

"God's Faithful Love"
Isaiah 54:1-56:8
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Based on the number of sermons I've heard in recent years, the trend is to begin with either a story that is either amusing and/or relevant to the topic of the sermon. Given we are heading into the passion week starting this coming Sunday, I can't come up with a better story than that one. Therefore, my hope is you will find from our reading applications help so you can better appreciate the meaning of this upcoming week and God's love for you. I've broken our reading into four sections.

- God's Faithfulness to Israel
- God's Timing
- God's Offers
- God's Heart

Stepping into our reading in chapter 54, we read about God's faithfulness to the Nation of Israel – the Jewish people. There is an unfortunate, and misguided, component of the church today that has taken the position that because of the Jews rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, they permanently severed their role as God's chosen ones. They claim it was the Jews fault for crucifying the LORD, so He has abandoned the Nation of Israel. These people claim the church has stepped in and has taken the role as the receiver of, or sole beneficiary God's covenant originally made to Abraham and the Nation of Israel.

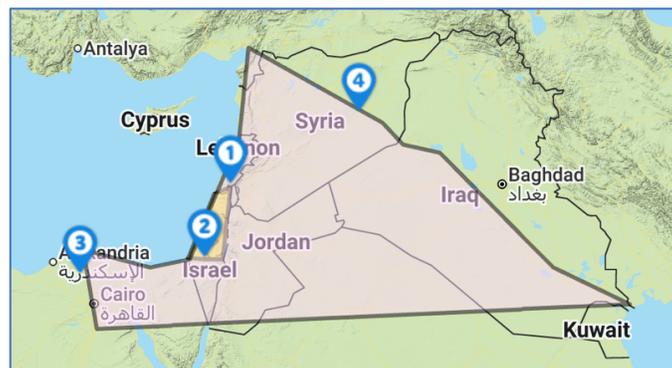
Apparently, this component of the church did not read Isaiah 53:5-6 close enough: "But He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Listen to the inclusive words in these two verses – *our, us, we, every one*. God was thinking of every single one of His creation – including *both* the Jews and the Gentiles, when He, not the Jews, sent His Son to the cross to pay the price for our sins. I completely reject this false accusation that the church has taken the place of the Nation of Israel. There is nothing in Scripture that supports this foolish and arrogant position.

In chapter 54, Isaiah is speaking to the beautiful moment in the future when God will reconcile Himself with the Jews. Contextually, we're reading about the Millennium. In verse 5 that provides multiple titles for the LORD, we should pay attention to a particular one. "For your Maker is your husband – the LORD Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth." While these are wonderful titles, the one that Isaiah is emphasizing is that of a husband. He does this for a reason to give us a picture of the state of the marriage between the LORD and the Jews in verse 6. "The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife

deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young, only to be rejected,” says your God.”

J. Vernon McGee noted, “Israel is today like a wife that has been divorced for adultery.” When God made His covenant with Abraham back in Genesis 15, in His mind and out of His love for Abraham and His seed, this covenant carried the assurance of the words we so often hear at a wedding, “For better or for worse. In sickness and in health.” The Nation of Israel’s history is littered with disobedience to the Law and the rejection of their Messiah, Jesus. The entire book of Hosea is a living parable where the prophet is commanded to marry a harlot to symbolize Israel's unfaithfulness to God. Yet, here in Isaiah 54, we’re reading something akin to a husband who, out of His ongoing love for His adulterous wife, choosing to forgive her. I’ll take a deeper look into this remarkable act of the LORD in the last section of the lecture.

As a gesture demonstrating the fullness of His desire to forgive and restore His relationship with the Jews, the LORD wants them to, finally, receive the fullness of the gift He originally promised to Abraham. This is alluded to in verses 2 & 3, “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities.” Isaiah is speaking to the original geographic size of the Promised Land. Today, Israel only occupies about 10% of the Promised Land – see the below map – the space between the numbers 1 and 2 is today’s Israel’s geographic territory. The larger triangular-like shape represents the totality of the Promised Land God originally intended.



