

A New Spirit

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[0 : 00] The passage we're looking at this morning is Isaiah 43, verse 23, to Isaiah 44, verse 5. I've had a wonderful time this week preparing this talk and trying to understand this passage, and I really would delight to think that you may be provoked to thinking about and that you may have a delightful time next week thinking about the passage.

So I want to sort of get some of the hooks of this passage into you so that you can't walk away without it. Sometimes in our Christian understanding and our Christian thought and our Christian world, we kind of build on the New Testament, and we build a very tall and high structure that lifts us high above the world in which we live.

And it gets to the point where it's so high up and it's so erudite that it tends to lean and might even collapse. And so you need a really strong dose of the Old Testament to give you a really broad base on which to understand all the great realities of the gospel.

And this passage gives you that. And I want to give you a number of pictures from this passage, which I hope will help provide a real basis for your faith in the world in which you live.

So the passage begins. Remember, it's Isaiah, the prophet, speaking for the Lord, telling his people who they are and what God is doing among them.

[2 : 00] The reason I prayed about our self-centered, introspective natures is because that's basically who we are. How does it apply to me?

How does it relate to me? How is it going to change me? But that's only a secondary consideration. And because primarily it has to do with God and who he is.

And if you get that straight, then the little me part can come in easily and find lots of space. But try and get it straight.

Isaiah 43, 14. Did I start with saying 23? Isaiah 43, 14 following. And you can look at this in the scriptures. The first picture he gives is the walls of Babylon coming, tumbling down.

Babylon was a great, powerful military machine, the heart of a great empire and a great culture. And the Lord says it's going to come tumbling down, which is no different than all the other great empires and structures of human pride and empire in which we build great things only to watch them collapse.

[3 : 26] And the past century has seen a great abundance of huge idealistic concepts for our world. And they lie in ruins all across the century through which we live.

Well, that's the first picture, that those come tumbling down. And they come tumbling down because of the Lord being the Holy One, Israel's creator and your king.

What is God doing as we build these great empires? God is prepared, preparing for their inevitable collapse. And it says that what he's going to do, and this is in verse 16, he's going to create a, and this is a lovely picture, he's going to make a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters. And this way through the sea, and this path through the mighty waters, is going to be that the Lord will cleave the Red Sea, that the people of Israel will go across in safety, and then in the next verse, the chariots and horses of the Egyptians will come that way, and they will go down into the pit on the same ground on which the children of Israel were saved.

But then he comes in with a strange verse in verse 18 when he says, forget the former things, don't dwell on the past. And I think this is a very strong reminder and a necessary reminder, which I hope will take hold of you this morning.

[5 : 08] And that is, that what God has done in the past edifies us, but the reality of our lives is the awareness of what God is doing right now, and where he is at work in our world, and how he works.

Well, how he works is to draw out of the collapsing structures of our proud empires, to draw out, in verse 19, a new thing, so that when you go from the high culture of Egypt and the path through the

sea into the desert, there in the desert, as Susan described for us, he makes a way, a way in the lostness of the desert, and he provides a resource.

And you get that lovely picture of I am making a way in the desert, and streams in the wasteland. So, that's how God is providing for his people.

I didn't get around to doing it, but I suggest you could read T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, and that would help you understand this passage, too. But, he talks about a way in the desert, and streams in the wasteland, and, what he's doing in that experience, not only applies to the whole of creation, and the whole of nature, so that the jackals and the owls join in the worship of God, but, what he's doing by providing water in the desert, and streams in the wasteland, is to preserve and keep his people.

He opens up a way for them in an impossible situation, and provides for them when their, their deep necessities can't be met.

[7 : 12] So, he's creating for himself his chosen people, and, uh, chosen has about it the, uh, the concept that these people of God, Israel in the Old Testament, the New Israel, the body of Christ in the New Testament, these are God's chosen people, meaning that he has made the choice.

He's not going to go back on his choice. He's committed to his choice. He has committed himself to his people, and he has made them, and he has made them, uh, for himself, and, their function is to praise him.

Do you see that at the end of, of, uh, verse 21? I formed for myself these people that they may proclaim my name.

Uh, that, that is, that is our highest function, and we have a wonderful series of hymns to sing this morning, uh, which, which is because that's, that's what the most important thing for us to do is, in terms of this life, is to give ourselves to the praise of God.

So, when this sermon is over, you're going to sing, praise my soul, the king of heaven, and I hope you're going to sing it with great heart, and that your heart will be given by the, as God meets you in your own wasteland, and in your own desert, and by his spirit refreshes and renews you, so that you can sing that with all your heart, in spite of the sad and difficult circumstances which may encompass your life.

[8 : 56] You will never last be able to stand and sing, praise my soul, the king of heaven. Well, that's what we're created for. But, and then you get down to the central, perhaps, figure of this passage, and it has to do with weariness.

He says of his people, yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourself for me, O Israel.

