

A People Not Forsaken

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Date: 09 May 1999

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 9th of May 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, A People Not Forsaken, and is from Isaiah, chapter 62, verses 1 to 12. Let's pray that God will help us to understand his word and to live it out in our lives. God, we thank you that you are a God who is not silent but does speak. We pray that you will give us ears to hear and wills to obey. And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Amen. Most of us like happy endings to books or films or stories or whatever.

[1 : 06] And our heartstrings are pulled when, in a film or a book, the guy dumps the girl or the girl dumps the guy. And she or he are left broken hearted.

And he goes off from the scene and disappears. At times in a story it looks like she might find somebody else after all and therefore be happy.

But often it seems that whoever else is around is a bit like second best. The guy who dumped her, he was the one that should have had her. And if you are like me, hopelessly romantic, which is why I am still single, you cry in films that have sad endings or sad middles in them even.

But our hearts are warmed when the original guy comes back and sweeps her off his feet and pledges his undying love to her.

And that final wedding scene sends goosebumps of happiness and gives us tears of joy as we see the ideal couple getting married.

[2 : 12] Well, dozens of films are like that, with little variations on the theme. An initial romance that looks right and then something comes along to separate them.

He dumps her, she dumps him, a war calls him away or something else happens. And then some sort of resolution, happy or sad. Real life's not always so happy, of course, as the happy endings in films.

For many, many people, they live with the feeling of abandonment and being dumped. And those feelings don't heal all that easily. Ancient Israel felt that its God, Yahweh, had dumped them. Abandoned them. They were forsaken by him. Imagine, they were desolate. Imagine the shame in the ancient world.

In the ancient sort of school playground of the Middle East. Ha, ha, ha, Israel's boyfriend Yahweh's dumped her. Ha, ha. That sort of mocking in the schoolyard of the ancient Middle East.

[3 : 21] And no doubt for Israel, it seems that as the spurned woman, she accuses God of abandoning her. Leaving her desolate.

And it seems, as we've read through Isaiah, that as long as God is silent, Israel's enemies prosper and mock her. As long as God is silent, Israel suffers punishment.

As long as God is silent, Israel remains cut off and separate from the one who first loved her. A silent God is not usually a good thing to endure.

God's silence is more often than not his judgment against sinners. Sometimes we think that when God speaks, we're going to hear words of condemnation.

Occasionally that happens. But God's silence, I think, is more often than not a more severe judgment. His silence means that he lets his people pursue their own sins and reap their consequences.

[4 : 40] And his silence had done that for ancient Israel. But this story, this love story, will end happily. After years of silence.

After years of ancient Israel running out to its mailbox to see if Yahweh had at last written a letter. Now at last, God speaks.

He ends his silence. And he responds to the accusation that he has dumped and forsaken his lover Israel.

And his words in this chapter are words of solemn commitment to the relationship. He's not dumped her.

But now, for her sake, he speaks and will act. See how the chapter begins.

[5 : 45] For Zion's sake. If you like, that's a sort of intimate nickname or pet name for Israel. For Zion's sake, I will not keep silent.

And for Jerusalem's sake, I will not rest. And his commitment to her is not just in words, but in action. And moreover, in an action that will be on the public scale.

I will not rest. I will not be silent until her vindication, literally her righteousness, shines out like the dawn and her salvation.

Like a burning torch. Not just until she is righteous. But until her righteousness and salvation shine out and beam out.

As verse 2 says, The nations shall see your vindication and all the kings your glory. This is a very public commitment of God's to his people.

[6 : 47] It's not just a private statement in a boudoir or bedroom. This is broadcast through the world. God is committed to his people.

And it will be so evident that all the nations shall see the fruit of that commitment in Israel's life.

Their righteousness and their salvation and their glory. God and Israel, you see, are an item. That's what God is saying.

And let the world see it. Let the world know that God and Israel are back together again. And you can imagine, can't you, on the front page of Rupert Murdoch's Babylonian Women's Weekly.