The above numbered bubbles are: 1 – the northernmost city of Dan.; 2 – the southernmost city of Beersheba; 3 – is the Nile River; 4 – is the Euphrates. As part of God’s reconciliation and recommitment to the Jews, they are to fully occupy this territory in the Millennium.

One more point on this component of God’s faithfulness before I move onto the next section. I want you to listen to the descriptive words and phrases provided by Isaiah of God’s forgiveness for His chosen children, the Nation of Israel. “Deep compassion; everlasting kindness; sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you

again; unending love for you; my covenant of peace is not removed; no weapon forged against you will prevail." As forgiven adopted children by our faith in His Son, Jesus, all of these descriptives applies to each of you. If you're ever questioning God's faithfulness in His commitment to you, loved ones, remember these incredible words and phrases of your loving God.

Let's move into a brief look at the concept of God's sense of time and His timing. From verses 54:7-8a, Isaiah uses the words "brief moment" and "moment" to describe God's period of abandonment and hiding His face from the Nation of Israel. The Apostle Peter gave us some insight to God's perspective on time in the eighth verse of the third chapter of his second epistle, "But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day *is* as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Since the last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi – the last documented words from God to the Jews, it has been almost 2,500 years. From our perspective, that is a very long time. However, in God's eternal eyes, it's only been 2.5 days! This is why Isaiah can, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, use words like "brief moment" to describe the time God turned away from the people of Israel. Despite their unwillingness to own their disobedience to God and given their long history of brutality upon them, I can, somewhat, understand why the majority of the Nation of Israel today is either agnostic or doesn't believe God is even real. In the LORD's eyes, it may be for a brief moment He abandoned them, but from a human's perspective, I can imagine the mindset of permanent abandonment.

Verse 6 of chapter 55 tells us, "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near." As we attempt to contemplate God's perspective on His sense of time, Isaiah also reminds us of the truth that was laid out to us way back in Genesis 6:3, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever." There comes a point in each person's life where God's grace to make salvation available to the unbeliever comes to an end. When exactly that is, only God knows. I know some people who won't believe in God because "He gives up on them at some point." That position comes from a position of a complete void of personal accountability in a relationship. God is so far more patient than any of us could ever be. I have no idea why He hung in there with me for the first 35 years of my life, but I'll be forever grateful He did. This is why have a deep appreciation for our memory verse of His thoughts not being my thoughts nor His ways being mine. I would never have put up with me for as long as God did. If you're concerned about how verse 6 might impact you, don't be. For the believer, I believe, God's grace has no end. I'm in the camp of once saved, always saved.

Chapter 54 speaks to the invitation to the Nation of Israel to receive His offer of reconciliation and redemption. In chapters 55, we read of the glorious news that this same offer is made to the Gentiles. There is one important qualifier to this offer, and it is provided in the opening verse to chapter 55, it's "to all who are thirsty." God is a gentleman. He does not force Himself upon people. Through the beauty and wonder of His physical creation, His faithfulness to a perpetually disobedient Nation of Israel, and

the penultimate gesture of passionate love for each person via Christ crucified, He makes His feelings clear about both His character and His desire to be with each one of us.

I believe the LORD designed each of us in such a way that we are not complete – we cannot live life to either its fullest or as it was designed by Him - without being in a relationship with Him. Without Him, we pursue the things of the flesh that only temporarily satisfy but eventually leaving us wanting more. One of my favorite C.S. Lewis quotes is, “If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.” This other world that Mr. Lewis is speaking to is being in a fully reconciled position in the Kingdom of God. Jesus spoke to this in John 8:23, “You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.” Satan, the prince of this world – a title given to Him by Jesus in John 14:30 – knows this full well, so being the liar that he is, attempts to deceive us that the thirst Isaiah is speaking to in chapter 55 can be met via what the world offers.

This is one of the reasons why God hates commercialism as it breeds greed and a love for money to the point that money becomes idol worship. 1 Timothy 6:10: “For the love of money is a root of all *kinds of* evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” Money in of itself is not evil – there’s nothing unbiblical about gaining wealth. What turns money into evil is when it becomes our first love – it takes priority over our relationship with God. For the greedy, they are harming themselves in choosing money over God. However, I believe the greater sin is commercialism – the drive to get people to spend beyond their means - because this leads people to become burdened and shackled with debt they may never be able to pay back. If you don’t believe God has an issue with commercialism, read the first eight verses in Revelation chapter 18 where God expresses His thoughts and then destroys commercial Babylon.

