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Isaiah 54:4-10

9th Message

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A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN

SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Do you believe that marriages are made in heaven? Some do... at least until they get married. Then they quickly discover that though marriages may be made in heaven, they have to be lived out on earth. In the movie Captain Corelli's Mandolin, a wise Greek father gives advice to his beautiful daughter who has fallen madly in love with an Italian soldier who has charmed her with his mandolin.

“When you fall in love
it is a temporary madness;
it erupts like an earthquake, then it subsides;
and when it subsides, you have to work out whether
your roots have become so entwined
it is inconceivable that you should ever part.
Love is what is left over,
when being in love has burned away.”

This wonderful imagery invites us to consider a love that is richer and more fulfilling than young lovers could ever imagine – and did you know that this is the invitation that lies behind every passage of the Bible? Every story, poem, prophecy, and epistle is secretly designed to captivate your heart by a love the world knows nothing about. Today you are invited to a historic wedding that will radically transform your understanding of what love is. It is my prayer that today you will get a taste of “what is left over, when being in love has burned away.”

The Plot

Our couple is not young, nor is this their first marriage. The bride grew up in poverty under harsh servitude in a foreign land. Her husband boldly confronted the injustice and crushed her oppressors, giving her entire family their first taste of freedom. Together they went backpacking in the desert where their devotion deepened (Jer 2:2). Then that great day arrived when he took her by the hand and led her up a steep mountain slope to the very summit. The view took her breath away. He got down on one knee and offered her his undying love. In return he asked for the undivided loyalty of her heart. She accepted his proposal and they exchanged their vows. He brought her to a new and fertile land where they settled down and prospered with an abundance of children and untold wealth.

It's difficult to know exactly when, but as they became more and more prosperous, her heart grew greedy and discontent. Even though she “loved” her husband and had everything she needed, it seemed like other women led more glamorous lives. She began to fantasize about other men and as she went to the market, she noticed them as well. It wasn't long before she started making eye contact. You can say a lot with the eyes. And then the affairs began. She would sneak out at night to illicit parties and come home before dawn, hoping her husband wouldn't notice. But he did. He knew everything. At first he spoke openly with her, forgiving her and gently exposing the consequences of her behavior. But the more he confronted her, the less discreet and more brazen she became.

Her younger sister idolized her and followed her lascivious ways. She contracted the AIDS virus and died within months of her diagnosis. After a short mourning period, her older sister returned to her lovers. Her relationship with her husband became more and more tumultuous until their communication was reduced to communiqués from attorneys.

What finally put her husband over the edge was the day she insisted on sitting next to him at church, wearing her hypocrisy without shame. He was so infuriated, that he stormed out of their home late that night and nailed plywood over the church doors. The next Sunday no one was able to worship. A week later the divorce papers came in the mail. She opened them with little emotion, thinking she was entitled to half his estate and could easily move in with one of her many lovers. She couldn't have been more wrong. She was cast out without a dime and not one of her lovers offered to take her in. Penniless and homeless, she was sold to the mafia to work in a foreign land.

Somehow she managed to survive those years. Now weathered and worn at fifty-two years of age, she has received a summons to meet her estranged husband at their home church. A bit fearful and bewildered she enters the back of the church and sees him on the stage. As she comes down the aisle, he is smiling. His heart is beating fast as he ponders his redemptive plan –

**“Therefore, I am now going to allure her,
I will lead her into the wilderness
and speak tenderly to her.” (Hos 2:14 TNIV)**

With tears streaming down his face, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a ring. She's shocked; what happened? How can it be? How could he? How could I?

Have you ever witnessed such an event? I have. It is a wondrous thing. When a covenant has been breached and trust has been violated, there are tremendous hurdles to overcome before reconciliation is possible. As the woman approaches the altar, you can hear all her objections rising to the surface:

1. The shame of past memories plagues me deeply and paralyzes me from moving forward.
2. I am so emotionally exhausted and physically spent that I have nothing left to give this relationship. Even if I did recommit my life to the Lord, based on my past record, I have zero confidence that I will be able to keep my vows.
3. I fear that the damage I have caused in our relationship is so severe that it is irreparable. Though I know that God may forgive me, forgiveness only goes so far. The scars of lost innocence and youthful joy will be with me to the grave.
4. The fear of being abandoned again terrifies me and is too overwhelming to consider. How can I know for certain that He won't leave me?

In the deepest places of your soul, are these your objections too? Like Israel, do you struggle to believe that God can reclaim you as his bride? Our text this morning addresses these very objections, revealing the new covenant God makes with his bride, not merely to re-enact old promises but to inaugurate a radically new marriage.

