

“GRACE TO THE SPIRITUALLY APATHETIC”

One problem that is present in the church in any age is the problem of spiritual apathy. I am not talking about the attitude of people in society at large, but of people who are actually a part of the church. On any given Sunday, a significant number of those who are in attendance at Christian worship services across the globe are not in attendance because they want to worship and commune with the Triune God. Some people attend worship out of a sense of duty. Others are there for the social experience. Others are there because they find the worship service to be entertaining or aesthetically pleasing. Others are there because they sing in a choir or perform in a praise band or have some other opportunity to use their talents. Now, think for a moment about how offensive this must be to God. He is the great God, the living God, the Maker of heaven and earth. He is greatly to be praised. He should be the focus of our worship. But there are many who offer their praises to God with their thoughts on other things and with their eyes on the clock. Imagine a young man asking a young woman out on a date and then, when they are actually out on the date, acting like he could not think of anything in the world that could be more boring than spending the evening with her. I think it is safe to say that there would not be a second date. In a similar way, we would expect God to utterly reject those who

worship him in a manner that fails to hallow his name. He would certainly be justified in doing so. Yet in this amazing passage, we see God doing the exact opposite, as he actually extends his grace to people who find true worship boring. *In these verses, the Lord says that he will glorify his name by forgiving and renewing a people who are spiritually apathetic.*

### **A Burden to God**

In the first part of our passage, the Lord tells us that those who see worship as something that is burdensome are themselves a burden to God. The passage begins with the word “Yet,” which sets it in contrast to what was said at the end of the previous section. Looking back at verse 21, we see God saying that he formed his covenant people in order “that they might declare my praise.” He created and redeemed the people of Israel so that they might worship him. But here in verse 22, God says, “Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel!” The Lord expected his people to respond to his gracious deliverance with heartfelt gratitude and praise. But instead, they grew weary of worship and failed to call upon the name of the Lord.

The fact that God says that his people failed to call upon him and failed to bring offerings to him tells us something very important about worship. We

know that the people of Israel in Isaiah's day were still worshipping God. The temple was still standing, and the sacrifices were still being offered. Yet, as the Lord said back in chapter 1, he regarded Israel's worship as a trampling of his courts because it only consisted of external acts. They were going through the motions, but they were not truly seeking the Lord. They turned the sacrificial system into a mere ritual instead of allowing it to show them their inability to keep the law and their utter dependence upon God for mercy. They had grown weary of true worship and turned it into something else. This is why the Lord did not regard their acts of worship as a genuine calling upon his name.

We can see the same thing in the church today. Christian worship in our day is sometimes made into a matter of entertainment, or self-improvement, or national prosperity, or social justice, or trying to make Christianity appear culturally hip. And the reason why this happens is because there are a number of professing Christians who have lost interest in what the Bible regards as true worship. They have no desire to listen attentively to a sermon that carefully explains and applies a specific passage of Scripture. They find theologically rich hymns to be too serious and demanding. They see no point in frequently observing the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. And they regard any prayer that is longer than a few brief sentences as burdensome. As a result, they make other

things the focus of their worship services. But when we turn worship into anything other than a grateful and sincere homage to God, offered in a manner that is in keeping with the pattern that God sets forth in his Word, we are not offering true worship. A great deal of what goes by the name of Christian worship in our day is actually not worship in the biblical sense. We have to remember that biblical worship is not evaluated by whether it is pleasing to men, but by whether it is pleasing to God.

We all have to contend with the temptation towards spiritual apathy. It is a problem that continually confronts us because of the sinfulness of our hearts. We have to take time to prepare our hearts if we want our worship to be pleasing to God and beneficial to us. We need to cultivate the kind of self-discipline that Paul was talking about when he said “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:27) The Puritan Thomas Watson even described this in terms of having to do violence to ourselves, saying, “We may bring our bodies to the preaching of the Word with ease—but not our hearts, without offering violence to ourselves. When we come to the Word preached, we come to a business of the highest importance, therefore [we] should stir up ourselves and hear with the greatest devotion...When the Word is dispensed, we are to lift up the everlasting

doors of our hearts, that the King of glory may enter in!" [*The Christian Soldier*, ch. 1, pt. 3.2] If we are not intentional about preparing our hearts for worship, we will almost certainly grow weary of it.

