

Lecture for People of the Word: **God's Faithful Love**
Lesson 24, Isaiah 54:1 – 56:8

Let's review the lesson about The Suffering Servant that we shared before our vacation.

The prophecy about the Suffering Servant, is so accurate about the details of the Christ's death, it was hard to realize it was prophecy, rather than a record of an eyewitness account of Jesus' crucifixion! Isaiah, you will recall, accurately spoke of Jesus' physical suffering, calling him marred beyond human likeness. He spoke of how everyone despised and rejected him and would not even consider him Messiah material. He was rejected by the same people who had witnessed his miracles and shouted "Hosanna" just one brief week before they called out for Pilot to crucify him. I was very impressed that Isaiah even recorded that Jesus would be surrounded by the wicked, speaking of the two criminals crucified on either side of him.

Studying this lesson before our Easter vacation brought this promise of "The Servant" home to me. It seemed written just for me, a Gentile. But, it was not intended only for us today. Rather, as we see in today's lesson, The Servant was promised to Israel as fulfillment of God's covenant relationship with Israel. Remember, Jim Swaney reminded us that the Jews began to look for a Messiah that would deliver them from captivity politically, not spiritually. Because Jesus did not fit their expectations, they rejected him as their Messiah. Now we will turn our attention to the promises God gave to Israel in his covenants. We will see his faithfulness toward Israel in each covenant. The first part of our passage in Isaiah 54 speaks to their anticipated restoration to the promised land. Let's consider how the covenants God made with Israel led them to believe these prophecies were about Israel as a nation.

Isaiah begins, in chapter 54, to promise Israel's remnant will be restored to return to the land. 54:1-3 God reminds Israel that in the coming punishment of exile for unfaithfulness, he will save a remnant. 54:7.8 We have read this promise before. He promised to bring the remnant back to the land in even greater numbers than before their exile. (54:3) Their return will be accompanied with explosive growth, even to the point of dispossessing the nations they find living there when they return. Israel will settle in the desolate cities abandoned by these nations and grow so much that they will have to expand their tents or homes to hold all their children! Israel would hold onto these promises throughout their captivity.

God's promise to expand Israel is described as being like a barren wife having more children than the wife with her own family v. 1 It will be like having so many children, you need a bigger tent/house to hold them all! v.2 God's words of consolation strike resonance in the hearts of women who had already lost their husbands due to battle. They also would be a consolation to men taken into captivity and rendered unable to have children in their slavery. God speaks to Israel's men and women by promising to make their homes full of children who would be their future, making up for the loss during exile. But how could such bounty come after the suffering captivity would bring? Isaiah uses the metaphor of the unfaithful wife being restored, to explain God's plan. v. 5-7 Although Israel is pictured in the O.T. as God's wife, her history chronicles repeated unfaithfulness to Him through idol worship. Israel broke her wedding vows as God's wife.

I recently went as a guest to the Jewish wedding of a good friend. Part of the wedding included a marriage contract, in which the groom promised to love his wife, provide food and shelter for her and protect her. The bride promised to love her husband, and be faithful under her husband's provision and protection. Both signed the contract and it was witnessed by two friends. This was not the marriage license. It was a spiritual contract between them, of their responsibilities before God to be faithful to each other. This is a picture of faithfulness between a husband and wife.

God also made a contract between Israel as his wife and himself. We know it as the ten commandments of the law. When Moses brought the "marriage contract" for Israel down from Mt. Sinai, Israel his "wife" was found already breaking her vows by worshiping an idol shaped like a golden calf. Ex. 32:8 Later, with a second copy of this contract presented to the people, they promised, in mass, to keep all of the contract. But, Israel's history of life with their kings further records king after king who refused to "have no other gods," but rather introduced or promoted the worship of the idols to all the people, like they had seen in the nations around them. Israel chose to worship false gods. God equated this to the unfaithfulness of adultery. So God called the prophet Hosea to illustrate this relationship of unfaithful Israel to her husband, God.

Hosea was a prophet who lived in the final days of the northern part of the kingdom. The northern kingdom is known as Ephraim, Samaria or Israel in our study. He prophesied during the reign of the last six kings of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 15:8 – 17:6) before Assyria separated Israel from the southern kingdom of Judah, about 722-721 B.C. As a symbolic illustration of how God chose Israel and Judah as his people, God told Hosea to marry an adulterous wife named Gomer, not a pure bride, but a chosen wife.

