

"GOD'S PATIENCE TOWARDS STUBBORN PEOPLE"

I would imagine that a number of you can think of someone you know whose actions repeatedly indicate that they are incapable of doing what is best for them. Again and again, they make bad decisions, decisions that end up creating more and more problems in their lives. It can be very frustrating to have to deal with people who are like this. You feel that if they would only listen to you, their lives would be so much better. Well, that is what the Lord has to say about his people in this passage. Again and again, God summons his people to listen to him, but as he makes clear at the end of the passage, they have refused to pay attention to his commandments. And yet, in spite of their stubborn rebellion, God is determined to save them -- not because of anything that they have done, but for the sake of his name. In this chapter, we see that *God's zeal for his glory causes him to promise and deliver salvation to a people who are persistently rebellious.*

God Confronts Nominal Faith

The chapter begins with God confronting his people for their nominal faith. That is, he confronts Israel for being his people in name only, not in truth or right. Nominalism is what takes place when people profess to have faith in the Lord but have not truly entrusted their lives to him. It was a problem in the time of

the Old Testament, and it has continued to be a problem from the New Testament era onward.

There are a variety of reasons why a person would have only a nominal faith in the Lord. At some points in church history, there have been cultural benefits to being a Christian. This was the situation in the Roman empire after the conversion of Constantine. As you might imagine, this led some people to profess to be Christians not because they had a true sense of their need for Christ but because they wanted the cultural benefits that came along with being a part of the church. This became so much of a problem after Constantine's conversion that some Christians began trying to find new ways to live out the costliness of Christian discipleship. This was one of the things that led to the development of the monastic movement, something which would eventually become another context for nominalism.

In our society, there are not as many clear cultural benefits to being a Christian. But there are still nominal Christians. Some people were raised in the church and have never really had a good reason to renounce Christ, yet they do not live as people who see their desperate need for Jesus as he is revealed and mediated to us through his Word. Other people may have come into the church for some other reason -- perhaps because of a relationship or a social need or a

program that the church offered -- but they have never really seen their need for Christ as he is offered in the gospel. Some of those who have a nominal faith continue to attend worship every week because of the other benefits that they derive from it. Others who have a nominal faith rarely attend worship, rarely pray, and rarely read the Bible, yet they still consider themselves to have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

I am afraid that there are a lot of people like this in our day. There are many who call themselves Christians who are not living as Christians. There are many who call themselves Christians who do not belong to a church. There are many who call themselves Christians who think that God accepts them on the basis of their works. There are many who call themselves Christians who think that the fact that they once prayed a prayer asking Jesus into their heart means they are guaranteed to go to heaven. It is not very hard to see that the church today faces the exact same problem that Israel faced in Isaiah's day. There are many people who confess the God of Israel who are not his people in truth.

God Confronts Skepticism

In the next part of this passage, God confronts his people for their skepticism. This is the focus in verses 3-8. The Lord tells Israel that he declared what would

happen to them before it came to pass. God's ability to foretell what will take place in the future, paired with his power to bring it to pass, serves as proof that he is the one true and living God. He tells Israel that he did this because he knows that they are stubborn in their unbelief. Their neck is like iron, unwilling to submit. Their forehead is like brass, set in their opinions and ways. The Lord knew that if he had not declared what would happen from of old the Israelites would have attributed what happened to their idols. They would claim that they knew what was going to happen anyway. The picture that emerges in these verses is of a people who are determined skeptics.

There is a significant amount of skepticism in the church today. And much of it is probably the same kind of skepticism that God's people exhibited in Isaiah's day. It was not that the Israelites were saying that they no longer believed in God. It was simply that they had reached the conclusion that the Lord is not really a factor when it comes to what takes place in this world. It is easy for people to slip into this mindset today. Even Christians can end up living, for all practical purposes, like atheists. Do we really believe that God governs the affairs of this world? Do we really believe that he determines who gets elected, what happens to the economy, who gets sick, who dies, and everything else that takes place in this world? We have a tendency to look almost entirely to other

causes for the things that happen. But this is not a Christian way of understanding things. The Lord actually describes such a mindset as one of treachery and rebellion. As his people, we should know better. We should acknowledge that he foreordains whatsoever comes to pass for the sake of his glory.

God Preserves His People for His Name's Sake

The first eight verses of this chapter are quite severe in their diagnosis of Israel's spiritual condition. These people have a nominal faith. They are proud, stubborn, idolatrous, and rebellious. They do not deserve anything good from the hand of the Lord. On the contrary, God's anger burns against them for their covenant unfaithfulness. Yet in verse 9 God says this: "For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off." This is what the Lord has done for all of those whom he has appointed to eternal life. Every one of us is a transgressor of God's law. If God dealt with us as we deserved, we would all be immediately sent to hell. God does not owe mercy to anyone. But he extends his mercy for his name's sake, for the sake of his glory.

The Lord deferred his anger towards Israel's sin, but he could not set that anger aside. He is a just God, and his justice must be carried out. This is why it is only in Christ that he can forgive us of our sins. This is what Paul is talking about in Romans when he writes, "This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:25–26)

In verse 10, God tells Israel, "I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction." Instead of pouring his wrath upon rebellious Israel, the Lord used their trials to discipline them. Notice, however, that God is careful to specify that this was a special kind of refining process. He did not refine them as a person would refine silver. When silver is refined, all of the dross is purged away so that the silver that is there can shine forth. This is not what God does for his rebellious people. If he burned away all of our dross, there would be nothing left. We are all dross. We have no silver. Once again, we see that there is nothing inherent in us that causes God to choose to redeem us. He does it for his own sake. We cannot take any of the credit. He will not give his glory to another.

