

“LISTEN TO ME”

If you have ever read John Bunyan’s classic allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*, then you will probably remember the part near the beginning where Christian and his traveling companion Pliable lose their way in the Slough of Despond, a swampy mire that is a symbol for the crippling despair that can afflict us in this life. After Pliable abandons him by turning back, Christian gets in serious trouble and it appears that his journey will come to a premature end in that swamp. But just when all hope seems to be lost, a man named Help arrives and shows him the way forward.

This is what we see the Lord doing in this passage. He is bringing help to his discouraged people. As Isaiah said back in chapter 42, God does not break the bruised reed. He does not snuff out the faintly burning wick. On the contrary, he goes to great lengths to fan that smoking wick back into flame. This is a well-suited image, because you have to be very careful when you are trying to get a fire that has died down to come back to life again. If you blow too hard, you will extinguish it altogether. Well, God is an expert at fanning smoking wicks back into flames. He knows exactly what is needed to renew our faith when we are discouraged. He knows that we need to listen to his promises. This is why we see him summoning his people to listen to him three times in these eight verses.

These three summons mark out the three sections of the passage. In the first section, God tells Israel to look back; in the second section, he tells them to look ahead; and in the third section, he tells them to look at the present. During times of disappointment, discouragement, and distress, the thing that we need more than anything is to be roused to listen again to God's great promises. We need to consider how these promises have been fulfilled in the past, how they will be fulfilled in the future, and how this can help us properly interpret what we experience in the present. In short, this passage shows us that *God renews our faith by instructing us to look at the past, the future, and the present in light of the glorious promises that he has given us in his Word.*

Look Back

As this passage begins, we see the Lord addressing his people as those "who pursue righteousness" and those "who seek the LORD." This tells us that these verses are addressed to the believing remnant in Israel. Only believers could be described as people who pursue righteousness and seek the Lord. For Paul tells us in Romans 3, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God." That is the estate of fallen mankind. As Isaiah showed us back

in chapter 46, we have no righteousness of our own, but only the righteousness that God graciously brings near to us in the gospel.

The redeemed can be described as those who pursue righteousness because the gospel brings about a genuine transformation in our lives. It leads us to submit our lives to God's Word and to strive to obey it. Every Christian should be able to be described as someone who pursues righteousness. Yes, we will continue to struggle with sin, but we should be deeply dissatisfied with the sins that we continue to commit. The fact that we cannot in any way contribute to our salvation should not cause us to be lax when it comes to the pursuit of holiness. We have died to sin by being baptized into Christ's death. We must not let sin reign in our bodies. We are called to present ourselves to God as instruments for righteousness.

It is important for us to remember that the pursuit of righteousness involves the practice of Spirit-worked self-control. We must not allow our unwavering commitment to the fact that salvation is by grace alone to cause us to neglect this. Paul was certainly committed to the gospel of grace alone, yet listen to what he says about himself in 1 Corinthians 9:27: "I pummel my body and make it a slave, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." Perhaps these words make you think of monks practicing self-flagellation, but that is not

what Paul is talking about here. He is not saying that there is something inherently meritorious about inflicting pain upon our bodies. He is not saying that pleasure itself is bad or wrong. Rather, he is saying that we need to learn how to deny our bodies what they want if we are going to bring them under proper control. Self-denial is not at all in conflict with the gospel of grace. In fact, it is interesting that both John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, two of the giants of the Reformed tradition, practiced self-denial by eating very sparingly most of the time. They did not do this because they wanted to keep their figures trim or avoid having health problems, but because they were serious about pursuing righteousness. They saw this as one way of training their bodies to be under the control of the Spirit instead of being at the beck and call of their appetites and desires.

After addressing his people as those who pursue righteousness, the Lord instructs them to look back. He tells them to think about Abraham and Sarah, the first parents of the nation of Israel. God created his covenant people out of a man who thought that he was going to die without having an heir. To use the words of the apostle Paul, Abraham's body was "as good as dead." (Rom. 4:19) And as for his wife Sarah, she really was dead as far as childbearing was concerned. Not only was she barren throughout her childbearing years; she was

also well beyond menopause when God told her that she would give birth to a son. It was not just unlikely that she would be able to bear a child, it was impossible. And yet, as God said to Abraham when Sarah laughed at the promise that she would have a son, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (Gen. 18:14) God was faithful to his promise. Out of this one man and this one woman, a man and woman who were incapable of producing a child on their own, God created the nation of Israel.

In verse 3, the Lord takes this truth and applies it to the situation that Israel was facing after the Babylonian exile. Yes, the Promised Land was in a state of ruin. The temple was gone. Most of the people were gone. But the same God who brought a child named "laughter" (for that is what the name Isaac means) out of a dead womb will bring joy and gladness to this desert land. He will make the wilderness like the garden of Eden. By stating the promise this way, God is saying that he will remove the curse from Israel. He will not merely restore them to the land; he will restore them to himself.

One of the ways the Lord renews our faith is by calling us to remember what he has done in the past. Contrary to the chronological snobbery that is so characteristic of the modern world, the Bible tells us that the past is extremely relevant to our lives in the present. When we look back at the unfolding of God's

plan of redemption within history, we see example after example of God's faithfulness to his covenant people. And because we belong to the same covenant people, we participate in the ongoing reality of the salvation that God worked out in their lives. His faithfulness to them is faithfulness to us as well. If God carried out his saving purposes in the face of so many hopeless circumstances in the past, then we have no reason to doubt that he will carry out his good purposes for us as well, no matter how hopeless our circumstances may at times seem.