Imagine this man of God as he hears the command given to him. He is to find a woman who has already been promiscuous and take her as his wife. I'm sure his family was quite upset at this turn of events. But Hosea began his marriage with the same kind of vows with which we are familiar- to love, protect and provide for Gomer. Their first child was born, who was son. God told Isaiah to name him Jezreel which means "God Scatters." A name should be chosen to describe the child, or his potential. But this name was chosen because God was foretelling that He would "put an end to the kingdom of Israel." Hosea 1:4; How could He do that? Didn't God promise that there would never be an end to David's Kingdom? But we see the picture of this captivity Isaiah also warned about.

The second child born was a daughter called Lo-Ruhamah. Her name means "Loved no longer." Hosea's sweet baby girl is named that she is not loved? God chose this name saying He will no longer show love or forgive Israel, but will show love to Judah. Hosea 1: 6, 7; The third child was a son. He was named Lo-Ammi "Not my people." Because the people had rejected God for adulterous idol worship, He would reject them and was saying, "I am not your God". Hosea 1:9 God was warning again that the breaking of a covenant is a serious business. This was a terrible prophecy and very disastrous to Hosea's marriage!

Hosea is told to have his children send their mother away. Gomer goes back into adultery. Hosea is illustrating the punishment Israel would undergo as they are taken off in captivity to

Assyria. Hosea chapter 2. In captivity Israel will be surrounded by idol worship. Gomer leaves Hosea and her children and gets into trouble through her adultery. She is enslaved as a prostitute and lives in adultery for some time. How dark these chapters of Hosea are. What was God doing to Hosea? What about the marriage vows? Many scholars believe that the wording of Gomer's second and third births may infer that Hosea was not their father. She had broken their marriage covenant already. In doing so, she suffered consequences. However, this consequence begs a question: Is God breaking his vow to Abraham and David by consigning Israel to the consequences of their unfaithfulness?

But God promises that his unconditional covenant with Abraham will still be upheld (Hosea 1:10 – 11.) Even in the middle of this “soap-opera-ish” prophesy, God reminds Hosea and the people of Israel that He promised Abraham his descendents “ will be like the sands on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted.” So, they would once more be called “sons of the living God,” and they would be reunited with the children of Judah. God always keeps his promises. God does not wink at sin. But no matter how much these two statements seem to contradict each other, they do not do so. But, God will allow discipline as a consequence of sin while maintaining his covenant. So, God continues his illustration in the life of Hosea.

God instructs Hosea to purchase his wife out of servitude with fifteen shekels of silver (exactly half of that paid to Judas to betray Jesus, 30 pieces of silver Matt. 26:15) with instructions to live without acting as a prostitute or intimacy with any man for many days because, “Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones...” so that afterward they will “return and seek the Lord their God and David their king,” coming trembling to the Lord and his blessings in the last days. Hosea 3 God's compassion to Israel will bring her back and restore her as a faithful wife, once again. Isaiah 54:7-8

Although Hosea lists the charges against Israel, he ends his prophecy with a call to repentance. “Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall!” Hosea 14: 1 God reminds Israel that their return is conditioned on repentance; “Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips.’” Hosea 14:1, 2 God's love is so deep that no choices, no selfishness, no sin can separate us from His love. Romans 8 Israel would be restored in that God would bring a decree from King Cyrus many years later that any who wish to do so may return to the land. However, it was only those who wished to worship the Lord their God who chose to leave captivity. Only those who repented their unfaithfulness of idol worship set out when that decree was given, to rebuild the promised land. This was the conditional part of God's covenant with Israel. With repentance, they will enjoy the hope of restoration. But part of this marriage contract or covenant with Israel was not conditional.

So, we see covenants can be conditional, such as in Hosea's prophecy, or unconditional as illustrated back in our passage by Isaiah. Israel's return to the land depended on their repentance of their unfaithfulness. But God also promises to keep his unconditional covenant with Israel even though Israel was unfaithful. Isa. 54: 9, 10 If Israel did not repent, the promises of restoration would not be kept for them. But God always honors his unconditional covenants.

