

Grace for the Undeserving

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Date: 10 July 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Well, again, I want to say good morning to all of you. We're glad that you're here. I see there are a few extra family members visiting this summer, which is wonderful. We're glad that you are here and joined with us, with your family.

The flowers in front remind us that yesterday, Mary Lou Bailey and Dan Midgett got married. So if you know them, celebrate with them. Wish them well as they begin their new life together.

And as we turn to the scriptures this morning, it occurs to me, as I've been reading the news this week, it feels like the world is getting worse.

This past week, there was an assassination in Japan. There continue to be stories of gun violence, whether it be in Highland Park, or if you read the New York Times article, the fact that more kids or more people died in the west and south side of Chicago than they did in Highland Park this past week.

And it's easy to think that the world is getting harder, getting worse. We see that there is war in our world that's affecting us.

[1 : 2 0] We see as well that we live in a culture where the overwhelming tide of cultural patterns moves further and further away from living as God called us to.

And we see in this post-pandemic just a sense of fear and anger that grips our society in many ways. As the hymn says it, though the wrong seems oft so strong, there is a sense of inevitability and a sense of triumphalism about it.

Many places in the world, there are people who would say, we don't need God to win. And what is wrong is defended as right and justified by those who do it.

You may be an optimist and think, oh, it's not that bad. But there's certainly some pretty good evidence for it. And it's not just out there.

It's not just in the world. It's in the church too. It's in the people who claim to be God's people. We see that the slide away from orthodoxy and faithfulness to the Bible is a constant tide that pulls us away.

[2 : 3 8] We see that church leaders have so often failed to lead in righteousness and spectacularly at times. To the point where even when people are successful and seem to be doing well, we find ourselves wary and suspicious rather than celebratory.

The church seems to know less and less of God and His Word, and there's more lukewarmness, more defense of sin, and more failure to live in ways that bring glory to God.

In the face of this tide, as you see the world through this lens, and I know some of you may not, some of you may think, man, that's a pretty doom and gloom analysis.

But I believe that it's the way that the people of God in the 7th and 6th century BC would have seen the world. We're preaching in our series through the book of Isaiah, and if you remember in the 7th and 6th centuries in Israel, what had happened is the northern kingdom had been conquered by Assyria and destroyed.

The southern kingdom was beleaguered. Political football between the superpowers of Assyria and Egypt, and then Babylon rose up and defeated Assyria and became the other superpower in the time.

[4 : 01] And if you remember, this section of Isaiah 40 through 55, Isaiah is writing to the people in the 600s, so the 7th century BC, but he's looking ahead to the 6th century when they would be taken off into exile.

And he's giving them a word of comfort and hope when it certainly seemed like evil had triumphed and the world had fallen apart. The temple was destroyed, the king was gone, and the people had been scattered and were living in exile.

And it sure felt like the world had gotten as bad as it could be. And in that moment, they asked themselves the questions, where is God? Did we pick the wrong side?

Are we in the wrong team? Has our God failed us? What is God doing? And this is what Isaiah 47 and 48, our text for today, speak to.

If you want to turn there in your pew Bible, and I'm going to encourage you to do so, because it's a long two chapters. We're not going to read them all the way through. So if you would please turn there. They're in their pew Bibles in front of you, page 569.

[5 : 17] We're going to try to follow along. And if you're new to the Bible, the big numbers are the chapters, and the little numbers are the verses. And so as I refer to them, you can try to track along with us.

We're going to look at Isaiah 47 and 48 this morning. And what we will see is that God, the gracious God of redemption, will have the last word, not sin and evil.

He will bring an end to the arrogance of the world, and He will graciously redeem a people for Himself. This is the big idea of these two chapters together.

We look at God's word together. Oh, Lord Jesus, we come to You now. We ask for Your help. Lord, as we look at this passage together, as we look at what You have to say to us, Lord, as we look at Your word, God, will You by Your Spirit enlighten our minds and open our hearts and soften us, Lord, so that we might receive Your word this morning, that we might hear it, that we might hold it to be true, and Lord, that we might respond as You would have us do so.

Lord, I pray for Your help, that You will help me to speak clearly this morning. Lord, that the words that I speak would be Your words, and Lord, that together we would sit under Your word and so bring glory to You.

[6 : 49] We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, as we've said, in this section, Isaiah is preaching to a people in the future who are going to be in exile in Babylon.

And chapter 47 is all about the end of Babylon, that God will bring an end to the arrogance of a self-reliant world that does not honor God.