God's back with Israel. All the exclusive photos. See page 3. Or the Egyptian New Idea. We've got the exclusive scoop about God and Israel back together.

[7 : 48] The wedding date's been set. And you read it first in the Egyptian New Idea. These words, you see, in verse 2, are God's I will.

It is his commitment and solemn vow to the people of Israel. He's not abandoned them or forsaken them forever. Indeed, as you read through Isaiah, you realize that he's leaving them to run off is because of their own wrongdoing.

Their own faithlessness. But God has come back. Committed to them. And wooing Israel back to himself. And his I will is loud enough for the whole world to hear.

It used to be that when a woman got married, she took the name of her husband.

Doesn't always seem to happen these days, much to my confusion at times. But my mother was Wendy Campbell and now she's Wendy Barker. She changed her name when she got married.

[8 : 57] I remember her telling me once that there was a girl that she was with at school whose surname was Stout. And she married a Mr. Short. And of course, you probably all heard the sorts of jokes about what would happen if a lady called Eileen married Fred Dover.

And you end up with Eileen Dover. Or something ridiculous like that. People change their names or brides change their names when they get married.

But we've also got to add to that idea that in the ancient world, names meant something. Names, like perhaps in more recent English times, would mean the profession.

The smith was perhaps the person who was the blacksmith. Barker was somebody who stripped bark off a tree. A muleman, I suppose, is somebody who looked after asses or mules.

A collier spent their time underground with coal. But in the Bible, and in Bible days, names denoted less the profession, more the character, the type of person.

[10 : 14] The end of verse 2, God promises his bride Israel a change of name. In a sense, a change of name because now they will be his.

Like a woman will change her surname to the husband's surname. But moreover, it carries not just the relationship, the new relationship and new identity of the bride, but also something of character as well.

And the change is God's work. You shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.

That is saying that in this relationship, you'll have a new identity as God's betrothed or God's wife. And as part of that, a new character that God himself will give to her.

The first four, we'll skip verse three for a minute, but verse four tells us the details of that new name. You may need to look in the footnotes to see the actual names that are mentioned.

[11:22] No longer shall you be called Azuba or Shemima. What a relief. Imagine you were called that. You'd want to get married pretty quickly, I guess. But now your name shall be Hephzibah and Beulah.

It's not much better, is it? Although a lot of American slaves of last century took names like Beulah and Hephzibah because they knew what it meant. Well, let's read verse four in the English to see what these words mean.

You shall no more be termed forsaken and your land shall no more be termed desolate. But now you shall be called, my delight is in her.

And your land shall be called married. What a name, Hephzibah. It means, my delight is in her. They're the words of a lover. They're the words of God for his people. The lover delighting in his loved one, Israel, his people.

[12:33] They are words of great tenderness and great joy, of heartfelt delight spilling over. We ought not to lose that sense of passion and love that is expressed in those words.

Hephzibah. My delight is in her. And the land shall be called married. Behind the idea of, in that particular word, is the idea of belonging.

Now the land and the people will belong to God. The relationship will be restored. The people rebuilt. Reconnected with their God.

No longer forsaken or desolate. No longer away in exile in Babylon, away from the land. But the land and the people with God brought back together again for eternity.

Isaiah's opening words and paragraph tell us why Israel was desolate. Because of their sin. So behind this name change is an acknowledgement that their sin will be over.

[13:37] It's the sin that causes their land to be desolate and them to be away from it. So if they're being brought back to the land and it's no longer desolate, by implication the sin that they commit will now be over as well.

And that's God's work. Not Israel's, but God's. Every bride wants to look perfect on her wedding day.

And heaven knows they spend enough money and enough time trying to look perfect, don't they? But God's promise to his bride in verse 3 is just staggering.

You, my loved one, Israel that is, shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

That's God's promise. This is no ordinary wedding. This is a royal wedding. There is a crown and a royal diadem.

[14:42] This is St. Paul's Cathedral 1981 all over again. Except this marriage, unlike Charles and Di's, is made in heaven and will last forever.