After the flood, Noah was promised by God, “Never again will I curse the ground because of man...Never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done.” Gen. 8:21 There was no conditional “if” in this promise. Therefore, we can count on God to keep this covenant.

God promised Abram, before he changed his name to Abraham, that he would have an heir before he had any sons at all. Genesis 15:4 God also promised that this heir would be blessed. His descendants would become so numerous, they would be like the stars of the sky and grains of sand on the seashore- uncountable. Doesn't this sound like the first verses we studied this week, where Israel would have to enlarge her tents? This covenant promised Abraham that Israel would become a nation Gen. 15:5 Abraham wanted to seal the contract for these promises. So, he set up a covenant ceremony, sacrificing a heifer, goat, a ram, a dove and a young pigeon. Gen. 15:9, 10 In that day, people making a contract would split the animals, arrange the pieces in two rows. Then, the two parties would walk between the sacrifices, indicating a promise such as, “So may I be cut in half if I break this promise.” This seems to be a rather severe promise, but certainly motivation to keep your part of the contract. This is rather like our sing-song promise: “Cross your heart and hope to die...”! But God made Abram fall into a deep sleep and only God's presence seen as a “smoking firepot” passed between the animal pieces signifying that it was God's covenant and that there was no condition to be kept on Abraham's part. God alone made the promise and God always keeps his promises.

God later tested Abraham's trust in God's covenant by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. But when God stopped this sacrifice and substituted a ram he added to this promise: “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all the nations on earth will be blessed.” Gen. 22: 16 - 18; This offspring of Abraham's descendants is Messiah, the Lord Jesus, the Christ, whom we studied as the suffering servant. Although Abraham was not a perfect man, God is. God is faithful and unconditionally promised that the nation of Israel would come to pass and would a blessing to all the nations. He brought it fulfilled it partially in the reign of King David.

David led Israel to completely conquer all of the nations possessing the land and brought Israel to the boundaries promised by God to Abraham. David wanted to honor God by building a Temple to his name. God was pleased with David's heart and again, made an unconditional covenant with him. God promised that David's house and kingdom would endure forever before God and his throne would be established forever. 2 Samuel 7: 16 This kingdom was promised when God said that the scepter, the kingship of Israel would never leave David's lineage. This was a reference that Messiah would come through David's line. There was no condition for David or his descendants to fulfill. Messiah did come and we call him Jesus, because he saved his people from their sins.

Troubled days followed the people of Israel as they were unfaithful. We see that this too was not a surprise to God in Isaiah 54:10. But even though Israel would be disciplined, God's unconditional promises would continue down through the ages.

Therefore, some covenants were conditional and some unconditional. One part of God's unconditional covenant is about Jerusalem, the city of Zion. Isaiah 54:11-14. This was future to

Israel and future to us as well. The returning remnant would rebuild Jerusalem, but Ezra and Nehemiah record that it was actually pretty minimal in its boundaries. It was not a city of beauty as described here, and it was destroyed again by Rome. Even now, it is a poor shadow of what is described here, even though it is pushing at the walls of the tent. So, this part of the covenant is about the future restoration of Jerusalem.

One day, Jerusalem will be a city of beauty. Notice the beautiful, precious building supplies! It will be built with stones of turquoise, a foundation of sapphires, battlement of rubies, gates of sparkling jewels and all the walls will have precious stones. The Apostle John saw a vision of this Jerusalem, which he recorded in Revelation 21:18-21. The description of the New Jerusalem was the picture that captured my attention in a sermon fifty-eight years ago, to bring me to salvation. I encourage you to read this passage for yourself, understanding one day we will see the real thing! Jerusalem will also be a city of peace Isa. 54:15 -17. We know throughout Biblical history that Jerusalem would remain a city of contention, under subjection to ruling powers beginning with Assyria, Babylonia, the Medio-Persians Grecians, and Romans. Even today, Jews, Muslims and Christians cannot settle the conflicts surrounding Jerusalem.

