

The Road to Jesus: The Gospel According to Isaiah
Celebrating the Return - Part 1
Isaiah 54-56

INTRODUCTION:

Isaiah has been teaching the nation of Israel how they need to respond to God. You will not respond to God until you understand what God expects from you. You will not respond to God until you realize you have a sin problem and it is keeping you away from God.

Israel is going into exile in Babylon. When she returns, she will have to return to God by repenting of her sins. But the issue of sin still has to be resolved, which God will do by sending Emmanuel to take the sins of the world on Himself. So, since chapter 40, Isaiah has pictured the return of the Jews from Babylonian exile as including a spiritual return to the God of heaven in faith and obedience.

Chapters 54-59 celebrate that return and we see these same themes highlighted in these chapters. Israel is pictured as returning to the Lord in five pictures:

#1 THE BARREN BECOME FERTILE - 54:1-3:

Isaiah directs his attention here to the "barren one," described further as "you who have borne no child." We have noticed back in 51:2, the only reference to Sarah outside of the book of Genesis. She was the barren one, until God gave her Isaac. Through Isaac, came the multitude of descendants and nations and kings, all in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham from Genesis 12. There are eight imperatives (jussives) in verses 1-2.

Here, Isaiah calls on Sarah's descendants, who were "barren" (spiritually) because of their sins to "shout for joy," to "break forth into joyful shouting," to "cry aloud," because the sons of the desolate one (Sarah, after the promise of God) will be more numerous than the sons of the married woman" (Sarah, before the promise of God).

When the Jews return from their exile, they will multiply and grow and be composed of many nations, the Gentiles joining them in the new spiritual house of God. Paul quotes this passage in Galatians 4:27, applying it to the church of Christ, as it is composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

These two verses want to emphasize how much the restored nation of Israel will be larger and more numerous than the exiled nation of Israel. Again, this refers to the Kingdom of the Messiah, the church of Christ.

#2 THE LORD HAS REDEEMED HIS PEOPLE - 54:4-8:

If the Jews would trust the Lord and obey His word, they would not be ashamed. They will not be humiliated. They will not be disgraced (vs 4).

Why? Because their "Maker" is their "Husband," the "Holy One of Israel" (vs 5). He is the Lord of Hosts. He is their Redeemer. He is the God of all the earth. Smith writes "these titles [esp. "Maker" and "Husband", p.h.] should assure the audience that God has not forgotten about his relationship with Zion" (481).

God had called them, beginning with Abraham and repeatedly throughout their history. Even though God and sent them into exile, in a situation similar to a woman who is divorced by her husband (vs 6).

But, she would stay exiled only for a certain period of time (vs 7). He will bring her back, "with great compassion."

It was in anger that God hid His face from her but "with everlasting lovingkindness," He will have compassion on her once again (vs 8). "Everlasting kindness" is used over 100 times in the OT. "Restoration to the land is really not the principle issue - restoration to the loving glance of God is" (Oswalt, 421).

#3 THE COVENANT OF PEACE - 54:9-10:

God swore during the days of Noah and his flood that He would not destroy the earth again with water. In the same way, God will not be angry with the Jewish nation forever (vs 9).

In contrast to the temporary nature of the physical earth, God's lovingkindness will last forever (vs 10), as will His covenant of peace. "The emotion of anger is gone for ever but the emotion of surging love abides" (Motyer, 385).

This peace is the peace that comes through the Messiah's Kingdom (9:6-7).

#4 THE CITY - 54:11-14:

Picturing God's restored people as a city has been a theme in Isaiah: 1:26-27; 2:2-4; 4:2-6; 12:1-6; 24-26; 47-52; 66:10ff. The church is pictured as being descended from the "Jerusalem" from above in Galatians 4:26. In Hebrews 12:22, Christians have come to "Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."

In verse 11, picturing the returned nation as a city, God says He will rebuild them, making them more beautiful than before, with precious stones. This may have been the inspiration for John's description of heaven in Revelation 21.

Notice here, we never get very far away from the fact that *man has to be taught the truth and he must obey it in humility* - verse 13. "The gift of revealed truth has always marked off the Lord's people from all others. It was the distinguishing mark of the city of 2:2-4" (Motyer, 386).

