

God's Faithfulness

January 19, 2020

Isaiah 49: 5-7 - ⁵ *And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength — ⁶ he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." ⁷ Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."*

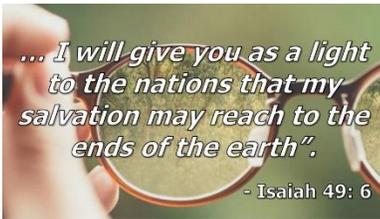
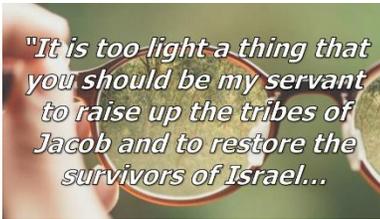
Psalms 40: 1-9a - ¹ *I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. ² He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. ³ He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD. ⁴ Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods. ⁵ You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted. ⁶ Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. ⁷ Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. ⁸ I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." ⁹ I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation.*



Last week we began by reviewing the major Old Testament covenants. We reviewed the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants and began to look at how they successively work together in the fulfillment of God's plans for creation and for humanity. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were two of the prophets that began to cast a vision for a new covenant, one that would lead to a new and more ideal human-divine relationship. In our first passage for today, we will explore the seeds of this vision with Isaiah, another who spoke of the coming Messiah that would establish this new covenant. As we prepare to do that this morning, let us begin with a word of prayer...



Today we add Isaiah to the timeline that we began last week. Jeremiah speaks of God's word being written on our hearts and Ezekiel speaks of a radical transformation that will occur in the new life of faith. These inner changes, these renewals will begin to reshape the human-divine relationship. Today, as we open our Bibles to Isaiah 49, we again hear words that speak of the suffering servant, the one we identify as Jesus Christ. Reading these words through the lens of Jesus, we can recognize how God brought Jesus into the world to bring the Jews back to God. The initial church, those first followers of Jesus, are Jews. The men and women who would go out after Jesus and would continue to spread the good news, almost all of them were Jews. The early church and the disciples remained largely within the closed circle of the Judaic faith. But in verse six of our first passage for today, God hints that the suffering servant did not come just for the Jewish people. Read this verse again with me. The words will be on the screen.



"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth".

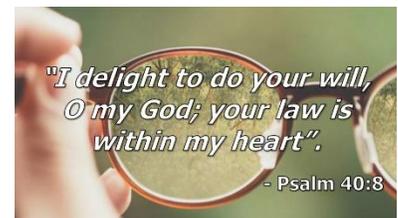
When just the tribes of Israel are in the circle, it is too light a thing. Salvation will extend to the ends of the earth. In the Great commission, Jesus is simply restating this idea as the gospel imperative. At the time these words are spoken, they are words of hope. Isaiah lived about 700 years before Jesus was born. These words would hang in the air for a long time. Isaiah also speaks of the suffering that the servant will endure. In verse 7 we read that the suffering servant will be "despised" and "abhorred" by the nation. Many will reject Jesus. Many will persecute Jesus and his disciples. The religious leaders of the first century largely do not accept Jesus and his teachings about love and forgiveness. They preferred to remain the centers of power and influence. They preferred to maintain the way things were. The religious leaders failed to hear these words from Isaiah as pertaining to Jesus the Messiah. They did all they could to preserve what they had and to keep the circle tightly closed.



The time in exile would end about 540 BC and the second temple would be rebuilt by about 500 BC. Most of the Israelites returned to their homeland. They returned with the words of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Isaiah as still unfulfilled promises. The Jews knew and trusted that after the period of exile, God would somehow enter into a new relationship with his people - one that could never be

broken. This much was clear in the words of promise given through these prophets. In addition, the words brought forth by other prophets and by the writers of the Psalms would also build into the common hope for a new future, a new reality where God would restore the people and the nation of Israel. In the opening words of our Psalm for today, we hear of the close connection that comes in and through a solid relationship with God. It speaks of God's faithfulness to those who trust in him. Turn with me to Psalm 40 as we look at the blessed relationship between God and his faithful people. The psalmist waits patiently for the Lord and the Lord inclines his ear, hearing their prayers. God rescues him from the pit and places a song of praise in his mouth. In verse four we read, *"Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods"*. It is a beautiful relationship when lived out fully by both parties. In verse five we hear of the wondrous deeds and blessings poured out upon the faithful – that is covenant, right?

