

From Hypocrisy to Sincerity

Isaiah 29:1-24

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Introduction

“The church is full of hypocrites.”

- Have you ever heard anybody use that as the reason that they do not go to church?
 - Well, it might not be a bad thing to just agree with them about that.
- There is a lot of hypocrisy, even in the best churches.
 - Who among us can claim that in our worship of the living God, we ourselves are do not struggle with hypocrisy?
 - Honestly, we often come before God as if He is not real.
 - In our daily living, and even in our worship, we are often more concerned about what others think of us than we are of what God thinks of us.
 - Is it not true?
 - Is there not shameful lust and worry and fear of man and pride and malice and covetousness and many other things that you bring before Him as if He were not real?
 - Is it not the case that there are things you would never say before men because of shame that you brazenly think and even do before God?
 - What is that but hypocrisy?
- Yet, you should go on and ask the one who stays home because of hypocrisy about his own sincerity.
 - If he is truly offended that God is hypocritically worshipped, he must be very concerned for the honour of God...
 - And if he is concerned for the honour of God, why would he not do the best he can to do what others are failing to do and worship Him sincerely?
 - Does he withhold the worship that God has appointed simply because others are doing it hypocritically?
 - Does this same person refuse to give to the poor because some people do it with selfish motives?
- But perhaps even more importantly,
 - you should point out to him that God is well aware that He is being worshipped hypocritically...
 - He is well aware of it, and He hates it.
 - But He has also promised that He is going to correct it and establish a church of pure worshippers!

- Brothers and sisters, that is our hope!
- We come to Him, not because we have arrived, but because He promises to pardon us and deliver us from all our sin by His grace.

Isaiah 29 is about God dealing with hypocrisy among His people so as at last to bring forth a church of sincere worshippers!

- We are not what we ought to be, but He knows what to do about it!
- He knows how disconnected we are from Him such that we often only go through the motions,
- but by His grace, He does all that is necessary to connect us to Himself in truth and then to strengthen our connection to Him!

In Isaiah 29, God addresses His people as Ariel.

- It is quite certain from the context that Ariel refers to Jerusalem,
 - the place God appointed for His worship to be given.
 - It is referred to as the city where David dwelt, and in verse 8 it is referred to as Mount Zion.
- However, the meaning of the word Ariel is somewhat debated.
 - But most understand it to refer to the altar hearth of God where sacrifices were offered.
 - The word is used this way in Ezekiel 24:9-10 where it is referred as the pyre where sacrifices are offered.
 - This alter, according to the Law of Moses was supposed to be kept burning at all times.
- In Isaiah 29, the LORD refers to the whole city of Jerusalem as His Ariel because Jerusalem is the one city in all the world where His altar was found.
 - It was here that the offering that reconciles sinners to God was offered.
 - Now that Jesus has come, we know that the blood of the covenant is His own blood that was shed for the remission of our sins.
 - And it is on the basis of that sacrifice of the Son of God that we have true fellowship with God.
 - It is through the altar that we draw near to God.
 - We are the people of the cross who rejoice in Christ crucified.
 - The whole church, founded as it is upon Jesus Christ, is God's Ariel.
 - We, of all people, who are members of the church, ought to be connected to God.
 - But many members of the church are completely disconnected from Him.

- And everyone of us is not as fully connected as we ought to be, even though we are Ariel!
- This is the problem that Isaiah addresses in chapter 29.
 - In verses 1-8, He shows that He is going to distress Ariel...
 - In verses 9-16, He shows that the reason He is going to distress Ariel is because of their hypocrisy...
 - And in verses 17-24, He shows how Ariel will be restored to be His sincere worshippers who are connected to Him.
 - Let's consider each of these points.