God Will Carry Out His Purposes

The next thing that we see in this passage has to do with Cyrus, the instrument that God was going to use to bring Israel back from their exile. This is the focus of verses 12-16. God reminds his people that he is the one who has called them. He is the first and the last, the God who existed before time began and who will continue to exist when everything else in this world reaches its end. He is the maker of heaven and earth. When he issues his decrees, the world snaps to attention. No idol can do that. The Lord chose Cyrus to be his instrument in bringing judgment upon the Babylonians. Cyrus will prosper in his way. Through him, God will restore his people to their land.

When we come to the last line of verse 16, we come across something that is a bit confusing. Up to this point, it has been the Lord who has been speaking. Here, though, the speaker is clearly someone other than the Lord. He says, "And now the Lord GOD has sent me, and his Spirit." Who is this person who was sent by the Lord? In light of the context, we might be inclined to think that it is Cyrus, but other factors suggest that it is someone else. The mention of God's Spirit brings to mind what was said of the Servant back in chapter 42: "Behold, my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." This, paired with

the fact that the Servant reappears again in chapter 49, suggests that the speaker in the last part of verse 16 is this Servant figure. It is Christ, Israel's Messiah. Cyrus will bring about a physical deliverance for God's people, but only Jesus can bring about the spiritual deliverance that we so desperately need.

God Rebukes His People for Their Rebellion

The need for this spiritual deliverance is underscored in verses 17-19, where God rebukes his people for their rebellion against his law. People have a tendency to think of God's law as something that is restrictive or oppressive, but these verses make it clear that this is not the case. The law of God is the way of life, the way of blessing. The law is good. Those who pay attention to it have peace like a river and righteousness like the waves of the sea. Their offspring are like the sand on the seashore. They have God's assurance that their names will never be cut off or destroyed from before him.

These are the things that the Lord had promised the people of Israel when he set up his covenant with them at Mount Sinai. We see this in Deuteronomy 28, where God says, "And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these

blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God." (Deut. 28:1-2) God's promise to establish Israel in the Promised Land as a holy theocracy under his blessing was a promise that was conditioned upon their obedience to his law. Their failure to keep the requirements of the Sinai covenant resulted in their forfeiture of what that covenant promised.

God dealt with Israel in this way in order to demonstrate man's inability to secure divine blessing on the basis of his performance of the law. Israel's failure to keep the requirements of the Sinai covenant shows that man cannot fulfill the requirements of the law, not even when he is placed in ideal circumstances. That is what the Lord had done for Israel. He did everything that he could have done to enable them to succeed. As we saw in the analogy of the vineyard back in chapter 5, God cleared the land and planted it with choice vines, but the vineyard of Israel only produced worthless grapes.

Israel's failure under the Sinai covenant illustrates our failure to live up to the requirements of God's law. And this points us, as it pointed Israel, to our need for a different kind of covenant arrangement. Our only hope for salvation is if the Lord undertakes our salvation not because we have earned it but because of his zeal for his glory. We cannot ask the Lord to save us for *our* name's sake. It

has to be for *his* name's sake. Salvation cannot be based on our performance, not in the least. It has to be based entirely on God's gracious promise.

God Delivers His People

In the last three verses of chapter 48, the Lord describes his deliverance of his people from their bondage in Babylon. As with the exodus from Egypt, God issues a word of command and his people come out from the land of captivity. They are commanded to come out with a shout of joy, proclaiming God's redemption to the end of the earth. The same God who brought the exodus generation through the desert and made water flow from the rock will bring this people back from the land of slavery.

Verses 20-21 contain God's glorious promise of Israel's restoration to the land. We might expect this prophetic oracle to end on that high note. But it does not end there. Instead, it ends with these words, "'There is no peace,' says the LORD, 'for the wicked.'" Who are these "wicked" people? At first, we might think that they are those who are outside of the covenant community, perhaps the Babylonians or the Persians. But the context suggests otherwise. All throughout this chapter, God has referred to the people of Israel as obstinate, treacherous, and rebellious. Moreover, he has said that they forfeited his promise

of peace by their failure to pay attention to his commandments. This tells us that the “wicked” people mentioned in verse 22 are none other than the people of Israel. Isaiah’s oracle ends with the Lord describing his people as a wicked people who have no peace in order to remind them that though they have been brought back to the land, nothing has been done to bring about moral reform in their hearts. Their geography has changed, but they have not changed. They still have the same rebellious hearts. This sets the stage for the mission of the Servant, the Messiah, who is the subject of the next chapter.

This passage shows us our utter dependence upon the Lord for salvation. We can only be delivered from our sins and misery by the grace of God in the gospel of his Son. Like Israel, we have nothing of our own to plead before God. We have failed to listen to him. We have obstinately insisted in going our own way. We have doubted the Lord’s control over the things that take place in our lives. God knows this. He knows all of our sins and failures. Yet he chooses to save us, for the sake of his name.