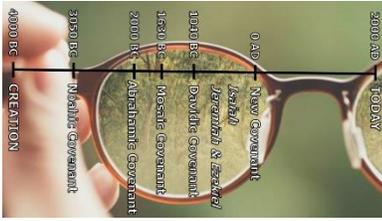
Then, in verses six through nine we again hear of this changing relationship. The psalmist reveals that God does not desire sacrifices and burnt offerings. They are not required. In verse eight we read about the core of what God does desire. Here we read, *"I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart"*. This is the transition that Jeremiah speaks of – God dwelling in our hearts instead of up there somewhere. This is the radical surgery that Ezekiel speaks of – God placing himself within us. Simply having the law is not enough. There is still a distance, a separation still there. It must become personal. The new relationship will have more of an all-in feel to it.



Being all-in is something that is necessary in this new relationship. This is because on our own, humanity cannot save itself. Because of sin that could not be defeated or mediated away through the sacrificial system, a new covenant was needed. So, God remained faithful, continuing to work to draw humanity closer and deeper into relationship.



Turn back with me to Isaiah 49. Here Isaiah looks forward to the day when God's plans will be culminated. There, at the end of verse seven, God points to a future day when *"kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful..."* Because of God's covenant love, that no-matter-what love will one day lead every knee to bow. Isaiah also reminds us that our faithful God, the Holy One of Israel, *"has chosen you"*. There is a personal connection that we can have with our faithful God. For the people of Isaiah's time, it was a future relationship. To get there, the human-divine relationship would have to be redefined. To accomplish this, God will establish a "new covenant". The word "new" in "new covenant" does not mean what it does, for example, in the phrase "new car." It does not describe something replacing an old, worn-out predecessor. No, the word "new" here means "of a different kind." It will be something the world has never seen before.



As BC transitions to AD, Jesus is born. Jesus Christ becomes the mediator of the new covenant, much as Moses was the mediator of the Mosaic covenant. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are all part of the

new covenant. In the moment of incarnation, God would, in effect, become both relationship partners. Instead of the old relationship between God and man, it would now be a relationship between God and the God-man, Jesus Christ. All of us who put our faith in Jesus as our divine-human representative can be assured that nothing can ever again separate us from God's love. Jesus' perfect faithfulness within the divine-human relationship ensures that God's relationship with all of us who make Jesus our representative is just as secure as the Son's relationship with the Father. Through faith in Christ we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's abiding presence within our hearts.

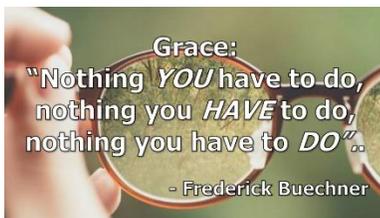
But this fantastic, eternal security comes at a dear price. There was still an enormous outstanding debt for unfaithfulness of the world - it had to be paid. God is holy and just. He cannot simply ignore the sins of his chosen people, or for that matter the sins of anyone. There would have to be judgment. This judgment is the cup filled with the wine of God's wrath that everyone on the face of the earth would have to drink. Except Jesus agreed to drink this cup for us.

The finished work, Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, sealed the new covenant with his blood. Under the new covenant we know that the forgiveness of sin is a free gift from God. Forgiveness is based solely upon belief in Jesus Christ as

Lord and Savior. It is not based upon someone following a set of rules or upon any other good work that one could do. The new covenant offers freedom from the power of sin and its consequence, death. Because believers are freed from these chains, we will one day be raised to new life in Christ. Ultimately, according to God's plans for all of creation, one day all things will be made new. When the new heaven and earth are established at the second coming of Christ, the new covenant will be fulfilled. This is the overarching story of the entire Bible – one day all will be made perfect. Even though one day we will all be made perfect, we do not live in perfection now. Yes, God remains faithful. God remembers the covenant. Therefore, God does not withhold forgiveness when we are unfaithful, when we forget the covenant.