I. First of all, see how that Lord Himself is going to distress Ariel (v. 1-8).

- Remember, Ariel is God's own people!
 - The people who, at least outwardly, worship Him through the blood of the covenant!
- A. He declares very plainly that He Himself will distress them!
 1. The chapter opens up with the words, "Woe to Ariel."
 - a. As we saw last week,
 - the word **woe** ordinarily speaks of impending disaster,
 - and that is exactly what it speaks of here.
 - God is going to strike Ariel with disaster!
 - b. This is what God does to the city where David dwelt!
 - The one city in all the world where God's altar that reconciles God and man could be found!
 - The city where the yearly feasts that God had appointed were kept year after year!
 - c. And now that Jesus has come, Ariel refers to those who worship God in the name of Jesus...
 - Ariel is the visible church that gathers in His name and that keeps the ordinances of worship that He has appointed in the New Testament.
 - The singing of praise, the preaching of the gospel, the prayers, the breaking of bread, the giving of our offerings...
 - All in the name of Jesus Christ!

TRANS> This is Ariel and God Himself in going to distress Ariel.

2. In verse 2 the LORD states expressly that He Himself is going to distress Ariel.

- And it appears that this will be a very heavy distress that God will bring upon His covenant people...
 - a. He says that his distressing of His people will bring them to heaviness and sorrow!
 - You must know that there are times when God does this to His own people who worship Him at His appointed altar...
 - b. He says that the whole city will be as Ariel, the place of burning and blood!
 - It is all to become like the blood laden altar—
 - The whole city will become as a sacrifice before God.
 - This is what happened, to a degree, when Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon...
 - but how much more when our dear LORD Jesus Christ was crucified for us...
 - As our Mediator, He represented the whole church...
 - And the wrath and curse of God was poured upon Him...
 - The whole church was offered up as a bleeding sacrifice when Jesus was crucified!
 - God's own city became one great Ariel!
 - c. In verse 3 He describes Himself as encamping against Ariel like an army so that none of them can escape—
 - 1) This is just the opposite of Psalm 34 where God is said to encircle and camp around His people to defend them...
 - Here, He surrounds them to attack them!
 - 2) And the result is that they will be brought down to the ground so that their speech will be like that of the dead when brought up by a medium...
 - The horse, whispering speech of a disembodied spirit...
 - Speech that is weak and humble as one laid low...
 - So it was that Jesus was brought to extreme weakness on the cross when He became Ariel.
3. When the LORD of Hosts becomes the avenger of His people, our earthly enemies become as nothing by comparison...
- a. That appears to be the point of verses 5-8...
 - The multitude of enemy nations that had seemed so menacing now are like fine dust that is quickly blown away into oblivion...

- b. What a terror it is when you realise that it is God Almighty with whom we have to do—
 - As verse 6 says,
 - Isa 29:6: You will be punished by the LORD of hosts with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with storm and tempest and the flame of devouring fire.
 - He is presented here as He appeared at Sinai...
 - As accompanied by thunder and earthquake and great noise, as storm and tempest and as a consuming fire!
 - The people at Sinai were terrified—so terrified that they thought they would die if God showed Himself to them like this again!
 - Terrified as Isaiah was in chapter 6 when He saw the glory of the Lord!
 - Only here, it is worse—much worse—because here the LORD breaks out and punishes His people!
- c. All the nations that Israel was so afraid of—all the persecutors and oppressors that we fear—by comparison become like a dream that quickly passes.
 - This is reality!
 - We have it all backwards now because we are terrified by the wrath of our earthly enemies...
 - but we have very little fear of the wrath of God such that our thoughts of His curse are like a dream that quickly passes.
 - And our enemies themselves who think they can overthrow Ariel...
 - They are only dreaming!
 - They wake up to reality when God’s wrath is revealed and suddenly they see how small and how helpless they are.
 - But how bold they often are in this world.
 - How many times they have supposed that they had Ariel right where they wanted her!
 - That they would quickly bring her down...
 - But they are only dreaming!
 - It is God who will deal with Ariel at last—as well as with these enemy nations!