This new city, this new people will be characterized by "righteousness," "far from oppression" (vs 14) and "terror."

#5 - PROTECTED STATUS - 54:15-17:

God will take care of Jerusalem's enemies, verse 15. God has His own craftsmen who make His weapons (vs 16-17). God will defend His people and vindicate them. Now, you notice in verse 17 the word "servants" is plural. Before, it was singular, often referring to the "Servant of the Lord," Jesus Christ. But from now on, it will be singular.

"God seems to be saying that he will no longer have any need to send enemies to judge his people since they are righteous" (Smith, 490).

Chapter 55 is a call to trust in God and His word because there is a big difference between the word of God and the word of man. Following the work of the Suffering Servant from chapters 52 & 53, what is made available for the one who seeks righteousness?

#1 TRUE RICHES - 55:1-2:

When the Israelites return from exile, they will likely be poor and destitute, leaving much of their belongings behind in Babylon. Here, Isaiah calls on them - without money - to buy.

Clearly, he is referring to spiritual riches, not physical wealth. Buy and eat. Buy wine. Buy milk “without money and without cost.” This passage is used in the New Testament twice, once by Jesus in John 7:37-39 and once by John in Revelation 22:17. There are twelve imperative verbs in this short paragraph, verses 1-3.

God calls on them to “listen” and eat what God has prepared for them, “in abundance” (vs 2). Please observe this point. “How does one eat of this food and delight in its richness? By listening carefully (the verb is emphasized by the infinitive absolute immediately following) to the words that God speaks to the prophet” (Oswalt, 436). The same thing is true in John 6 when Jesus talks about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. He is not talking about eating Himself and He is not talking about eating the Lord’s Supper. He is talking about “consuming” His words, His Truth, His message.

#2 EQUAL CITIZENSHIP - 55:3-5:

Twice more in verse 3, God calls on Israel to listen and to “incline their ear” and come to God so that they would live. He will make an “everlasting covenant” with them, according to His “faithful mercies” shown toward David, His covenant made with the house of David found in 2 Samuel 7:8-16, that of forming a new kingdom, a new dynasty, with the Son of David, Jesus Christ sitting on the throne, ruling with no end forever. Isaiah uses the word “covenant” a dozen times. He uses the expression “everlasting” covenant only 3 times. Paul quotes this passage in Acts 13:34, showing that it does refer to the Gospel Age.

David was made a witness of God’s goodness (vs 4) and he was a leader and commander for the Israelites, as will the Messiah. The word translated “leader” (*nagid*) here is used in Daniel 9:25 to refer to the Messiah. The Greek translation is used of Jesus in Acts 3:15; Hebrews 2:10; and Revelation 1:5.

Verse 5 alludes once again to the idea that Gentiles will come join the Israelites in the new spiritual kingdom.

YIELD YOURSELVES TO GOD - 55:6-13:

With these thoughts in mind, a renewed relationship with God through an everlasting covenant based on God’s promise to David, Isaiah issues a command to “seek” the Lord and “call upon Him” (vs 6). “The blessings described in chaps. 54-55 are not false or deceitful hopes, silly dreams of grandeur, or just pious nationalistic rhetoric that will never be fulfilled. All that God promises will happen just as he said (55:9-10)” (Smith, 506).

Repentance is always demanded of people who want to be right with God. The wicked must forsake their ways (vs 7) and return to the Lord. There he will find compassion (15 times) and pardon.

Why should the wicked forsake his way? Because the thoughts of the Lord are so much higher than man’s (vs 8). Just as far above as the heavens are than the earth.

Plus, God’s word is dependable, reliable, trustworthy in His nature and character. As the rain and snow fall from heaven and water the ground without fail, so God’s word leaves His mouth and does not return without accomplishing what God intends for it to accomplish (vss 10-11). “The Bible reveals his thoughts and ways, sets his targets, voices his promises and is powerful to achieve what it expresses” (Motyer, 391).

Smith writes (511): "God does not make impotent threats or empty promises; when he talks people should listen because what he predicts is exactly what will happen. ...When God speaks he externalizes who he is; his words represent his values, his will, and his existence."

