

May 9 Lesson 10 (NIV)

OFFERING HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Jeremiah 29:10–14

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 29

ISAIAH 29:13–24

¹³ The Lord says:

“These people come near to me with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

Their worship of me

is based on merely human rules they have been taught.

¹⁴ Therefore once more I will astound these people
with wonder upon wonder;

the wisdom of the wise will perish,
the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”

¹⁵ Woe to those who go to great depths
to hide their plans from the LORD,
who do their work in darkness and think,
“Who sees us? Who will know?”

¹⁶ You turn things upside down,
as if the potter were thought to be like the clay!
Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it,
“You did not make me”?

Can the pot say to the potter,
“You know nothing”?

¹⁷ In a very short time, will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field
and the fertile field seem like a forest?

¹⁸ In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll,
and out of gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind will see.

¹⁹ Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD;
the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

²⁰ The ruthless will vanish,
the mockers will disappear,
and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down—

²¹ those who with a word make someone out to be guilty,
who ensnare the defender in court

and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice.

²² Therefore this is what the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, says to the descendants of Jacob:

“No longer will Jacob be ashamed;
no longer will their faces grow pale.

²³ When they see among them their children,
the work of my hands,
they will keep my name holy;
they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob,
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

²⁴ Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding;
those who complain will accept instruction.”

KEY VERSE

Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding; those who complain will accept instruction. —Isaiah 29:24

PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD’S COVENANT

Unit 3: Courageous Prophets of Change

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Stone (walling) Hearts
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Unfaithful Worship (Isaiah 29:13–14)
 - A. Present Indifference to God (v. 13)
 - B. Future Awe of God (v. 14)
Wonderful?
- II. Unfaithful Plans (Isaiah 29:15–22)
 - A. Hidden Plans Are Judged (vv. 15–16)
Appearances Can Be Deceiving
 - B. Followed by Flourishing (vv. 17–19)
 - C. Judgment for the Unjust (vv. 20–21)
 - D. Followed by Restoration (v. 22)
- III. Faithful Worship (Isaiah 29:23–24)
 - A. Based on God’s Character (v. 23)
 - B. Expressed Through God’s Word (v. 24)

Conclusion

- A. Intimate Hearts

- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Assyria *Uh-sear-ee-uh*.

Babylon *Bab-uh-lun*.

Mediterranean *Med-uh-tuh-ray-nee-un*.

Mesopotamia *Mes-uh-puh-tay-me-uh*.

Tiglath-Pileser *Tig-lath-pih-lee-zer*.

Introduction

A. Stone(walling) Hearts

Dr. John Gottman studies marriage and the forces likely to break a union apart. After years of research, he identified four relational traits that reliably predict divorce: contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, and criticism. He refers to these metaphorically as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Criticism becomes destructive when a spouse's value and worth are questioned instead of specific behaviors. Generalizations are made, and the spouse on the receiving end begins to feel resentful and overwhelmed. Contempt manifests itself through eye rolls and insults, which telegraph that one partner believes that he or she possesses exclusive moral high ground within the relationship.

Signs of defensiveness become legion. A defensive spouse might respond to perceived criticism with verbal argumentativeness. A pattern of assuming the role of victim in the face of criticism is another form of excessive self-protection. When these three habits are practiced over time, stonewalling results. A spouse begins to withdraw emotionally from the relationship for self-protection or out of a sense of not knowing how to respond in a productive manner.

Gottman's Four Horsemen are intended to identify marital decay. This model can also be useful when measuring the quality of a person's relationship with God. But this is not a new insight, as today's text reveals.

B. Lesson Context

A predominant theme of the book of Isaiah is God's sovereignty over history. The fictitious pagan fertility gods were imagined to be caught in never-ending cycles of birth, life, and death. For pagans, history endlessly turned on itself. Their gods were doomed to the same repetitive beats as were mere mortals.

By contrast, the God of Israel stood outside of history. Since he brought all things into being (Isaiah 40:21–31), how could it be otherwise? He demonstrated mastery over history by giving Isaiah visions of what would occur before, during, and after the Babylonian exile. That tragedy extended from the destruction of the temple in 586 BC until release from captivity in 538 BC.

