

## ISAIAH 29

In John 9 Jesus told the blind leaders of the Jews that they would remain blind.

This wasn't the first time Jews were told that they would remain blind; it wouldn't be the last!

The problem with the Jews Isaiah was writing about is in verses nine and ten:

Isaiah 29:9 Pause and wonder! Blind yourselves and be blind! They are drunk, but not with wine; They stagger, but not with intoxicating drink.

Isaiah 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.

Because of their willful disobedience – “blinding **themselves**” – God removed His blessings – the “prophets” and “seers” – and let them *remain* blind.

How had they “blinded themselves?”

Isaiah 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,

**This is exactly what the Jews were again doing in Jesus' day!**

They had an outward form of religion, but no inward faith. They taught others to fear God, to relate to Him, “by the commandment of men.” They held their man-made Sabbath regulations as the formalism by which you could relate to God. Rather than *rejoice* in the miraculous healing and worship God, they *rebuke* the man born blind and excluded him from worshipping God!

### Background

Isaiah was God's prophet around 700BC. It was a time of great struggle for the Jews, both politically and spiritually. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, deteriorated and fell to Assyrian invasion in 722BC. The Southern kingdom, Judah, looked like it, too, would fall. Isaiah delivered God's message that they should trust in the Lord who had promised them a glorious kingdom. He urged them not to rely on

political alliances with Egypt or any other worldly foreign power. Hosea and Micah were contemporaries of Isaiah.

The book itself follows a pattern established in Deuteronomy: Judgment comes before blessing. Thus chapters 1-39 point out the nation's sin which must be rectified; judgment is the purifying work God allows that leads to repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Chapters 40-66 emphasize the blessing of the redeemed, but go far beyond the immediate history to speak of the ultimate restoration of the coming kingdom of God on the earth ruled by the Messiah.

Chapter 29 is a judgment pronounced against Jerusalem. Its purpose was to lead to repentance. It would be severe; but unlike the judgment against the Northern Kingdom, it would be miraculously averted by God. They would not fall to Assyria.

Isaiah 29:1 "Woe to Ariel, to Ariel, the city where David dwelt! Add year to year; Let feasts come around.

"Ariel" is a word describing Jerusalem. It literally means "the hearth," and is applied to Jerusalem as God's hearth or home – the place He has chosen to dwell.

"David" is a reminder of their once great spiritual and political heritage when they had a man who sought after the Lord's own heart.

"Feasts" were held in Jerusalem... But, as we will see, their observance meant nothing to the people.

Isaiah 29:2 Yet I will distress Ariel; There shall be heaviness and sorrow, And it shall be to Me as Ariel.

Here "Ariel" refers to the hearth-fire of judgment coming upon them.

Isaiah 29:3 I will encamp against you all around, I will lay siege against you with a mound, And I will raise siegeworks against you.

Isaiah 29:4 You shall be brought down, You shall speak out of the ground; Your speech shall be low, out of the dust; Your voice shall be like a medium's, out of the ground; And your speech shall whisper out of the dust.

The Assyrians were coming – terrifying, brutal...But,

Isaiah 29:5 "Moreover the multitude of your foes Shall be like fine dust, And the multitude of the terrible ones Like chaff that passes away; Yes, it shall be in an instant, suddenly.

Isaiah 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.  
Isaiah 29:7 The multitude of all the nations who fight against Ariel, Even all who fight against her and her fortress, And distress her, Shall be as a dream of a night vision.  
Isaiah 29:8 It shall even be as when a hungry man dreams, And look; he eats; But he awakes, and his soul is still empty; Or as when a thirsty man dreams, And look; he drinks; But he awakes, and indeed he is faint, And his soul still craves: So the multitude of all the nations shall be, Who fight against Mount Zion."

The Assyrians did come. They encamped around Jerusalem. They spoke blasphemies against God. But King Hezekiah sought the Lord. In one memorable night the angel of the Lord kills 185,000 Assyrians!

Distress... And deliverance! God would give them a powerful lesson in genuine, heart-felt worship.

Theirs was not a heart-felt worship; and that was the problem!

Isaiah 29:9 Pause and wonder! Blind yourselves and be blind! They are drunk, but not with wine; They stagger, but not with intoxicating drink.  
Isaiah 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.  
Isaiah 29:11 The whole vision has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one who is literate, saying, "Read this, please." And he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed."  
Isaiah 29:12 Then the book is delivered to one who is illiterate, saying, "Read this, please." And he says, "I am not literate."

“Blind yourselves and be blind.” I take that to mean that there is a willful decision to disobey or otherwise ignore God and then He confirms you in your own decision. It is similar to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus. Scripture says Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and that God hardened his heart.

It is similar to the hardening of the clay you read about in Jeremiah 18 where God’s working with the clay depends upon the conditions of the clay; or, in other words,

Jeremiah 18:7 "The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it,  
Jeremiah 18:8 "if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it.  
Jeremiah 18:9 "And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it,  
Jeremiah 18:10 "if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.

The Lord will honor your decision to disobey and ignore and He will confirm it by allowing you to go further into disobedience and ignorance! All the while, though, He will be planning judgment that is designed to turn you towards Him in repentance.

Their worship was not heart-felt. What was it? It was formal:

Isaiah 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,

Isaiah 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."

This is the outward form of religious observance that prefers the teaching of men to the Word of God. The Jews of Isaiah's time were guilty of it... The Jews of Jesus' time were guilty of it! You see it so clearly in John 9 when they preferred their Sabbath regulation regarding clay over the healing of a man born blind!

Can Christians be guilty of formalism? *You bet!*

For example:

Isaiah warns about the commandment of men being used to teach the fear of the Lord. In other words, the interpretations and decrees of men are elevated to a place above Scripture itself.

While no one would admit that they elevate the systematic teachings of men above the Scriptures, many groups do this in practice. There are whole denominations who depend upon certain traditions of Scripture interpretation suggested by godly men. In practice they depend more upon those words, and those traditions, than the Bible itself.

Formalism is always a potential problem. How can we avoid it?

Well, Isaiah says that it is a heart condition. You "remove your heart far from" God. It is therefore willful. It is similar to Jesus warning the church at Ephesus that they had willfully "left" their first love. So it is a matter of setting the heart right; setting your affections on things above, or – as Daniel in the OT – of "purposing" in your heart.

And it is secondly a problem with regard to the place you give the Word of God versus the teachings of men. I'm going to be bold and say that the systematic teachings of men about the Bible all fall short! For example: The great Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, in his systematic theology, decides one issue in a very curious way. He lists Scriptures that indicate a particular position, then those that seem contrary to that position... And he chooses the position with the most verses!

Let me give you another example:

There are those whose systematic theology lead them to conclude that Jesus only died for those particular people Whom He had already saved in eternity past. It is a theological position known as "Limited Atonement." It can be argued, and quite effectively.

The problem? Take a verse like John 3:16,

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Who does Jesus say He died for? The "world" – but not according to the system of theology! So "world" is argued to mean the smaller, limited group – the "world" of saved people.

You can disagree with me... But this is the teaching of men that overrules Scripture!

Avoid formalism; it leads to Phariseeism.