In other words, you're weary, you're stressed, you're anxious, you're overburdened, but it's not because you were doing what you were created to do, you have been doing something else. It's your other involvement that have brought this stress and this anxiety and this weariness upon you, so that you are, you are very weary, but it's not from doing what you're supposed to do, it's from being involved in other things.

And then he describes to them how this works. You've not brought sheep, you've not honored me with sacrifices, I haven't asked of you grain offerings, I haven't wearied you with my demands for incense, you haven't brought any fragrant frankincense for me or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices, but you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.

[10 : 26] sacrifices. And one of the commentators said the interesting thing about this is that they were in fact very careful to keep at the heart of their life as a nation this sacrificial system going to bring the lambs, to make the offerings, to observe the rituals, to maintain the cult.

They were very busy about doing that. And so he says you've got to read this with the special understanding that in all your religious whirl of activity, the Lord says you weren't involved with me. You're only involved with yourself or your own, the gods that you have created. So you haven't wearied yourself by worshipping me.

That's not where your weariness comes from. Your weariness comes out of your own making. And he describes that to them.

And you see the interesting thing about it is at the end of verse 24 he says, but you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.

[11 : 35] You know how a lot of people think that church is a pretty weary place to go. And I'm one of them. And, you know, because I sort of feel the burden of being a minister, you know, to be a weary and worn preacher going to a weary and worn congregation to participate in weary and worn

worship is not my idea of a nice way to spend time.

And yet I seem to have spent most of my life doing it. So I, so something, something is missing. And the thing that is missing is that our weariness is not the important thing.

It's the God whom we worship, who we have wearied with our worship. We've just burdened him with it. And, uh, and he hasn't done, he hasn't been allowed to do for us what he longs to do for us. What does he long to do for us? And it says, I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own namesake, and I remember your sins no more.

Isn't that amazing? I mean, it is amazing whether you recognize it or not. Uh, because what it means is that if you have a beautiful piece of cloth, you spill some indelible ink on it, and there it is, ruined.

[13:01] He says, that's your life. That's your life because of your obstinate refusal to obey me. That's your life. But he says, I am prepared to wipe that blot out so you can't even see it.

And I'm prepared to take the catalog of your sins and remember them no more, to totally forget them. And that's a wonderful and divine attribute.

And all you have to think about is how easy it is for you to forget other people's sins. You know, most of our conscious moments are recounting the sins of others who have offended us. We spend our time at it. And we are reminded of it by every circumstance. And it just burns within us. If there's any sacrificial burning going on, it's the burning anger we have towards those whose sins we can't forget and can't forgive.

That's the terrible, in a sense, weakness of our position. In contrast to a God who says, I will blot out your transgressions for my sake and I will remember your sins no more.

[14:16] What a glorious promise that is. And how consistent we are in ignoring it. And so, the Lord brings us back to the judgment table in the next verse and says, review the past for me.

Let us argue at law the matter together. Let us, let you, you can state now the case for your innocence. Now, most of us presume that everybody else in church is a sinner, but we happen to be innocent.

And if only other people knew that, we would be treated with more respect. But, what the Lord says is, all right, I'll listen.

Bring me the case. Let me hear it. What is the basis of your innocence? And how did you establish it? I was delighted.

You know how we use the prayer book, the old, old prayer book that goes way back to 1962. Before that, there was an old prayer book that went way back to 1918.

[15:30] And do you know what it said in one of the confessions? They've taken this out. But they took it out because they didn't read Isaiah, I'm sure. They said that your armist doings are grievous unto us.

The burden of them is intolerable. Well, it hasn't been intolerable since 1962. Because they took it out.

But they, it seems entirely appropriate here that when, that the reality of our life is not that we could establish our innocence, but that the reality is that our weariness is because the burden of our sins is intolerable.

We're invited to accept that. And the Lord makes his case when he says in 43-27, your first father sinned, and your spokesman rebelled against me.

That is, what's happened here, you see, is that it's been consistent all along, since the very beginning.

[16:52] Your first father sinned, and those who are your representatives, they have rebelled against me. So that the continuing condition of man's relationship to God is marked by sin and rebellion.

And, you know, the Vancouver sun, which you get every day, is kind of a consistent record of how that keeps on happening, you know, as it records the sin and rebellion against God.

And so the case is closed and people are condemned and in Isaiah 43, 28, he says, as far as the laws demand, and as far as the case you've established, the only possible result is, I will disgrace the dignitaries of your temple, I will consign Jacob to destruction and Israel to scorn.

Disgrace, destruction, and scorn are all that belongs to you. They're all that the law can give you. That's all there is.

Disgrace, destruction, and scorn. Now, it's, I was reminded when I was thinking of this, of what happened, what used to happen, as we're told in the courts when there was hanging in the country, that a man would be tried by a court and condemned, and the judge would say that that passed sentence by saying, I, you are to be taken to such and such a place on such and such a day, and there you are to be hanged by your neck until you are dead.

[18 : 38] That's what the law has to say to you. Then the judge adds, may God have mercy on your soul. You see, when the law's work is all done, God's work is scarcely begun, because his work is to have mercy, not to carry out the work of condemnation.

