

A prophecy suited to the modern church

'Hear, you deaf; and look, you blind, that you may see. Who is blind but My servant, or deaf as My messenger whom I send? Who is blind as he who is perfect, and blind as the LORD's servant? Seeing many things, but you do not observe; opening the ears, but he does not hear.' The LORD is well pleased for His righteousness' sake; He will exalt the law and make it honourable. But this is a people robbed and plundered; all of them are snared in holes, and they are hidden in prison houses; they are for prey, and no one delivers; for plunder, and no one says, 'Restore!' Who among you will give ear to this? Who will listen and hear for the time to come? Who gave Jacob for plunder, and Israel to the robbers? Was it not the LORD, He against whom we have sinned? For they would not walk in His ways, nor were they obedient to His law. Therefore He has poured on him the fury of His anger and the strength of battle; it has set him on fire all around, Yet he did not know; and it burned him, yet he did not take it to heart. Isa 42:18-25¹

Introduction

The Lord God repeatedly warned Israel, through prophet after prophet beginning with the stern warnings of Moses at Sinai, about the cost of turning from him. The historical story of Israel teaches us the hard facts about apostasy and what follows in divine chastisement. Holding on to her privileged position of alone knowing God amongst the nations, and continuing ritual worship and festal celebrations did nothing to alter God's anger. In the end Israel failed to even recognise her appointed Deliverer when the Messiah came, and he took the kingdom away from her (Matt 21:43).

Yet despite such warnings and examples, the modern church has followed in exactly the same pattern. It has turned from God; it has ignored God's law; it has made alliances with heretics; it has shared a bed with the world; it has not disciplined false teachers; it has accepted leaders who get rich on the back of the poor; it has failed to be a true witness to Christ; it has failed to give to the poor and needy but rather wasted God's money on men and buildings; it has failed to comfort and edify the weak in spirit; it has failed in mission and it has dishonoured Christ. Indeed, many churches are even guilty of blasphemy.²

What can we learn from this prophecy by Isaiah written about 2,700 years ago?

The modern church is blind and deaf

'Hear, you deaf; and look, you blind, that you may see. Who is blind but My servant, or deaf as My messenger whom I send? Who is blind as he who is perfect, and blind as the LORD's servant? Seeing many things, but you do not observe; opening the ears, but he does not hear.' Isa 42:18-20

The modern church continues as if everything was fine and that God is blessing her. Leaders judge their success by large numbers (mostly vulnerable people and students); plenty of money (because authoritarian leaders keep demanding it) and exciting meetings (which are but fleshly emotionalism). In fact the modern church is in the apostasy that God prophesied would occur towards the end (2 Thess 2:1-12).

The church is called to be the servant of God but this modern church is deaf to his words and blind to his will. This is made worse by the superficial appearance of listening to God;

¹ A few commentators (such as John Gill) take this to apply to the Gentiles; but most sound commentators apply this to the Jews, those called to see but who are blind and called to hear God, but who are deaf to him.

² The modern church comprises many different groups, which vary in their condition. I am tarring them all with the same brush because, in general, the church is corrupted, wayward and disobedient. However, of course, some churches are much more obedient and less corrupt; but the few that have escaped apostasy does not significantly alter the overall picture. A barrel full of rotten apples may have two or three that are not yet tainted, but we can still reasonably say that the barrel is full of corruption.

of opening the ears to hear, of claiming to see many things but not observing God. This is like the Pharisees in Jesus' day who read the law constantly, preached on it on the Sabbath week by week and yet so dramatically failed to hear God that they killed the Messiah. The appearance of listening to God is not the same as observing his commands.

Some people think that because they are a Christian they could not be blind or deaf; that churches committed to the Lord Jesus could not veer from the path. This is false and in fact is a dangerous position. It is far better to realise that sin can so easily overtake us that we are called to rely upon Christ every moment, for everything. The place of dependence, because we ourselves are so weak and sinful, is the only safe place to be.

Look at the warnings of God to churches and individuals throughout the NT; there are very many.³ Look at the co-workers of Paul who not only deserted him but later became enemies of Christ.⁴ Look at the severe castigation of Christ to the Revelation churches. This included:

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent. Rev 2:5

Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them [certain church members] with the sword of My mouth. Rev 2:16

Indeed I will cast her [a false teacher] into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children [those who listen to false teachings] with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. Rev 2:22-23

So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Rev 3:16

To make it even more clear, the Lord himself tells people in a Christian church that they: 'do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked' (Rev 3:17).

It is folly to think that a Christian can never fall into deceit, can never be blind to God's will and can fail to hear God and fall aside.⁵ Peter even denied Christ shortly after promising him faithfulness and later denied the equality of justification in the church, requiring a public admonition from Paul. If Peter can fall, so can you; and so can your beloved leader.

