

# The Covenant LORD's Response to Rebellious Children

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*Come now, and let us reason together, saith 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.*

—Isaiah 1:18

What would God say to those who grew up in the church but have since stopped attending? What would He say to those who sit in church but do not care about what they hear? What would He say to the prodigal sons and daughters who know they need to return home? Thankfully, we are able to answer those questions from Isaiah 1:18: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith 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.”

## **He Invites**

First, we need to realize who the Lord is inviting. The covenant Lord is calling the covenant family—a family of children who are making excuses, trying to ignore the real issue, acting stubborn and foolish. This family thinks the Father—God—is the problem. And yet the Covenant Lord, who sees Himself as their Father (2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chron. 22:10; Isa. 43:6; Hos. 1:10, 2 Cor. 6:18), invites them back. Isaiah, as the covenant prosecutor, has already laid this out earlier in chapter 1, with six descriptions:

First, the invitation comes to rebellious children (vv. 2–3). The Lord has spoken: “I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.” Israel has had many blessings, but they do not even stop to think of them. They are ungrateful and ignorant. They are acting contrary to nature; even an ox and a donkey know better.

Second, the invitation comes to heirs who have abandoned their family inheritance (v. 4). They are corrupters. They have forsaken the Lord and angered Him. They have gone away backward. They are a sinful nation, weighed down with iniquity and acting contrary to their privilege.

Third, the invitation also comes to unhealthy people (vv. 5–6). It comes to those who are sick and fainting; it comes to those with no wellness in themselves. It comes to people with open wounds and sores who have no ointment and do not even use the opportunities they receive. The question comes to them, “Why should you be stricken any more?” (v. 5).

Fourth, the invitation also comes to scandalized citizens (vv. 7–10). These prosperous people had cities that were burned; their land is taken over by strangers; they are isolated as a besieged city. They have become wicked like Sodom and Gomorrah, and only the Father’s mercy spares them.

Fifth, the invitation comes to vain worshippers (vv. 11–15). Even though the Father has commanded burnt offerings and blood from bulls, He does not want it insincerely. He says to His children: To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices? What purpose is served by the trampling of My courts? For what purpose is the Sabbath and the calling of assemblies and feast days and all your prayers if you don’t do it from the heart?

Sixth, the invitation comes to evil workers and those acting unjustly (vv. 16–17). Put away your evil actions;

cease to do evil. The wrongs and the crimes of these children cannot be exaggerated. They deserve death. And yet because they were the covenant family, Israel thought they were excused. They had experienced blessing; they were religious. They did the sacrifices and held worship. They prayed. But how did God their Father see them? As rebellious, backsliding, unhealthy, scandalous, vain, and evil! Of all people, His children were like this, His own children!

How do you see yourself? As a covenant community, how should we see ourselves? Our religious activity cannot cover over our hearts' sinfulness. The blessings of our inheritance cannot cover our wrong. The Father knows all, sees all, and understands the heart—the motives and desires behind all. So, my friends, we too need to listen to the Lord as He invites, "Come!" The Father is inviting, indeed, commanding these sinners to come. Come, my rebellious, abandoning, backsliding, unhealthy, isolated, vain, evil-doing children! Come! What did the Lord say to Adam after his sin? "Adam, where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). Don't walk out on Me but walk with Me! Have you ever heard of a more generous invitation? Kings do not often invite criminals and enemies to come to them and confess their guilt. Nor do they invite them into their palaces in order to pardon them. Yet here is an invitation to both Jerusalem-sinners and Sodom-sinners; an invitation to people who are adding to their sin every day and to people who are trying to hide.

In verse 2, God called all of creation to witness His invitation. "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth!" Look at how the children have responded to their Lord, and look at how the Father deals with His children: He invites them. This is not like a mass-mailing that invites you to an event but you know the advertiser does not really care whether you attend. This invitation comes with pleading and with urgency—"Come now" (1:18). The Father does

not say to His rebellious children, Goodbye, I am done with you, depart from Me. No, He invites them to come now. “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not” (Mark 10: 14).