Even though we abandon God, break our word, turn away from God, sin – God remains resolutely faithful. That is so good because perfection is so unattainable. My friends, because of Jesus, it is all about grace. Author, pastor, and professor Frederick Buechner offers this definition of grace: "Nothing *you*



have to do, nothing you *have* to do, nothing you have to *do*". It is not about us. Read this with me, emphasizing the words in italics. Yes, we are charged to be faithful, even to live faithfully with all that we are. But we are

not charged to live faithfully alone. And the good news is that we do not have to live alone. We can have a helper – the Holy Spirit – as we strive to live out our faith. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ within us, that we can begin to live faithfully and into the new human-divine relationship. We receive the Spirit through baptism into the community of faith.



I invite you to now turn to John 1 as we unpack this gift we receive from God. There, in verses 26 and 27, we read John the Baptist's words: *"I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal"*. The humble John proclaims that Jesus, the Messiah, is already among them. John lets them know that Jesus is about to be revealed among them – Jesus is coming after John the Baptist. The Jews, and the religious leaders in particular, do not yet know Jesus. As the passage unfolds, we next read verse 29. There we read these words: *"The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'!"* He identifies Jesus as the Savior. Then John goes on to testify to what he witnessed during Jesus' baptism, saying, *"I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him... the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit'"*. Jesus is the first to be sealed with the Holy Spirit. He will baptize and through Christ we continue to baptize all believers with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Through faith in Christ alone to save us, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit as Christ's continual presence in our lives – God written upon our hearts, to connect back to the words of the psalmist and the prophet Jeremiah.

The presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the ideal of a fully realized Immanuel – God with us – is what now will define the new human-divine relationship. This is the basis of the new covenant. The distant and impersonal-feeling God of the Old Testament is better understood, better related to, as the close and personal

God of the New Testament. Because God chose to become present to humanity in the person of Jesus and then, to up the ante, becoming the constant presence within our heart as the Holy Spirit, the relationship has been forever changed.

Next week we will continue our series as we begin to explore what it means and looks like to live out the new covenant that we enter through faith in Jesus Christ. As we will see, in Christ, God remains faithful. Because of our new and more personal connection to God, his presence becomes more active in our lives as well, redeeming us, restoring us, making us more and more into his image. Through the new covenant, God becomes personally connected to each of us. That is a radical shift from the human-divine relationship found in the Old Testament covenants. This personal, intimate God now walks through all of life with us. In God, we find a connection unlike any other we find in this life. To illustrate how God in Christ Jesus is so much more than anyone in this life could ever be, I close with a cute little illustration.

A traveler fell into a deep pit and couldn't get out. Several persons came along and saw him struggling in the pit. The sensitive person said, "I feel for you down there." The reflective person said, "It's logical that someone would fall into the pit." The aesthetic person said, "I can give you ideas on how to decorate your pit." The judgmental person said, "Only bad people fall into the pit." The analytical person said, "Help me measure the depth of your pit." The curious person said, "Tell me how you fell into the pit." The perfectionist said, "I believe you deserve your pit." The evaluator said, "Tell me, are you paying taxes on this pit." The self-pitying person said, "You should have seen my pit."

The specialist in meditation said, "Just relax and don't think about the pit." The optimist said, "Cheer up! Things could be worse." The pessimist said, "Be prepared! Things will get worse." Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the miserable pit.

The world offers all kinds of answers to life, doesn't it? Jesus offers the eternal and final answer to this life. Jesus will lift us out of the pit, and he will walk with us daily. No matter what comes, may we also take his hand as we journey this earth. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS - Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. How has your understanding of who and what God is changed as your faith has grown and matured?
- 2) Pray. Who do you know (individual or group) that you would like to see brought within the circle of God's love? Pray for this to happen!
- 3) Serve. If you came upon a person struggling in a pit - like in the sermon illustration - what would you do?