In verse 24, the Lord says that he has been burdened and wearied by his people's sins. The verb translated as "burdened" is the word that the Hebrew Bible uses to describe being subjected to slavery or forced into labor. In this context, the idea being conveyed is that the people of Israel thought that their acts of external religion would place God in their debt and compel him to do their bidding. They wanted to make God serve their interests. This too is something that we can still see today. There are a number of people who have no desire for true worship but who are nevertheless interested in religion because of its personal or social usefulness.

### **Grace for God's Own Sake**

This brings us to the second part of our passage, where God declares that he extends mercy to an undeserving people for his own sake. He says, "I, I am he, who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." When we read these words in light of what was said in the previous verses, it is very clear that this is an act of sheer grace. God does not owe us

anything. He does not forgive our sins because of anything that we do. The forgiveness that is offered in the gospel of Jesus Christ is offered for the sake of God's glory. His purpose in saving us is to magnify *his* name. Not even the faith by which we laid hold of Christ and his benefits can be attributed to us. As J. Gresham Machen once wrote, "Faith consists not in doing something but in receiving something. To say that we are justified by faith is just another way of saying that we are justified not in slightest measure by ourselves, but simply and solely by the One in whom our faith is reposed." [*What Is Faith?*, 172] God is the one who blots out our transgressions, and he does it for his own sake.

Notice that the Lord says that he will not remember our sins. Think about what a glorious statement that is! While we forget a lot of things, most of us have an excellent memory when it comes to the sins that other people commit against us. But the Bible tells us that when we place our faith in Christ, God forgets our sins. What this means is that he will never again bring our sins against us. If you are a Christian, then not one of the sins that you commit in this life will be brought up at the final judgment. That is a truly amazing thing. But how different it will be on that day for those who are not united to Jesus Christ by faith. Instead of having their sins forgotten, each and every one of their sins will be made public. And not only that: they will also receive in full all of the

wages that their sins have earned for them. This shows us how very urgent it is for us to be sure that we are united to Christ by faith. Only then does God say to you that he will not remember your sins.

As amazing as God's grace is, fallen humanity has an allergic reaction to it. We do not want to be told that our redemption is entirely out of our hands. We want to believe that there is something about us that God finds acceptable, something that makes us worth saving. This is the attitude that the Lord is confronting in verses 26-27. Once again, God declares that his heavenly court is in session, and he challenges the people of Israel to set forth their case and prove that they really do deserve his favor. But God shows them that they do not have a leg to stand on. He says, "Your first father sinned, and your mediators transgressed against me." This "first father" could be either Abraham or Jacob, both of whom could be thought of as the father of the Jewish people. Whichever one it is, both were sinners. Furthermore, all of the men who served as covenant mediators for Israel, men like Moses and David, were sinners as well. There was not one member of the covenant people who lived a sinless life. All alike were transgressors.

Because of Israel's sin, God says that he will consign them to "utter destruction." That sounds pretty serious, doesn't it? Well, it is pretty serious.

This is the word that the Old Testament uses to refer to those who come under the divine curse. It is sometimes translated by the phrase “devoted to destruction.” We see an example of this in Joshua 6, where Joshua said of city of Jericho that “the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction.” (v. 6) In verse 28 of our passage, God is saying the same thing about Israel.