As earthly fathers, we might call our children to come and the inference is that we want to say something in an intimate, meaningful way. That is what God is doing as He invites. He has already said what He does not want: He wants no more vain oblations, solemn services, insincerity, cursory prayers. Rather, He want us to consider our ways, our guilt, and then turn to Him. Obey Him and walk with Him. “Come now, and let us reason together.”

If you still live as an enemy of the King, He invites you still. If you have wandered away from home, the Father invites. If you rejected His wisdom and fell back into sin a thousand times, the Lord still says to come. Keep coming; come always. Come now, even after everything you have already done against Him. God knows you cannot turn back the clock or erase years, but He still invites you. Come as you are—a rebellious, backsliding, unhealthy, idolatrous, dirty, needy prodigal who has wasted his life on riotous living. He still invites you because the situation is urgent. As George Burder says, “Is your house on fire? Escape for your life! Is the prodigal ready to starve? Run to your Father! Is the child drowning? Grab the life-line! Are you a sinner in need of forgiveness? Come now, let us reason together!”<sup>1</sup>

### **He Reasons**

Our text says, “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord.” The covenant Lord reaches out to those who think He is the problem, and He says, “Let us reason.” What does He mean by “reason”? Reason here is to discuss

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1. George Burder, *Village Sermons* (London: Tegg, 1852), 288.

or make legal dialogue; to go back and forth on an issue to prove what happened.

This reasoning is not about whether the covenant children should debate or argue whether the Father still exists, or whether He has done anything for them, or whether they as children have received what they need or want, or whether their desires should override His. The Father does not delight in arguing, but He does delight in making Himself, and His will, known. So He calls them to come and reason with Him. "Let us reason about how willing I am to show mercy and forgiveness—because that, dear children, is what you need. Let us reason about your sin and your stubbornness."

The Father wants this discussion, but He is honest: "It is your sins as wayward children that need to be discussed. It is because you have gone astray and turned to your own ways rather than following Mine that we need to talk." Sin is always inexcusable; ignoring it will never resolve it. And only when you see your sin will you understand your need for God the Father and His mercy. God is not calling for those who have no sin; this invitation is from God to those who do not deserve to be united with the Father through His Son, or be His adopted children, because they are guilty. They stand condemned. To these rebellious ones who know their need for forgiveness God the Father says, "Come, let us reason together."

Maybe you are thinking: I cannot do that; I am totally depraved, I am spiritually dead. My friend, do you think that God does not know that? Yet, He calls you in verse 16 to "wash yourself." James 4:8–9 says to "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep..." Yes, He is the only one who can open your ears, move your feet, warm your heart, and raise you from that deadness. But He is calling

you to come now and to reason with Him. He has given you thoughts and rationality, and, as Kennedy says, “if you know that you are spiritually dead, you are most unreasonable if you refuse a call from the only One who can make you alive and invites you to come.”<sup>2</sup> He gave you ears. You hear His invitation.

This is a really simple verse: God wants obedience. You cannot say you did not know or you couldn’t help sinning, or it wasn’t you. God will not bludgeon you and beat you until you listen, but He will reason with you. He does it to take away all excuses. There can be no misunderstanding of what He intends, because He is not saying, Figure it out by yourself. Rather, let us reason together. God wants you to think not about yourself or your thoughts, but about what He says. Even as the Father invites His wayward children back, He wants them to sit down and listen to His words. They must not keep talking to each other while ignoring Him. They must not keep making excuses. They must not be so loud and busy that they push their Father’s words away.

So, my friends, even though you may have objections and barriers, listen to Him rather than yourself. Even as you say:

- I can’t come, I don’t know enough about God. The Father promises that the “glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it...” (Isa. 40:5).
- I have done the opposite of what God wants; I have sinned too long. The Father says, “Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem..., that her iniquity is pardoned” (Isa. 40:2).

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2. John Kennedy, *Sermons* (Inverness: Northern Chronicle Office, 1885), 196.