Objection #1: The shame of my past plagues me so deeply that I'm paralyzed by fear, which prevents me from moving forward.

A. The Power of Shame

"Shame" (*bosh*) is that terrible feeling of distress and humiliation caused by the awareness of sin and the loss of respect that results from that sinful behavior. Its breadth and depth of meaning are evident in some of its parallel expressions: "to be humiliated," "to be shattered, dismayed," "to turn pale," "to withdraw," "to be terrified."¹

Shame is relentless. When our first parents sinned, they immediately experienced a sense of dishonor replacing their former innocence, and attempted to cover themselves and hide from the presence of God. When your sins are hidden and shame is purely personal, you might be able to maintain the appearance of a vital faith with your external practices of religion. But in your heart of hearts you know that you feel distant from God. Shame drowns the desire to take new ground for the kingdom of God. It takes away your excitement in sharing your faith with unbelievers. It dampens your enthusiasm to seek opportunities to serve and the thrill of sacrificial giving. Shame robs you of the freedom of being fully known and embraced by others. It leaves you isolated and alone. When sins are hidden, shame may be managed, but you will never silence it. I suspect that a significant proportion of suicides today are the result of the inability to silence those demons of shame.

The second term, "humiliation" (*kalam*) lays stress on the public scorn and relentless ridicule that results from shame. Michael McGarry writes, "Honor is the claim to social worth and the public acknowledgement of that claim. Shame is the opposite of honor, a claim to worth that is publicly denied and repudiated."²

When sins are made public the shame factor intensifies exponentially. Living in our individualistic world of the West, it is difficult to comprehend the power that "shame" exerts in a communal society like the Middle East. In that world shame is no individual matter. When a son or daughter violates the communities' expectations or standards for behavior, the whole family suffers shame, as does the entire clan. To have your sins / failures publicly exposed within the intimate context of a village and then to endure the hate-filled stares of relatives and neighbors who would prefer to disown you or have you killed is more than almost anyone can endure. Anyone who has tasted the bitter fruit of shame will testify they would do anything to prevent it from happening again. It is more feared than danger, perhaps even more than death itself.

I listened this week to an interview on BBC radio of a Libyan man who was imprisoned by government forces for public protesting. Through great efforts of his family and friends he was finally released. He described how, for two straight weeks of imprisonment, he was abused and raped non-stop. The interviewer asked whether, after his release, had he told his family what had been done to him and the man replied, "I can't tell anyone." The interviewer pressed further, asking, "Have you not even told your father?" The man replied, "I would rather die than tell my father." This man is free on the outside but inside he's dead because he can't tell his story to anyone because of

the shame. He's since discovered he has sexually transmitted diseases from the sexual abuse he suffered, and as a result he knows he'll never marry, even though his father tries continually to set him up on dates with potential brides. The interviewer finally asked him, "Aren't you ever going to tell anyone?" and the man replied, "If the day comes that I tell someone, I hope that is the day I have no memory."

Now God says to the barren woman, the defeated nation, that her days of shame are past; she will remember them no more!

B. The Death of Shame

**Do not fear, because you will not be put to shame,
and do not feel humiliated, because you will not be disgraced;
for the shame of your youth you will forget,
and the disgrace of your widowhood you will not remember
any more.**

(Isa 54:4 John Oswalt's translation)

In verse one Isaiah personified the surviving exiles as a barren woman, unable to bear children. As Oswalt explains,

One of the results of childlessness in the ancient world was terrible shame. A childless woman was a failure, someone who had apparently committed some sin, or had been at least been judged unworthy of bearing a child. Thus all her life was agony of humiliation. In the historical context, Israel had been humiliated by the apparent failure of her God to deliver her, so she went off to exile in shame.⁴

From the earliest days of her marriage to the Lord on Mount Sinai, to her later years of exile, this woman, like Sarah or Elizabeth, has lived with unremitting reproach and contempt. But now God says that she may drop the thought habits of a lifetime and hold her head high with the abundant evidence of God's blessing.⁵

How would you like to live in a shame free future? Perhaps even more miraculous, God promises to erase a lifetime of painful memories that haunt her relentlessly. Now they will be utterly erased, blotted out from the universe, zero memory of accusation (you can't even get your hard drives that clean!). Shame will cease to be a past memory as well as future threat. Do you know why? The servant took that shame upon himself. He "endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2) and God was satisfied, so we can live in a shame-free world – past and future. The joy of this as a new covenant believer is that we are free to be vulnerable without condemnation. This is the joy that replaces shame.

