

How Does God Respond to Those Who've Lost Their Way?

~Isaiah 1:1-2:5

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Have you ever been lost? Have you experienced a situation where you did not know where you were or where to go? The invention of GPS or Google Maps has helped many people find their way when lost. But we can still happen. When it does happen, it can feel horrible. Back in the dark ages, when I was about 10 years old, my Dad sent me into a department store to do a small errand. I was to go in and up an escalator to find someone and give them a piece of information. Then I would return back to the car where my Dad waited. So I went in, went up the escalator but couldn't find the person. So I went back down the escalator out the doors and went to the spot where my Dad had parked. But he wasn't there. I remembered he had parked beside a power box. I saw the power box but there sat a strange car.

I went back into the store, back up the escalator and searched for the person. But they still weren't there. So I went back down the escalator and thought maybe my Dad had just gone for a quick drive and had returned. But he still wasn't there. I looked around to see if I had made a mistake. But everything looked right.

Slowly but surely, I could feel some panic begin rising up in me. I went back into the store, up the escalator and searched again for the person Dad sent me to find. They weren't there and I was too shy to ask an adult for some help. But now I was more concerned with finding my Dad. So back down the escalator and out to the power box. But I could not find my Dad. This must have happened 4 or 5 times with each trip adding to my anxiety. Finally, on about the sixth trip down the escalator, I saw my Dad going up the escalator on the other side.

"Dad," I cried out. He saw me and said "wait for me at the bottom." He got to the top and turned around to come down again. I think I started crying at that point. By the time he got to the bottom I buried myself in his hug. Then he asked "Tommy, what happened?" I cried out "You moved the car so I couldn't find you." But he hadn't moved the car. So he asked me to show him where I looked. As I began to lead him out to the parking lot he stopped me. "You went this way?" he asked? "Yes," I replied.

"Tommy, you had to turn right when you got to the bottom of the escalator. Did you forget to do that?" Suddenly it dawned on me. When I came into the store, I had turned left to get on the escalator. But when I came down the escalator I had forgotten the turn and gone straight. So when I went out to a similar looking parking lot with a similar looking power

box, it seemed like my Dad left. But when we turned right from the escalator, we went outside and saw our car sat right beside the power box. I was so relieved and felt so good to be found.

Now in that situation I knew I was lost. But sometimes people don't know they're lost until they get to the end of their journey and find they've arrived at the wrong place. It's like someone who gets on the wrong plane but thinks they're on the right one. They don't realize this until the flight crew announces the descent into the wrong city. Now in that situation, at least you can book another flight to get to the right destination.

But there's one kind of lostness that leads to a destination you can't return from. People can walk on this path for many years and don't know they're lost. Maybe some of us here today walk on this path and don't realize our lostness. Or we may have strayed on this path and if we don't get back on right track, we might end up seriously lost.

This lostness is not directional. It is spiritual and can affect our entire lives. So what does this lostness look like? Well our Bible passage today tells us about some common characteristics of spiritually lost or wandering people. They have forsaken God and refuse to follow His ways. Some of us here right now might be living lost might live right now in full blown rebellion against God. Others might have started to stray. Maybe some of you have tried to keep following God's ways, but life is not going well. You may wonder if it's worth it.

Well I believe today's passage can speak to all of us regardless of our life situation. It talks about how God responds to lost people and it will show us the way to get back to or stay on His path.

We will see this by watching how God responded to His own lost people; the ancient Israelites. He led them out of slavery in Egypt and established them as a nation in the Promised Land. They experienced some success under the reigns of King David and Solomon. But the pride of subsequent kings, with popular support, led many away from the Lord. By the time of our passage, invaders destroyed the northern part of the country. The southern part barely hung on. They were spiritually lost.

But God did not leave them there. He sent a prophet named Isaiah to deliver His Word to them. Through Isaiah, we will see how the Lord responds to people who have lost their way. Once we see that, we will learn how to connect to the Lord's help so we can find our way.

Isaiah 1:1-2:5 (ESV)

1 The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

² Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:

“Children have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.

³ The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.”

⁴ Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged.

⁵ Why will you still be struck down?
Why will you continue to rebel?
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 bruises and sores
and raw wounds;
they are not pressed out or bound up
or softened with oil.

⁷ Your country lies desolate;
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
foreigners devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.

⁸ And the daughter of Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,
like a lodge in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city.

⁹ If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we should have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom!

Give ear to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹ “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.

¹² “When you come to appear before me,
who has required of you
this trampling of my courts?

¹³ Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;

they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵ When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,

¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause.

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

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 eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

²¹ How the faithful city
has become a whore,
she who was full of justice!

Righteousness lodged in her,
but now murderers.

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

²³ Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.

Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.

They do not bring justice to the fatherless,
and the widow's cause does not come to them.

²⁴ Therefore the Lord declares,
the LORD of hosts,
the Mighty One of Israel:

“Ah, I will get relief from my enemies
and avenge myself on my foes.

