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Isaiah 55:14-17

11th Message

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# NEVER AGAIN

*SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

Rising 1300 feet out of the Judean desert just west of the Dead Sea stands a rocky plateau known as Masada (Hebrew: “stronghold”). The Hasmoneans were the first to use it as one of their desert fortresses. Herod the Great recaptured the site from the rebels and fortified it as a palace refuge for himself in the event of a revolt. In A.D. 66, a band of Zealots commanded by Elazar ben Ya’ir overpowered the Roman garrison stationed there, and after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, numerous Jewish families fled to Masada, turning it into the base of operations for the rebels to raid and harass the Romans. After two years the Romans had had enough, and in A.D. 72 they sent the 10th legion to lay siege to the fortress.

After failed attempts to breach the wall, they built a circumvallation wall and then a rampart against the western face of the plateau, using thousands of tons of stones and beaten earth. The rampart was complete in the spring of A.D. 73, after approximately two to three months of siege, allowing the Romans to finally breach the wall of the fortress with a battering ram on April 16. According to Josephus, when the Roman troops entered the fortress, they discovered that all of its 960 inhabitants had committed mass suicide.

This account of the siege of Masada was related to Josephus by two women who survived the suicide by hiding inside a cistern along with five children and repeated Elazar ben Yair’s final exhortation to his followers:

But certainly our hands are still at liberty, and have a sword in them; let them then be subservient to us in our glorious design; let us die before we become slaves under our enemies, and let us go out of the world, together with our children and our wives, in a state of freedom.<sup>1</sup>

After WWII and the unspeakable Holocaust, Masada became a symbol of Jewish survival and was chosen by Moshe Dayan, the Chief of Staff of the IDF, as the site where Israeli troops take their oath of allegiance. The ceremony ends with the declaration: **“Masada shall never fall again.”**

This is a natural response for a people or individuals who have survived terrible trauma. As they consider the future, whatever the “unthinkable” trauma was, they vow that it will never happen again. Have you ever said this?

Often we make the vow because we feel betrayed by God or others; if we are going to survive, we’re going to have to take charge of our destiny. The problem with living that way, however, is that it dehumanizes you. Like Israel, you may be able to create elaborate defense structures and erect thick walls to protect your heart, but it comes with a price. Governed by fear and suspicion, you lose the ability to be vulnerable and to trust; you become more isolated and lonely; you are robbed of the freedom forgiveness brings and the joyous adventure of loving your enemies.

Today we are going to hear God’s wedding vows when he says, “Never again.”

**The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies.**

**The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. (Zeph 3:15 ESV)**

Only the Lord can make that vow. After Israel’s terrible betrayal and exile, God wants to put a ring on his bride’s finger and make his commitment to her in a new covenant that will outlast history. Our text is Isaiah 54:14-17:

**In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near you.**

**If anyone stirs up strife, (“fiercely attacks you”) it is not from me;**

**whoever stirs up strife with you (“attacks you”) shall fall because of you.**

**Behold, I (myself) have created the smith who blows the fire of coals and produces a weapon for its purpose.**

**I have also created the ravager to destroy; no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment.**

**This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD and their vindication (righteousness is) from me, declares the LORD. (Isa 54:14-17)**

## I. A Safe and Secure City (Isa 54:14a)

### A. True Security (Deut 17:14-20; Psalm 1, 127)

In ancient Israel national security depended not on the strength of Israel’s fortifications, nor its military might or foreign alliances, but *solely* on the righteousness of its king. In the significant text of Deuteronomy 17:14-20, called the Law of the King, God instructs Israel’s kings to cast aside worldly security (vv. 16-17) and place their complete trust in the Lord. Their first priority as head of state was daily devotion to God’s word.

**And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel. (Deut 17:18-20)**

The necessity for the king to place his complete trust in God was fully affirmed by David in Psalm 1 and by David’s greater son, Solomon, in Psalm 127.

**Blessed is the man who...**

but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.  
He is like a tree  
planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers. (Ps 1:1-3)

Unless the LORD builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.  
Unless the LORD watches over the city,  
the watchman stays awake in vain. (Ps 127:1)

## B. The Golden Age of False Security

Sadly, the record of history shows that God's command went unheeded by the majority of Israel's kings, but none surpassed Solomon in the accumulation of worldly wealth and power. As a master builder, Solomon spent thirteen years building his own house and seven years to construct Jerusalem's temple, for which he conscripted 33,000 men. In the midst of prosperous and peaceful times, Solomon fortified Israel's national defense. He spared no expense on state-of-the-art weaponry – horses and chariots – and deployed them in strategic cities, which he further fortified with a series of interlocking gates that provided an almost impenetrable barrier to invaders (1 Kgs 10:26). Solomon's building projects produced a booming economy, not to mention international fame. Leaders from every nation brought untold wealth as tribute to the king to hear his wisdom. Gold became so plentiful, silver was considered worthless, as common as stones. This was the golden age of Israel: the economy was thriving, Israel's borders were secure and her military power unrivaled.

**Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy. Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life.** (1 Kgs 4:20-21)

Despite the grandeur of Solomon's wealth, the strength of his armaments and his international acclaim, at the dedication of the temple God warned, "If you turn aside from following me...this house will become a heap of ruins" (1 Kgs 9:6).

And it did. After centuries of idolatry destroyed the religious fabric of the nation, Israel forced the Lord's reluctant hand. Bruce Waltke writes, "By the end of the seventh century, *I AM* has abandoned even the house of David, and in 586 B.C. defying the eternal security doctrine of the false prophets, he lays his temple to waste (Mic 3:9-12)."<sup>2</sup>

## C. Eternal Security

After a long dynasty of wicked sons, it took Israel's Servant to do for Israel and the world what no king in Israel could ever do.

**Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,  
make many to be accounted righteous,  
and he shall bear their iniquities.** (Isa 53:11)

As Israel's representative, Jesus fulfilled God's law with his whole heart. By means of his sacrifice on the cross, he imparts the gift of righteousness to his people (Gal 3:13-15) and the City that he builds stands secure (Isa 28:16).

**In righteousness you shall be established...** (v. 14a)  
**Their vindication ["righteousness" is] from me** (v. 17c)

Our text is framed by the word "righteousness." In the first instance (v. 14a), it is firmly established and permanently secured; in the second (v. 17c), we learn that it is a gift of grace ("from me") that cannot be tarnished or lost. Righteousness "is the ground on which they rest, and the personal possession they enjoy."<sup>3</sup> With the New Covenant "eternal security" becomes the hallmark of grace, a gift that is treasured by God's people. The implications cannot be overstated.

## II. A Fear-Free City (Isa 54:14b)

**you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear;  
and from terror, for it shall not come near you.** (v. 14b)

"Oppression," is a term whose derivatives have strong overtones of "extortion" and the "ruin" or "devastation" that results from being laid waste. On a national level it is used of a nation being crushed and plundered by a stronger foreign power. "Terror" takes oppression to another level. It describes the unrelenting emotion of dread evoked by the memory of the desolation. In psychological terms we know it as "post-traumatic stress syndrome." In Israel's case it was the terror of being utterly abandoned by God and, even more unthinkable, that he would fight against them as his enemy. In Isaiah 42:24-25 God is named as the one "who gave Jacob up for spoil," and "poured out on him the heat of his anger, and the fierceness of battle."

**Yet they rebelled,  
and grieved his Holy Spirit.  
So he turned and became their enemy,  
and he himself fought against them.** (Isa 63:10 TNIV)

Think of the horror when you discover that the war machine advancing towards you is a sword in the hand of the Living God to unleash his wrath upon you as his enemy. That wound went so deep "that it threatened to rob many exiles of both their faith and their ability to sing hymns of praise (cf. Psalm 137)."<sup>4</sup> But because of the work of the Servant, God vows that his people will never again know such terror.

To create a feeling of protection and safety the poet uses the spatial terms "far" and "near." "The opening verb is an imperative – "*be far* from oppression" – "but it is used to express a promise or a possibility beyond the power of the addressee. An imperative can thus be a mark of a blessing."<sup>5</sup> A sign of just how far removed they will be is given in the second line – that dreaded feeling of terror will never again come "near." God's City is a "fear-free" community, a safe community.

In verses 15-17 the prophet qualifies and amplifies the promise of peace and security.