The most immediate new thing that God would do was to use a foreign power, Assyria, to accomplish his will by disciplining Israel for their sin and corruption. During Isaiah's tenure as a prophet (740–681 BC), Assyria was the region's sole superpower. Founded in Mesopotamia in about 1750 BC, that nation's period of most militant expansion began in about 1100 BC.

Assyria's most coveted prize, Egypt, lay to the west. However, several smaller nations on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, including the divided northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, stood in its path. The risk of invasion was constant.

Two centuries before Isaiah's time, King Solomon had accumulated immense wealth through his initiative of international commerce. That fact, along with prosperity in the interim, made the covenant people an attractive target for the aggressive Assyrian Empire. Both Israel and Judah experienced years of prosperity after they divided into two kingdoms (Isaiah 2:7; etc.). Assyria menaced both for years.

The threat diminished during the reigns of less bellicose Assyrian monarchs. However, Tiglath-Pileser III (reigned 745–727 BC) renewed Assyrian designs against both Israel and Judah (2 Kings 15:29). The prophets Hosea and Amos had issued the earliest warnings, in the eighth century BC (examples: Hosea 10:6; Amos 3:11). At the time, their prophecies must have been seen as outlandish to a nation enjoying peace. But during Isaiah's ministry as a prophet, predicted doom became reality.

Ahaz, king of Judah from 735 to 715 BC, allied with Assyria to foil aggression by Aram and northern Israel, paying steep tribute in the process (2 Kings 16:7–8). Eventually, however, he felt pressure to rebel against Assyria and shift allegiance to Egypt. The prophets warned both northern Israel and southern Judah against such entanglements, but they were ignored (Hosea 7:11, 16; etc.). God instructed both nations to place their trust in him, not pagan empires and their fictitious gods.

Beginning in the period of Hezekiah's reign (about 724–695 BC), Isaiah preached five "Woe Sermons" that included further warning against such alliances. These five sermons are found in Isaiah 28:1–33:24, each opening with the word *Woe* (28:1; 29:1; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1). The sermons establish the rationale behind God's judgment, yet also offer hope that God would someday restore the nation predicted to fall. Today's study concerns both.

Leading into today's text is a sad observation regarding ignorance of the Word of the Lord as delivered through the prophet (Isaiah 29:11–12).

I. Unfaithful Worship

(ISAIAH 29:13–14)

A. Present Indifference to God (v. 13)

13. The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.

The failure to heed the contents of the scroll in Isaiah 29:11–12 (not in our lesson text) results in (or results from) the characterization we see here: insincere piety. The people’s worship was little more than “going through the motions”; it was empty and meaningless. *With their mouth* and *with their lips* the people professed loyalty and devotion to God, but their hearts weren’t in it.

Isaiah had confessed his own and his people’s unclean lips when he was called by God (Isaiah 6:5). Here the lips appeared to speak what was right. But whatever pious words they uttered were nullified by hearts that had little passion or desire for a genuine relationship with God. Centuries later, Jesus would apply these very words to the teachers of the law and Pharisees in his day (Matthew 15:1–9; Mark 7:5–8). There, Jesus adds his own characterization: *hypocrites*.

B. Future Awe of God (v. 14)

14. Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”

The Lord’s response is to shatter the apathy by astounding *these people with wonder upon wonder*. Literally the promise is, “I will treat this people wonderfully, wonderfully and with wonder.” This is something wonderful beyond description! But what is this wonderfully wonderful wonder? The second half of the verse before us is cited by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:19 as justification for his statement “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Paul goes on to comment on how God has “made foolish the wisdom of the world” and brought it down to nothing by means of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:19–25).

The cross of Christ should move us to humble worship—the kind that was sadly lacking in Isaiah’s day. No “merely human rules” (Isaiah 29:13), no matter what they may be, can produce the degree of worship that the wonder of the cross can. May we who have accepted the crucified and risen Christ as Savior never lose our sense of wonder at that which so-called intellectual people of the world ridicule!

