martyrdom. Because of this wicked king, God's judgment on Judah became irreversible.

Not even the godly reign of Manasseh's grandson Josiah could reverse the trajectory that this evil king had set for Judah. 2 Kings 23:26 explains how Israel passed the point of no return under this wicked king: "Notwithstanding the Lord turned not from the fierceness of his great wrath, wherewith his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations that Manasseh had provoked him withal."

The wrath of that passage still exists today, as does Israel's rejection of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Present-day Israel enjoys not the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant, which are available only in Jesus Christ, but rather the curses of the Pal-

estinian Covenant, due to their unbelief and disobedience to the laws of Sinai. Because the Abrahamic Covenant is an eternal and unconditional promise to Abraham, Israel's current cursed condition is temporary. The curse will end when Israel turns to Jesus Christ for salvation during the Great Tribulation. The nation's glorious future will then begin.

So biblically, we are living in a period of prophetic history during which Israel is not blessed as the Lord's chosen people, but rather cursed as the Lord's chosen people. It is a period of judgment that began in Isaiah's day with the sins of Judah under Manasseh. The last verse of our passage communicates this theme – Judah has committed sin for which there is simply no atonement, the unforgivable sin (v. 14).

Our passage is about this sin that has no atonement, the unforgiveable sin, the sin of final unbelief. Just like this sin is the sin that ended Judah's existence as a sovereign nation, it is also the sin in which men and women die, who then experience God's final judgment in hell. In a sermon titled, "The Sin of Unbelief," Charles Spurgeon preached to a New Testament audience the message Isaiah preaches here to his Old Testament audience. Spurgeon explained the unforgivable sin of unbelief this way:

"And now to close this point—for I have been already too long—let me remark that you will observe the heinous nature of unbelief in this—that it is the damning sin. There is one sin for which Christ never died; it is the sin against the Holy Ghost. There is one other sin for which Christ never made atonement. Mention every crime in the calendar of evil, and I will show you persons who have found forgiveness for it. But ask me whether the man who died in unbelief can be saved, and I reply there is no atonement for that man. There is an atonement made for the unbelief of a Christian, because it is temporary; but the final unbelief—the unbelief with which men die—never was atoned for. You may turn over this whole

Book, and you will find that there is no atonement for the man who died in unbelief; there is no mercy for him. Had he been guilty of every other sin, if he had but believed, he would have been pardoned; but this is the damning exception — he had no faith.”

In our passage Isaiah describes the sin that has no atonement, the unforgiveable sin of final unbelief. The sin is idolatrous, self-destructive, plagued by an enemy, and both self-reliant and unrepentant.

I. The unforgiveable sin is idolatrous (vv. 1-2a).

Illustration: On September 8 of last year, our President gave an address at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C.. He said in part, “To have a great nation, you have to have religion. I believe that so strongly. There has to be something after we go through all of this — and that something is God.”

Religion has been a blessing to our nation’s history. The President was correct to say, “When faith gets weaker, our country seems to get weaker. When faith gets stronger... good things happen for our country. It’s amazing the way it seems to work that way. Under the Trump Administration, we’re defending our rights and restoring our identity as a nation under God. We are One Nation Under God — and we always will be.” Our nation has been blessed with religious freedom.

Application: Yet the Israel about which Isaiah is burdened in our passage had also been a religious nation. And yet, it was not religion that the nation needed, but true religion. They needed to be a nation in submission to the true God.

Verse one titles the passage “the burden of the Valley of Vision.” This name refers to Judah and Jerusalem (vv. 8-10). This is the fourth burden of Isaiah in a row. At the beginning of chapter 21, we saw Isaiah’s burden for Babylon, then for

Edom (nicknamed *Dumah*), and then various Arabian tribes. Isaiah's Jerusalem is in the same burdensome category as these others. It is not only secularized pagans that can commit the unforgiveable sin of unbelief. Religious people can too.

Jerusalem was on a hill, surrounded by taller hills with valleys in between the hills, so it is not clear why Isaiah would call this city a *valley of vision* rather than a *hill of vision*. *Vision* means that unlike Babylon, Edom, and Arabia, Jerusalem had received special revelation from the Lord directly. They had the Torah and other books of the Bible, like many of the Psalms. Prophets like Isaiah had spoken and written to them the inerrant words of direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

So in what sense was Jerusalem a valley? We may not be able to say for sure, but a valley in Scripture is an inhabited piece of topography, whereas mountains are typically less inhabited. Perhaps Jerusalem was the *valley* of vision because vision was for its inhabitants, the people.

Nevertheless, ignoring this vision from the Lord, these people had built altars on their rooftops to worship false gods (v. 1b). They enjoyed pagan parties up there, which gave them a good time (v. 2a). Jeremiah 19:13 explains this rooftop idolatry: "And the houses of Jerusalem, and the houses of the kings of Judah, shall be defiled as the place of Tophet [a place known for idols], because of all the houses upon whose roofs they have burned incense unto all the host of heaven, and have pored out drink offerings unto other gods."