- I am nothing but messed up, addicted, struggling. The Father promises that “he will feed his flock like a shepherd...and gently lead them” (Isa. 40:11).
- I have pursued sins of the world, and my heart struggles with sin. The Father promises that even though we went our own way, “the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6).
- I have tried to save myself, or I have turned to things. The Father still says, “There is no God else beside me.... Look unto me, and be ye saved” (Isa. 45:21, 22).
- I have prayed but nothing happens. The Father says, “Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live” (Isa. 55:3).
- I am afraid it's not for me. The Father still comes and says, “But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen.... Fear thou not, for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness” (Isa. 41:8, 10).

My dear friends, when you hear God's invitations and promises to these objections, are you honestly reasoning with Him? Are you hearing God's Word? Or is your mind and heart full of your own ideas? Are you listening to yourself more than God? Are you reasoning only your own ideas, or are you believing God's Word to you?

Imagine some children are playing outside after school. Their parent goes to the backdoor and says, “Children, come in now for dinner!” Are you like children who think if they ignore their parents' instructions, they can keep playing? Are you like a child who would rather have two more minutes of play plus a punishment than obedience and the blessing of a warm dinner? What did Christ say of the Pharisees? “Woe unto you! for ye shut up the

kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in” (Matt. 23:13).

There may be some here who think, I cannot come until the Spirit changes me, and will know that through a radical experience. My friend, what if your father invited you to a family meeting to discuss an ongoing issue in your family. Would you say, Only when I feel like it, and then wait for your feeling to be confirmed in some radical way? Or would you only come if your father sends his guards over to drag you back home? Or would the fact that your father is calling and inviting you to this family meeting cause you to consider it?

You cannot ignore your heavenly Father; He is the One who created you! You may come up with excuses, but you cannot ignore Him! You must acknowledge Him and His words. The goodness of the Father should lead you to repentance.

It may be that you have come before; you know that God is your Father for Christ’s sake, and yet you know that you continue to sin. You still struggle with your own heart; you still wrestle with Satan. The Father invites you, too. Even though it may seem like the life of faith is a struggle and the pure heart is not growing, He promises that “He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might, He increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint” (Isa. 40:30–31).

The covenant Lord reaches out to His rebellious children. Some of you have never yet come back; some of you have already come and wandered away again; some of you slip out once in a while and instantly regret it. Yet the door



is not closed. Rather, He invites, He reasons with you. He even gives promises for all those who do come and believe.

### **He Promises**

The promise in our text is amazing: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” The Father does not invite these rebellious and unwilling children in to give a lecture. You could say that He already laid out His case. He told them why they need His forgiveness and has proven that He is just and right. But as the merciful, loving, gentle Father that He is, He also gives them this promise.

He promises that their state of sinfulness can change to a state of purity. “Though your sins be as scarlet, they *shall be* as white as snow” (emphasis added). Again, notice that the Father acknowledges the reality of the sins. He does not dismiss them; He even acknowledges how severe they are. Yet He tells them that those sins can be forgiven—not through their own efforts. The Father can still promise forgiveness because the promise becomes the good news, the peace, the glad tidings of salvation that will be proclaimed (Isa. 52:7). The promise is guaranteed because the Servant of the Father (that Isaiah will later prophecy of) will be marred and despised. The Father’s promise is secure because it pleased the Father to bruise His Servant; His servant poured out His soul unto death for the rebellious ones, was numbered with the transgressors, bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors (Isa. 53). “Though your sins be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” Because Christ’s life and death satisfied the Father, your sins can be pardoned. Christ has carried the curse. He has paid the punishment.

This promise is true even if you are the worst sinner. Even if your sins are diametrically opposed to what is good

and right, this can be true for you. Because of Christ's perfect life, even though your sins are red, they will be as pristine white as snow. Because of Christ's complete sacrifice, even though your life is as stained as crimson, you can be clean as wool. Dear friends, there is no sin too great, too glaring, or too excessive that Christ's atonement cannot cover it and that the Father cannot forgive it. There is no sin so ingrained that it cannot be changed.

This promise is not just for other people; it is personal. Christ for you, your sins. You can be pardoned. This is true for you, children; for you, teens; for you, single adults; for you, parents; for you, seniors; your sins can be pardoned.

