

Born to Win

Leadership Lost

by Ronald L. Dart

In my time, I have followed a *lot* of election campaigns. I remember, for example, sitting in a car, in the rain, in 1964, *in England*, listening to the Democratic National Convention of *America* on the BBC. Believe it or not, it was that important that the BBC was carrying it. Lyndon Johnson was nominated as president that year. But in all my years of following elections I have *never* seen *anything* quite like this election season.

The political process has always been a little crazy, but this one is *really strange*. And I find myself wondering, every time this cycle rolls around, is this the best that we can do? As a nation, we probably expect too much of our leaders and too little of ourselves. Like everyone else, I marvel at the *weakness* of people running for office, and I sometimes forget that they are merely a reflection of ourselves. I recall those famous lines from Abraham Lincoln about government “of the people, by the people, for the people,” and I don’t see how we can escape responsibility for what our leaders do and don’t do, for the quality or lack thereof, for their experience or lack thereof. I don’t see how we can sidestep that issue. If there are no strong leaders before us, it’s our fault. We have been willing to elect idiots and idiots is what we will continue to get.

There are a couple of things that I think are badly understood about history and about God. One: God does not change. The consequences of that are *far-reaching*. Two: Human nature doesn’t change, either. Oh sure, we invent new kinds of geegaws and gadgets, and our technology advances, our ability to communicate advances. And all we accomplish with all of this is make it possible for us to do *more damage* than we could have done in years gone by. But the nature of man doesn’t change. Therefore, we keep making the *same mistakes* and reaping the *same rewards* over and over again.

I’d like to take you back today to another time and place—to a nation *surprisingly* like us. They were like us in spite of all the changes in technology. They were like us—in the place of the explosion of knowledge and information that we’re going for today—they *still were like us*. The place is Jerusalem. The time is the days of Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah was really quite a young man when he had his first vision and volunteered to be a prophet. He had *no idea* what he was letting himself in for. For reasons of his own, Isaiah does not begin his prophecy with the story of his calling—he postpones that all the way down to chapter six—and in the earlier chapters he touches on what *bothers me most* about the political landscape around us right now. It’s in Isaiah 3, verse one:

Isaiah 3

NIV '84

¹ See now, the Lord,
the LORD Almighty,
is about to take from Jerusalem and Judah
both supply and support:
all supplies of food and all supplies of water,

But that's not where he stops taking stuff away. He goes on to say he will take from Jerusalem and Judah:

Isaiah 3

NIV '84

- ² the hero and the warrior,
the judge and the prophet,
the soothsayer and the elder,
³ the captain of fifty and the man of rank,
the counselor, skilled craftsman and clever enchanter.
⁴ "I will make boys their officials;
mere children will govern them."

Historically, we know what was happening at the time—the Assyrians had invaded the north, taken Samaria and all the 10 northern tribes. They would besiege Jerusalem and destroy a *lot* of Judah. But here's the puzzle: Why would God take away the leadership of the country when they *needed them most*? A small clue lies in that first verse. What would be the instrument—the proximate cause—of the absence of food and water? Well, it was the Assyrians, of course. They were the ones who came in, they besieged the country, they took down cities all over the place, they destroyed crops. I mean, Jerusalem was *sealed up*—the only thing there was to eat or drink was inside the walls of that city. So, if that's the case—if it was the Assyrians that did it—it really took no miracle at all. It was more the *absence* of something that led to it—the absence of wisdom, the absence of godly men, the absence of godly intervention, of God saying that he's going to save them from it. Now, the rest of what happened here may not be due to divine intervention but to the *absence* of divine intervention. God did not have to *lift a finger* to say that he had done it.

Now, here's something we need to think about. When sin is committed—whether it be by a man or a people—there are three things that can follow on it. One: *consequences*. When you tell a lie, something happens to you and to your reputation. This is inevitable. It cannot be done away with. The consequences may be small, they may be great, but they are *there without question*—automatic. Two: the second thing that can happen is *chastisement*. God can actually take a hand and use the consequences to bring us to our senses. The third is *banishment*. If things get bad enough, God can just remove us out of his sight—punishment, destruction.