Look with me in the first couple of verses. Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon. Sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for you shall no more be called tender and delicate.

Take the millstones and grind flowers. Put off your veil. Strip off your robe. Uncover your legs. Pass through the rivers. Your nakedness shall be uncovered and your disgrace shall be seen.

I will take vengeance and I will spare no one. So, this is the message fundamentally that Isaiah is bringing from God to the nation of Babylon.

[8 : 01] And a lot of what he's doing in this chapter is he's uncovering the arrogance and the pride of the nation of Babylon. So, I'm going to walk through what that looked like and then we're going to talk a little bit about how God responded to it.

So, first we see that one of the things that Babylon prided themselves on was their privileged place in the world. They were the local superpower during this time. And you see some of the words that they saw themselves like a pampered princess or like a privileged queen.

That they had all the power that they wanted to conquer the nations around them. They had all the riches of the things that they gathered from these conquering nations. There's a great opportunity if you ever go to Berlin to see the gate of Ishtar and the magnificence of the Babylonian empire at that time.

It's a remarkable piece of architecture. To see their great power and their greatness. And they lived in comfort and security and satisfaction. You see this in verse 1.

You also see it in verse 5. You shall no longer be called the mistress of kingdoms. That is, the one who is the queen of the party, so to speak. And verse 7.

[9 : 17] You said I will be a mistress forever. And you did not lay these things to heart. There was this sense in the Babylonian empire. We're going to last forever.

We're going to sit on top and no one's going to conquer us. Not only that, but in verses 8 and 9, you see how profoundly they were self-reliant.

Look with me in verses 8 and 9. Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness. Let earth open and salvation and righteousness may bear fruit.

I'm sorry. That's the wrong chapter. I forgot to turn my page. Let's try 47 verses 8 and 9. Let's try this again. Now, therefore, hear this, you lover of pleasures who sit securely, who say in your heart, I am, and there is no one beside me.

I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children. These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day. The loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments.

[10 : 28] Second half of verse 8. I am, and there is no one beside me. The arrogance of Babylon was to say, I am sovereign in my own life.

I am unaccountable to all, and I have control. I will never suffer the hardship and the losses that others suffer of widowhood or of loss of children because my power is so great.

This is the spirit of the human heart. This is the spirit of the lie that the serpent spoke in the Garden of Eden when he said, you can be like God.

You can have your own independent power and sovereignty in the world. And friends, if you can't see this, let me just point it out.

Is this not the spirit of our age today? That we live in a world today where self-determination, I am who I say I am, not who I've been made by the Lord who is the creator of heaven and earth, but who I am.

[11 : 33] Self-reliance. I have created my own success. How I live is completely determined by my own strength and my own power.

A self-orientation. It is not only good, but right for me to care about myself first, no matter what it does to other people. Friends, we recognize how profoundly self-centered our modern world is.

How little we think of neighbor, of nation, of the world. How little we care for others. And even when we do care, how often we do it for our own aggrandizement rather than for the ultimate good of others.

So not only was Babylon privileged in their position, in their self-esteem, not only were they self-reliant, but they worshipped feudal gods. Verses 12 and 13 remind us of this.

Stand fast in your enchantments and your many sorceries in which you have labored from your youth. Perhaps you will be able to succeed. Perhaps you may inspire terror. This is God talking smack.

[12 : 47] If you've ever seen, like, this is what prophets do really well. He's like, hey, why don't you test out your gods and see if they're any good? Maybe they'll be successful. And the implication is they won't be.

They're unable to do this. Right? Verse 13. You are wearied by your many counsels. Let them stand forth and save you. Those who divide the heavens, who gaze to stars, who went to new moons, make known what shall come upon you.

And he's saying this ironically because they can't do it. They can't tell you what's going to happen. They, and, and Isaiah's making a contrast that he'll make in the next chapter with the God of the Bible who's actually able to say what is going to happen.

We know from history that the Babylonian Empire was full of magic and sorcery and astrology. All of these things promised a special knowledge and good fortune in life.

a certain way that you might worship these idols with a promise of getting victory in battle or a good harvest for food or, or fruitfulness in childbearing.

[13 : 52] But they're futile and they're unable to save them. And God mocks them and says, do you see the emptiness of what they do? And again, friends, let us recognize that our idols today might look different.

Some of them may not, actually, we still, maybe you or some of your neighbors know what it's looked like to play with crystals or to read your astrology every morning and wonder if this is, is this going to tell me what's going to happen today?

