

Forgiveness & Renewal

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. It's good to see you all. Good to be with you all. Happy Father's Day. Happy Juneteenth. Would you turn with me to the book of Isaiah? This summer we've been studying Isaiah 40 through 55, and today we come to chapter 43, verse 22. That's page 565 in the Pew Bible, 565. And this passage of Isaiah that we're looking at extends all the way to chapter 44, verse 23. That's nearly all of page 566 in the Pew Bible. And there are three parts to this passage, and Isaiah. I'm going to begin by reading the first two parts. That's chapter 43, verse 22, through chapter 44, verse 5. So let me pray, and then I'll read that section for us. Let's pray together.

Father, grant us light that we may not simply understand your word, but truly receive it by your Spirit. And so would you renew us inwardly and outwardly for Christ's sake. In his name we pray.

Amen. All right. Isaiah 43, all the way through 44. Isaiah 43, 22, all the way through 44, 5. Let me read for us. Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob, but you have been weary of me, O Israel. You've not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings or honored me with your sacrifices. I've not burdened you with offerings or wearied you with frankincense. You have not bought me, sweet cane, with money or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins. You have wearied me with your iniquities. I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Put me in remembrance. Let us argue together. Set forth your case that you may be proved right. Your first father sinned. Your mediators transgressed against me. Therefore,

I will profane the princes of the sanctuary and deliver Jacob to utter destruction and Israel to reviling. But now hear, O Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen. Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you. Fear not, O Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen. For I will pour out on the thirsty, I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. I will pour my spirit upon your offspring and my blessing on your descendants.

They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. This one will say, I am the Lord's. Another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, the Lord's, and name himself by the name of Israel. Well, I wonder if it's ever occurred to you that right now you and I could be engaged in one of the most deadly and dangerous of spiritual activities. Coming to church, singing songs, reading the Bible, listening to a sermon, right now you and I could be doing something that is utterly dangerous, even deadly for our souls.

[3 : 3 5] But how could that be? All the things we're doing right now are things God tells us to do. He tells us to gather, to sing, to read, to listen to his word for our spiritual good. Isn't this what we're supposed to be doing? How could this be spiritually dangerous? How could this be spiritually deadly?

Ah, but it can be. In this passage of Isaiah, God is getting down to the root of our human condition.

Last week in the passage right before ours, God speaks, God spoke of his intention to liberate his people from exile. Just as he saved them from slavery in Egypt, so he was going to save them from exile in Babylon. A new exodus is coming, God says. Yet, yet, that's how our text today starts. Yet, there is still a deeper problem that needs to be addressed. And what is that problem?

Well, it's the problem of our sin. But here's the thing. On the outside, in Isaiah's day, the people didn't look all that bad. In fact, they were very, very religious. They went to the temple.

They sang songs. They offered sacrifices. They gave offerings. They were very, very religious. But, and this is why it was so dangerous and deadly, it was all a formality.

[5 : 06] There was a lot of outward form, but no inward reality.

Could that be you today? Could that be us, corporately, as a church? On the outside, could we look like we're doing all the proper things without any inward reality?

Could it be that though we are very religious outwardly, we're just as lost as ever? And if so, what's the answer?

Well, this is what our passage is about. The people need, you and I need, the church needs, not just a political or material redemption, but a spiritual heart renewal.

Let's walk through Isaiah's text, and let's see how God addresses this problem. First, in verses 22 through 24, 22 through 24, God exposes our empty formality.

[6 : 19] God exposes our empty formalities. If you look at these verses again, verses 22 through 24, it's important to realize that the pronoun me, in verse 22, for example, is in the emphatic position, and I tried to read it that way.

In other words, the text is not saying that the people aren't sacrificing at all. Rather, they're not really offering their sacrifices to the Lord. You've not called upon me. You've not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings.

They're going through the motions, but there's no true worship of the Lord. Empty ritual had replaced real repentance and real devotion.

And that meant they weren't doing these things for the Lord. They weren't doing these things for the Lord to know Him, to enjoy Him, to love Him. It turns out they were doing all those things for themselves.

They went through the empty formality. They went through the religious motions, maybe, maybe just to look good to their neighbors, you know, to keep up appearances, or perhaps to please their family, you know, to just go through the motions of what their parents had done.