Now, in a very real way, Judah's loss of leadership was the very real consequences of what they had been doing for a *long time*. Now, having said that, there may be something to learn, then, from the events that led up to this prophecy. For reasons known only to Isaiah, it seems as though he feels driven to start with what God had *told him to say* (or sing, because Isaiah's language is very poetic and prophecy was *always* sung. These prophecies were, in a way, the *protest songs* of that era). Well, after a short header at the beginning of the Book of Isaiah, he begins to sing.

Isaiah 1

AKJV

- ² Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD has spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.
³ The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel does not know, my people does not consider.

Even a dumb *ass* knows who the boss is and knows where home is. Not Israel; they don't know.

Isaiah 1

AKJV

⁴ Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel to anger, they are gone away backward.

And no longer are they going to find God on their side, in anything. You don't have to be a news junkie to recognize *our people* in this description. God gave us this land as much as he gave Canaan to Israel. He turned blessings on us, that we can't even *begin* to account for, just as he did with Israel. And just like Israel, we've turned our back on God. Oh, I know we have a Thanksgiving Day once a year—so far. And I know there are a lot of good people in this country. In fact, I think the presence of all these good people this country is the reason why we are all *still here*. But we should know that something has gone terribly wrong when we see, as I saw on television, a high school class where the kids were being shown how to put a condom on a banana. Now, understand something, though, at this point: the sex education going on in schools nowadays is *not the cause* of the corruption of our children. It is a *symptom*, not the cause of a moral disease. It's a sign of moral rot having set in among our people.

The thing that I finally came to realize about all this is that the schools are trying to *hold back the tide with a broom* and I'm finding it hard to blame them for at least trying. But we should know this: We have allowed the hands of the teachers to be tied. We have denied them a real basis for teaching morals in school. We have denied them the implements of discipline in any educational circumstance, and they have been reduced to *trying*—with whatever they've got to work with—to limit the *damage* being done. So while I have many things I can criticize the schools about—they need to do a better job of teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic—the fact that they're teaching sex education is not the cause of the problem. It's a sign of it. The obsession with sex in our society is a sure sign of a people who have *lost the power to love*. In the words of the song, “the feelings gone and we just can't get it back.” And it's what lies at the root of the explosion of pornography on the internet and people chasing around trying to *feel something* when they have lost the power to love and can't find it.

There's one major difference between our day and that of Isaiah, at the time he wrote his prophecies: He was writing and speaking much later in the day, so to speak. His nation was *even further* down the greased slide than we are. That's not to say that we are *better* than they, only that it is earlier in the day—for we are marching steadily down the *same road*. We need to give that some *very serious thought*.

These were hard and dangerous times. The nations were like wild animals, attacking and devouring one another, and that's the choice of the imagery God often uses. (Things haven't changed very much, I guess you've noticed.) The Assyrians had invaded Samaria taken the northern tribes away. They'd come into Judah with fire and destruction and only the city of Jerusalem had managed to hold against them. The countryside was devastated. The only food left was inside the city. And that sets the stage for Isaiah—a great communicator—to stand in the gate of the city and preach (or sing, as the case may be). Isaiah 1, verse five:

Isaiah 1

AKJV

⁵ Why should you be stricken any more? you will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.

⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment.

You know, it's with the greatest dismay that I can see this description play out, day-by-day, in the leadership of *our* nation, just as you see it in theirs. For Israel, the situation had become *dire*.

Isaiah 1

AKJV

⁷ Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers.
⁸ And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city.

In other words, just one walled city is standing out here in the middle of *nothing*. And he goes on, in verse nine, to say this:

Isaiah 1

AKJV

⁹ Except the LORD of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like to Gomorrah.

What Isaiah says about the “remnant” reminds me of something that happened long before this, with another prophet—his name was Elijah. It is worth knowing that long before the House of Israel at Samaria fell, they had been getting the *same warnings* that Isaiah would give to Judah much later. But even then, there was a *remnant* of faithful people among them just as there is today. Elijah, in a fit of self-pity, concluded he was the only servant of God left in the land and they were after him to kill him. He said, “They’re going to just wipe us all out, Lord!” “Buck up,” said God:

1 Kings 19

ISV

¹⁸ [...] I’ve reserved 7,000 in Israel who have neither bowed their knees to Baal nor kissed him.