Look Ahead

We turn now to the second section of this passage, where the Lord instructs his people to look ahead to the future. Not only is God going to restore Israel, he is going to extend his saving purposes to all the peoples of the earth. He says "a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples." In this context, "law" is being used in a general sense to refer to the teaching by which God governs his kingdom. God is saying that he will gather people from distant lands, from the "coastlands," to himself. Imagine how hard it would have been for the exiled Israelites to believe this. They were having a hard enough time believing that God was going to restore them. It would have

seemed nigh on impossible that the nations would be ingrafted into the covenant people. And yet, this is exactly what God has been doing for the past two thousand years. It is what he continues to do today. Even on this very Sabbath day, there are Christians gathering all over the globe to worship the Lord. In spite of all of the ways the world opposes it, in spite of all of the false teaching and compromise that can be found in the church, the gospel continues to go forth and give light to those who are in darkness.

You may have noticed the two words that God repeatedly uses in this passage to describe the gospel. In three places, he speaks of it as “my righteousness” and “my salvation.” For the most part, these two terms function as synonyms in this passage. God’s plan of salvation manifests his righteousness by showing how he keeps his promises while also satisfying his justice. And the only righteousness that we can know is the righteousness that God brings near to us in his plan of salvation.

This section’s focus on the future becomes especially prominent in verse 6, where the Lord reminds us of the fleeting nature of this life and the eternal nature of his salvation. The heavens and the earth will one day vanish like smoke. They will wear out like a garment. Only God’s kingdom will last forever. You may recall from our recent sermon series on Ecclesiastes that this

was a key theme in that book. The Bible clearly tells us that this present age is not going to last. All the same, it is difficult for us to believe this, at least at a practical level. Life in this world has been going on for ages and ages, and for all we know it may very well continue to go on for ages after we are gone. This makes it easy for us to live as if this world was our permanent home. We are so easily ensnared by worldly-mindedness.

This is why we need to be constantly reminding ourselves of passages like this, passages that talk about the impermanence of this world. We need to cultivate an other-worldly mindset, with our hearts and minds set on the things that are above. Now, some people will say that doing this will make us of no use for life in this world. But this is not true. A biblical otherworldliness gives us the proper perspective upon the things of this world, and this enables us to contribute to the welfare of the world in the best ways. It is not escapist to be heavenly-minded. On the contrary, as Peter Kreeft has noted, “Otherworldliness is escapism only if there is no other world. If there is, it is worldliness that is escapism.” If we live our lives in this world as if this world is the one that will last forever, we are living in denial of God’s revealed truth.

Look at the Present

This brings us to the third part of our passage, where the Lord tells his people to look at the present. This section begins with God addressing his people as those who “know righteousness,” those who have his law in their hearts. As at the beginning of the chapter, emphasis is being laid upon the transformation that the gospel brings about in the hearts of the redeemed. This transformation is a necessary aspect of salvation. Salvation is a package deal. Those who are justified through faith in Christ are also regenerated and sanctified in him. This is why the writer of Hebrews urges us to “Strive for...the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” (Hebrews 12:14) J.C. Ryle explains it this way:

“Most men hope to go to heaven when they die, but few, it may be feared, take the trouble to consider whether they would enjoy heaven if they got there. Heaven is essentially a holy place; its inhabitants are all holy; its occupations are all holy. To be really happy in heaven, it is clear and plain that we must be somewhat trained and made ready for heaven while we are on earth.” [*Holiness*, 22]

If you are a Christian, then you know righteousness. God has written his law on your heart. By the power of his Spirit, the Lord enables you to use your time in this world to do the good works that he has prepared in advance for you to do. This is how he makes you ready for heaven.

It is in the second half of verse 7 that this section focuses on the present situation of those to whom this passage was first written. Isaiah writes: “fear not the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings.” Here we see the benefit of being heavenly-minded. When we remember the mighty deeds that the Lord has brought about in the past, and when we keep in mind the future that God has in store for this world, we will be able to endure whatever difficulties we face in the present. The church and its members are bound to face opposition from the world. Of course, we should not seek out opposition for its own sake, but neither should we avoid it by compromising with worldly ideals. We need to trust that one day, those who set themselves against Christ’s people will see how very wrong they have been. In the end, the church will be vindicated.

Three times in this passage, God refers to the gospel as “*my* salvation” and “*my* righteousness.” This is another way of saying that salvation belongs to the Lord. It is entirely grounded in him. Its foundation is in God, not in us or in anything that we do. And in verse 8, God says that his salvation is eternal. It

will be forever. It will endure to all generations. This present age will not last. Our bodies will not last. But if we have a share in God's salvation, we will enjoy life in his presence forever, life in a renewed creation with renewed bodies. As we will sing in a few moments,

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;

Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;

Change and decay in all around I see;

O thou who changest not, abide with me.

Because of what Christ has done for us, God does abide with us. And we abide in him, in the eternal God. As the apostle Paul puts it, "For we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (2 Cor. 5:1)

Maybe you sometimes have doubts about whether or not this is really true for you. Maybe there are times when you wonder if you really have a claim to the salvation that God talks about in these verses. If so, then consider these words of Jesus, found in John 10: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." Have you heard Jesus' voice in the preaching of the gospel? Have

you responded to his voice by trusting him and following him? If you have, then you are one of his sheep. And if you are one of his sheep, then these words of Jesus, spoken in the very next verse in John 10, apply to you as well: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” (John 10:27–28) What a great promise that is! May we never stop listening to it.