[7 : 28] Or perhaps, more subtly, they did these things to try to get God's favor or to try to manipulate God. This is the kind of thinking that says, God, I'll do these things for you.

Now, you do something for me. I'll show up. I'll do the rites, the rituals, the acts. I'll go through the motions. You give me a comfortable life. You keep me from trial and hardship.

I do my part, God. You do yours. I wonder, do you see any of this in your own heart as we sit here at church, sing songs, and listen to Scripture read?

Do you see any signs of empty formality in your own life? Here are perhaps two signs that were sliding in this dangerous direction. First, weariness.

Notice again verse 22. You did not call upon me, O Jacob, but you have been weary of me, O Israel. Empty formality, you see, is wearying.

[8 : 40] It's burdensome. There's no joy in it. If as a church we do things because that's how we've always done them, or because this is how we keep up appearances as godly people, or if we go through the motions because we think this is how we get a comfortable life from God, there will be no joy.

It will get stale. It will become a burden. And tragically, we'll even start to be weary of God himself. You have been weary of me, God says in verse 22.

Now, of course, for Old Testament believers, the temple worship and the sacrifices weren't originally given to be a burden. The Old Testament sacrifices were meant to be signs of a vital relationship with God.

They were meant to be means to experience the promises of God's forgiveness and grace. Ultimately, we know they were signs pointing ahead to the ultimate atonement in Christ. So these things weren't meant to be a burden.

They were meant to be signs or ways to enjoy their relationship with God. But when religious practices become an empty ritual, empty formalism, they're not that anymore.

[9 : 56] They're a burden. And we become weary. We even start to get weary, we think, of God himself. The second sign that we might be sliding into the danger of empty formalism is that we're blinded to the reality of our sinfulness.

Look at the end of verse 24. You have burdened me with your sins, God says. You have wearied me with your iniquities. God, in essence, is saying here, all that time you were going through the empty motions, trying to keep up appearances, trying to get me in your pocket, that whole time you were doing those outwardly religious things, you know what was really happening?

Your sins were just mounting up. You thought that your religious acts could make up for your sins. You thought that if you gave enough sacrifices or performed enough religious duties that you could maybe earn or get a little closer to a right relationship with me or at least get a comfortable life out of me.

But it was just the opposite. God says, your empty religion was the very thing separating you from me. Your empty religion was actually driving you further away from me.

Why? God says, because you were treating me like an idol. You were treating me like an idol that you could manipulate, a false god that you could placate or control.

[11 : 22] But friends, God is not that kind of God. And our empty formality will just drive us even further from a real relationship with the living God.

God says, it just piled up your offenses against me. And that's why sitting in church can be one of the most spiritually dangerous or deadly things you could ever do.

Because if we think that going through the religious motions will earn God's favor or get God on our side, if we're here because that's what so-called moral people are supposed to do, then friends, we're in worse trouble than when we started.

We should all go walk down to Nika's and eat brunch. It'd be a better way to spend our Sunday morning. Empty formalism, empty religion.

It's spiritually deadly and it's offensive to God. It was a problem in Isaiah's day and it's still a very real problem for us today. But what's the answer?

[12 : 32] If you and I feel the danger of our situation, if we can maybe sympathize with the weariness or maybe even the blindedness to our own sin, where do we go? What do we do? Well, after exposing our empty formalism in verses 22 through 24, the next section of our passage shows us God's promise of undeserved forgiveness and renewal.

The end of chapter 43 and the beginning of chapter 44 show us God's promise of undeserved forgiveness and renewal. Notice, if you look down, if you have the pew Bible open, notice how abrupt verse 25 comes in.

Just when God has exposed our sin and He says, your sins have been mounting up, He comes in like a lightning bolt and says, I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and I will not remember your sins.

This is a sheer, a word of sheer undeserved grace. And from a human standpoint, it doesn't make sense.

Just like the transition from verse 24 to 25 doesn't make any sense. After offending God and turning the worship of God into a false and empty show, God turns and says, I'll blot out your transgressions.

[13 : 47] Doesn't make any human sense, does it? In fact, look at how verses 26 through 28 even press home this point. Lest the people of Israel think that God can forgive them because, well, we're not so bad after all, right?

