



Catalog No. 1669

Isaiah 55:6-13

13th Message

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June 3, 2012

COME HOME!

SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

This year's winner of American Idol was a likeable young artist named Phillip Phillips. I'm always curious to learn what it is about an artist that captures America's heart. Throughout the competition Phillip consistently demonstrated skill as a musician and originality as a songwriter. His voice, though not the most powerful or pure, was certainly the most unique. He was proud of being ordinary and firmly resisted the pressure to be remade in Hollywood's idolatrous image of glitz and glitter. All of these qualities, not to mention his humility, kept him from elimination. However, I suspect what put him over the top at the finals had everything to do with his last song selection entitled "Home," for which he received a standing ovation. The lyrics, co-written by Drew Pearson and Greg Holden, were profoundly simple, but the choice of the theme, set to a masterful arrangement of a triumphant march, touched the nationwide audience to the core.

There's nothing quite like the driving cadence of a distant drum to rouse you out of discouragement or despair and magically revitalize your courage to dream again. And perhaps no dream resonates within us as deeply as the longing for "home," especially when we know our home is not quite right. For some the longing is amplified because they can't go home; others have no home. The ache was felt acutely by Israel's exiles who in 586 B.C. had lost everything they held dear – their land, their temple, their children, and most tragically their relationship with God. As we have seen in recent weeks, chapter 54 of the book of Isaiah "is a love song by God to Zion, his estranged bride, telling her all the things he is going to do in restoring her."¹ The blessings are beyond what the exiles could have imagined, and were the result of the work of his Servant (Isa 52:13-53:12), who would do for Israel and the world, what Israel had failed to do.

Today we come to the grand finale of Isaiah's book of Comfort (chaps. 40-55), when the prophet takes the stage for one last song that will hopefully awaken Israel's faith and ignite her courage to overcome her demons and come "home." This text is shaped around the term *šûb* (pronounced "shuv" meaning "to turn, to return"), which occurs three times and gives a classic description of what it means to repent. First, we have the call to repent; second, the motivations to repent; third, the necessity of repentance; and finally, the promise of repentance.

I. The Definition of Repentance (Isa 55:6-7)

Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD,
that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isa 55:6-7 ESV)

The Lord has come near to his people, not only in the sacrificial work of the Servant, but also through the prophet and Lord himself going out to the people and pleading with them to repent and come home. Up until now the conversation has been all about grace. The living God has reached down to his people in sheer undeserved mercy to restore them through the work of his Servant. But grace has another dimension. It is not only what God freely and lovingly does *for* us, but it is also what he longs to do *in* us and *through* us to others. For that to occur, the exiles must address those things that damaged their relationship with the Lord and ultimately destroyed their marriage covenant. In a word, Israel and we must repent.

Most people have a deficient understanding of repentance and view it as feeling remorse over the consequences of sin, or enduring the terrible shame of being found out. Repentance has nothing to do with the emotional discomfort we feel from guilt or the shame of our having to endure the natural consequences of our wrongs.

The Hebrew word *šûb* is a verb of motion, meaning "to return, go back, come back." According to William Holladay its central meaning is "having moved in a particular direction, to move thereupon in the opposite direction, the implication being (unless there is evidence to the contrary) that one will arrive again at the initial point of departure."² Repentance means to come home.

Repentance is a *turning* away from one road and *returning* to *seek* a vital *relationship* with the living God. *Relationship* is the operative word. To "seek" does not imply "seeking information" as in an oracle (Isa 58:1-2), but as Oswald observes, "seeking' that is for the presence of God and his ways in one's life."³ It requires completely *abandoning* old ways of thinking and behaving, and adopting new ones by actively *seeking* God through his word and prayer ("call upon him"). As the Psalmist affirms, "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth" (Ps 145:18). You can't return to the Lord with an idol in your hand, any more than an adulterous husband can be restored to his wife, when he continues to harbor other women in his heart.