²⁵ I will turn my hand against you
and will smelt away your dross as with lye
and remove 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.”

²⁷ Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.

²⁸ But rebels and sinners shall be broken together,
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.

²⁹ For they shall be ashamed of the oaks
that you desired;

and you shall blush for the gardens
that you have chosen.

³⁰ For you shall be like an oak

whose leaf withers,
and like a garden without water.

³¹ And the strong shall become tinder,
and his work a spark,
and both of them shall burn together,
with none to quench them.

2 The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,

³ and many peoples shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.

⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD.

So begins the collection of scrolls now known as the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament. The first verse tells us what we will read – a vision from the Lord to Isaiah. He received it during the reign of four kings in that southern kingdom of Israel called Judah. It begins by calling the heavens and earth to witness. The Lord will speak. We immediately see our first answer to the question **“How does God respond to people who have lost their way?” He warns about the realities and consequences of a lost life.** “Children I have reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.” This expresses the heart of an aggrieved Father. He poured His life and energy into these children. He taught them about the world. He raised them up into a people with a homeland. They even experienced a taste of life in a just, prosperous and influential

nation during the time of David and Solomon. But they have forgotten. They now live **An ungrateful life that grieves the Father (1:2-3).**

They've forgotten all He did and put into raising them. They live as if He never created them or looked after them. Who ignores and forgets the one who gave them life and nurtured them? They act worse than animals. An ox knows its owner. It respects that the owner provides the food. Even though the ox could sit on the owner and crush him, most ox don't do that because they understand the owner provides their food. Even donkeys recognize the lodging or stall their owner provides in the barn. But lost people don't know or care about their Heavenly Fathers' love.

These lost people also live **A relationship-breaking life that leads to utter estrangement from God.** Verse 4 packs 7 different descriptions of people rebelling against God into one verse. They are a sinful meaning they miss the mark on God's desires for their lives. They experience the burden of guilt from their sins. They live like the children of evildoers instead of children of God. They act corruptly though they came from an incorruptible Father. They have forsaken or abandoned the Lord. But they not only left Him. They despise Him, the Holy One of Israel. So in the end they are "utterly estranged", or turn their back from the Lord. They have chosen a path that breaks relationship with the Lord and despises Him.

The Lord also reveals that this lost life is **A pain-filled life with no hope of healing.** Verses 5 and 6 describe someone who experiences sickness and pain across their entire body. Sickness dominates their head. Faintness covers their heart. From the bottom of their feet to the top of their head there is no health seen. Bruises, sores and raw wounds cover them. They receive no treatment for their sickness. It's most likely this image talks not about physical sickness, but spiritual. Those wandering or lost have little or no spiritual health.

On top of this spiritual sickness the Lord reveals that lost people live **A vulnerable life that can suddenly collapse.** Verse 7 describes a nation overrun by an invader. The stripped land and burned cities testify to a defeated people. Some remain yet barely stand. They are like the booth of the watchman in a vineyard. When a crop ripened it caught thieves eyes.. So owners would hire watchmen to sit in a booth to guard the fruit. The watchmen constructed the booth out of branches and leaves to protect himself from the sun. But a strong wind could blow it over. Sometimes the booths remained in the field after harvest barely standing. So this flimsy structure portrays the unhearable people of the Lord.

Then in verses 10-15, the Lord reveals that a lost people live **An unjust life that pollutes one's worship**. These verses describe a very religious people. Who sacrifice their best animals. They dutifully attend worship and they burn incense. They even lift up their hands in prayer. But the Lord will have none of it. Did you notice the Lord's strong emotional language towards these worshippers? "I have had enough; I do not delight; A trampling of my courts; Abomination; I cannot endure; My soul hates; A burden; I am weary; I will not listen."

Well what was the big deal? Why didn't the Lord accept their worship? They ignored the vulnerable. They lived comfortably in an unjust society. Their negligence led to the unnecessary deaths of needy people. We know that because the Lord describes their outstretched praying hands as full of blood.

The final way the Lord warns about the realities and consequences of a lost life is found in verses 21-23 (not verse 28 as it says on the insert). There we see **A tainted life that gets comfortable with corruption**. Verse 21 talks about a once faithful city changing to unfaithfulness. Verse 22 talks about pure materials becoming tempered. Verse 23 says that they are like best wine diluted with water. Princes, instead of leading a just society, keep company with thieves. People love bribes and run after gifts. So those who have money or can give gifts get ahead. But poor people, orphans and widows get ignored. That's a corrupt society in the eyes of the Lord. All of these symptoms portray a lost people who have wandered off the Lord's path. Maybe the last two of these describes something in our lives.

But the Lord still cared about them. So He sent them a prophet with this hard message. Sometimes, we only respond when someone speaks the plain truth to us about our lives. We ignore the polite appeals. So the Lord uses a direct approach to get His message through. This warning comes out from a heart of love. The Lord does not want us to experience all the consequences and hardships that a lost and sinful life brings. So He exposes the symptoms. But He then proposes a solution.