Lest we think God's forgiveness comes because we're not really that bad. God says, okay, put forth your case. Don't you see? Your brokenness, your sinfulness, it goes all the way down your family tree.

From your forebears right to today. And if I gave you what you deserved, it would be utter destruction. But for God's own sake, that is out of His own nature and initiative, not because of anything in us, He blots out our transgressions.

Now, in this passage, Isaiah gives no explanation why or how God will blot out our transgressions, just that God will do it.

But we know that this forgiveness, though it comes free to us, is incredibly costly to God. Forgiveness is always costly, isn't it?

[15 : 07] To absorb the wrong that's done and not to repay. It's always costly for the one doing the forgiving. And for God, too, forgiveness would be costly. Because how would God forgive our sins?

How would the holy God forgive a sinful people? Well, in the fullness of time, God the Son would come. And He would take on our human nature.

And He would live a life of complete obedience to God the Father. And there would not be an ounce of empty formalism or empty religion in Him. But nothing but genuine worship, love, and obedience.

And after living a perfect life, the Son of God would give Himself up to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus would be cut off and numbered among the transgressors and die on a cross.

And through His one perfect sacrifice offered to God on our behalf, offered without any pretense, offered without any empty formality, that one perfect sacrifice would do what no other sacrifice could ever do.

[16 : 14] It would forgive the sins of all who would admit their empty formalism and sin and place their trust in Christ alone.

And with this full and free forgiveness that God would work for us, also comes renewal by the Holy Spirit.

That's verses 1 through 5 of chapter 44. After forgiving our sin, forgiving the offense of our empty formalism, God doesn't just create a blank slate. He pours out His Spirit on us.

Like water on thirsty ground, like streams in the desert. Can you imagine? What if your relationship to God wasn't a wearisome burden anymore?

What if you weren't trying to keep up appearances anymore? What if you didn't have to go through the motions anymore? What if it didn't feel like your Christian life was a giant process of twisting God's arm into giving you a comfortable life?

[17 : 24] What if His Spirit was poured out upon you? And instead of empty ritual, there was reality. Genuine repentance, heartfelt love for God, desire for the things of God.

And all of that, not because ultimately we want something from God, but because we just want more of God Himself. Notice verse 5.

What has replaced the empty formalities, the empty religion? When the Spirit is poured out, when the Spirit is poured out, they're replaced with a real vital relationship with God and a real vital belonging to God's people.

This one will say, I am the Lord's. There it is. A vital relationship with God. Another will call on the name of Jacob, belonging to the people of God. Another will write on his hand, the Lord's.

There it is. Belonging to God. A vital relationship with Him. And name Himself by the name of Israel. There it is. Belonging to the people of God. A vital, real relationship with God and God's people.

[18 : 38] That's what replaces the empty formalities when the Spirit is poured out. Friends, what does the church ultimately need today? What do you and I ultimately need?

What we need is God to pour out the Holy Spirit afresh on us. At Pentecost, the new covenant work of the Spirit began. The Spirit's work of uniting us to the risen Christ, of flooding our hearts with the assurance of parting, of making us living stones in the new temple of God.

We need the Spirit to come and renew His work among us. God, the Holy Spirit, He's the only one who can break us and change us from our empty formalism.

Open our eyes to the beauty of Christ crucified and risen and grant us the renewed saving faith. We need to be united to Him in the first place. Ultimately, we don't need more programs or more policies or more systems.

Those things are fine and good in their place. Ultimately, what we need is the Holy Spirit to come and do His work. And here in Isaiah, He promises to do just that.

[19 : 56] I will pour water on the thirsty ground. I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring. God doesn't leave us to wallow in our empty formalism.

He promises to pour out His Spirit, and then we'll be like willow trees by the water, Isaiah says. Strong, sturdy, offering shade and peace to all who pass by.

What a beautiful image of the church, full of the Spirit. So how can we respond to this promise then? How can we take hold of this promise in faith that God will fulfill it?

Well, that's the last part of our passage. In the last part, verses 6 through 23 of chapter 44, God exposes the futility of false idols, and then invites us in response to His promise to remember, return, and rejoice.

