

Sunday February 23, 2020
Lesson 13: Holy Purpose
Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-11

Context:

Our last lesson in this series focuses on holy purpose and how a holy person will seek justice. Just as God is just and seeks to hold others accountable, we too are to strive towards justice. The book of Isaiah provides a message from the Lord to the people reminding them of the holy purpose to be found in their lives.

This passage in Isaiah belongs to what is known as Third Isaiah. The book addresses different stages of life in Israel and can be divided into three different time periods, indicating there are several writers of Isaiah. First Isaiah prophesizes the doom of Jerusalem, Second Isaiah has Jerusalem destroyed and promise of exiles returning, and Third Isaiah comes after the postexilic period.¹ Throughout Third Isaiah, the writer(s) focus on helping the people recover after discovering Jerusalem and the country in ruins.

The chapters in Third Isaiah are more hopeful than those of First and Second Isaiah (chapters fifty-five through sixty-six). All the transgressors of the Israelite community are forgiven except for the Edomites, those who participated in the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.² Scholars believe at the time Third Isaiah was written, most exiles had returned and the Temple had been rebuilt under the leadership of Persian-appointed governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Jeshua, with the support of prophets Haggai and Zechariah.³ However, things were still unstable as the city and infrastructure of the kingdom needed to be rebuilt.⁴ There were still questions about next steps and the stability of Jerusalem and the country.

The beautiful passage from chapter sixty-one gives a glimpse of how the hard path will still be beautiful. The vision describes the spirit of the Lord coming to mourn with those there and then leading them to rejoice at the renewal of their city. The patriarchs and matriarchs will lead the city in being rebuilt from its ancient ruins. Other nations will help them rebuild and the people will once again receive wealth and prosperity.

All of this shall come as the Lord promises to bring justice to the people. God will be fair to a people who have been persecuted and dismissed. Their covenant will sustain them as their children and their children's children shall receive blessings. The writer(s) share in the excitement and describe how the Lord will fill them with righteousness and praise before the nations. They will show the joy of the Lord as they rebuild the city they

¹ Coogan, Michael D., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 422.

² Ibid., 423.

³ Ibid., 424.

⁴ Ibid., 424.

love.

Application:

As one reads this passage, it might be helpful to have a picture in mind. Imagine a city in ruins. Some houses and streets are standing, while other blocks are still demolished. Picture the people as going about the street carrying with them steely, yet tired faces. This might give us a glimpse into the context our writer(s) addresses as they seek to give hope to those living in this less than ideal situation.

Justice is also much like this scene. While justice sounds like a lovely term, the road to get there is often less than ideal. You can ask anyone who has been in a complicated court case and dispute and they will reveal that while justice is what one craves, there is still mourning, frustration, and strife. Yet people pursue justice so they and others may have a sense of peace about them.

At times we may be like the Israelites. We see things we love destroyed or changed whether it is our home lives, our workplace, our churches, or our communities. We experience brokenness and strife sometimes due to the cruelty or spitefulness of others. Something happens and everything we loved or cherished is unfairly destroyed or taken away from us. We look at our world and see ruins of things that were once splendid, steady presences in our lives.

The words of Isaiah remind us that no one is ever guaranteed a life without pain or suffering. At some point, we will have our “Jerusalem has fallen” moments in different areas of our lives and we will mourn. We will weep and our spirits will be zapped by the weight of the world.

And yet the word of the Lord reminds us that as our cities may fall, there will be moments to restore and repair. Those who love the Lord may not be spared suffering, and yet we are promised there will be an opportunity for us to rebuild and have joy in our lives. The Lord will deliver justice in some form and generations after us will receive the benefit.

Best of all, the Lord will use the people of God to bring righteousness and praise to the world. Even in the midst of the ruins and the brokenness, God will be at work. It does not mean it will be easy. Rebuilding and renewal always take time and growing pains. Ask any person involved in a building project and they will tell you that restoring or rebuilding brings all sorts of challenges along the way.

Several weeks ago, I had the privilege of meeting with the provost of the National Cathedral with one of my doctoral classes. We discussed leadership and the blessings and challenges the National Cathedral faces being the cathedral of the country. The closing words of the provost have been my mantra as she told us: “Stand strong in the Lord. The world is in need of the good news of Jesus Christ more than ever.” That is my new prayer that I remind myself of daily with whatever situations coming my way. Wherever you may be today whether the Jerusalems of your life seem to be steady, coming apart, or completely in ruins, hear the good news of Jesus Christ and take comfort that the Lord’s justice will be brought.

Where are the places of your life that you feel there is repair work that needs to be done? How do you stand strong in the Lord when everything seems to be falling apart? What does the justice of God look like to you for God’s holy people? How can you be a

part of God's justice in this world? Where are the places where your gifts can help others in rebuilding their lives?

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