He offers mercy and forgiveness to those who repent. This is the second way the Lord responds to lost people. You may have heard Isaiah 1:18 before; one of the many famous verses from this book. It's like God's tone changes from accusing to advocate. He invites His wayward people to come and meet so they can resolve their dispute. "Come let us reason together." Let us reach an adjustment. Let us resolve our differences. But Israel says nothing. Her many sins paralyze her. She cannot offer appropriate payment. She cannot atone for her own sins except by her own blood.

But then, the Lord's words take a shocking turn. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." Wait a minute. How is that possible? The people can't do anything about their bloodstained hands. They're guilty. So this dramatic transformation can only happen by God's hand. Somehow He will change them so instead of scarlet red sin-stained lives they will be white as snow. This seems to promise not just of verbal forgiveness but some new holy nature. Yet the Lord does not explain how He will do this. That's for later in the book.

He only states that those willing and obedient will eat the good of the land in verse 19. So somehow, this transformation involves a response from the people. They must change and cooperate. Instead of continuing on their current path, they need to come back to His path. They need to follow or obey His ways.

But many will choose to ignore this offer according to verse 20. They will continue in rebellion. Instead of eating from the good of the land, they shall be eaten by the sword. Now that is a strange image at first. Swords don't literally eat. But swords can devour through cutting and slashing. The Bible uses the image of sword for words from the mouth. In Isaiah 49:2, the servant of the Lord says "He made my mouth like a sharp sword. Hebrews 4:12 – For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword [...]" In Revelation 1:19 we read that from his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations." So simply by speaking the Lord can strike down nations.

So here in Isaiah 1:20, it seems the sword also describes the word of the Lord that will ultimately pronounce judgment on those who continue to refuse and rebel. It doesn't have to be that way. God invites any lost person whose sins are like scarlet to come to Him so they will be white as snow. This is grace – an undeserved and unearned gift offered to anyone who will receive and respond to it. According to Isaiah 27, that response includes repentance. "Zion shall be redeemed by justice and those in her who repent by righteousness."

Then the Lord offers more to those who respond to Him. **He provides long term hope for those who turn to Him.** In the little poem of chapter 2, the Lord gives us a glimpse into the future. Verse 2 – "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills." In ancient times, people believed that their gods lived on the top of mountains. So if you had a high mountain in your region, your god was the supreme god. But here we see that little Judah which was like an ant compared

to the superpower Assyria, would one day see the Lord as the highest. The Lord's house would be on the highest mountain. But this house and this Lord is not only for the Israelites.

Notice at the end of verse 2 "all nations shall flow to it." That's weird. Streams and rivers don't flow up mountains. Yet the strong draw of the Lord results in a flowing stream of people coming up to Him. Many say "Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the God of Jacob (another name for Israel) that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." So here people from all nations seek to learn the Lord's ways so they can walk in His paths. These people are not lost. They follow the Lord's ways.

He guides them with His Word. The end of verse 3 says "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." So the Lord reigns over the earth. Look at what kind of world it will be in verse 4. "He shall judge between the nations and shall decide disputes for many peoples." This is quite a contrast to the corrupt and bribed filled city of chapter 1:22-23. People will experience such contentment that will produce an astonishing result. The end of verse 4, another famous verse, "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Weapons of war will be transformed into farm tools. Nations will not wage war. This Lord's reign over a people who live by His word will result in a comprehensive peace.

Such visions give us hope to keep going today. We've just come through a week of extremely cold weather. How did we make it through this week? What did people keep saying to one another? The warm up is coming on Monday. We live with the hope for a better warmer day. But this day talked about in Isaiah 2 will be much better than a warm day in the winter. It will be a glorious day and life in the Lord's presence.

So we've seen how the Lord responds to people who've lost their way. He warns – He offers forgiveness – He provides hope. How can we tap into Him to get back on His path?

Heed his warnings. Heed means to listen and to act on. We must remember all the Lord has given and provided. We need to repent from rebelling and ungratefulness. We need to reorient our lives to the Lord. Repent, Acknowledge, Confess and start walking closely with Him again.

Receive and Respond to the Lord's forgiveness. Trust the Lord's ability to not only forgive but wash us completely clean. Trust the Lord's promise – There is therefore now no condemnation for those who in Christ Jesus. Yes, face the

consequences of sin. Make things right where needed. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice and correct oppression. But remember you live forgiven.

Look forward with hope to better days. Life is difficult. It includes blessings and trials. But we trust that there is a better life coming. Even for loved ones that have passed on, the Scriptures reveal to us that their lives are much better than now. And one day life on this earth will be unimaginably better. We will live in harmony with fellow humans because of Christ's wisdom and teaching. So, God responds to people who have lost their way. Now let's go and respond to Him.