But one day, the name Jerusalem will be synonymous with peace. Isaiah predicts that any attacker will surrender to the Jews rather than fight. (v. 15) No weapon formed against Israel will prevail and all accusations against Israel will be refuted. I hear many accusations and threats going out against Jerusalem now. But God's unconditional promise will be fulfilled in the future when The Lord will be the King of all Kings, ruling from his throne in the New Jerusalem.

God calls all to come to His city and believe in His promises. This city will be a city of spiritual restoration for the nations Isa. 55:1-5 All who are thirsty may come and be satisfied. They will not need any currency at all! They can come and eat wine and milk, both products of a peaceful land. He encourages all people to make purchases that will actually satisfy their souls, not temporary goods. He offers what is good, delightful, truly rich fare. What is he talking about? Through God's "faithful love promised to David," the Messiah, God will keep this promise/ this covenant. Jesus told us that he is Living Water to quench thirst eternally; He is the Bread of Life, offering salvation to those who believe; He is our Redeemer. Will he redeem all people? Is this a conditional covenant or unconditional covenant?

God's plan for the earth has always been to have a people who choose to love him. He offered his unconditional promise of the special "seed of woman" made to Adam and Eve, the promised descendant of Abraham, the King of Kings promised to David, the Redeemer promised in the prophets. But participation in this blessing is conditional on repentance of sin, and answering his call to come. People who are repentant will choose to answer the summons of Isaiah 55:5 which makes this a conditional covenant.

The condition of the promised restoration is repentance. Listen to the Witness God sends to you. He will be a leader and commander of the people. He will call all nations to come too, nations not yet known to the people. This refers to us!

God's call to repentance is for all who seek the Lord and call on him while he may be found. This presumes that there will be a time when he may not be found. A time will come when it is too late to answer his call. (v. 6,7) The wicked must forsake their evil ways and thoughts. They need to turn around and go toward the Lord – this is the definition of repentance. God is waiting, full of mercy, ready to forgive and pardon all who believe that He has done to pay our deserved penalty for us. His redemption is promised to all, but it is conditioned on repentance. Knowing Israel's unfaithfulness, how can God promise redemption to them? Knowing our unfaithfulness, how can God even offer redemption to us? Knowing what he did for all of mankind on the cross, how can we doubt that he would redeem us?

Is it possible to even understand God's compassion with this amazing offer of redemption? Is.55:8,9 We can say the words and rationalize our habits of sin. But His ways are so far above our ways, we could never have imagined such mercy. His thoughts through all of time are so much higher than our thoughts in that He planned this redemption covenant, understanding all of the rebellion and all of the rejection of man's wicked hearts through all the ages of man.

God gave his word as a seed. It grew in our understanding as his word revealed his covenants. He promised he would send someone who would make a way for man to be redeemed. He promised all of the world would be blessed through this descendant of Abraham. He promised that this one would extend David's throne as King of Kings through eternity. He promised that all who come and seek him will receive mercy. He promised a Kingdom of joy and peace which will radiate through a renewed Jerusalem.

But He also promised that this was a conditional offer of reconciliation, although the offer would last forever. His people would be recognized as those who "maintain justice and do what is right," which is the condition. Isa. 56:1 He reveals his righteousness through the salvation he says is "close at hand," which is his eternal covenant. The blessings that result from this reconciliation of his justice and his salvation are open to all: the foreigner, the eunuch and the faithful.

Nations beyond Israel can be redeemed, which includes us Gentiles. He will give those who respond to his salvation, binding themselves to the Lord, joy in his house of prayer. Those who gave themselves to the service of false gods, like the eunuchs, are still offered redemption when they repent. The physical land given to Israel was passed on from father to son. But some were made to be eunuchs in captivity and so their line of inheritance was cut off. But God "will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off." Those who worship the true God, Israel, are offered a memorial, a place in this redemption, where their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on God's altar. God's covenant with Israel and all who repent of their sin, culminates with His gathering all of the exiles of Israel and "still others to them besides those already gathered. He is offering his everlasting covenant, redemption, to us here at the end of our lesson. Israel looked forward to being gathered back to their land. But we, the nations, are offered the same covenant. We too can repent our unfaithfulness, and come when he calls. We too must meet the condition of repentance to obtain the promises of the unconditional covenant. Seek the Lord while you may. He remains faithful enough for all of us.