So let me read Isaiah 44, 6 through 23. Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and His Redeemer, the Lord of hosts. I am the first and I am the last.

[21 : 01] Beside me there is no God. Who is like me? Let Him proclaim it. Let Him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come and what will happen. Fear not nor be afraid.

Have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? There is no rock. I know not any. All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit.

Their witnesses neither see nor know that they may put to shame. Who fashions a God or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing. Behold, all His companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human.

Let them all assemble. Let them stand forth. They should be terrified. They should be put to shame together. The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He hammers it.

He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails. He drinks no water, and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line. He marks it out with a pencil.

[21 : 59] He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man with the beauty of a man to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or He chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest.

He plants a cedar, and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself. He kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also, He makes a god and worships it.

He makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it, He burns in the fire. Over the half, He eats meat. He roasts it and is satisfied. Also, He warms Himself and says, Ah, I'm warm. I've seen the fire.

And the rest of it, He makes into a god, His idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, Deliver me, for You are my God. They do not know, nor do they discern, for He has shut their eyes so that they cannot see, and their hearts so that they cannot understand.

No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, Half of it I burned in the fire. I also baked bread on its coals. I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination?

[23 : 08] Shall I fall down before a block of wood? He feeds on ashes. A deluded heart has led Him astray, and He cannot deliver Himself or say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?

Remember these things, O Jacob and Israel, for You are my servant. I formed You. You are my servant. O Israel, You will not be forgotten by me.

I've blotted out Your transgressions like a cloud and Your sins like a mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed You. Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it. Shout, O depths of the earth.

Break forth into singing, O mountains, O forests, and every tree in it, for the Lord has redeemed Jacob. And will be glorified in Israel. So how do we respond to the promise of the Spirit's renewal?

First, we remember, verse 21. We remember that unlike the false gods, unlike the idols made by hands that Isaiah sort of scathingly exposes here, idols that can't see or speak or think or act, unlike those false gods, this God, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, will never forget us.

[24 : 21] Remember, God says, He will not be forgotten by me. God made you. He formed you. He chose you. And He will not forget you. Remember that. Remember the promise of God's grace.

But how? How do we go about remembering this awesome truth about God? This awesome truth about God that sets Him in such wonderful distinction to all the false gods in the world?

Well, this is the real reason, isn't it, that we read Scripture. This is why Bible reading and teaching are so vital. Because through the pages of Scripture, we're invited, once again, to remember, to remember who God is, our Creator and Redeemer, who will never forget us.

Here is a God who is not fashioned by human hands like all the other false gods. Here's the God who fashioned us with His almighty hands. Here's not a God who we have made in our own image, but this is the God who made us in His image.

When we gather on Sundays around God's Word, what we're doing is engaging in a great act of remembering God and remembering ourselves.

- [25 : 33] We are so prone to forget, and that's why we must return to God's Word again and again and again. Not as some empty ritual or empty formality, but we take up the Scriptures in an act of remembrance like we take up a love letter.

Here is the Holy God of the universe saying, I'll never forget you. And what do we know about this Word that God's given us? Well, we know that God the Holy Spirit, whose renewal that we need, God the Holy Spirit is the one who inspired this very Word in Scripture.

God inspired it. The Spirit inspired it to be the constant witness to God's never-failing remembrance of His promises and His people. So you see, the renewal of the Spirit always comes through the Word of the Spirit.

That's how we remember. And that's why corporately we put the Word in the center of what we do. That's week after week after week. Because we want to remember God's promises in the way that the Spirit has revealed these promises.

So we teach and preach God's Word in the way He gave it to us. And the good news is we don't just have to do it on Sundays, right? We can take up this Word throughout the week and remember.

- [26 : 56] Remember the God who never forgets us and who promises to renew us by His Spirit. Remember, that's verse. Second, return. Verse 22 says, return to me.

It's not enough to just remember. We must return. You know, our hearts tragically do go after those false gods as silly as they are, right? We still chase after them.

But none of the false gods can do what this God has done. And what is that? Verse 22, I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist.

Return to me for I have redeemed you. There's no other God who can unshackle us from the weight of our sin and shame, who can release us from the guilt of transgressions.