They were the remnant in Elijah’s day. Someone once said they thought the population of the northern tribes of Israel was about one million at that time. This 7,000 would amount to 0.7% of the population. That would amount to—in a city of about 100,000 people, you’d find 700 somewhere who are faithful. They were the remnant, but the remnant didn’t save the nation. The nation had just gone *too far*. Now Judah was a long way down the same road, and Isaiah had the grim duty to go out there and tell him. I’ve said it before, let me say it again: When you see a prophet of God walking down the road, it’s bad news. God does not send a prophet to tell you how *well* you are doing. Now, it was a very small remnant that Isaiah found, that was still there. I said we have a lot of good people in this country and it is so. Will that hold, or are we going to systematically *rid* ourselves of good leaders as every civilization before us has done? What are we doing wrong? Well, Isaiah said:

Isaiah 1

AKJV

⁹ Except the LORD of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like to Gomorrah.

Now God begins to address the people of Jerusalem as if they *were Sodom*. He says—chapter one, verse ten:

Isaiah 1

AKJV

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah.
¹¹ To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to me? said the LORD: I am full of the

burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.

What this is telling me is that religious observance was continuing apace. But it says even more. It says going through the motions of religion *won't help*. God is saying, "I am *fed up* with your worship-by-the-numbers that you just keep on, keep on, keep on going through."

Isaiah 1

AKJV

¹² When you come to appear before me, who has required this at your hand, to tread my courts?

In our vernacular he would be saying, "Who asked you here?"

Isaiah 1

AKJV

¹³ Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination to me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates: they are a trouble to me; I am weary to bear them.

¹⁵ And when you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you: yes, when you make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.

So now we start getting the picture. Going to church is not good enough. God created the Sabbath. God gave them instructions for feasts and solemn assemblies and for times to fast—whatever they were going to do—but they were no longer his; they had become *theirs*. He said, "When you spread forth your hands, I will not look at them. Your hands are full of blood." What an image! I don't know what terrible social scourge, in that time, lead to hands full of blood. Isaiah doesn't say right here. I'll bet the people who heard him say this *knew well enough*. And when you consider our society, how could you overlook *40 million abortions*—40 million Americans that might have been, who are not? How can you do that? You know, there is just no point in raising bloody hands to God in song or in prayer. You only make things *worse*.

What is Isaiah trying to tell us that we need to know? One: religion comes in two aspects—form and substance. You can have all the *form* you want, but if the substance isn't there you are *dead meat*. All of our theological arguments, all our worship services with pageantry and orchestras and choirs and sacred dance—powerful preachers who tell us what we want to hear—all the great song services with dancing in the aisles, all the great prayers with hands held on high, can be *for nothing*.

Isaiah 1

AKJV

¹⁵ And when you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you: yes, when you make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.

You see, the whole thing about lifting up holy hands to God—which the Bible does mention—is not about some kind of spiritual antennae that you put up there to feel God or what have you. It is a *statement* made to God, "My hands are clean." How do you expect God to respond to your prayer when the hands you raised to him are *not clean*? You can't sleep with your neighbor's wife on Saturday night and lift up holy hands to God on Sunday morning, my brother. You just gotta get used to that idea: somehow the *form* of your religion has got to *shape* the life you live. But in Isaiah's day there was still hope for the nation, even at that late date. He goes on in verse 16 to say this:

Isaiah 1

AKJV

¹⁶ Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil;
¹⁷ Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

You know, this is the kind of thing that we're supposed to be doing. It has to do with the way we live in society—that we, as Christian people, should be having an influence on society—like leavening or like the salt of the earth—that wherever we go we have an *effect* on the things around us, because we live the life and we stand for what is right. And even if you yourself have never killed anybody, if you don't stand behind a government that leads us to do what's right, you are guilty as those who actually get around to doing it. So what are we supposed to do now, Isaiah? What do we do next?

So where do we go from here?