B. But what a shocking thing this is!

1. That God should come upon Ariel to distress her!

- Why should He attack His own altar?
 - Why should He come against His own people who worship Him at His altar—at the one place in all the world where He is reconciled to His people?
2. Indeed, why is it that He should come against His own Son?
- This is what so perplexed the disciples of Jesus...
 - Over and over He told them He must go to Jerusalem and be offered as a sacrifice...
 - even that He should be lifted up to be crucified, as one cursed of God.
 - His disciples could not accept this.
 - The first time He mentioned it, Peter protested and fell under His sharp rebuke... “Get behind me Satan.”
 - And after that they usually just changed the subject whenever Jesus said anything about it.
3. And I say, that even today, in the church,
- It is so hard for God’s people to accept that the Lord should have reason to come against His own people to distress them...
 - They can believe that Jesus suffered and the cross,
 - but they find it very hard to believe that God Himself broke out against His Son and brought His wrath and curse upon Him there!
 - Why would God do such a thing against His own beloved Son?
 - Why would He distress His own Ariel?
 - Well, of course the answer is because His justice demands it!
 - That is the very reason why there is an altar...
 - Because all men require the shedding of blood to be accepted of God because they do not regard Him as God.

TRANS> And is the second thing I want you to see from this chapter...namely that,

II. God distresses Ariel because they do not regard Him as God (v. 9-16).

- Instead of serving Him with complete devotion, they act as if **He** were a passing dream.
 - Though He has revealed Himself to them in particular, they live before Him as if He is not real—not all that He says He is!
- A. He will distress His people because they are blind to His revelation.
1. Their blindness is seen even in what Isaiah has been saying to them...

- He has just told them that the LORD is going to distress Ariel—His own people.
 - And to them, this is absurd—it makes no sense!
 - Why would God ever judge Ariel when Ariel is the place where His true worship is conducted and where He is reconciled?
- You see how verse 9 begins!
 - “Pause and wonder!”
 - In other words, “be stunned!”
 - “Be astonished so that you cannot even speak!”
 - How could it be that God would judge His own people?

TRANS> The question from God’s perspective is rather, “how could He not judge them when they are so blind that they do not see Him despite all the light He has given to them?”

2. With deep irony, the LORD speaks to them...
 - a. He says, “Blind yourselves and be blind!”
 - Go ahead and make yourself blind!
 - “You cannot see how it could be that I should curse Ariel because you have made yourself blind to me!”
 - You refuse to know me as the Holy One.
 - You have become like as one who is drunk and insensible.
 - b. And then in verse 10, Isaiah explains that such blindness can only be accounted for as a judgement of God.
 - No one could be so blind concerning God unless his blindness is supernatural.
 - To be so near to God’s revelation and to be stupefied by the announcement of His coming judgement is beyond natural blindness.
 - John Calvin has a great explanation of this. He says:
 - “As it belongs to Him [God] to give eyes to see, and to enlighten minds by the spirit of judgement and understanding, so He alone deprives us of all light, when He sees that by a wicked and depraved hatred of the truth we of our own accord wish for darkness. Accordingly, when men are blind, and especially in things so plain and obvious, we perceive His righteous judgement.”

- You will remember back in chapter 6 when Isaiah saw the glory of God that the LORD told him that he was going to blind this people by his ministry.
 - Isaiah would preach to them, and they would become more and more blinded because the LORD would send blindness to them.
 - They had blinded themselves, so now He had poured out even more blindness on them
 - That's what it says in verse 10:
 - Isa 29:10: For the LORD has poured out on you The spirit of deep sleep, And has closed your eyes, namely, the prophets; And He has covered your heads, namely, the seers.
- Yes, it was such a great blindness that even those who were appointed to teach them—the prophets and the seers—were stupefied.
 - This is given to us in the New Testament to explain why so many in Israel rejected the Messiah...
 - In John 12:40, Jesus says of those rejecting Him...
 - Joh 12:40: "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, Lest they should see with their eyes, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them."
 - It is because God blinded them and hardened their hearts as a judgement for their wickedness.
 - This was especially true of their leaders...
 - How else could they have missed the Messiah?
 - How else could anyone have missed Him?
 - They have been blinded as a judgement!
- But see that you do not become proud because you can see...
 - The blindness that God sent into the world because of sin affects all of us and is only removed by His grace that calls us out of darkness...
 - Even the disciples could not for the life of them see why Jesus should suffer and die—and be cursed of God!
 - Even to them whose eyes were being opened and had been opened, there was still much darkness...
 - And so it is for all of us—
 - 1 Cor 13:12: For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face.
 - We should be humbled by the dimness of our vision of our God!