II. The Motivations for Repentance

A. God's Accessibility

Isaiah gives two motivations to stir God's people to come home. The first is that now is *the* opportune time, for the Lord is near and accessible. If the Lord were not near or accessible, there would be no reason to seek his presence. For the exiles the Lord had not always been near, as Hosea wrote,

With their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the LORD,

but they will not find him;
 he has withdrawn from them.
 They have dealt faithlessly with the LORD;
 for they have borne alien children. (Hos 5:6-7)
 For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,
 and like a young lion to the house of Judah.
 I, even I, will tear and go away;
 I will carry off, and no one shall rescue.
 I will return again to my place,
 until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face,
 and in their distress earnestly seek me. (Hos 5:14-15)

B. God's Compassion

The second motivation is God's compassion. The exiles were haunted by the question of whether they could ever be restored to their land and thus, God's presence, when it was their "wickedness" and "iniquity" that had driven away them from the Lord into exile. But a new era is about to dawn and the "wicked" and "iniquitous" are beckoned to "return." Instead of facing the wrath of an angry judge, they will be welcomed by the warm embrace of a compassionate Father, who will "abundantly pardon."

J. Stamm notes that the verb *salah* ("to pardon, forgive") is used only with God as the subject, and therefore denotes "an act of pardon by God alone." Its synonymous expressions include "atoning for sin, removing it, wiping it out, washing it away, cleansing it, and forgetting it. These marked expressions...speak of Yahweh removing sin (Psa 103:12) and throwing it behind his back (Isa 38:17) or into the depths of the sea (Mic 7:19)...the theme of unconditional forgiveness was first articulated by the promise of the new covenant (Jer 31:34), whereby the Lord would nullify and remove all the sin of Israel and Judah, never to recall it again. This may account why the word *salah* occurs almost exclusively in exilic and postexilic literature."⁴

As Oswalt observes, this radical change of tone is "because 'his [i.e. the Servant of the Lord] grave was assigned with the *wicked*' (53:9), and 'the Lord has caused to fall on him the *iniquity* of all of us' (53:6), that we, wicked and iniquitous though we be, can be treated as though we were righteous (53:12)."⁵

This explains the significance of the ministry of John the Baptist who "appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). As Tom Wright points out, this is eschatological repentance, meaning what Israel must do if her exile was to come to an end, inaugurating the Messianic Age, where forgiveness would be the norm. Baptism was an initiation rite for proselytes, not for Jews, and signified a brand new beginning. People needed, as it were, a second birth of water and spirit (Ezek 36:24-27), which would transport them to Israel's final exodus into the Messianic Age.

III. The Necessity of Repentance (Isa 55:8-9)

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
 neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD
 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
 so are my ways higher than your ways.
 and my thoughts than your thoughts. (vv. 8-9)

There is no way around repentance; it is an absolute necessity. The reason for this is that humans do not think, assess, or plan (*hašab*) the way God does. As the sage writes in Proverbs,

All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes,
 but the LORD weighs the spirit. (Prov 16:2)

The gap between man's attitudes and ways of acting and God's thoughts and ways is so great, that apart from divine revelation we would never be able to comprehend it. A case in point is how Israel esteemed the "highly exalted" Servant of the Lord. Isaiah says, "they esteemed (*hašab*) him not" (Isa 53:4). On the other hand, the mighty world powers and their war machines that struck terror in the hearts of Israel, were "regarded (*hašab*) [by the LORD] as dust on the scales...as worthless and less than nothing" (Isa 40:15, 17). In Psalm 103, David uses the same expression to help us comprehend the magnitude of God's commitment and compassion towards us.

He does not deal with us according to our sins,
 nor repay us according to our iniquities.
 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
 as far as the east is from the west,
 so far does he remove our transgressions from us. (Ps 103:10-12)

God's instinct to not deal with us according to our sins is so utterly foreign to the way we think, let alone act that, to put it plainly, is inconceivable to us ("as high as the heavens are above the earth"). How can someone be that committed? If that is not enough, the poet adds another metaphorical distance, which we know to be infinity ("as far as the east is from the west") as how far God removes our transgressions from us.⁶ But restoration involves more than forgiveness. God had wonderful plans for his people:

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD,
 plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future
 and a hope. (Jer 29:11)

God plans to destroy the arrogant might of Babylon and to bless the tiny remnant of Judah, and through the remnant, the whole world. But it won't happen the "way" Judah thinks, so Isaiah writes that God will have to "lead the *blind* in a way they do not know" (Isa 42:16).