In the first verse of chapter 55, we read a very cool aspect of God’s Kingdom in the future – where everything is free. Notice the truth of the unsatisfying fruit of Satan’s deceptive offer to meet this thirst via fleshly things, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” If everything is free, there’s no need to beg, borrow, steal, or hoard what is needed. How much of our lives do we spend worrying about money? Do we have enough? Can we afford all the increases in prices? How are we going to pay back all this debt? We were created by God, who is spirit, in His image as spirit beings to be in a permanent and uninterrupted relationship with our Creator – Jehovah Jireh – the LORD who provides our every need. My original mentor accurately described the life of the believer as a journey that ends in the Garden of Eden. What we read in the first verse of chapter 55 is really a picture of what God provided Adam and Eve in the Garden before they sinned. This future Isaiah is speaking to will allow us to be like the birds Jesus spoke of in Matthew 6:26, “Look at

the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”

Verse 11 of chapter 55 says, “so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” Hebrews 4:12 speaks to the power of God’s Word, “For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” There was a popular commercial many years ago by the investment brokerage firm of Dean Witter (my first employer out of college, by the way). The key line was, “When Dean Witter speaks.....” then you would see everyone in the scene stop and lean in to listen. God uses His word to not only reveal Himself but also reveal to each person who reads it and/or hears it to reveal their need for Him. I won’t speak for the other lecturers, but I have often wondered if all the work I put into preparing and giving these lectures is doing any good. Verse 11 brings me hope that His word never returns empty.

In chapter 56, Isaiah returns to the Nation of Israel in the Millennium. There’s an emphasis on ethics with phrases like, “Maintain justice and do what is right” from verse 1 and verse 2, “Blessed is the one who does this— the person who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps their hands from doing any evil.” J. Vernon McGee wisely points out, “The study of prophecy is not to entertain the curious or to intrigue the intellect but to encourage holy living.” The Nation of Israel will be fully reconciled to God, but they will be accountable to live in a manner that represents the holy character of their Divine Husband.

For the remaining verses of our reading in chapter 56, we learn that God’s invitation to repent and return to Him is for everyone – even the eunuchs and the sons of the stranger. This is a good segue into the final component of our outline – God’s heart.

This last component of this lecture is also my conclusion as I believe you’re going to see a singular theme through the previous components – God’s faithfulness to Israel, His timing, His offer, and now here about His heart. The main theme of this reading is God’s inviting the Nation of Israel and the Gentiles back to Him. This is the fruit of a covenant-keeping God. In this final component of today’s outline, let’s begin with a presentation on what a Biblical covenant is. Back in Genesis 15, God chose to make a covenant with Abram (eventually, Abraham) because of his belief, or faith in the LORD. The Hebrew word for covenant is “beriyth,” which means a formal, solemn, and binding agreement, treaty, pledge, pact, alliance, or contract. The etymology of this word comes from a root meaning “to cut.” Appropriately, confirming covenants at the time of Abraham involved the sacrificing of animals and cutting them in two. Each side would be laid out opposite each other creating a path. Typically, in these arrangements, each of the two parties seeking to make the covenant would start at opposite ends of the

path, walk towards each other, and meet in the middle memorializing their respective commitments to the blood-based agreement.

The scene described in Genesis 15, though, was an important variation from the typical meet-in-the-middle component of this ceremony. Abraham fell into a deep sleep (likely the LORD's doing). In verse 17, we learned, "a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces." The firepot is symbolic of God. However, there was no meeting in the middle in this covenant ceremony – the smoking firepot traveled the distance of the path from one end to the other. The important spiritual context of the firepot passing from the LORD's side to Abraham's side was that God would do all the work necessary to keep the covenant.