God the King is taking Israel, his people, to be his bride, his queen. That's the crown, that's the diadem. A crown and diadem of great beauty.

And verse 5 completes this section about the wedding. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you. And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

These are exciting words for Israel that felt abandoned and forsaken by God. And for God's people of any age, they are no less true.

They are God's words to his people of both Old and New Testament times and in our own day and age as well. When circumstance makes you think that God has forsaken you or abandoned you, then hear the whisper from the other side of the bed, Hephzibah, my delight is in you.

[16:10] Your God rejoices over you. Some years ago, I was the best man at a wedding.

I actually didn't do much as the best man. Partly that's because I lived in Melbourne and my friend lived in Sydney and was getting married in Sydney. I didn't go and get David drunk the night before his wedding.

I didn't write, Help me, or something like that, on the soles of his shoes so that everyone could see it when he knelt to pray. All I did really was look after the rings and he didn't trust me with them until the service was just about to begin.

And I made a speech. And David gave me a book of etiquette so I knew what sort of speech to make. And I thought, well, this book's speech is perfect, really.

So I just sort of read the speech from the book. It was hilarious because it was very old-fashioned. Best men don't really do much.

[17:17] But God's best men for his wedding with Israel have a very important role to play. Indeed, I think this is a role that best men today could learn from.

His best men, and it's plural it seems, so I suppose it's the best man and the groomsman, their role is to keep on reminding him to keep his wedding vows.

I don't think once in the last 12 years I've rung up David and said, are you keeping your wedding vows? It's about five years since I saw him, to be honest. But God's best men he places as watchmen or sentinels whose job it is to remind him to keep his wedding vows.

It's not God checking up on his wife. It's God giving them a job of making sure that God keeps his wedding vows. That's what verses 6 and 7 are on about.

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I've posted sentinels. All day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the Lord take no rest and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth.

[18:41] It's a continuous tense. They are to keep on keeping on reminding him to keep his wedding vows. They are holding God to account.

They are forcing God to be faithful. In effect, they have the same function as the rainbow that God put in the sky after the flood with Noah at the beginning of the Bible.

The point of that rainbow is not for you and me. It's for God. It's to remind God not to do it again. So whenever you see a rainbow, you can know that that rainbow is reminding God never to bring a flood upon the earth again.

Well, these best men have the same function. Their job is to make sure God keeps his vows. Now you might think, well, does that imply that God's forgetful?

After all, he is very old. No. God is making it very public that he is committed to his people and he will be faithful to them forever.

[19:52] and he is wanting the world to know that and he is wanting his people to know that because these sentinels are placed on the walls of Jerusalem around God's people.

It is God reminding himself but in the hearing of his people so that his people can have confidence in his faithfulness.

It's an extraordinary thing that God does but he's reassuring and underlining that reassurance for his people that he is faithful.

That's not a bad thing is it for a best man to do for the groom even if it's 12 years down the track to remind the best of the groom to keep their wedding vows but it's not a bad thing for any Christian to do is it?

To exhort each other and encourage each other to keep the vows that we've made. but it also spills over to the way we pray to God for in effect these best men as posted sentinels are to keep on exhorting God in a sense in prayer to keep his promises and we ought to have the same boldness to God regarding the things that are clearly his promises.

[21:19] God has promised never to abandon us so we can have the same sort of persistence and boldness in praying to God that he will keep that promise amongst all his others.

Well God's determination is given to us in the oath of verse 8 the Lord has sworn by his right hand and his mighty arm just like the signing of a marriage register just like the exchange of vows in a ceremony and the exchange of rings God is saying here this is my solemn vow and promise this is God's I will and he assures his loved one Israel that never again will their grain be given to their enemies never again will foreigners drink their wine which they have labored for.