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, we hear God's voice at Jesus' baptism: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). The statement brings together two texts from the Old Testament. "You are my son" comes from Psalm 2:7 and reveals the first secret of the gospel, that Jesus is King. The second phrase, "in you I am well-pleased" is taken from Isaiah's first Servant song (42:1) and reveals the second secret to the gospel, that the king must die. These two realities shape Mark's entire gospel. The first secret is unfolded with images and themes of a new exodus in the first eight chapters. After Jesus heals a blind man in Bethsaida, they travel to Caesarea Philippi where Jesus asks Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." The first secret is grasped, but Jesus tells Peter that it was not flesh and blood that revealed this truth to him, but rather it was divine revelation (Matt 16:17). The blind now see! But that is only half the story, for the healing of the blind man occurred

in two stages, and it will take another divine miracle for Peter to understand the “way” Jesus is going to be king.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, God speaks for a second time: “This is my beloved Son, listen to him!” (Mark 9:7). The meaning is clear, Jesus is King, but you must listen carefully to “the way” he will inaugurate his kingdom. From this point forward, Mark gives us a description of the “way” in which Jesus will be King (the word “way” occurs in Mark at 8:27 and at 10:53 forming an *inclusio* and indicating the theme of this section). In this section Jesus tells his disciples three times that it is necessary that he die to inaugurate the kingdom. But disciples cannot comprehend it. At the climax of the section Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, comes to Jesus, pleading for mercy, for he wants to see (the very thing the disciples are unable to do).

And Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” And the blind man said to him, “Rabbi, let me recover my sight.” And Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. (Mark 10:51-52)

Jesus heals the man, and after he “sees,” he follows Jesus on the way. The first person to articulate the second secret, however, is not one of the disciples, but a Roman centurion, “who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39).

The structure of Mark’s gospel story is a paradigm for our own journey. Being like the blind, it takes a divine miracle for us to see that Jesus is the Messiah King. But that’s only half the story. It takes another divine miracle of sight for us to discover that following Jesus in his “way” of being King means suffering and dying. For Emily and I, we lost our first two children shortly after birth. That is certainly not the “way” we thought we would build a home. But we discovered that through the pain of our sorrow and our willingness to be vulnerable, God is creating for us a new, bigger family, for which I am eternally grateful (Mark 10:29-30).

IV. The Promise of Repentance: Transformation (Isa 55:10-13)

A. The Certainty of Transformation (vv. 10-11)

**For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (vv. 10-11)**

“In the ancient Near East rain spelled the difference between life and death.”⁷ Whenever we are faced with a drought and possible famine, the only hope of transformation must come from the skies above. When God opens the windows of heaven to pour forth its rain, the dry and scorched earth is instantly transformed into a fertile landscape. Dry wadis become torrents of living water, the thirsty ground drinks until it can drink no more, waterfalls cascade over rocky cliffs, underground springs bubble up and overflow, hard ground is broken up and softened,

crops take root, sprout and are harvested, giving abundant provision both for the present and seed for the future.

The point of the metaphor is that when that heavenly window opens, everything instantly changes. Rain never “returns” to heaven without succeeding in the purpose (“delight”) for which the Lord sent it. The dry and thirsty land is a metaphor for God’s people who are parched from a severe drought of God’s word. This was Isaiah’s description of the people in the opening chapter of 40-55.

**A voice says, “Cry out.”
And I said, “What shall I cry?”
“All people are like grass,
and all human faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the LORD blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever.” (Isa 40:6-8)**

The people were grass, but not any more. As Goldingay observes, the “scorching sun and searing wind are succeeded by life-giving rain and snow.”⁸ God declares that tiny Judah will live, and the Lord does not call back his words once they are spoken. And as God’s word pours out his life-giving Spirit hard hearts are going to be transformed into receptive and responsive hearts.

The transformation of God’s people will be as dramatic and as certain as the radical change of a desert landscape after a torrential downpour. The intensification of each line drives home the omnipotent power of God’s word. It shall not return *empty*; without *accomplishing* what God *desires* (“delights” used of the Servant 42:1); and without *succeeding* (used of the Servant, who will succeed 52:13) in the matter for which God sent it. “God intends to bless the human race, to forgive its sins, to redeem its failures, and to give permanence to its work. And this will be accomplished through his revelatory word.”⁹

When Jesus arrives on the scene, the whole world of Israel is ready for revolution, hoping to overthrow the Romans by the sword. But Jesus refuses to use a sword and wanders around Galilee carrying a bag of seed, like a farmer. In Mark 4 he tells several parables about the nature of God’s kingdom and how it grows. The kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground and the seed is powerful, but has varying results, which have nothing to do with the power inherent in the seed, but rather the condition of the heart onto which it falls.