The church is meant to be a messenger sent from God. It has a message from God that it is supposed to preach to the world. This message is firstly about the Gospel as a witness to the Saviour-hood of Christ the King. The first problem in the churches is that most of them do not know what this Gospel is and preach a false one. This is a subject we have covered many times elsewhere and will not develop here. If we say that even the Gospel message preached is wrong, if this utterly basic fact is wrong, how much more is wrong?

But the message also has a great deal to do with example. Prophets were to teach by example as well as by what they said. In fact, sometimes their actions and lifestyle were more important than their words (e.g. Hosea, Jonah, Ezekiel). The church itself is to model the message of God. What does this involve? It includes being totally different from the world. It means not establishing worldly leadership structures of power. It is where the first are last. It means not relying upon money. It means shunning buildings, and especially large, expensive buildings. It means giving to the poor and needy in the

³ E.g. Heb 4:1, 6:8, 10:29, 12:15-17; 1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 6:4; Rev 2:5.

⁴ E.g. 1 Tim 1:19-20; 2 Tim 2:17-18. See also: Acts 20:29-30; Phil 3:18; 1 Tim 6:3-5.

⁵ Genuine believers may backslide but will never be lost; however, many in the church today are not genuine but are merely professing Christians – these will be lost if they do not repent of their apostasy.

congregation and outside it. It means ensuring that the flock are well fed, protected from error and looked after financially. It means making certain that God's word is the foundation of everything in the church. It is where every member has an active ministry and all are interdependent. It means making certain that Jesus is the focal point of the meeting and the life of the church. It means being nothing like the world at all.

Churches that try to preach, even their compromised Gospel, will have no success if they are far from being like the messenger of God that they are supposed to be.

Who is blind but My servant, or deaf as My messenger.

God will exalt his law

The LORD is well pleased for His righteousness' sake; He will exalt the law and make it honourable. Isa 42:21

The chief reason that churches today have fallen so low, full of deception, is that they have not followed God's word, let alone exalted in it.

God will exalt his law; he will lift it up and glorify it because it is the outward manifestation of his will. In fact, God's word is so important that he says that he magnifies it above all his other attributes: 'You have magnified Your word above all Your name' (Ps 138:2). If God exalts his word in this way, how vital is it for us to do so?

Instead, the modern church has ignored God's word. Some churches do this deliberately and say that it is now outdated and prophecy is the thing. Such church leaders are simply blasphemous and will perish. Others do so implicitly; accepting God's word but ignoring it in practice. This is not blasphemy but it is disobedience. Yet others claim to honour God's word but succumb to fleshly arguments to diminish it in practice.

Here are some tests of obedience to God's word.

- Does your leader tell you that God loves everybody? Then he is denying God's word (Ps 5:5-6, 11:5; Rm 9:13). God only loves the elect and loves them fully and perfectly (Rm 9:13; Eph 1:4-5).
- Are you taught that Christ died for everyone? Then you have heard heresy; Christ only died for the elect (Isa 53:11; Matt 1:21, 20:16, 28, 26:28; Jn 10:7-10; Acts 20:28).
- Does your church have a single authoritative church leader? Then it is disobeying God's word. (The church is only led by a small team of equal elders and no one else: Acts 20:17; 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5. There is no such thing as a senior pastor.)
- Does your church have women leaders? If so it has disobeyed God (1 Tim 2:12-15).
- Does your church meet in a dedicated building? Then your church has disobeyed God. (All the NT churches met in houses and nowhere else. The spiritual dynamics of a Biblical church can only operate in a house.)
- Does your church allow everyone to contribute to the meeting? If not it is disobeying God (1 Cor 14:26, 29-30; Col 3:16; 1 Thess 5:11; Heb 10:24).
- Does your church use musical instruments? Then it is disobeying God's word. (There is not one word in apostolic teaching advocating the use of musical instruments and they did not appear for over 200 years after the death of the apostles, only becoming common after 1200. Calvin, Spurgeon and Luther condemned musical instruments. They were not common in Reformed churches until the 20th century. Instruments are a part of the Old Covenant ritual that has been cancelled along with blood offerings and a priestly system.)

The majority of churches fail all the above tests.

God's righteousness is seen in those who exalt his word and no one else. If we do not honour God's law we cannot honour God.

The church is robbed and snared

But this is a people robbed and plundered; all of them are snared in holes, and they are hidden in prison houses; they are for prey, and no one delivers; for plunder, and no one says, 'Restore!' Isa 42:22

The church, having ignored God's word and established false doctrines and aberrant practices, has been snared. The church today is a people robbed and plundered. By whom?