3. Isaiah illustrates the effect of this blindness in verse 11 and 12.
- He says that God's whole revelation to His people has become like a sealed book.
 - The people take it to their leaders to read it, but they cannot because to them it is sealed—they cannot make sense of it.
 - And they take it to one who is not trained (not literate) and he protests that he cannot read.
 - How sad this is!
 - The book is there—God's revelation is there—It is given to His people—
 - but it does them no more good than a closed book or a book in the hands of one who cannot read!
 - A while back, a woman told me of a friend in her town who was distressed about her life and wanted to know what God's word said about salvation...
 - She went to her friends who went to church, but none of them could explain it to her...
 - Neither could the minister of the church they went to.
 - It was a sealed book to him!
 - How many times this has happened in church history!
 - Before the reformation, how few there were even among the priests and bishops who could explain why God would judge Ariel...
 - And the people all felt the Bible was a book that they could not read because they were not trained.
 - How sad to have the revelation right there at your fingertips and have no benefit from it!
 - Oh brothers and sisters,
 - Cry out to God that He would make His word real in your life and in the life of your children and the life your minister and elders!
 - Many of you come from churches from which the word was taken away!
 - Pray God to open your eyes and give you more and more understanding!

TRANS> So you see why God would bring judgement upon His people...

- It is the very fact that they are Ariel, a people near to His altar where He is revealed to them,

- and yet for all that revelation they are still blind.
 - That is why His judgement must fall on them.
 - Indeed, judgement begins with the house of God!
 - Not I want you to see what else Ariel is judged for—
 - something that is closely related to blindness.
- B. They also must be judged because their worship is hypocritical.
1. Oh yes, they were still worshipping!
 - The form was still there!
 - At Jerusalem, it was more or less the right form, especially after the reforms under Hezekiah, one of the few times when the high places were removed!
 - But there was still a very serious problem with their worship...
 - a problem described in verse 13!
 - Isa 29:13: Therefore the Lord said: "Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men,
 - They were worshipping God in Ariel without a heart for God!
 - The worship they were offering was not sincere!
 - They worshipped God as if He were a god that was impressed with outward conformity.
 - But God is a Spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth!
 - He is not a god that does not see the heart of His worshippers!
 - True worship begins with the heart!
 - The foundation of true worship is a heart devoted to Him.
 - Outward honour without inward devotion is worse then worthless—it is downright offensive to God!
 - When we lose sight of God, we start to look at worship according to what man demands rather than at what is pleasing to God.
 - It is amazing to me how strong the demands of worshippers can be!
 - They want what they want instead of looking to what God wants...
 - And this leads to all sorts of superstition and worship that God never appointed and that never came into His mind... according to the commandments of men.

- But the problem begins in the heart—
 - when, even though our worship is regulated by God’s commands,
 - we have lost sight of the great and holy God we come to worship!
2. The LORD declares that He will bring a marvellous stupidity upon people who do not honour Him with their hearts...
- a. He will make them to become veritable idiots—
 - Isa 29:14: Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work Among this people, A marvelous work and a wonder; For the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, And the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden."
 - Here are people who do all the motions of worship without any true sense of the One they are actually worshipping!
 - It is a terrible judgement!
 - There you are, worshipping, all the while, completely disconnected from God!
 - b. Woe to you if you have become so stupid as to think that you can hide what you are from Him!
 - Verse 15 says,
 - Isa 29:15: Woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the LORD, And their works are in the dark; They say, "Who sees us?" and, "Who knows us?"
 - Do you see how insulting it is to come before God with an impenitent heart as if He cannot see you?
 - Do you really think He does not see what is in your heart?
 - Do you really think He does not see the wickedness of your plans when you come before Him?
 - If you do, wisdom and understanding of even the most basic sort has been taken from you.
 - c. Do you have things so turned around that you look at the LORD as the clay?
 - That is what verse 16 speaks of...
 - Isa 29:16: Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; For shall the thing made say of him who made it, "He did not make me"? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"?
 - Do you not see that He holds your destiny in His hands?
 - Do you not realise that He is the One who made you?
 - Do you suppose that the One who made you has no understanding?