What's the point of that statement? One of the curses on God's people for disobedience in Deuteronomy 28 is that they'll plant vineyards and they'll have crops but they won't enjoy the fruit of their labor it's what's called a curse of futility you do all the work and you don't enjoy the benefit God's saying that won't happen again rather what will happen is that those who garner it shall eat it and praise the Lord and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts you'll enjoy the blessing of all your labor this is a very significant statement it's easy to pass over it and skip over its significance it's saying at one level if there is going to be no curse for your sin then it's because there will be no sin to bring that curse its roots go beyond even Deuteronomy because in the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned they were given various curses by God before they were expelled from the garden and one of them to Adam was that the ground will be hard and it will

bring forth thorns and thistles and so on in effect this is a reversal of that you see the promise of God here to his people is not just that he's committed to them but ultimately it will be perfection no sin and therefore no curses for sin no disobedience and therefore no punishment for disobedience that's what this verse is hinting towards in the end and notice too that not only will

God's people reap the fruit of their labor but they will praise the Lord that after all is why we are made as the groom delights in the bride so now will the bride praise the groom this announcement of God's commitment to his people is a spur to them to act in faith and verse 10 now changes gear a little bit we've seen so far God's commitment and God's promises and God's reassurance and determination for his people now comes the command seven of them in quick succession go through go through the gates prepare the way for the people build up build up the highway clear it of stones lift up an ensign or a flag over the peoples seven commands seven things

Israel to do although there are a couple of repeats in there for emphasis it's spurring Israel to act in faith they'll only do those things if they trust God's commitment for them so long as they think he's abandoned them they're not going to do what he's commanding them in verse 10 basically what it's saying is this get ready your groom is coming get ready for the wedding your groom is on the way prepare be ready he's coming the Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth say to daughter Zion see your salvation comes his reward is with him and his recompense before him the groom is coming he's saying so get ready act in faith don't be caught out when he arrives it's easy for us in our world to feel that God doesn't love us that we're forsaken by him we often think that

[26 : 22] God is silent towards us perhaps he's silent because of your sin like ancient Israel but perhaps you think he's silent because the world's noise and clamour drowns his voice Isaiah is calling Israel to repentance and faith repentance from the sin which cuts God off and creates his silence and faith that he's not abandoned you or forsaken you faith to hear his tender wooing my delight is in you in the end the wedding imagery breaks down in this passage because the bride Israel is also a city Jerusalem a city not forsaken the chapter tells us at the end and the same mixed metaphor of the bride and the city comes at the very end of the Bible as well the book of Revelation towards its end tells us that

God's people are his bride beautiful and adorned in clothes of righteousness that he gives her to wear but God's people is also a city a heavenly city again prepared by God the new Jerusalem both bride and city speak of renewed and restored relationships between God's people and God but we know more clearly who the groom is than Isaiah did it's Jesus he's the groom in Revelation he's the groom in the Gospels and softly and tenderly he is wooing his loved one oh sinner come home to those who respond to his courting verse 12 will be true working backwards you shall not be called you shall be called sought out because it is the groom who goes seeking for his people not vice versa it is

God in Isaiah who's seeking his people in their sinfulness they've turned their backs on him in their stubbornness they refuse to return to him it is he who seeks them out not they him and those he seeks out he buys he redeems he pays the price the death of his servant as we've seen in earlier chapters to redeem them to himself and those whom he redeems he makes holy and righteous they shall be called holy people God's people are naught until sought and then bought and brought home this chapter asks us then to consider for we are God's people his loved ones are we ready for the wedding are we wearing the wedding dress yes people spend hours and thousands of dollars to wear one dress once but our wedding dress from

God is to be worn for eternity and it will never wear out and it doesn't matter how old you get you'll always fit into it it's ours for the wearing now clothed in righteousness divine now and our groom is coming he assures us about in virtually every page of the new testament and he's coming and he's coming soon to collect us his bride and take us away for an eternal honeymoon don't be a typical bride and not be ready don't be a typical bride and be late he expects us to be ready when he comes and he won't wait if we're not but if we are ready his words in our ear on the wedding bed my delight is in you ought to give us unspeakable joy now as we wait for that glorious day