Isaiah 1

AKJV

¹⁸ Come now, and let us reason together, said the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

What is it that makes the difference? Well, he's just said:

Isaiah 1

AKJV

¹⁶ Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil;
¹⁷ Learn to do well; seek judgment, [...]

If you're on a jury, be fair with people.

Isaiah 1

AKJV

¹⁷ relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.
¹⁸ Come now, and let us reason together, said the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow[....]

Now, understand something: this doesn't mean that the *works* you do will wash away your sins. Only the blood of Christ can do that. But that blood won't apply unless or until you *repent*. And what God is telling us is, "Look, you've got to change the *way you live*. We're not talking about the way you worship. We're talking about how you treat your neighbor." In verse 19, he said:

Isaiah 1

AKJV

¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land:
²⁰ But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD has spoken it.

I *love* this country. My heart swells with *pride* when I think of the men and women who have sacrificed so much for the freedom we take for granted. But love of country impels me to call on my country to

repent and turn to God because we are systematically destroying this land—not just the dirt—the society that God established and planted here and blessed. To call on people, not to come to this or that church, but to *come to God* as the source of morality and truth. And I want to make this call while I can. I make the call not because I'm any better than anybody else (I've got as many problems as the next man has) but all of us, *all of us*, need to turn to God, sincerely, and begin to turn our lives around. Only then can *we* begin to make a difference. Having made his call for repentance, Isaiah returns to his lament.

Isaiah 1

KJ2000

²¹ How has the faithful city become a harlot! it was full of justice; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers.

²² Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water:

²³ Your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: everyone loves bribes, and follows after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither does the cause of the widow come before them.

One of the things that galls me most about politics nowadays is the politician who promises things to the poor to get elected and then lines his own pockets with *bribes and special deals* for himself and his friends. These are *our* princes, in Biblical terms—the congressman and the senators—and guess who is responsible for them? We are. And now we come to the reason why we end up, in time of war, with less leadership than we need. We are so stupid that, in Isaiah's words, we will elect a child to office if he will just *tell us what we want to hear*. Has anyone figured out that we cannot depend on Congress to police itself? It's absurd to even think they would? I mean, if you make your own self the law—what *you* feel like and what *you* want is going to determine what's right, guess where you're going to go?

Who expected us to police Congress? The framers of our Constitution expected you and me to do that. And isn't it astonishing (I want you to think about this) that the approval rating of Congress can drop into the *teens* and yet we the people have elected the scoundrels. And we click our tongues and say, "Oh, this is terrible! This is bad. I hate this. Look at all these bad people in Congress." We'll make jokes about Congress. If we the people won't punish congressmen who take bribes and line their pockets with unethical gain, who will? Now, maybe your congressman hasn't done that—and that's a good thing. Here's the next question, though: What's he doing about those who *are* doing it? Does he have the nerve, does he have the gall, does he have what it takes to stand up in Congress and *demand* changes be made in the ethics of that body? These men become so powerful that they can perpetuate themselves in office. But it wouldn't work if we were paying attention. It wouldn't work if *we cared*. God says, "I am going to deal with this."

Isaiah 1

KJ2000

²⁵ I will turn my hand upon you, and thoroughly purge away your dross, and take away all your alloy:

²⁶ And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning: afterward you shall be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city.

Are you familiar with his analogy? It's the refining of silver. To do that, you put the silver in a pot and you heat it until it melts. The impurities, the dross, rise to the surface and are skimmed off. What God is saying is that we are heading into the *chastisement phase*. He is turning up the heat. His goal: to turn us around. You know, it worked for a little while after 9/11, but it didn't hold. I guess we'll have to go through something else—a little more heat, a little hotter.

Isaiah 1

KJ2000

²⁷ Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and her converts with righteousness.

²⁸ And the destruction of the transgressors and of the sinners shall be together[....]

There's something you need to know about this, in summary: God is about to take things away from Judah in Isaiah's day. In point of fact, though, it's their *own doings* that have taken these things away from them. Did God do it? He said he did. How did he do it? He let them do it to themselves. They were the instruments of their *own* destruction. Just as I said in the beginning: our leaders are just a reflection of all of us.

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart.

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