3. Brothers and sisters, understand that there are many who worship God in this foolish delusion—without any real recognition of who He is that they worship!
 - Let me tell you something!
 - When you truly know Him, you know that you can only come to Him through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ!
 - It becomes real to you that He is holy and that you are not holy.
 - You know Him as the God who cursed Christ because of your wickedness.
 - You know that your acceptance of God is only because of the altar on which Jesus was crucified.
 - You know that God is a holy God who would consume you in a second in His wrath if Jesus had not taken your place.
 - You don't pretend that God does not see the wrong that is in you.
 - You don't pretend that He is the kind of God who does not loath that wrong and take divine offence against it.
 - You rather rejoice in the provision of the sacrifice that He has made for you!
 - You come, knowing that you are in need of His mercy and grace, pleading with Him and rejoicing in His promise to sinners.
 - Your worship is in Christ!

TRANS> And this brings us to our third point...

III. Thirdly, see how Ariel will be restored to sincere worship (verses 17-24)

A. There will be a complete reversal of things.

1. In verse 17 there is a wonderful illustration about this reversal...

- It says:
 - Isa 29:17: Is it not yet a very little while till Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be esteemed as a forest?
- a. Lebanon was an uncultivated place.
 - And this is saying that it will become a Carmel—a fruitful field where there were crops for man's benefit and blessing.
 - The idea is that the wild place will become a fruitful place because God will make it a fruitful place.
 - And at the same time, the fruitful field will be esteemed as a forest...
 - The place that had been cultivated, in other words, will become wild.
 - There is a complete reversal.

- b. This suggests that those within Ariel who were highly cultivated will be humbled and will be seen as fools...
 - while those that were lowly will be exalted.
 - It is the principle by which God operates...
 - the proud are abased and the humble are exalted.
 - Those who pretended to be something before God will be exposed for what they are,
 - and those who are humble before Him will be blessed with abundant fruitfulness!
 - This is exactly what happened when Jesus came.
 - Those who were the leaders and so were filled with self-righteousness were abased...
 - and those who saw their need of a Saviour—the publicans and the harlots—became fruitful.

TRANS> That is the way that God will reverse things.

- 2. You see that the reversal is spelled out in verse 18-21—the lowly are blessed and the proud are abased.
 - a. First, he speaks about the lowly in Ariel:
 - Isa 29:18-19: In that day the deaf shall hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness. The humble also shall increase their joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall rejoice In the Holy One of Israel.
 - You see here that they are called deaf and blind...
 - This shows you that all are blind and death until God is pleased to open our ears and our eyes by His Spirit.
 - We do not see God as He is.
 - We do not understand His revelation.
 - We do not worship Him through Jesus Christ.
 - But God is going to change that!
 - He is going to call out a people to Himself!
 - And for the most part, He will not take these people from among those who are highly esteemed, but from the lowly...
 - He will take those who are the uncultivated members of society and cause them to bear fruit.
 - In this way, He will humble those who vainly suppose that they are something before God and do not know that they are nothing.

- And the lowly ones who are made fruitful will attribute all of their fruit to the grace of God.
- b. See what will become of the proud...
- It describes them under three classifications...
- 1) First, it says that the terrible one will be brought to nothing.
 - This is the oppressor who strikes terror in those he oppresses...
 - But when the lowly ones are brought to God, the oppressor will no longer be feared by them.
 - The lowly will have a new perspective on things...
 - They will see that the LORD is the One to be feared, not the terrible one.
 - Soon, he will be completely taken out of the way.
 - 2) Second, it says that the scornful one will be consumed.
 - This is the one who mocks at God's word and at His ways—
 - He perverts the truth and leads God's people astray, but he will be devoured by God's wrath.
 - When God brings you to Christ, you see the falseness of the false teachers, no matter how great their position...
 - You say things to them such as, "Judge for yourself, ought we to obey God or man?"
 - 3) Third, it says that all who watch for iniquity will be cut off...
 - These are the sly ones who look for opportunities to do evil and to deceive.
 - They are further described in verse 21 as operating in a court of law.
 - They are the ones who twist things around in such a way that a man who is innocent is charged with wrong,
 - and the one who comes to obtain justice ends up being turned away!
- c. In all of this, we ought to think of our LORD Jesus Christ...
- He came into this world as One meek and lowly...
 - But the LORD has highly exalted Him and given Him the name that is above every name.
 - He was brought very low because our sins were laid upon Him,
 - but He rose having obtained justification for all who believe!