Perhaps you are wondering how God could say that his own people were devoted to destruction? If they were given over to utter destruction, then how would God’s purpose of redemption be fulfilled? How will all the peoples of the earth be blessed in Abraham? This is where a proper understanding of covenant theology is so helpful. We need to understand that the nation of Israel in Isaiah’s day was under the Sinai covenant. While this covenant was ultimately a part of God’s plan to bring unmerited blessing to those whom he graciously appointed to eternal life, there was a sense in which the Sinai covenant was a works-oriented covenant. The covenant blessings and curses that were set forth when the Sinai covenant was ratified made it clear that Israel’s inheritance of the promised land was contingent upon her performance of God’s law. Because of this, the Sinai covenant was of a provisional nature, focused on the national destiny of Israel in a land that served as a typological symbol of the kingdom of

God. God used the Sinai covenant, and Israel's history up until the time of the exile, to demonstrate that fallen humanity cannot merit the inheritance of eternal life by our performance of God's law. Israel's failure to keep the requirements of the Sinai covenant resulted in their coming under the curses of that covenant, thereby losing her claim of inheritance upon the promised land. In other words, her days as a theocratic kingdom were about to come to an end. And God's point in all of this was to demonstrate that every single one of us is in the exact same bind. No one can earn God's favor by their performance of the law. If God were to evaluate us on the basis of our works, then we too would be delivered to utter destruction.

### **Living Waters on Dry Ground**

Thankfully, the Bible does not leave us there, and neither does this passage. Instead, at the beginning of chapter 44, the Lord once again utters those two wonderful words: "But now..." He assures his covenant people that he has chosen them and formed them from the womb. He will not abandon them to the curse of the law. He will help them, even though they do not in any way deserve his help. As we have already seen, the salvation that God is promising here is based entirely upon his grace, and it has his glory as its ultimate end.

Notice that Israel is called by two different names at the end of verse 2. God says, "Fear not, O *Jacob* my servant, *Jeshurun* whom I have chosen. As you may know, Jacob was the father of twelve sons after whom Israel's twelve tribes were named. In the Hebrew, the name Jacob means 'deceiver.' Jacob was given this name because he would grow up to be a man of deceptive character. By referring to the people of Israel as 'Jacob,' God is calling attention to who they are by nature. The other name that God uses to refer to Israel here stands in sharp contrast to this. *Jeshurun* is a Hebrew word that means 'upright.' The people of Israel are being referred to as simultaneously sinful and just. God is saying that he will reckon the deceiver as one who is upright. He will justify the ungodly.

In verse 3, the Lord promises that he will pour out water on a thirsty land. This is an image of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as is made clear by what is said at the end of the verse: "I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring." This is a prophecy of Pentecost, when the ascended Christ would pour out the fullness of his Holy Spirit upon his church to empower her for her mission to bear witness to him to the ends of the earth. It is also a picture of the renewal that the Lord brings about in our lives when we are born again. Before we come to Christ, we are dead in our sins. We are like thirsty land, like dry ground. But when we are made alive by the Spirit through faith in Christ, rivers of living

water flow forth from within us. Hearts that were once made of stone, hearts that once had no interest in true worship, are transformed into hearts of flesh.

In the last two verses of our passage, the Lord assures us that he will succeed in building his church. The offspring of Abraham will spring up all over the globe and call on the name of Jacob's God. We need to keep such promises at the forefront of our minds. If we don't, we will inevitably grow discouraged. It is only by keeping our eyes fixed on Christ and his promise to build his church that we will be able to persevere in the work and witness to which he calls us as his people. As Charles Bridges reminds us, "Peter -- looking at the waves instead of the Saviour -- 'began to sink.' We too -- if we look at the difficulties of our work, and forget the upholding arm of our ever-present-Head -- shall sink in despondency." [*The Christian Ministry*, 167] It is the Lord who pours out his Spirit and brings life and renewal to his church. Our hope is not in the church itself or in any of the manmade strategies that it comes up with. The church is not the good news. It is witness to the good news. Our hope is in Christ's promise that his Spirit will work through the ministry he has instituted in his church to gather and perfect a people who truly belong to God. The gospel has the power to break through our spiritual apathy. It is strong enough to take people who see worship as something that is boring and burdensome and

transform us into a people who can truly say, "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple." (Psalms 27:4)