**He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isa 53:3 ESV)**

Objection #2: I am so emotionally exhausted and physically spent that I have nothing left to give to this relationship. And based on my past record, I have zero confidence that I will be able to keep my vows.

Do you ever get tired of turning over a new leaf? What does God say? No problem! It doesn't depend upon you in the new covenant. This is going to be a marriage made in heaven; God will fulfill his vows and the servant will fulfill yours. All you have to do is receive it.

**For your husband is your Maker,
the LORD of Hosts is his name:
and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,
the God of all the earth he is called. (Isa 54:5)**

God knows that it will be difficult to get his bride to consider reconciliation and renew her wedding vows. To do so, she needs a “name” she can trust in. Names are important; much more so than titles, a name is a key to all a person is. It’s like a signed check you can take to the bank. This verse has a total of six names densely packed into it, more than any verse I know of in the Scriptures. The number “six” is suggestive of the 6th day of creation, when humankind was first created. Once again God summons all his creative forces to re-create his bride. He takes all the focus off of her and places it entirely on **who** He is: Consider who your husband is? And who is your redeemer? In our new arrangement for living, nothing will depend on you for success.

To the question, “Who is your Husband?” his answer is “your Maker the LORD of Hosts is his name.” As Oswalt observes,

As Creator, he made her, he knows her intimately and has the affection that only a Creator could have. Beyond that he who made the world has the power to remake it, he is the sole author of the cosmos and has the power to alter even the ingrained habits of a lifetime. This power is expressed in his *name, the Lord of hosts*.⁶

“Lord of Hosts” is used when the mighty power of heaven is going to exert its full force upon the earth. It literally means “the Lord of armies,” which consists of three realms – the realm of nature, the heavenly realm of angels, and the political realm consisting of the nation’s war machines. The Lord has them all at his disposal to accomplish his purposes.

The Lord is not only our husband, but like Boaz in the story of Ruth, he also is our Redeemer.

[Ruth] is a childless, foreign widow, as humiliating and hopeless a position as it was possible to reach in Israel. But the man who falls in love with her is also just the man who is able to redeem the land and name of her dead husband. This is our God, the one whose love is able somehow to salve the sting of the past and turn even bitter water to sweet. Who is this Redeemer? *He is the Holy One of Israel*, that favorite term of Isaiah to express both the absolute transcendence of God and his unbelievable condescension. He is the one who is so holy that to see him is to die, and at the same time the one who has borne helpless Israel on his back as a mother eagle does her eaglets (Exod 19:4)...It is one thing to have the desire to redeem, but it is quite another to have the power to do so. Our God has both. Why? Because he is *the God of all the earth*.⁷

When Emily and I moved in to our first apartment we took care of a 3 year-old boy. One day the father came over to our house and said to me, “My wife is leaving me. She has confronted me on several issues and I’ve tried to change but I just can’t.” I responded to him, “David, that is great news! Now you know you are inadequate. If you accept Jesus, he will be in you and you will become everything your wife wants you to be.” He went home on cloud nine, but then his wife came over and said, “I’m not changing my mind; I don’t put any stock in David to change.” I responded, “You don’t have to; Christ will do it all, and David will become the husband you always dreamed of having.” Shortly after, David became a follower of Jesus and they were reconciled.

Objection # 3: It’s too late. The damage I have caused in our relationship is so severe I fear that it is irreparable. Though I know God may forgive me, forgiveness only goes so far. The

scars of my lost innocence and youthful joy will be with me to the grave.

After there has been tremendous damage in a relationship, it is hard to come back together. You can do it out of duty and go through the motions, but there is always the question, “Can I really trust this person?” or even deeper, “Will I ever feel emotions again?” “Can I have the joy of when we were first married?” God answers:

**For like a wife forsaken, and one wounded in spirit,
the LORD has called you,
like a wife of youth when she is rejected,
says your God. (Isa 54:6)**

When we compare verse 6 with verse 4, we can see the Creator–Redeemer already views his bride through a new lens. In verse 4, “the shame of her youth” and the “disgrace of her widowhood” were consequences of her persistent rebellion. In verse 6 God addresses her as a young bride, whose grievous wounds are undeserved.

Her barrenness is no longer seen as due to any sin on her part, but is just one of life’s tragic, unexplainable misfortunes. Unable to bear children, her husband rejected and abandoned her to avoid the shame. As a result she became the object of reproach with little hope of remarrying. With no husband to care for her in the present and no children to provide for her in her old age, her life teeters on the brink of servitude. As the Lord looks upon her plight, his compassion is ignited with such force, that it overrides his memory: “God calls her back to all that might have been and yet will be again.”⁸ The “wife of youth” has the last word.