Deception always comes from the enemy; indeed deceit is his chief weapon. Having failed to exterminate the church in the fires of persecution in history, he overcame many in the church by feeding them lies and deceit. The Saviour warned us that at the end, deception would multiply and false teachers abound, ruining the faith of many. The apostles repeated this warning:

The coming of the *lawless one* is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth. 2 Thess 2:9-10

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. Rm 16:17-18

For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore *it is* no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. 2 Cor 11:13-15

We should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting. Eph 4:14

That they may come to their senses *and escape* the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to *do* his will. 2 Tim 2:26

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Jm 1:16

An example

I will give just one example of an extremely common heresy that has ensnared the Lord's people. The two chief problems of the early church were being enticed to follow Jewish legalism or alternatively Charismatic mysticism. This continued throughout church history but it is very common today; indeed there are many who submit to both at the same time.

Now many world religions accept the Lord Jesus Christ in some form or another. Hinduism accepts him as one of 330 million gods. Islam accepts that Christ was a great prophet like Moses; Buddhists are happy to say that he was a teacher. Baha'i is happy to include Christ as a god, or a teacher, with others. Many other religions simply have no concept of a personal God at all, such as Jainism or Zen. Only one religion hates Christ and blasphemes his name in the foulest ways. That religion is Judaism.

So, guess what? Satan has deceived many Christians to give great favour to Jews and Judaism or even to openly adopt Jewish practices, teachings, feasts and rituals. Many, following the various strands of the Jewish Root Movement, give great sway to rabbinic teachings and accept that the Talmud has, at least some, authority. This is the collection of books that blasphemes Christ repeatedly in ways too foul to mention. Some follow rabbinic

arbitrary methods of Bible interpretation instead of sound Protestant principles.⁶ Some deceived believers go further still and change their name to a Jewish equivalent, call Paul Rabbi Sha'ul, write 'G-d' for 'God' (a Jewish superstition), call Jesus 'Yeshua', go to a synagogue on Saturday or even get circumcised. This is a clear example of supposed Christians being ensnared, robbed and plundered.

This is so serious that if those entrapped in this heresy fail to escape, then this is a clear testimony that they were never saved at all. Their end is, as Isaiah tells us, 'all of them are snared in holes, and they are hidden in prison houses; they are for prey, and no one delivers; for plunder, and no one says, 'Restore'.

Just as Israel fell into deception, apostasy and then rebellion, so many in the modern church fall similarly. God's word to us who wish to press on is, 'Take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them,' Deut 12:30. Snares are there; we must avoid them. The first snare is to believe there are none.

Who will listen?

Who among you will give ear to this? Who will listen and hear for the time to come? Isa 42:23

Many modern believers are simply not listening to God and yet they seem to listen quite intently to the world or the devil. Just an evaluation of the multiplicity of heresies in the modern church (more than all the previous ages combined) proves that they are not listening to God but hearing deceit.

Then again, Scripture is full of warnings on many subjects; indeed it is the job of brethren to warn each other, 'brethren, warn those who' (1 Thess 5:14). It is also the job of elders to do this to the church 'Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears' (Acts 20:31). 'Warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus'; (Col 1:28). Who is listening to these warnings today? For example:

- 'As my beloved children I warn you. [that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other]' (1 Cor 4:14, 6)
- 'Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.' (Ezek 33:9). [Note: if you do not share the Gospel with someone close to you and they die, you are guilty of their blood: 'When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you shall surely die!' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand'; Ezek 33:8.]
- 'Warn the righteous man that the righteous should not sin'; (Ezek 3:21).
- 'Do not speak with a stiff neck'; (Ps 75:5).
- 'Do not harden your hearts'; (Ps 95:8).
- 'Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do so'; (Prov 3:27).

We could add many more. The fact that so many poor and needy people, both in the church and secular neighbours of the church, are going without, proves that many churches in the land are not obeying the last warning.⁷

We must listen for the time to come. We must build up a testimony that will stand and last.

⁶ There are many of these, but key principles are that: the Bible interprets itself, so context is absolutely vital; the simple grammatical meaning is usually the best; passages must take into account the historical and cultural context; figures of speech must be observed; apocalyptic passages involve symbolism rather than literalism, and so on.

⁷ I am aware of the good work of some churches in dealing out food parcels. This is a good testimony, but so few are doing it and the richest churches are mostly ignoring this matter.

The sovereignty of God is in control

Who gave Jacob for plunder, and Israel to the robbers? Was it not the LORD, He against whom we have sinned? Isa 42:24a

Those who are faithful still must encourage themselves that God is still on the throne of the universe and sovereign over all that is going on. His decree will not falter. Those who do not listen, who do not hear are sinners – plain and simple.