This promise is true even if you are a repeat offender. In English, we read "though your sins," but one possible translation is "as often as your sins are as scarlet." There is forgiveness available after rejecting and ignoring God. There is forgiveness available for the sins of your heart, your mind, and your desires that seem to come from deep within you. There is forgiveness available for those sins that are visible in your actions, your words, your spending habits, your parenting, your secrets, your relationships. Even if you have lived selfishly, thrown temper tantrums, hit, robbed, raped, murdered—the promise is that they will be washed away. Through Christ they will be whiter than snow.

Maybe you are thinking: I am pretty good. I do not do these bad sins. My sins are just a pale yellow, not red. What will the Father say to a child who thinks it is the other children who need forgiveness rather than him? "But thou hast not called upon me, O Jacob...Thou hast wearied me with thine iniquities.... Put me in remembrance; let us plead together.... Thy first father hath sinned, and thy teachers have transgressed against me" (Isa. 43:22–27). You are forgetting that "*all we* like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own

way” (Isa. 53:6). And yet the Father still invites you: Come, my rebellious and unwilling child.

Maybe you are thinking: This all sounds good, but I do not see any need for it. Look around—see the sin in your country, the sin in your community, the sin in your family. My friend, sin is everywhere and in everyone, including you and me. We all need pardon. When Isaiah wrote “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts,” he was not just writing about the worst public sinners. He was writing about everyone with a wicked heart and unrighteous thoughts. That is everyone, including you. But even then, what was the promise? “Let him return to the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:7).

My friend, your sins can be forgiven. Because Christ paid the price, your sins, even if they are as large and many as a sky full of clouds (Isa. 44:22), will be wiped away. If you ask why, the only answer is grace! If you ask when, the Father says, Now. Come while He permits Himself to be found (Isa. 55:6). Come while the offer is still available. Come while the gospel still reaches your ears.

Hear the voice that entreats you  
 Oh, return ye unto God...  
 He is of great compassion,  
 And of wondrous love...  
 Though your sins be as scarlet,  
 They shall be as white as snow.

Have you heard and obeyed that voice? Have you felt His cleansing? The covenant Lord is telling you that you cannot find peace in religion until your sins are forgiven. He is demonstrating that He wants to pardon every member of the covenant family, and pleading for sinners to come to Him for pardon—for the first time or for the tenthousandth time.

Just as the sins of the children cannot be exaggerated, the Father's forgiveness cannot be exaggerated either. It is more radical, more complete, than the sins of the repentant children. Romans 5 says that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." Christians often speak longingly of the day when the white robes of righteousness will be worn and seen (Rev. 7); but God promises that today, today your sins can be washed as white as snow!

And yet there is a condition: you must obey in true repentance. You cannot come to the holy Lord, glibly say, "I'm sorry," and then continue to live your rebellious life. You need to be convinced and sincere. Because the consequences are eternal. Look at verse 20: "But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it." Disobedience and refusal will be punished—not by man, but by the Father Himself. At the end of Isaiah, a similar warning is recorded: "I will number (destine) you to the sword, and ye shall all bow down to the slaughter: because when I called, ye did not answer; when I spake, ye did not hear, but did evil before mine eyes" (65:12). God leaves no excuses for not obeying this call. He invites because He is willing to reason with you; your disobedience shows your own stubbornness, not His unwillingness.<sup>3</sup>

So come now, let us reason. All who hear, are willing, obey, and come, will be blessed. Even if they were rebellious, unhealthy, scandalous, formalistic; even if they disowned their family; they will be blessed. Go back to verse 19: "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land." Chapter 65 also describes those blessings: "Behold, my servants shall eat...behold, my servants shall drink...behold, my servants shall rejoice...my servants shall sing for joy of heart.... But be ye glad and

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3. Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 1:18.

rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people” (Isa. 65:13–23). What did the prodigal son say? “I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no longer worthy to be called thy son” (Luke 15:18–19). And he received the best robe, a ring, a kiss, a feast, and full joy!

Isaiah began his ministry to Judah and Jerusalem with a plea that the people consider their ways. As the covenant Lord calls His rebellious and unwilling children around Him, and openly reveals their wrong actions and their heart problems, what will these children do? What will you do? Because the Father still calls you: “Come now, and let us reason together...though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”

