

Work as Worship (Isaiah 1-4)

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Isaiah

The Prophet Isaiah received a vision of God — of his great power, his glorious majesty, and his purifying holiness. When we glimpse who God is in Scripture, it can cleanse away our inflated self-importance and the insufficiency of our lip-service in worship. But it also can give us a clear picture of what is truly valuable in this life. It changes the way we live, the way we do business and the way we worship. When we understand who God is and where we stand in relation to him, we come out different people in our values and our work ethic.

The bulk of the book of Isaiah consists of the prophet Isaiah giving voice to God's assessment of Israel's failure to live up to the covenant between God and Israel. Through Moses, God entered a covenant with his people. He promised them security, peace and prosperity, secured by his presence among them. They promised him worship and observance of the law he gave them. Isaiah, like the other writing prophets after him, proclaims the people's — and especially the leaders' — failure to obey God's law.

According to Isaiah 1:1, the prophet Isaiah's career extended through the reigns of four kings in the southern kingdom of Judah. While the political scene in Judah was different from that in the northern kingdom of Israel, the sins of the people were distressingly similar: idol worship, the oppression and marginalization of the poor for personal gain, and business practices that fundamentally threatened God's Law. Like his contemporary Amos, Isaiah clearly saw that lip-service worship leads to self-serving social ethics.

In Isaiah's writings, there is an integral connection between our worship and our work life. Isaiah begins by insisting that religious rituals nauseate God when accompanied by sinful living:

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts...Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (Isaiah 1:11–17)

The catastrophe Isaiah later predicts comes as a direct result of the nation's oppression of workers and lack of provision for those in economic need.

In our world today in which our daily work seems disconnected from our weekend worship, God says, “If you know my Law and love me, you will not mistreat workers in the workplace.” Isaiah knew from personal experience that a genuine vision of God changes our lives, including how we behave in the workplace.

A recurring charge throughout the book of Isaiah is that the leaders were unfaithful to God’s covenant because they pursued wealth and status at the expense of the marginalized and the poor. As the people of God, they were called to be different from the surrounding and competing cultures. The exploitation of the poor for the advancement of the social elite was a breach of God’s covenant claims on his people.

God’s concern for justice and righteousness leads him today to judge nations, corporations and individuals who defraud and deceive others for personal gain. In our day, we see exploitation of entire nations by their own leaders. Just as significantly, we see — and engage in — seemingly minor injustices such as unfair compensation, excessive workloads, oppressive contract terms and conditions, and looking the other way when abuse occurs at home, at work, in church and on the street. God will ultimately judge those who gain wealth or preserve their jobs or privileges by exploiting the poor and marginalized.