And God gets into great trouble for this because he, unlike us, he is prepared to forgive and to forget. He's prepared to blot out so that it will be remembered no more.

That seems to us in our sense of personal arrogance and self-righteousness. That seems wrong, and God nevertheless promises to do it.

And so, right at the heart of the scriptures is this strange conundrum that God has given the law, by the law we are unconditionally condemned.

But having come under that condemnation, God isn't finished with us. And he wants to show his grace and his mercy towards us. And that's what the rest of the passage is about.

[20 : 03] When you read in chapter 44, verse 1, he says, now listen, O Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen. this is what the Lord says, he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you, do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant, to assure whom I have chosen.

That this, there's something, there's something, after the law has finished with its condemnation, after we've acknowledged that the burden of our sins is intolerable, after we've come into this totally hopeless situation, the Lord through Isaiah says, but listen, there's more to be said.

Then he tells us what more is to be said. He says, and it has to do with his purpose towards us, it doesn't have to do with us, it's he who formed us in the womb, it is he who has chosen us, committed himself to us, it is he who will help us, it is he who will overcome our fear, and he who will change us in the end of verse two, from being Jacob my servant to Jeshurun, the name Jacob means the deceiver, and Jeshurun means the beloved one.

So this nation, which is a nation by inheritance, they are deceivers, by God's grace, they are beloved. So you move from being a deceiver to being the beloved.

That's the transition that God wants to bring about. As deceivers, we are condemned, as beloved, we have a hope in what God can do.

[22 : 02] And so he describes then what he's going to do. He says, I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. And that's the picture that he gives.

What he did when he brought the children out of Egypt, he will continue to do. That the deepest longings of our hearts, the deepest thirstings we have, he will satisfy.

And not only will he satisfy them, he will give us refreshment and renewal in a wonderful way.

That's what God is for and that's why we depend upon him. That's why our whole life is based on his doing what he here promises to do, to provide water, water, on thirsty land and streams on the dry ground.

He goes on to explain what that means when he says, I will pour out my spirit on your offspring and my blessing on your descendants. God is not concerned just with this generation.

[23 : 17] He wants to provide for our offspring and for our descendants to make them the object of his blessing and that the picture of water in the thirsty land streams on the dry ground is a picture of his pouring out his holy spirit upon his people to refresh and renew them in the midst of a culture and a society that is constantly breaking down.

He says, my people, because of the blessing of my spirit on them, he says, my people will be like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.

There will be growth and vitality and fertility because I will bring my people whom I have chosen, my people whom I have formed, my people whom I help, I will bring my people to that place of prosperity.

So what do we do with it all? Well, in the last verse, there's a wonderful picture of commitment. Commitment which you as an individual must make.

You've got to break through all the weariness and make your commitment. And by coming this morning to take Holy Communion, you're renewing that commitment.

[24 : 45] And the nature of that commitment is wonderfully described in verse 5 of chapter 44 when among the people it says, one will say, I belong to the Lord.

Now what that means is that in the chaos and the confusion of the wasteland, in the desert place, in the peril and danger we are in under the burden of our anxieties and weariness, in all those circumstances, there's one reality which stands firm at the center of our lives and that is the confession, I belong to the Lord.

That's who I am. Now, in our world of course there's millions of options and we like to stay open to all the options and waste most of our life doing it.

So, in understanding who the Lord is and how he works, one will come to the point of saying, I belong to the Lord.

And I trust you have come to that point. If you need some help and encouragement, there are those around you who will help you as you make that confession.

[26 : 02] Because the second thing that it says is that one will say, I belong to the Lord, and another will recognize it in calling himself by the name of Jacob. I belong to the people of God.

That's where my home is. That's who my family is. Those are the people I relate to. So, it's not only a personal individual sense of I belong to the Lord, but it's also I belong to the people of God.

And that's repeated in the last two lines of this passage when it says, still another will write on his hand the Lord's. remember last week in the passage from Isaiah 49 where the Lord carved in his hand that we are his people and his compassion and love for us is the central purpose of his relationship.

That we are written on his hand. In response to that, remember, we talked about Jesus holding up his hands before his disciples and saying, behold, my hands and my feet, and showing them that his commitment to them, well, our commitment is described in the same way in Isaiah 44 5, when written on our hands is that I am the Lord's.

The central reality of my life is who I belong to. and I belong to the Lord. This is the life of faith. This is to what you're called to. Not just to speculate about it, but to come to the realization that that's in fact who you are.

[27 : 52] God's God's God's God's God's God's God's God's name. I will be, I will without shame acknowledge that I belong to the people of God.

And as that people of God wander through the desert, trying to find a way, and the Lord opens for them a way, and as they are dying of thirst in the midst of their cultural wasteland, he provides water for them.

So you see, that's the commitment in faith to our Lord and to his Christ. I belong to the Lord. On my hand is written, the Lord's.

I am a member of the body of Christ, and I am committed to that community. It's an amazing statement, isn't it? You see what a foundation it gives you for reading the New Testament, and understanding the fresh and new wonderful implications of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Amen.