The unforgiveable sin is idolatrous. Today, our idolatry may not happen on the housetop. But when we serve other gods instead of worshipping the true God, whether at the ballpark, the football stadium, or in front of the TV, the idolatry is the same. It may be on a bar stool, or at a computer screen, or while scrolling on the phone. It may be during long hours at the office or in the field making more money while we fail to

seek first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). To love self, pleasure, or money more than God is idolatry, the kind that characterizes the unforgiveable sin. It is this unbelief in practice.

II. The unforgiveable sin is self-destructive (vv. 2b-5).

Illustration: Last May a company called Emergence AI conducted an experiment they called Emergence World. Ten AI agents were allowed to interact to build a society. In the end the project self-destructed. One headline about the results of the experiment read: "Wild experiment sees AI agents falling in love, burning down towns, and deleting themselves."

Application: Isaiah's "Valley of Vision" has much in common with that AI experiment. Isaiah says that there are the slain and imprisoned here, but no battles or war (vv. 2b-3). What is killing and imprisoning people is internal trouble, treading-down one another, and perplexity (v. 5). Their God has given Jerusalem over to reprobation for their own self-destruction.

These are the conditions described in 2 Kings 21:16: "Moreover, Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another; beside his sin wherewith he made Judah to sin, in doing that which was evil in the sight of the Lord." There is nothing more self-destructive than the unforgivable sin of unbelief.

Verse 4 tells us how Isaiah felt about this destruction – the demise of a once great nation. He weeps for Israel the way the Lord Jesus laments them in Matthew 23:37-38, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate."

Isaiah weeps with the burdened heart Paul had in Romans 9:1-4a, "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: Who are Israelites."

And like our Lord and His servants, Isaiah and Paul, we are called to the sorrowful burden of gospel ministry to the self-destroying unbelievers of our world. They are family, friends, and neighbors, whom we love, even weeping. As we carry our burden, let us also remember the precious promise of Psalm 126:6, "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him." The salvation of just one eternal soul makes all the weeping and sorrow worthwhile.

III. The unforgiveable sin is plagued by an enemy (vv. 6-7).

Application: These verses reference allies of Babylon who would be involved in the demise of Judah, Elam and Kir. Isaiah's prediction came true when Nebuchadnezzar showed up at Jerusalem's gate. Judah's fate was not only self-destruction, but enemy-destruction. The sin of unbelief had laid them open to the destruction of their enemy.

Every unbeliever has a destroying enemy. 2 Corinthians 4:4, "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." Ephesians 2:2, "Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience." 1 Peter 5:8, "Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." Satan is real, and he is doing everything he can to make unbelievers

commit the sin of final unbelief. Sadly, unbelievers do not even know they have an enemy like this.

IV. The unforgiveable sin is self-reliant and unrepentant (vv. 8-13).

Illustration: A verse I like to share when asked to speak at funerals of people I do not know comes from Ecclesiastes 7:2, “It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.” It tells us that a funeral in a house of mourning is a good place to be, because it reminds us that we all have an end that we must lay to heart.

Application: The Jews Isaiah describes in this passage laid a different doctrine to heart: “Let us eat and drink, for we have made ourselves safe by our own efforts.” Isaiah rephrases their hopeful idea: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” Isaiah’s take on their self-reliant refusal to repent of their unbelief is the correct one. The unforgiveable sin is self-reliant and unrepentant, when it should be entering the house of mourning in consideration of the end. We all will die, and then what will become of our self-reliance?

Conclusion: Isaiah concludes his message about the unforgiveable sin with an explanation about why it is unforgiveable (v. 14). The words *shall not be purged* in Hebrew is the verb for *cover*, and it is the technical term in the Old Testament for the work of *atonement*. We could translate with the ESV, “Surely this iniquity shall not be atoned for you.” In the words of Charles Spurgeon: “the final unbelief—the unbelief with which men die—never was atoned for. You may turn over this whole Book, and you will find that there is no atonement for the man who died in unbelief; there is no mercy for him. Had he been guilty of every other sin, if he had but believed, he would have been pardoned; but this is the damning exception—he had no faith.”

But if you are here this morning, you have obviously not yet died in final unbelief. You have not yet committed this unforgiveable sin. There is still hope for you.

It is the hope that saved the Apostle Paul, who describes what happened to his own sin of unbelief in 1 Timothy 1:13, “[I] was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.” Paul’s point is not that his sin of ignorant unbelief had been excusable. He wrote in Romans 1:20 that every unbeliever is without excuse. His point is that because his ignorant unbelief was inexcusable, only God’s mercy could save him. The greater the sin, the greater the mercy needed to save from sin.

God’s mercy is very great, offered to those who are committing the very great sin of ignorant unbelief: “And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus” (v. 14). Paul’s message is clear — “If God can save me from my ignorant unbelief, He can do the same for you.” The power of Jesus’s faithfulness and love is strong enough to save the chief of sinners. He did it for Saul of Tarsus; He can do it for you.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*