II. Unfaithful Plans

(ISAIAH 29:15–22)

A. Hidden Plans Are Judged (vv. 15–16)

15. Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, “Who sees us? Who will know?”

Those who fancy themselves to be wise and intelligent are frequently those who *go to great depths to hide their plans from the Lord*—they literally stop at nothing to do whatever is necessary to conceal their sinful plans from God. If only they would exert similar efforts to discover the truth that God has gone to great depths to reveal to humanity!

The wayward seem to believe that God is subject to the same limitations that restrict humans. Supposedly, he cannot know or see what is planned or done *in darkness*. But as David rightly

observes, “Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you” (Psalm 139:12; compare Daniel 2:22; Jonah 2; and 1 Corinthians 4:5).

16. You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, “You did not make me”? Can the pot say to the potter, “You know nothing”?

The reason that the plotters and schemers of Isaiah 29:15 think and act as they do is that they have a faulty view of God. They have turned his authority structure *upside down*. Such is the inevitable outcome when humans refuse to acknowledge that they are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). They think of themselves as the potter, as if they were in charge.

But the potter’s *clay* has no right to command *the potter*, and it is utter foolishness for the clay to deny that the potter made him or her (see Romans 9:21). The Hebrew word translated *formed* in this verse is a variation of the word used to describe how “the Lord God *formed* a man from the dust of the ground” in Genesis 2:7.

True worship can never come from a mind-set that considers human beings to be the potter. This displays the utmost contempt for the true potter, who is God alone. Ignoring the prophet’s insistence to trust God instead of pagan nations was absurd. Isaiah has painted the scene of a piece of fine art attempting to correct and guide the hand of the creating artist, even while the artist was immersed in the creative act!

B. Followed by Flourishing (vv. 17–19)

17. In a very short time, will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field and the fertile field seem like a forest?

Lebanon was known for its forests, which supplied lumber for building projects (see 2 Chronicles 2:8–9; 1 Kings 5:6). To take a majestic forest and create *a fertile field* from it isn’t a comment on the quality of the forest or the field as much as it is that of massive reversal. Likewise, fields that had already proven themselves fertile would become instead *forest*. Isaiah used these upheaval images as metaphors for the massive changes Israel would undergo when God renewed them in ways they never expected. This theme continues through the end of our printed text.

18. In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.

Isaiah 29:11–12 (not in today’s lesson text) described *the words of the scroll* as being incomprehensible and/or inaccessible. These go hand in hand with spiritual deafness and blindness (compare 42:19–25). But in the future, God’s *words* will be so accessible to the people that even *the deaf* and *blind* would hear and read the words of the book (compare Psalms 146:8; Isaiah 32:1–4).

19. Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

Those who find themselves oppressed by the mighty and wealthy will rejoice over how God acts on their behalf. A key phrase here is *the Holy One of Israel*. It occurs in 31 verses in the Old Testament, and 25 of those are in Isaiah. The rejoicing of which this verse speaks is to be found

in him (Isaiah 12:6), not in pagan nations (10:20; 31:1). He is the Maker (17:7; 45:11), the Sovereign Lord (30:15), the Redeemer (41:14; 43:14; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5), the Lord Almighty (47:4).

The unholy spirits of the demonic realm correctly recognized the Holy One in the person of Jesus (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34). Some humans correctly came to recognize him that way as well (Acts 3:14; 1 John 2:20). In the Beatitudes, Jesus echoed the promises in the verse before us (Matthew 5:5; Luke 6:20).

C. Judgment for the Unjust (vv. 20–21)

20–21. The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear, and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down—those who with a word make someone out to be guilty, who ensnare the defender in court and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice.

The purveyors of injustice will receive exactly the opposite of what is promised in Isaiah 29:19. God intended judges to uphold the concerns of the poor, and he reserves fierce anger for those who use their position to harm them (see Proverbs 28:27; Amos 5:10; Matthew 23:14).