You know, late night television still has lots of advertisements for psychics that you can call and they will tell you all about your life and what you should do and where you should go. But we all know that the idols of our world tend to be less spiritual but more subtle.

The promise of if you work a little harder and climb the ladder a little bit more fiercely that you will gain success. The thought that if you have just a little more money or a little more prestige or a little more position in the world that you'll finally feel comfortable.

if you get just that right kind of family or that spouse that you long for that finally you'll be satisfied and won't be lonely anymore. There are all sorts of ways in which we idolize many things, many times good things that when we make them ultimate become idols that cannot deliver.

[15 : 26] Babylon was like this as well. They worshipped feudal gods and God exposed them. And the last thing that Isaiah exposes about the Babylonian empire is the cruelty that they exhibited towards God's people.

Verse 6 says this. So this is God speaking about Israel. He says, I was angry with my people and I profaned my heritage. I gave them into your hand.

You showed them no mercy. On the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy. Though Babylon was an instrument of God's judgment on his own people for their faithlessness, for their lack of trust, for their turning away from worshipping him to worship other idols, they were not authorized to sin and to be cruel and to be ungodly in the way that they carried that out.

And yet Babylon did that very thing. They put, they treated God's people without mercy, treated those who were most vulnerable with the most harshness.

And for all of this, God says, I will bring judgment. I will bring an end to the kingdom of Babylon.

[16 : 55] You who have exalted yourself up in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of yourself, I will bring low. This is what verses 14 and 15 say. Behold, they are like stubble.

The fire consumes them. They cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. No coal for warming oneself is this. No fire to sit before. Such to you are those whom you have labored, with whom you have labored, who have done business with you from your youth.

They wander around each in his own direction. There is no one to save you. And as we have seen in the history, what Isaiah is referring to is that God will raise up Cyrus in the Persian Empire from the east and they will come and they will conquer Babylon and Babylon will fall.

And no longer will the Babylonian gods and the Babylonian kings and the Babylonian rulers and the Babylonian wolf be theirs, but they will be brought low by this instrument that God is raising up to humble this nation that has exalted itself before Him.

So what do we have to learn from a chapter like this? Two things. First, let us recognize that God calls us to not be like them. As He exposes their sin, He calls us to forsake these ways.

[18 : 23] To recognize how easily the human heart wants to be arrogant in our position to defend our sin and our cruelty. To say our self-reliance and trusting in selves is not just good but right and to turn to other gods for our salvation.

Let us turn away from these things. But the second thing that He reminds us and the purpose that I think Isaiah says this is to say don't be afraid, God's people.

Though the wrong seems off so strong, He is the ruler yet. God is still in charge. Though the nations that are evil rise up against God and His people, God will not let that stand forever.

There will be a reckoning. There will be a restoration. There will be a righteousness that will come. And God's people are not abandoned. And the evil will not win.

So don't be afraid. But continue in faith in God. And it seems like this is launching us into verse, into chapter 48.

[19 : 40] And chapter 48 would be this great, you know, come to me and believe in me and I will restore your fortunes and I will give you all these great things. It seems like this is what God would do in verse, in chapter 48.

Because in chapter 48, Isaiah turns to the people of Israel, to the people of God and speaks to them. He speaks a word that says God will graciously redeem a people for Himself.

But it will be not because of their faithfulness but despite their faithlessness that He will do this. Israel might have hoped God would turn from judgment to Babylon to praise to Israel.

But He has no praise for them. Let's look at it. Chapter 48, verses 1 through 9. We see in this God reminding Israel of their faithlessness.

Hear this, O house of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and who came from the waters of Judah, who swear by the name of the Lord and confess the God of Israel, but not in truth or right.

[20 : 48] For they call themselves after the holy city and stay themselves on the God of Israel. The Lord of hosts is His name. The former things I declared of old.

They went out from my mouth and I announced them. Then suddenly I did them and they came to pass. Because I know that you are obstinate and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass, I declared them to you from of old.

Before they came to pass, I announced them to you, lest you should say, my idol did this, my carved image and my mental image, commanded them. You have heard.

Now see all this and will you not declare it. From this time forth, I announced to you new things, hidden things that you have not known. They are created now not long ago.

Before today, you have never heard of them, lest you should say, behold, I knew them. You have never heard, you have never known. From of old, your ear has not been opened, for I knew that you would surely deal treacherously and that from before birth you were called rebel.

[22 : 04] God comes and he speaks to his own people and he says, you too have failed. You too, let me lay bare before you your own sinfulness.