In another parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a man who scatters seed on the ground and then goes to sleep, and when he awakes, to his amazement, God has been working and the seed has spouted. When his teaching is complete, Jesus acts it out by climbing into a boat and going to sleep, while around him the Sea of Galilee rages and the disciples panic in fear and doubt. The next day, Jesus is on other side of the lake, in the country of the Gerasenes (Gentile territory). There he casts out a legion of demons out of the demoniac. The demons enter a herd of pigs, and the startled pigs race off the cliff and drown in the sea. News spread to the city and once the people observe that the herdsman have lost their source of income, they beg Jesus to leave.

Jesus obeys and the Gentile mission looks like a complete failure, but the story doesn't end there. Jesus tells the demon possessed man, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). The man obeys and spreads the good news about "how much Jesus had done for him" throughout the region east of the Jordan and Galilee known as the Decapolis ("ten cities"). "And all the people were amazed" (Mark 5:20). The "no-name" man is like the mustard seed in the parable, and when Jesus returns in Mark 7:31, he harvests the fruit of this man sowed. Therein lies the power of the kingdom for those who have eyes to see.

B. The Magnitude of Transformation (vv. 12-13)

**For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall make a name for the LORD,
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. (vv. 12-13)**

Homecomings are seldom easy. When loved ones have been separated from home for any length of time, re-entry can be difficult. For war veterans, the terrors of combat can be unrelenting; for prodigals, embracing shame and rebuilding trust takes time; for university students and young adults, exploring new ideas, philosophies and religions can threaten family structures. Despite how hard mothers try and preserve their perfect nest, there comes a point in all of our lives when we no longer feel at home in our home. That is because we have been made for another home.

When our transformation is complete, we will be led out of our present exile on earth (which Peter describes as living in Babylon, 1 Pet 5:13) with great joy and peace, unlike the first Exodus, when Israel left Egypt in haste only to be pursued by the Egyptian army. God miraculously delivered them through the Red Sea, but their journey was far from over. For forty years they wandered in a vast untamed wilderness.

What awaits us there? Not a desert wilderness (or purgatory), but a new creation. When Phillip Phillips finished singing his last song, "Home," he got a standing ovation. When we make our final journey "HOME" the whole creation will rise up and sing and clap with joy over the sight of sinners being made holy through the Word of God. The reason for the joy is that the creation has a vested interest in our transformation, for as Paul writes, at that moment it will be set free from its bondage and decay to share in our glory as children of God (Rom 8:19-21).

Under the curse, man was created from the dust, to work in toil and pain, only to return to the dust. But if he *returns* to the Lord, God will send his word from heaven to pour out the Spirit into his life and *return* him to heaven. And when we arrive we will know we are finally HOME. The transformation of the creation from a desolate desert to a Swiss paradise "will stand as a testimony to the name of the Holy One of Israel, Creator and Redeemer, the one who formed and the one who saved his creation."¹⁰

The eternal sign is the third element that has received this description (*'olam*) in chs. 54-55. The first is the everlasting *hesed*, love, mercy, grace, kindness of God (54:8); the second is the everlasting covenant (55:3), which is an expression of the grace of God; and the third is this sign, the redemption of the world, which is the expression of the other two.¹¹

Wherever we go in our new home, the creation's glorious splendor will forever be a constant mirror of our own redemption and the beauty of God's everlasting love, commitment and grace. This gives a whole new meaning to the term "homemaker." It is a title that has been undervalued by our culture, but from the kingdom's perspective, it is perhaps the greatest work we can be involved in, for God is the ultimate "homemaker," and he's "going to make this place your home."¹²

1. John Oswalt, *Isaiah* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 595.
2. J. A. Soggin, *šûb* "to return," *TLOT* 3:1312-17.
3. John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 443.
4. J. P. J. Olivier, *slh* "to forgive," *NIDOTTE* 3:259-64.
5. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66*, 444.
6. I am indebted to Goldingay for this insight. John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 553.
7. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66*, 446.
8. Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55*, 554.
9. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66*, 446.
10. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66*, 448.
11. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66*, 448.
12. This is the last line from "Home," lyrics by Drew Pearson and Greg Holden.