D. Followed by Restoration (v. 22)

22. Therefore this is what the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, says to the descendants of Jacob: “No longer will Jacob be ashamed; no longer will their faces grow pale.

God assured the nation by invoking the names of two patriarchs with whom God had established his covenant centuries before (Exodus 2:24; etc.). But the record of Scripture is that God’s people proved themselves incapable and unwilling to maintain a holy status before God. Moses had introduced God’s perfect law to the people (Exodus 20; etc.), but they did not obey it. Their restoration was not precipitated by renewed effort on their part, but in God’s unilateral act of mercy.

III. Faithful Worship **(ISAIAH 29:23–24)**

A. Based on God’s Character (v. 23)

23. “When they see among them their children, the work of my hands, they will keep my name holy; they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

If at the time of restoration, Jacob were to observe *Israel*, the nation bearing his name as changed by God (Genesis 32:28), he would see renewed devotion to God. In spite of the Israelites’ unfaithfulness, they will remain as God’s creative *work*. As such, God has remained committed to them until he finishes what he started in them. Human unfaithfulness does not deter God (see 2 Timothy 2:13).

To *keep* God’s *name holy* is to acknowledge God’s inherent holiness. We cannot add to God’s holiness. But we can add to the number of those who know his holiness and also worship him.

Israel would come to worship and obey God with a sense of awe and reverence when he turns everything upside down (see Isaiah 29:17, above).

To *stand in awe of the God of Israel* is a parallel statement to *keep my name holy*. To do one is to do the other. The result is to be appropriate reverence for the Lord as he allows people the opportunity to marvel at his holiness. Since Jacob's name was changed to Israel, *the Holy One of Jacob* and *the God of Israel* are parallels. Calling God by either or both titles is to acknowledge that he chose Jacob/Israel, loved him from before he wrestled with God (Genesis 32:22–30), and proved that love by settling Jacob's descendants in the land of promise that would belong to his descendants (Psalm 136:21; compare Jeremiah 33:11; Hosea 2:23).

But that settlement and resettlement were only shadows of God's act of mercy ultimately accomplished through the work of Christ on the cross. Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). We come to Christ admitting that we depend on his generous gift of salvation (Ephesians 2:8–9) and the rest in our eternal home that is to follow (Hebrews 4).

B. Expressed Through God's Word (v. 24)

24. "Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding; those who complain will accept instruction."

This future time of renewal is to be marked by increased sensitivity to God's Word. The Hebrew word translated *complain* occurs in only six other places in the Old Testament; in two of those, it is used of the wilderness wanderings who griped about their situation (Deuteronomy 1:27; Psalm 106:25). When the time of revival came to pass, the people would do the opposite as they value *instruction* (compare Deuteronomy 32:2; Psalm 119).

Conclusion

A. Intimate Hearts

Today's passage offers hope for all who find themselves far from God despite any robust religious heritage. In every generation churches are filled with those who have devoted themselves fully to God. But there are also those who attend out of habit or a sense of duty. Outside observers might consider this group to be highly religious. However, their true spiritual state is not hidden from God. He feels the coldness of their worship. He sees the plans they make without consulting him in prayer or study of Scripture. The unjust ways with which these congregants treat their neighbor are not hidden from God.

The way back now is the same as it was in Isaiah's day: regardless of our current level of spiritual fervency, we need to live mindful of the reality that God judges each person justly. We have to discard the illusions that our thoughts are private before God. He sees our true spiritual condition, even when we don't allow ourselves that same insight.

God the Father, through the completed work of Christ and the present indwelling of his Holy Spirit, is able and willing to free us so we can love him with the entirety of our hearts, souls, and abilities (compare Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37). There is no question regarding his

ability and our inability in that regard. Neither is there any question about his willingness to do so. The only question on the table is our willingness to allow him to renew us.

Are we?

B. Prayer

Father, we are ever capable of straying from you! May our worship and service to you never find us lacking in devotion. Renew our hearts today so that the unbelieving world can see Christ in us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God is able and willing to renew our hearts.¹