Verses 1 and 2 is Israel's claiming, but aren't we God's privileged people? We claim the name of God. We come from Jerusalem. Isn't that a place? Don't we have a standing with God because of that name?

Do you guys know what a bandwagon fan is in sports? A bandwagon fan in sports is someone who starts to root for, say, the New York Jets, if that ever happens again, say the New York Jets because they start winning, right?

And so lots of people become Jets fans in the world. But they're only fans as long as they win. And they might wear the jersey and strut around town saying, look at me, I'm a Jets fan.

But they're fair weather fans and they will turn away as soon as the Jets start losing, which is sure to happen. And sorry, Jets fans, I love you, but it's been a rough long time.

[23 : 12] Israel was like a bandwagon fan of God. They loved being God's people when it was easy, when it was providing them victory, when it was, but when it came down to actually living it out, they were only on the surface and they were wearing the jersey and saying, don't we have a right to something because we're God's people?

And God says, no, because you did not do it, as it says in the end of verse 1, not in truth or in right. Not only did they do this, but they had a hard-headed trust in idols.

Did you see when I read verse 4 and 5? This is like the best image in the Bible. You are hard-headed. You actually literally have a forehead of bronze and a neck of steel, a neck that will not bow before me and a forehead that cannot receive any information inside of it.

This is the image that it's saying and you are the most hard-headed people what God has ever seen. He's saying, you have not listened, you have not received, and you have not humbled yourselves before me.

And then in verses 6 through 9, he exposes that they too were presumptuous, unfaithful, and rebellious.

[24 : 43] That they assumed because they were God's people and maybe because they had received revelation from Sinai, because they had prophets in their midst, that they knew what God was going to do.

And he says, no, I am working in a way that will reveal you have no idea what I am up to. What I have spoken in the past, I'm bringing to bear in the present, and you didn't see it coming.

And what I'm going to do in the future is even better, and you have no idea, you have no place to say, my idol did this, because you didn't even know what God was going to do.

And he exposes their presumption and the pride of their knowledge and the ways that they had turned to other ways of learning and knowing for salvation, the idols that they had trusted in.

And so God in these first eight verses has this word of rebuke for his own people. And yet, and yet, though God's people should deserve the same judgment that Babylon deserves, this is part of what Isaiah is doing, is saying, Israel, you're no better.

[25 : 58] Do you see the same pride, the same presumption, the same hard-heartedness, the same worship of idols? Though you deserve the same judgment that Babylon does, I am a God who's committed to redeeming a people for myself, for my own namesake, and for my glory.

God will show his gracious faithfulness in redemption in spite of the sin and fallenness of the world. This is what he begins talking about in verse 9.

So let's read verses 9 through 17. For my namesake, I defer my anger. For the sake of my praise, I restrain it for you that I may not cut you off.

Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver. I have tried you in the furnace of affliction for my own sake. For my own sake, I do it. How shall my name be profaned?

My glory I will not give to another. Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel whom I called. I am he, I am the first, and I am the last.

[27 : 06] My hand laid the foundation of the earth, my right hand spread out the heavens. When I called to them, they stand forth together. Assemble, all of you, and listen.

Who, who among them has declared these things? The Lord loves him. He shall perform his purpose on Babylon, and his arms shall be against the Chaldeans.

I, even I, have spoken and called him. I brought him, and he will prosper in his way. Draw near to me. Hear this. From the beginning I have not spoken in secret.

From the time it came to be I have been there. And now the Lord God has sent me and his spirit. And thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

I am the Lord, your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go. This is the promise of God's gracious faithfulness towards his people.

[28 : 12] In verses 9 through 11, we see God explaining his motivation for this. No one is deserving of God's redemptive power, certainly not Israel, certainly not Babylon, but God says, I will do this not because you deserve it, because of who I am, because I am a God who is right and good, and because I am the creator of the world, and because it is my delight to reveal my glory, and my glory is shown not merely in the greatness of my creation, and the power and the beauty of it, but even more so in my power to redeem people out of darkness into light.

And so, I will do this work because I have said this is the kind of God that I am, the Holy One of Israel, your Redeemer. And that is, because that is who I am, I will bring faithfulness to you that you don't have to call you out of your arrogance and pride and rebellion to be my people so that in the world my people might be a place where I might display my glory and my power in people who don't deserve it and people who have no merit of their own to receive it.

How do we know this? Well, he talks about it in two different ways. He talks about his past faithfulness, the old things that I've done. He says, my past faithfulness is proven. Verse 5, he talks about what I've declared from old.