But this God has blotted them out, evaporated them like a mist, Isaiah says. Through the cross of Christ, God has redeemed us. Last week, Pastor Matt mentioned the parable of the prodigal son.

- [27 : 59] And if you know that story, you know it ends with the older brother hard-hearted, refusing to celebrate the return of his younger brother. But as many commentators and preachers have pointed out, it actually should have been the older brother going out, finding, redeeming his younger brother.

brother. The older brother is the one who should have paid the cost to bring his wayward little brother home. And friends, the wonder of the gospel is this, that Jesus Christ is the true older brother, the true redeemer that we need.

He did go into the far country. He did pay the penalty to set us free. And so, we can return. We can return to God and expect to find not some angry deity, not some angry older brother.

But when we return, what do we find? We find the embrace of eternal love. So return, God says. Return to me.

Lay down your empty formalism. Lay down your weary burden of outward appearances. And return. Brothers and sisters, we can return today.

- [29 : 20] How do we do it? How do we return? Well, it begins through the simple and yet profound act of prayer. We turn our hearts to God and speak to the God who always listens and who always hears.

And we know that for the believer, the act of prayer is also an act of the Holy Spirit. In prayer, God's Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God and we cry out, Abba, Father.

So just as renewal comes through the Word of the Spirit, so renewal comes through prayer in the Spirit. And that's why in our corporate gatherings we give so much attention to prayer, to prayers of confession and thanksgiving, to prayers of petition and praise.

We don't just remember, we return. We return to the God who's forgiven all of our sins and promises to renew us by His Holy Spirit. And lastly, we rejoice.

Verse 23, Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it. Shout, O depths of the earth. Why do we sing? Why do we rejoice? Because unlike all the false gods who have no power to save, this God, the Lord, verse 23 says, has done it.

[30 : 44] We rejoice because the Lord has done it. That is, we rejoice because it's a finished work. The Lord has done it.

Do you want to know the difference between empty formalism and the gospel? empty formalism says do. Do this.

Do that. Do this. Keep on doing that and maybe you'll get what you want. Do, do, do, do. But the gospel says done.

God has done it. All of it. When Christ died on the cross and rose again, it was done. It's a finished work.

For you to receive and enjoy. The do, do, do of empty formalism, of empty religion, as we said, it just produces weariness. But the done of the gospel produces joy.

[31 : 44] And out of that wellspring of joy, what comes? Complacency? No. Love and service and righteousness and peace. It's the weariness of formal religion that creates burdensome, tired, burned out people.

But the joy of the done of the gospel creates a people who love righteousness and justice and want everyone to know and experience it. You know, the truth is we won't be able to love and serve our fallen world for very long unless we have this joy.

You know, today's Father's Day and today's Juneteenth. There's a lot of fathers who are weary. We're in a country where there's a long history of injustice. What's going to empower us as people to go out and to work hard to love in our families and to go out into our communities to love and to listen?

Unless we have this joy, unless we have this rejoicing that comes not from what we do but from what the Lord Jesus Christ has done, unless we have that, it's not going to last long, friends.

But here's the good news. The done of the gospel is going to create in us a dynamic where the Spirit doesn't just fill us but it overflows and we go out. So rejoice, church.

[33 : 06] Remember, return, and rejoice. Your sins have been blotted out. The Spirit has been poured out and you don't need to go through the weary motions anymore.

you can have a vital living relationship with God and Christ. It's yours. May God pour out His Spirit afresh on us and may we remember and return and rejoice.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, as we spend a moment to just meditate on Your Word, our prayer is simple this morning.

As we open our hands and our hearts to You, we pray that Your Spirit would come. We pray that He would be poured out upon us, this blessing of the Spirit.

Oh Lord, we pray for the grace to receive His work, to release us from sin, to fill us with joy, to unite us to our risen and reigning Lord Jesus.

[34 : 29] Father, we know that some of us have maybe thought for a long time that we're Christians but we're realizing maybe that it's been empty formalism, that it's maybe just been going through the motions and there hasn't been any reality.

God, I pray this morning that You would do something new in the hearts of those who are feeling this way, that perhaps for the first time they would lay down empty formalism and religion and take hold of the living Christ.

O God, fill us all with Your joy, we pray. Amen.