The church is given to the plunderers because it has sinned against God by not listening and not seeing his words. Instead of patting itself on the back that it now has big expensive church buildings and hundreds of followers and bursting bank accounts, the church needs to bewail its sins in deserting God's law.

The disobedience of the church and God's chastisement

For they would not walk in His ways, nor were they obedient to His law. Therefore He has poured on him the fury of His anger and the strength of battle; it has set him on fire all around, Yet he did not know; and it burned him, yet he did not take it to heart. Isa 42:24b-25

This failure to follow God's law will result in chastisement in due course. If churches fail to walk in God's ways then they will know his anger. The church has plenty of examples to stand as a warning: Jacob, David, Saul, Israel and so on. The fact that God loved David did not prevent his being severely chastised for his sin. Hebrews 12 explains that all believers are in this situation. Any leader who tells his people that they can never be guilty before God and never worthy of any condemnation, neither knows God, nor understands theology, nor reads his Bible.⁸ Believers can be disciplined by God in this world⁹ and at the Day of Judgment by losing rewards.¹⁰

Many individuals and churches are actually under God's chastisement right now, but they do not see it for what it is: 'it has set him on fire all around, yet he did not know; and it burned him, yet he did not take it to heart'. Leaders especially are not taking God's discipline to heart but excuse their actions. This will lead to greater and greater chastisement; indeed this is how churches collapse; something I have witnessed myself many times (sometimes I have warned the people concerned first).

Many Christians today, due to their godless actions, are actually walking in chastisement, but put it down to other things. This is especially the case with individuals who have been disciplined by the church but have not repented. They tolerate not hearing from God, not being blessed by God and not seeing fresh revelation without admitting that the first thing to do is repent. They will wander like idle clouds until they do.

A warning

We need to take very great care that we do not follow in the footsteps of Israel, which the apostles stated was an example and a warning to us. At the end of 1500 years of God's providential care and longsuffering, most of Israel failed to accept the promised Messiah, including almost all of her religious leaders.

When the Messiah was an infant, only a few recognised him. Chief of these were Simeon, a just and devout man full of the Spirit (Lk 2:25) who clearly was also a prophet. There was also Anna, a devout widow who served God daily (Lk 2:36-37).

⁸ This is antinomianism.

⁹ 2 Sam 7:14; Heb 12:5-6, 10-11.

¹⁰ 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Jn 1:8; Rev 3:11.

Now all of the chosen people should have recognised him if they had been looking for him, as these two, and serving God in the Spirit, as these two. The whole nation missed his birth and yet foreign Magi did not! There were sufficient signs and prophecies to be consulted, as the priests later confirmed.

So Israel as a whole failed to be ready for the coming of her own Messiah. Is this a type of the end? Will the church fail to be ready for the Second Coming of the Christ? The words of Christ himself seem to suggest that this is likely:

When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth? Lk 18:8

The Greek scholar Robertson says,

The use of *ara* before *e`urhsei* seems to indicate a question expecting a negative answer as in Ac 8:30; Ro 14:19. But here *ara* comes in the middle of the sentence instead of near the beginning, an unusual position for either inferential *ara* or interrogative *ara*. On the whole the interrogative *ara* is probably correct, meaning to question if the Son will find a persistence of faith like that of the widow.¹¹

So, the Greek suggests either a lack of faith (i.e. the lack of a significant worldwide testimony of faith) or the lack of persistent faith (the church is present but has generally given up). Either way there is no foundation for the global revivalism and triumphalism of the modern Charismatic movement; the church is not going to rule the world through apostles and prophets.

The words of Jesus are meant to be a warning and an exhortation to keep persisting in faith, whatever the problems (and there will be many of these). The model to follow is not a burgeoning, militaristic church ruling the world with a rod of iron but that of a lowly widow who had faith despite the odds against her; despite needing justice against a wicked adversary.

Almost everything the church is currently doing is wrong. Its doctrine is wrong, it tolerates heretics in leadership, it wastes God's money, it disobeys God's laws and it is in bed with the world. If things do not change we will see the Lord come to a church that did not survive the coming persecution because it was in bed with the persecutors. Brethren, we must change; we must seek after the Lord and that means obeying his revealed word.

We must learn to be dead to the world and abandon its methods; that includes hierarchical leadership structures. We must build the local church God's way – in small groups with a plurality of elders where everyone serves each other. We must sell off every church building and give the money to the poor and needy. We must abandon fleshly emotionalism and learn that church gatherings are places of mutual edification centred around the Lord's Supper; that worship is rational and not merely emotional, that it involves self-control and not passivity. We must encourage everyone to be evangelists and not leave the work to preachers at certain meetings. There is so much more to put right – but it must be done if we are to have a testimony at the end.

Brethren, heed the words of this ancient prophecy.

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¹¹ *Robertson's Word Pictures*, in. loc.