In light of the power and dependability of God's word, the Jews are promised that they will leave exile "with joy" and "with peace." The whole creation will celebrate their return - the mountains and hills and "all the trees of the field" (vs 12). Cypress will grow instead of thorns and the myrtle instead of nettles. All of God's blessings will be a memorial to what God's word had said and will be an everlasting sign that God keeps His promises.

REWARDS FOR OBEDIENCE - 56:1-2:

Isaiah calls for Israel to "preserve" justice (26 times) and righteousness (68 times) because the salvation and righteousness that come from God are to be revealed.

The man who works to preserve justice and righteousness will be blessed. To give an example of what Isaiah means, he uses the Sabbath law, the one who keeps from profaning the Sabbath and keeps his hand from doing any evil. It was easy, especially in that day, to ignore the Sabbath day and keep right on working through it. Another day, another dollar. Isaiah will refer to the Sabbath observance again in verses 4, 6, and chapter 58:13-14.

The point is that the Israelites were to returning to the covenant lifestyle that God had called them to back at Mount Sinai.

CALL TO EUNUCHS AND FOREIGNERS - 56:3-8:

Observe here that "foreigners" have joined themselves to the Lord, by becoming a part of the Israelite nation. If he is within the framework of the Israelite covenant, then he should not think that the Lord will separate him from the blessings promised on Israel. Nor should the eunuch think that he, too, will be a "dry tree," that is, unfruitful (Deut. 23:1 excluded the eunuch from the assembly of Israel). Isaiah has talked about the Gentiles being included in God's new spiritual temple, the Kingdom of the Messiah, quite frequently: 2:2-3; 11:10-12; 14:1-2; 18:7; 19:18-25; 42:6; 45:22-24; 49:6, 22-23, 26.

How will they receive the blessings God has to share? Always through an humble, obedient response - they need to keep God's sabbaths, choose what pleases God, hold fast to His covenant (vs 4).

To those who do respond to God with humility and obedience, God says He will give them a memorial (vs 5), in His house (the temple) and within His walls (His defense). He will give them a name better than sons and daughters. In fact, He will give them an "everlasting name" - the name, designation, or character of one *who belongs to God*. Eunuchs, because they can't have children, would die without leaving their name. But, they will be given an everlasting name which will not be cut off.

Commenting on the "Sabbath," Oswalt writes (460): "Once every seven days they reset their compasses, remembering that they are not the center of the universe, but God."

Likewise for the "foreigner" - they join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him and to love His name, to be His servants, who respect the Sabbath law and hold fast God's covenant (vs 7) - God will bring them to His "holy mountain" (His temple; see 2:1-4), and make these foreigners "joyful" in His house of prayer. Their worship - their burnt offerings and their sacrifices - will be acceptable by God because this new spiritual temple will be a universal temple - "My

house will be called a house of prayer *for all the peoples*.” This verse is quoted by Jesus (along with Jeremiah 7:11) in Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46.

The Lord God who gathers the Jews who have been dispersed (vs 8), will also gather others, likely a reference to Gentiles.

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS - 56:9-12:

Through all this talk, Isaiah is not talking about some kind of fantasy millennial kingdom set up on earth. Despite God’s promised blessings, there will still be sin going on in the world, even within Israel. God calls the beasts to come and eat - a call to punish those who persist in sin (vs 9).

The watchmen are blind (vs 10) and know nothing - the perennial problem of the Israelites. They are useless as watchmen - mute dogs who cannot bark. People who just love to sleep.

These watchmen, portrayed again as dogs, are greedy and are not satisfied (vs 11). They might be shepherds, but they have no understanding. Why? Selfishness. Always selfishness. “They have all turned to their own way, each one to his unjust gain, to the last one.”

These leaders, and that’s what they are, just wanted to drink their wine, with no concern about the people who were hurting in sin (vs 12). They would do the same thing tomorrow too.

“They are unqualified (*knowledge*), unmotivated (*lie around*), insatiable (*never enough*), undiscerning (*understanding*, the ability to see to the heart of a thing), improvident (*tomorrow...better*). Life at public expense is a bottomless purse” (Motyer, 399).

In chapter 57, God will rebuke these leaders for their lack of spiritual concern.

Next week:
Celebrating the Return - Part 2
Isaiah 57-59