

## Take Comfort, to the Very End

<sup>18</sup> “And I, because of what they have planned and done, am about to come and gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will come and see my glory.

<sup>19</sup> “I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. <sup>20</sup> And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD—on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels,” says the LORD. “They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels. <sup>21</sup> And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites,” says the LORD.

<sup>22</sup> “As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the Lord, “so will your name and descendants endure. <sup>23</sup> From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,” says the LORD. <sup>24</sup> “And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

The context of Isaiah is the Assyrian Crisis in the 700s BC. The northern tribes had been carried off leaving their cities very much like ghost towns. Nazareth, Capernaum, Bethsaida, Nain, Shunem, Beth Shan, and hundreds of other villages and towns were all but emptied, leaving behind the old, the lame, the blind, to scratch out their survival. But most of the young and the healthy were forced to march away into heathen, pagan lands to the north and northeast. These were places that were unclean. And remember that by “unclean” we mean that they were ceremonially unclean, because they came into contact with unclean things-- forbidden animals for food, such as pork products and shellfish and certain game birds that for God’s people were off limits. They also included blood from some of these meats in their diet, and other things that made people unclean with regard to worship. And this wasn’t only certain people in these lands, but whole communities, and nations.

And when the people of the north arrived there, they were probably shocked by the difference. They no longer had faithful Judah as their neighbor, the orthodox, familiar tribe that the north rebelled against and complained about but in many ways they also counted on the Jews of Judah to be there for them, and many perhaps took comfort that although they lived far away in Galilee, the old Temple of Solomon was always there, and there was still a sense of being the people of God, even when certain kings and rulers seemed to scrape against God’s laws and God’s will.

Sin had got them there in that place. Idolatry, pagan worship, violations against God’s will about

what constituted the Old Testament Church and its ministry as well as who had the right to call and ordain their ministers, who were priests. There were sexual sins from every angle of the Sixth Commandment (and the Tenth—the warning not to covet people that other people are married to) and these were so obscene that they spilled over into the realm of the Fourth and Fifth Commandments, and the Third and even First Commandments as well.

But the people became blind to sin, just as people in our time have become blind to sins of the very same kind. And now they were no longer living a country where they could do what they pleased. They could no longer simply choose not to go to church, but be privately glad that their neighbors and parents went to church, and for a wedding or a funeral or maybe one or two holidays they would even go themselves. No, now there was no church at all. They no longer had a choice. Generations of bad choices had brought them into a nation where there was no choice to be made.

Think of the sins in our lives. What sin do I commit without noticing it, a sin that's so much a part of my life that my conscience is seared, cauterized, burned away on that side. These need to be red flags in the mind and in the heart. What is it that you keep repenting about day after day, night after night, before you're able to close your eyes and rest peacefully? When those frequent sins keep happening but stop showing up in your repentance, then they have become rebellion against the Lord and his will. This is what got Israel into trouble, and into the exile. What kind of exile might the Lord use to put our sinfulness on display?

But by grace, God keeps calling us back to him. He shows this in our text, because he kept thinking about the north even long after they were in exile, and even though they would never be released from their bondage. God did not forget about them.

He was going to bring them back into his kingdom, even though they would not come back to Nazareth and Capernaum and Bethsaida and Nain, they, or at least some of them, would be restored to faith through the gospel. And in those faraway lands they would discover that there was the church, as we know it now, wherever faith in Christ is preached, the church is found there under the cross. And just to touch on those lands as Isaiah describes them:

- Tarshish – a place faraway to the west, maybe on the Atlantic coast of Spain.
- The Libyans – a region of north Africa apart from Egypt, but far away.
- The Lydians – probably in Asia Minor? But warlike, and famous as archers.
- Tubal – this was in the very distant north; we would be imprecise but in the ballpark to say “Siberia” or “the tundra” of Finland or wherever.
- And our translation says “Greece” where Isaiah simply says “the distant shores or islands,” and while we can think of Greece, it's worth noting that at this time, Isaiah's ministry in the 700s, one of the very first migrations of ancient people to the Americas

was taking place, and the civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas and Mayas were forming on distant shore at this time.

Wherever the gospel is preached, God offers forgiveness and life, the resurrection for the dead and the power to live until the end of our earthly days. What Isaiah says about the gathering of the people from distant lands is about the planting and growing of the New Testament Church.

Everything about the new church, the Christian Church, will be holy and acceptable to God in every single way. They will be invited, not forced or brought in by accident. From the most distant corners of the world they will come. They will proclaim, not only confess and believe, but preach Christ crucified and risen from the dead for forgiveness of all of our sins, the ones we struggle with, the ones we don't notice, the one obvious to everyone except us, except me.

Then God's people will bring more into the church—who? More people? Yes. But more than that, says Isaiah. They will bring your people, even some of the ancient Israelites who set themselves outside the church with their unfaithfulness, and bring them in by every means (carts, wagons, mules, and crazy she-camels that can't run in a straight line but that get you there eventually (says Jeremiah).

The new church, the Christian Church, will be as beautiful and acceptable to God as any properly done OT sacrifice. And even the vessels they are brought in will be clean (perhaps a reference to the church being cleansed through the preaching of the word) and they, the new members of that holy Christian Church, will be acceptable as priests and Levites, the officials of the OT Church, even though they are not from the family of Levi, but simply because they have faith, and they are called by the church to serve.

They will worship together, says Isaiah, not just on the three great festivals of the year, and not just on the popular New Moon celebrations, but Sabbath to Sabbath, week by week, in regular worship just as we are doing here and now.

In the very last verse, there is a description of the unbelievers who are condemned to eternal suffering. The point Isaiah makes is that they are outside of God's family, that unbelief is the only thing that damns, which is just what Jesus says in the final verses of Mark's Gospel.

Take comfort to the very end, whatever your circumstance, whether you feel far from home or whatever hangs on your heart today. Your Savior loves you, and he has called to faith, and through faith, you have the promise of eternal life in heaven, and heroic spiritual strength to live each day as God's chosen child. Amen.

“Righteousness” is the state of living under God’s grace, free from guilt or the stain of sin. It is to be holy while walking in the unholy and fallen world. In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Proverbs, Solomon describes righteousness in many ways, and I want to share three of these today:

29 The way of the LORD is a refuge for the righteous... 30 The righteous will never be uprooted, but the wicked will not remain in the land. 32 The lips of the righteous know what is fitting, but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse.