

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for April 26: The Lord is compassionate

April 13, 2009

Twenty-seven years after our first first trip to the Holy Land, my wife and I returned. Significant changes were observed, but the one thing that remained the same is the Jewish national conflict and hope for peace. Israel still is the center of the world and a nation under the threat of death.

During the last visit, I asked our guide to explain to me the rationale for the hatred between the Arabs and Jews. She lowered her head and said, "I cannot tell you. Perhaps you could speak with my grandfather, and he might be able to explain." Generation after generation, Israel has been in conflict where hatred produces hatred, eye-for-an-eye retaliations take place and political wrangling persists.

Iran has vowed the annihilation of Israel and is striving for nuclear armaments. Israel threatens to defend itself with air strikes on nuclear incubators. The Pope has made overtures to help bridge a peace between Palestinians and Jews. Young men and women are seen constantly with guns guarding the citizens from daily threats of violence. All around Israel there are threats of violence, invasion, missiles, terrorists, explosive devices, unrest, diplomatic verbal assaults and angry tension.

In this atmosphere, Israel continues to depend primarily upon its military strength, but it has not brought international acceptance or permanent relief.

Christ Jesus wept over his people while coming into Jerusalem during the triumphal entry, exclaiming: "I tell you ... if you, even you, had only known

on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42). Though God placed Israel on track for peace of mind and heart through Christ, her mass rejection of the Son of God, forebode the continuation of national jeopardy and unrest. A nation of destiny, still holding out a hope for peace under God, trusts mostly in her own ability and courage for deliverance rather than the guidance of God.

Isaiah reminds the world that the suffering servant upon whom is laid “the iniquity of us all” is the cosmic, earthly and heavenly answer to peace. Change within is the persuasion for changing the world, as Christ explained so clearly when his disciples asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” His plan is explained: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:6-8). World peace begins with personal peace that embraces love for God and loving others as one loves himself.

Remember that our focal passage for this lesson is out of sequence because of the placement of the Suffering Servant passage, Isaiah 53, on Palm Sunday, followed by the Easter lesson from Matthew 25. Reread the Suffering Servant passages, Isaiah 53:1-12, before reading Isaiah 54:1-10, to capture the continuity and emotion of the promise of hope and encouragement built upon the coming of the King of Kings.

Following the advent of the messianic leader who voluntarily “was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed,” (53:5), the prophet projects excitement that rejoices in the reunion of God with Judah and the restoration of Israel. See how the message that Isaiah presents extends far beyond the times in which this poem was written and sense the emotions of the prophet who earnestly anticipated the coming of the Deliverer.

Just as God welcomes Israel back into his redemptive relationship following their disobedience, God welcomes all who sin, fail, miss the mark and rebel against him when repentance takes place.

The Lord provides a future (Isaiah 54:1-3)

Past sorrows give way to rejoicing. The tragedy of years of captivity paved the way for enthusiastic exclamations of exuberance. The period of exile would soon be over. The restoration of Judah to her homeland was imminent. Though the nation has produced little toward their godly purpose, Zion was encouraged to sing a new song because the yoke of bondage would soon be removed.

“Barren one” would refer to Judah (the nation of Israel), God’s people, who are exhorted to “burst into song, shout for joy” (v. 1) because of going home again and a future of success and peace. Judah is barren because her husband (God) has left her to abide alone in a foreign land.

Hope springs eternal again and hearts become aflame with anticipation of the blessings from God. Analogous to the nomadic life, the blessings would be so great that Israel would have to “enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide” and “lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes” (v. 2). Israel would propagate more children than she did before she went into captivity. Israel is to hold nothing back.

The influence of the people of God would extend in all directions by removing nations and settling in their vacant cities (v. 3). God’s hand would be upon Israel, whose punishment is completed, and would empower her future covenant expectation.

God is the God of second, third, fourth and even more, chances. Reconciliation motivates future hope for personal fulfillment and divine achievement. God never gives up on his plan for reconciliation.

The Lord forgives the past (Isaiah 54:4-6)

In the similar cast of Hosea who redeemed Gomer, his estranged adulterous wife, God redeems his relationship with his people and the prophet declares, "For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name: and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called" (v. 5). Israel's Maker will call her back as though she "were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit"(v. 6). The separation is over and relationship has been restored as illustrated by the spousal metaphor. That having taken place, the past with its failures is forgiven and forgotten by both God and Israel and there is no need for fear, shame, disgrace or feelings of humiliation. The new beginning is totally fresh, loving, sweet and pure.

The future has no future if the past imposes itself upon the persons of the relationship. You learn from the past but must not let it negatively color the present. To do so postures the present and future to become fragile, uncertain, painful and doubtful.

Willie Nelson sings these lines, "Forgiving you is easy, but forgetting takes a long, long time." Not so with God. God forgets when he forgives. Forgetting, merged with forgiveness, makes the coming years best and most satisfying. Israel could look to the future with joy and hope while forgetting those failures of the past.

The Lord is compassionate (Isaiah 54:6-8)

Out of "deep compassion," God would receive Israel back to himself. Using the analogy of a young wife who has been deserted and rejected, the prophet sees God, who momentarily divorced Israel, as having compassion and sought out his people to restore the intimate relationship that would open wide the door for God's purpose to be achieved. The divorce would be followed by remarriage and the end of the separation.

The abandonment, or divorce, was with cause because Israel broke the covenant in disobedience and rebellion. Now that Israel had been punished and her spirit of repentance accepted, God compassionately took the initiative, opened up his heart of “unfailing love,” (v. 10) and acknowledged Israel as redeemed and his beloved companion. In that relationship, God became the strong arm of protection and the wise curator of her destiny.

God had a surge of holy anger and hid “his face” from Israel for a moment (v. 8). The prophet poetically portrays the character and attitude of God to be human like. The anger is momentary and quickly became compassion and everlasting kindness (v. 8).

The Lord honors his covenant (Isaiah 54:9-10)

A covenant is an oath that binds a relationship, an ultimate agreement based on trust that regulates the behavior of all parties. A covenant may be established, issued, arranged, entered and demanded.

God made a holy covenant with Israel and obligations were imposed on them both. God kept his oath, but Israel frequently broke hers by idol worship, unfaithfulness, neglect, immorality, rebellion, selfishness, injustice and arrogance. God sees the restoration of covenant like that of the one with Noah when the rainbow became a symbol of God’s promise never to destroy the earth by water again. The covenant would be more permanent than the mountains or hills.

With angry rebuke laid aside, God reaffirmed the covenant with his “unfailing love ... that will not be shaken” and the commitment not to remove the “covenant of peace” (v. 10).

Conclusion

God has shown man something of himself. God, unquestionably, prefers love, grace, mercy, forgiveness and faith. Only when necessary is the force

of judgment used as a tool of discipline. Punishment is but a brief experience and then his love bursts forth to, once again, take up the covenant agreement.

Individuals and churches experience the ebb and flow of his grace and his justice, all of the masterful purpose of reconciliation and redemption. Even in the dark times of judgment, God is with us and carries us along with encouragement and strength. Isaiah wants all to know and understand that God is far more farsighted than man, understands the objective of history, and sees both the beginning and end at the same time.

What may be a personal struggle, will in some way benefit all in the economy of God. Paul did not miss this truth, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

God always seeks to reconcile with us. The purpose of his salvation is reconciliation. He stretches out his hand to us and offers another chance for a mutual relationship of love and peace.