- He was the stone that was rejected by the builders, to use the picture in chapter 28...
 - But God has made Him the chief cornerstone upon which the whole church is established.
 - By Him, the lowly are exalted and the proud are abased.
 - Those who are needy find life in Him, and those who think they have no need are crushed by Him.

TRANS> And the rest of the chapter explains the marvellous change that comes when God acts to make the wilderness fruitful!

B. Jacob will once again have children!

1. Jacob had reason to be ashamed because of his children (v. 22)

- Jacob is the one who took a vow that he and his house, if delivered by God, would worship Him!
 - And after God had delivered him, he built an altar and gathered his family together and worshipped God.
- Jacob had come to see who God really was!
 - He had come to see that his only hope was in God's mercy, and he had wrestled with God and prevailed upon Him for that mercy.
 - His name had been changed from Jacob to Israel.
- But here his children were in Isaiah's day, still worshipping at God's altar in accordance with the vow of Jacob...
 - but only with their mouth and their lips.
 - Their hearts were far from God!
 - They no longer saw their need for God's mercy!
 - They could tell the story of Jacob, but they did not understand the story of Jacob!
 - They make Jacob ashamed!
- Just like those in the church today who know the story of Jesus so well—
 - they can recite all the facts...
 - but they do not have a heart for God.
 - They do not see their need of God's mercy in Christ...
 - They do not cry out to God for it.
 - They make Jesus ashamed!
 - For He also took a vow that He would gather His church together to worship God,
 - to declare His acceptance of His sacrifice and to give thanks to Him.

- But you see, He too has reason to be ashamed because so many of His children are not true worshippers of God...
 - They go through the motions of Christian worship.
 - But they do not reverence God in truth.
 - They are not truly connected to God with living faith.
2. But you see that when God does His work, Jacob will see His true children—and so will our greater Jacob, Jesus Christ!
- a. They will be the work of God’s hands, as it says in verse 23.
 - The ones that He has graciously given life to!
 - The ones whose eyes have been opened to see God and whose ears have been unstopped to hear His voice!
 - Oh how different a person is when God has given him life in Christ!
 - All things are made new!
 - b. Look at what the LORD says about the change in them in verse 23!
 - Isa 29:23: But when he sees his children, the work of My hands, in his midst, they will hallow My name, And hallow the Holy One of Jacob, and fear the God of Israel.
 - Isn’t that marvellous?
 - These who were so insensible of the true God and who could stand before Him when their hearts were not right—
 - Now they reverence Him!
 - They know Him!
 - They see His majesty and His grace and His mercy and His holiness and justice and wrath and wisdom!
 - These who had been in such gross error now have understanding of God because they have been taught of God!
 - They who had complained and murmured as Israel did in the wildness now learn doctrine—they learn about God and His ways.
 - They who were once hypocritical worshippers become true worshippers...
 - not standing in their own righteousness, but only in Christ.
 - They come to God yearning for the mercy and life that He gives in Jesus Christ.
 - God is real to them!
 - God is known to them in truth!
 - And they grow in the grace and knowledge of Him.

Conclusion:

- Can this be said of you?
 - The true worshipper in this fallen world comes to God,
 - not pretending that He has arrived—that he is all that he should be...
 - but as one broken and needy who is looking to Christ and resting in Christ...
 - He comes before God, not on the basis of his own righteousness,
 - but on the basis of God's mercy in Christ crucified.
 - Looking to Him to bring forth fruit in his life.