And this is, he's talking about his prediction of Cyrus coming and freeing them from Babylon. And he's saying, I have predicted it, I said it was going to come, and now you have seen it happen.

Right? Now you have seen that Cyrus is arriving and the end of Babylon is upon you. Okay? So my faithfulness has been proven by my ability to predict what would happen and then carry it out.

[30 : 05] And that had always been his plan. And he would do it according to verse 5, excuse me, particularly so they would see that it wasn't the idols. There's no way they could have predicted that it would be Cyrus who was raised up apart from God's word.

The idols didn't say, oh, well, another nation's going to come and free you from Babylon. Only God did this and he did it so that, so that all would see that this was God's work.

He did it not to destroy them but to save them. He refined them like silver and if you know anything about silver, the way you refine it is you put it in heat and it burns off all the impurities. But the implication of the image here is that Israel was so impure that if it had been refined to its fullest extent there'd be nothing but ashes.

There was no silver left. There was nothing that Israel had that would be preserved through the fires of judgment and so God relented and brings instead his redemptive power.

power. And this redemptive power is shown first through Cyrus but then he says but there is a new thing that's coming.

[31 : 16] He referenced it in verse 6. There is a new thing that I'm doing and I don't know if you noticed it but in verse 16 the voice changes and it's a confusing, if you sit down and you really work through it, it's a confusing thing.

Verse 16 doesn't seem to flow from verse 15. It feels like the flow of thought changes and I think that's right because I think what verse 16 is doing is giving us for one verse in these two chapters the voice of the suffering servant.

The voice of the one. We've already seen it mentioned earlier in Isaiah and we're certainly going to see it as it comes up in the next section because at the end of chapter 48 this whole section 40 to 55 40 through 48 is about Cyrus and God's deliverance from Babylon and 49 through 55 is going to be about God's deliverance of His people from sin and it's going to focus on the suffering servant and it's going to find its highlight in chapter 53 which you all know is the picture of Jesus as a substitute suffering for His people to redeem them out of sin and death and to bring them into life and this is what God is up to.

If the old things were redeeming Israel from Babylon through Cyrus the new thing is He's going to redeem His people from sin and of course this isn't new because we know it's throughout the whole Old Testament that this is God's purpose but the new thing is how is He going to do it and this brings us to the hope of Isaiah it's the hope that Jesus is coming and that Jesus is going to humble Himself where we are proud Jesus is going to obey and listen to God's Word when we don't Jesus is going to submit Himself when our hearts rebel and in being the Israel that God intended Israel to be for us in being the perfect human being that He intended us to be before the fall that we are never going to be able to be Jesus is able to be our substitute and so when He goes to the cross and He dies for our sin in our place

His substitute achieves for us a redemption and freedom from that sin and freedom from the judgment of God that should be upon all of us because Jesus Himself took it and so that all who are under Christ all who have put their faith in Him know then the God of Israel the Holy One the Redeemer as their God who has redeemed them from the world and from sin through Jesus Christ and this is the hope of the gospel and this is the message that the Christian church is called to proclaim this is what we cling to and what we hope in this is what grace is I kept wanting to in this sermon talk about undeserved grace and I realized undeserved grace is repetitive and unhelpful because grace is by definition undeserved it's what God showed to Israel by not destroying them the way He destroyed Babylon it's what God shows to us by sending Jesus to be our Savior so that as we humble ourselves and believe in Him we can be

[34 : 53] God's people we can be redeemed from our sin so how do we respond quickly first we're to hear and to listen to God's word Isaiah over and over says Israel didn't hear they didn't listen and then he encourages them listen hear hear what I have to say hear the words of the gospel not the gospels the four stories about the life of Jesus but the message the core message of the Bible which is that God is a God who redeems through the person of Jesus Christ hear that go back to it meditate on it say that and should let us do it as we understand we need some but we want a and then he can get

And finally, as you see in verse 21, nope, verse 20, Declare it with a shout of joy, proclaim it, and send it out to the ends of the earth.

The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob. Friends, this message is really good news. It's good news for all of us. And we ought to be full of praise.

Praise in our conversations with our neighbors about what a great God we serve. Praise as we gather around our family tables or in our apartments, as we recognize his goodness on a daily basis.

Praise as we gather in our small groups and as we gather here in our praise to God, because though we are undeserving, he is a gracious redeemer.

[37 : 15] Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we pray that you will fill our tongues with the song of praise. Lord, that we will be humbled before you, recognizing our unworthiness, but your greatness.

Lord, we thank you for your word. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.