Several years ago I created a book for Emily about our courtship, called *When We Were Young*. That time in our lives is seared in my mind and, though Emily may feel the years have taken a toll on her appearance, I see her through the lens of our youth. She is gorgeous! My dad never commented on any of the girls I used to date, but when I took Emily out he asked me, “Who is that blonde bomber you were with last night?” Forty years later her beauty still captivates my heart.

Who is this God, whom we violently betray, spit on, walk away from and blaspheme, yet with the passing of time, as he beholds us suffering in self-inflicted sorrow, he turns off the breaker switch of his memory and rushes to our aid as if we were his precious daughter, whose innocence was stolen by thugs, and then kidnapped, drugged and transported to Bangkok as a sex slave.

Objection #4: The fear of being abandoned again terrifies me and is too overwhelming to consider. How can I know for certain that He won’t leave me?

A. Love has the final word

In the book of Hosea the prophet depicts the war that goes on in God’s heart when his wrath comes into conflict with his compassion. Which will prevail, anger or compassion?

**How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my burning anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not a man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath. Hos 11:8-9**

As Oswalt observes, “Anger may describe his condition for a period of time, but his love (*hesed*) describes his unchanging essence.”⁹

**For a little moment I rejected you,
but in great compassion I will gather you.
With a flood of wrath
I hid my face from you for a little,
but with eternal love I have had compassion on you,
says your Redeemer, the LORD. (Isa 54:7-8)**

The fact that God gets angry affirms that he is a personal God with real emotions. When we betray him, he is not some distant grand Being who feels nothing. No, he is touched to the depths of his being. If we continue in highhanded disobedience, we can put him over the edge and make his wrath boil. That is what Israel did. And God’s wrath boiled over like a volcano and he deserted his people by handing them over to their enemies. For seventy years he hid his face from them.

Though seventy years is a lifetime to us, it is a blink of an eye compared to years without end basking in the light of God’s favor. Because “he was crushed for our iniquities” and “upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed,” (53:5) nothing can ever separate us from his everlasting love. As Cheyne says, “God’s anger may have gushed over the land like a flood, but that is nothing compared to the unchanging sea of his righteous deliverance.”¹⁰ But there is still more good news: not only does “love” have the last word, it becomes the eternal word.

B. Love is the Eternal Word

**This is like the days of Noah to me,
when I swore that the waters of Noah would not pass over the
earth any more.
So, I swear not to become enraged at you or to rebuke you
and will not rebuke you.
For the mountains may depart
and the hills slide away,
but my love will not depart from you,
and neither will my covenant of peace slide away,
says the One who has compassion on you, the LORD.
(Isa 54:9-10)**

When we have been wounded and betrayed, it is not easy to become vulnerable again and to trust someone unconditionally with our lives. Just as broken bones need time and progressive therapy to mend and to be strengthened, so do broken hearts when covenants have been broken. God substantiates his promise of fidelity with a lesson in history and then seals it with an oath to strengthen Israel’s faith. When God promised Abraham that his seed would be like the stars of the sky and the sand on the shore, it seemed impossible. Abraham knew God was faithful to his word, but he nonetheless asked him to put it in writing, and God did, writing an eternal covenant. As if that’s not enough, God then swore an oath, and you can’t get any more permanent than that. God does the same thing here.

The permanency of my love, God says, is just like it was in the days of Noah. God’s righteous anger flooded the earth for a brief time. But following the flood, the essence of God’s character expressed itself in an oath. No matter how depraved the world would get, God vowed never again to destroy the earth by water. As a permanent sign of that oath, a rainbow appeared in the sky. Looking back over several millennia of history, the exiles would know that God could be counted on to keep his word.

But the New Covenant established by his Servant is even greater than the Noahic Covenant. For someday, history will come to an end when the present creation will depart to make way for the new. Even then, God’s undying love will remain constant for you (implying you’ll be raised from the dead).

A Marriage Made in Heaven

Love is what is left over,
when wrath has burned away.
For now our roots have become so entwined
it is inconceivable
that we should ever part!
What is our part? Simply to receive it.

1. F. Stolz, “*bosh*”—“to be ashamed,” TLOT 1:204-7.

2. James L. Heft, *Reuven Firestone, Omid Safi, eds., Learned Ignorance: Intellectual Humility Among Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 215.

3. I have used John Oswalt’s translation for it well illustrates the poetic structures of the original. John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 411-12.

4. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 418.

5. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 418-19.

6. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 419.

7. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 419-20.

8. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 421.

9. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 421.

10. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 422.