

Isaiah Part 34: The Restoration of Israel...

Isaiah 54 and 55

The eternal covenant of peace (Isaiah 54 v 1 to 17)

“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear” (v 1) – in ancient Israel, a barren woman carried an enormous load of shame and disgrace. Here God likens captive Israel to a barren woman who can now sing – because now “the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married”. The Babylonian exile and captivity meant more than oppression for Israel; it meant shame, disgrace, and humiliation. God promises a glorious release from exile and captivity, and from shame and humiliation (see Galatians 4 v 26, 27).

“Enlarge the place of your tent” (v 2) – the curse and shame of barrenness would be so completely broken, and Israel would be so fruitful, that they would have to expand their living space! This would be of particular comfort to the returning Babylonian exiles, who felt themselves small in number and weak...

- William Carey (1761 to 1834), pioneer missionary to India, applied v 2 and 3 (“Enlarge the place of your tent... lengthen your cords”) to mission, and summoned the church to reach out to the unevangelized nations. How does this passage show God’s greatness and his far-reaching purposes?
- In v 4 to 10, what reasons are given why God’s reconciled people should not fear. In what ways will God be like a ‘husband’ to his people? How does God show that he is faithful to his covenant?
- “This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord” (v 17) – what is this heritage? How can we be sure that we will enjoy these blessings?

In verses 4 to 10 God shows how Israel will be restored like a widow who is rescued from her reproach. “The reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more”(v 4) – God compares Israel’s humiliation to the reproach of widowhood, and promises rescue from shame. “For your Maker is your husband”(v 5) – though Israel might be regarded as forsaken as a widow, God promises to stand in the place of her husband. “The LORD of hosts is his name” – to comfort and strengthen his people, God reminds them that he is their Maker, the LORD of hosts, their Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, “the God of the whole earth”.

“For a brief moment I deserted you” (v 7) – God says in effect, ‘for a brief moment I allowed you to feel that I had deserted you’. “But with great compassion I will gather you” – giving Israel cause to set their hope and trust in God. “In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you” (v 8). “This is like the days of Noah to me” (v 9) – just as God promised that the flood waters of Noah’s day would not cover the earth forever, so will his anger recede from Israel. “For the mountains may depart... but my steadfast love shall not depart” – the ‘steadfast love’ (חֶסֶד, *chesed*) is more certain than the mountains, and his “covenant of peace” is more sure...

Verses 11 to 17 contain promises of prosperity, peace, and protection. “Behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires...” (v 11) – God promises he will lavish riches upon those who feel “afflicted, storm-tossed and not comforted”. “All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the peace of your children” (v 13) – when we are “afflicted, storm-tossed and not comforted”, we feel bad not just for ourselves, but also for our children. God gives precious assurance that he will teach our children and give them great peace.

“In righteousness you shall be established... you shall not fear... whoever stirs up strife with you shall fall because of you “ (v 14, 15) – God promises that those who are afflicted will find protection and security in him. “No weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed” (v 17) – the sovereign God – who created the blacksmith, who created the ravager to destroy – also has the power to protect. Whatever weapon is raised against God’s people is destined to be destroyed itself. God will ultimately even protect his people from criticism; indeed, every tongue which rises against God’s people in judgment shall be condemned.

Invitations to life, forgiveness and restoration (Isaiah 55 v 1 to 13)

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters” (v 1) – this is an invitation to everyone – but only one who thirsts. Jesus may have had this passage in mind when he cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink” (John 7 v 37). “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?” (v 2) – this is a remarkably relevant question, in light of all the things we can pour our time and money and effort into – things which will never satisfy the way the LORD can satisfy.

- Are the invitations in this chapter any less applicable or urgent in our day than it was to the people of Israel living in captivity in Babylon? How can re-phrase this chapter in present day language?
- In verses 8 to 13, what do we learn about (i) man’s inability to comprehend God; (ii) God’s Word of promise; (iii) the future for God’s people? How should these truths affect our behaviour?

“Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good” the invitation is clear, provision is made, everything is available – but we must still do certain things: (i) first, we must listen diligently; (ii) second, we must “eat what is good”, which requires discernment; (iii) third, we must “delight [ourselves] in rich food”, suggesting taking time to meditate on spiritual truths (see Psalm 1 v 2). “Incline your ear” (v 3) – continues this idea. “Hear, that your soul may live” – shows the benefit of listening to the Word of God: spiritual life!

“I will make with you an everlasting covenant” (v 3) – for the one who will listen, God promises a covenant, characterized by his “steadfast, sure love for David”. “Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples” (v 4) – David was a witness in the sense that he had a real relationship with God, and could speak to Israel as a witness of what he had seen and heard in that relationship. David was a leader for Israel, spiritually, politically, and militarily. He led by his godly example and his shepherd’s heart that genuinely desired God’s best for the peoples.

“You shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you” (v 5) – is a prophecy that has its ultimate fulfillment in the Millennium, when the nations will flock to Israel (Isaiah 60 v 5; 60 v 9). Why do the nations flock to Israel? “Because of the LORD your God... for he has glorified you”, in accordance with his blessings of restoration for Israel.

“Seek the LORD while he may be found” (v 6) – Isaiah impresses a sense of urgency on God’s people. It is not that God is hidden and can only be found now: he can only be found when our hearts are inclined to look for him (v 3), and that inclination itself is a gift from God. “Let the wicked forsake his way” (v 7) – Isaiah impresses the need for repentance among God’s people (see 2 Chronicles 7 v 14; Romans 12 v 2).

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (v 8) – God does not think the way we do. Because we are made in the image of God, we can relate to God’s thoughts, but we cannot master them. God does things his way, and his ways are often not our ways. “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth” (v 10) – using the illustration of the water cycle, God shows the essential principle that his Word shall not return to him empty, but will successfully accomplish his purposes. As rain waters the earth, “making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater”, God’s Word bears fruit in rich and varied ways.

“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace” (v 12) – when God’s people listen to him, and his Word does his work in them, joy and peace are the result – joy so great, that even the mountains, hills and trees join in! “Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress” (v 13) – where there was barrenness and reminders of the curse (the thorn), there will be beautiful and useful trees. In his glorious work of restoration, God takes away the barren and the cursed, and brings forth beauty and fruit. “It shall make a name for the LORD” – when the LORD restores, all the work is done for his name, and for his glory. When the LORD restores, the work is secure; it is an “everlasting sign that shall not be cut off”.