Now let's jump forward to the New Testament, and we learn from the only begotten Son of God and our Savior, Jesus Christ, that He instituted another blood covenant. This covenant, though, would not be sealed by animal blood - it would be sealed by His own precious blood. The work of the two parties in this covenant – one being Jesus and the other party being each member of humanity – would once again be completely taken care of by God. What were Jesus' last words on the cross? "It is finished." In both of these covenants, the only responsibility of the non-God parties was, and still is, to believe that God will deliver on the terms of the covenants.

Why is this important? And what does this have to do with our reading? God is a promise keeper – He cannot lie. If He says He's going to do something, He's going to do it. Can we say that? If each of us is honest with ourselves, we will arrive at the sad conclusion we have not always honored our commitments. Yet, while God has done all the work to make these covenants permanent, we do have a responsibility to do our best, out of gratitude, to live according to the terms of the covenant. God tells us to be perfect for He is perfect. Thankfully, He knows better than we do we will not always be perfect. Since this is true, a reasonable thinking person must ask the question, "Why would God enter into a covenant where He does all the work, and He knows the other side, meaning us, are going to fail to comply on what is asked of us over and over and over?"

Before I answer that, let me add some more context. As I read through the first ten verses of chapter 54 of our reading, as we noted earlier, I hear the heart of a faithful God for His chosen children -the Nation of Israel. We read of deep fatherly caring words and phrases like, do not be afraid, you will not be put to shame, you will not be humiliated, with deep compassion I will bring you back, everlasting kindness, and unfailing love. Place these words against the backdrop of over 2,000 years of blatant disobedience and try to reconcile the two. Now add that to my question as to why would God enter into a covenant with these people? When I say "these people" loved ones, I mean not only the Nation of Israel, I mean the rest of us.

The only way to reconcile God's words in our reading to a disobedient people is **covenant love**. Covenant love goes beyond the feelings. This isn't to say that feelings aren't important, but they come from our hearts. What does the Bible say about our hearts? They are desperately wicked, and who can know them? The difference with God and us is He never lets His feelings overrule His role and responsibility in His covenants. A covenant is a commitment and, praise the LORD, regardless of what we do, He keeps His end of the commitment. To summarize what I see coming from the heart of God in our reading is a covenant love that produces grace. I don't think grace is possible without covenant love. As a reminder, grace is getting what you don't deserve.

Cheri spoke to us last week about the suffering servant in Isaiah chapter 53. A week from tomorrow is the day we remember what was so incredibly and accurately prophesied more than 700 years before it happened – that suffering servant, Jesus, dying on a cross to make a way for those who believe to be forgiven of every sin and be reconciled to God. I can't think of a greater display of covenant love that produces grace for everyone who chooses to believe. As we move through next week and arrive at the glorious Resurrection Sunday, my prayer for each of you is that you not only will give thanks and praise for God's covenant love and grace, but also you will ask the Lord to empower you to be a greater representative of His covenant love-producing grace to those He currently has brought into your lives and those He will bring. If you're not sure what that covenant-love grace practically looks like, listen to the exhortations from our LORD to us to display covenant love-based grace:

- Matthew 5:39: "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."
- Matthew 5:44: "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,"
- In responding to Peter's question how often should we forgive someone, he said in Matthew 18:21: "Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

These are all commandments of grace. None of them are easy – they will cost us - they require a sacrifice. For reconciliation between two parties to take place, someone has to die. Jesus died for us to be reconciled to God. For us to be representatives of Christ, we're going to have to be willing die to our fleshly responses to offenses and submit to these commandments of grace to demonstrate the true faithful and reconciling heart of God. This is why we must be so devoted to God's Word – remember, it does not return empty or void. The Holy Spirit is not only the interpreter of God's Word, but He also has the power to apply it in how we live – should we surrender our heart-driven responses to His leading. We can be covenant-love-driven grace-giving people, but we cannot be them on our own strength. To be these types of people, we must humble ourselves, pick up our crosses daily, and surrender to the Spirit's leading and power. We can change the world if we do this. It was God's

covenant love for His Son and for us that sent Jesus to the cross. It was God's covenant love for His Son and for us that resurrected Jesus proving the victory over death. The Apostle Paul got it right – covenant love never fails. Let's stand and sing and give thanks to Him for His faithful covenant-love driven grace.