

Comfort to the Committed – Isaiah 51:1-16

Introduction – In this passage, the Lord turns to those who seek Him; He wants to particularly encourage them. There are others in the covenant, those whose hearts are hardened, who are not particularly troubled by God’s warnings of chastisement for they don’t really believe that He has much to do with their lives; they were never trusting Him in the first place. But for those who do believe God – that He has not forsaken or forgotten them – for them the times of hard trials can be times when trusting Him can be really tough. “Listen to Me,” He begins, and promises are renewed. Those who are seeking the Lord need such encouragement; and may those who are not seeking be swayed and won with His mercy as they overhear what God says. This is Gospel-speak.

Listen to Me; Faith of Righteous Abraham (vv1-3) - Those who “follow after righteousness” are those who “seek the Lord” (v1). In the Scriptures, the Lord’s righteousness regularly refers to His faithfulness to His promises (see the end of v8). This is not what we often think of when we think of righteousness. God exhorts us to “look to Abraham” (v2), just as He told Abraham to “look...and count the stars” (Gen 15:1-6). It is as if He is saying, “don’t forget that it is in times of barrenness that you may trust Me that I am bringing forth fruitfulness.” Jerusalem may become a waste place, but actually God is planning a great New Eden, a New Creation of joy, gladness, and thanksgiving (v3). This is where the faith of Abraham leans in such times.

Listen to Me; Faith for the Salvation of the Nations (vv4-6) – When God promised Abraham that he would not be able to number his descendants, He also promised Him that He would be a blessing to all nations (Gen 12:3) and that he would be heir of the world (Rom 4:13). This was the gospel preached to Abraham (Gal 3:8-9). We are His children if we join with Abraham in seeking the Lord and trusting His faithfulness. And His faithfulness includes that His law will be a light to the peoples (v4), and His salvation to the coastlands (v5). But what of verse 6? Remember, throughout the Old Testament, language of heavens and earth, its establishment, or judgment upon it, referred to political/covenantal orders. We saw this in the collapsing universe language in the judgment upon Edom (Isaiah 34:1-5). In this verse (v6), Zion’s old covenant order (described in terms of the heavens and the earth) are vanishing along with all who trust in it, but His salvation (and its new covenant orders) will be forever (v6). In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus is not declaring that at one time He did not have control over the physical universe. Rather, Adam had been given covenantal dominion over the world, had lost it because of his sin before God. And then this world was wrested from Satan by Christ, the second Adam, on the Cross.

Listen to Me; Faith that Knows God (vv7-8) – God again turns to those “who know righteousness, in whose heart is My law” and exhorts them, “Do not fear!” To those who say with the Psalmist, “I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart” (Psalm 40:8), Jesus gives the same admonition in Matt 10:28-31, “Do not fear those who kill the body...” Isaiah is writing this to a people who, in future generations, will experience real suffering. Knowing God does not mean living in self-delusion, denying the horror, pain, or degradation of oppression or suffering. It is a call (that can only be done when you know God) to see the larger reality, beyond the horizon of these earthly years alone (Rom 8:35-39).

Faith that Responds Honestly Again to God (vv9-11) – The voice changes from God to the faithful. They know God has been faithful before. They know He is able. But they cry out (as we are invited to do as well) to God that He would wake up and deliver again (vv9-10). God did not deliver in the exact way that Israel would have wanted (but then remember, most were not crying out to God to deliver), but a Way has been made where the world is all being brought out of captivity. Verse 11 (a repeat of 35:10) is actually fulfilled in a far greater Way than Israel ever imagined. Now, we are a part of that ransomed clan; the redeemed are far more than Israel could have ever imagined. The everlasting joy and singing upon their (our) heads is first the song of Jesus the Redeemer who is singing over you with great joy. It was for the joy set before Him that He died for you and now, while our experience of joy may wax and wane, His is an everlasting joy and it is upon us. We are invited to join in the song and in the joy and as we learn more and more to enter into that strong joy, “sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Faith that Knows God’s Assuring Love (vv12-16) – God now speaks, the One who comforts you (v12): “Who are you that you should be afraid?” Again, we are reminded of His strength over all men (v12b), His sovereign authority over all creation (v13), His promise of final deliverance (v14), His covenant-name and the power of that name (v15). He is the One who has put His words in our mouths, covered us with the shadow of His hand, that we may bear witness to the new heavens and earth, the New Creation that He is bringing forth. For those “who follow after righteousness...and seek the Lord” (v1), that God says to you: “You are My people.” This is the gospel of Abraham, of Moses, of Isaiah, and of Jesus. It is Good News to us and to this world now and forever.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” - Jesus