## III. A Victorious City (Isa 54:15-17a)

**If anyone stirs up strife, ("fiercely attacks you")  
it is not from me;  
whoever stirs up strife with you ("attacks you")  
shall fall because of you.  
Behold, I (myself) have created the smith  
who blows the fire of coals  
and produces a weapon for its purpose.  
I have also created the ravager to destroy;  
no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed,  
and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in  
judgment.** (vv. 15-17a ESV)

## A. Fear-free is not conflict-free

Verse 15 is ambiguous. The verb *gûr*, used three times, is a homonym with three distinct meanings – “to sojourn,” “to attack,” or “to be afraid, to dread.” Most translators have translated it as “attack.” The doubling of the verb *gûr* in the first cola makes it emphatic – “fiercely attack.” Goldingay, however, takes the first two occurrences to mean “dread,” and the third to mean “contend.” “There, no one need dread anything from me. Who contends with you? – they will fall to you.”<sup>6</sup>

Though the city is safe and secure from tyranny and terror, it will still come under “fierce attack” from those whose evil intent is bent on its destruction. “Fear-free” does not mean “conflict-free.” There will be those outside the city whose hatred will manifest itself in plotting violence, enlisting arms dealers, paying off judges, taking control of the press, bribing politicians, manipulating elections, and carrying out assassination plots. You’re probably thinking, “If this is what God means by peace and security, I’m packing!” What difference does the New Covenant make?

## B. Staying calm in the conflict

The source of the conflict makes all the difference in the world – “It is not from me.”

### 1. No assault against his people has divine authorization.

Oswalt’s comments are pertinent:

Whatever trouble may come to those who follow Christ, God did not send it as a sign of his displeasure or retribution, or judgment or discipline. Although God is in control of history, and nothing happens outside that control, he is not a puppet master whose sovereignty requires that he individually initiate every event. We live in a fallen world where trouble comes to all people. But those who are living in obedience to the righteousness of God need not fear such trouble. It is neither a sign of retribution nor discipline, but merely of the patience of God in allowing cause and effect to take its natural course.<sup>7</sup>

Young Christians, knowing that God is sovereign, often misinterpret trouble that comes to them as a sign of God’s displeasure or discipline. When Emily and I were first married I bought my first new car with a loan from my father for half the cost. We had the car for about a week and Emily, who was pregnant, had taken the car but a few minutes later came running home. She had an accident, she explained. She had pulled down the visor and a spider had dropped down into her face and she screamed and let go of the wheel and drove the car into two parked cars. The cost of the repairs was exactly the same amount of money my father had loaned us, and I concluded, “God smashed my idol!” But the truth is, God didn’t smash my idol. A spider came down off the visor, scaring my wife, who then crashed the car. If anything, God protected Emily from getting seriously hurt!

On a more serious note, we have friends in Romania, Marcelus and Manu, whose newborn daughter Emma had an enzyme deficiency similar to ours; she was doomed to die within 6-9 months. Christians everywhere – pastors, friends and relatives – were coming out of the woodwork saying, “Emma is sick because of generational sin. If you confess and repent of the sin, Emma will be healed, guaranteed.” We even had people blaming Emma’s illness on the fact that alcohol was served in the restaurant owned by Marcelus’ family. I took a few friends and we went to Romania and had a beer in Marcelus’ restaurant just to make the point that Emma was not sick because of

sin or alcohol or because the hand of God was against her and her parents in any way. She was just sick.

Why do you think God wrote the book of Job? Terrible things happen to Job, but through them all Job takes an oath saying he knows he has done nothing to deserve the suffering he is experiencing. And he was right. As God gives Job a tour of creation, Job learns that creation is chaotic and wild, that there are circumstances outside Job’s control that have nothing to do with him whatsoever. There is chaos in creation but there are also boundaries, and God is in control. Job grasps this truth so deeply that by the end of the book, Job becomes like God – taking risks and fathering more children and breaking all social conventions with the sensuous names he gives his daughters and by giving them a share of his inheritance.

2. **Any attack on you is an attack upon the Lord himself**, therefore you have direct access to all his resources to combat your oppressor; and God has a legal obligation to save you. This is the theological foundation that David constantly relies on in the Psalms. As God’s anointed king, God had a legal obligation to save him. In the New Testament, Jesus was not saved “from death,” but “through death.” In the book of Revelation believers are encouraged not to fear death, for even death is not outside God’s protective care and salvation:

**Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev 2:10)**

### 3. The Creator God is the sovereign Lord over everything –

over the *manufacturer* of arms,

over the *forging of the weapon*

over the *intent* of the user

over the *one who uses* the weapon

Therefore if an attack comes upon you, whether it is physical violence or slanderous speech, he will use the evil intent of the perpetrator, the means that they used to carry out the attack, as well as the actual attack to further his kingdom and to sanctify your life.

4. **Victory is guaranteed – no weapon or propaganda will succeed** As Oswalt affirms, “But those who, in the course of events, decide to make trouble for the people of God should think very carefully. God has laid the cornerstone of the city (28:16), and those who stumble over it will have a very unpleasant fall.”<sup>8</sup> As Jesus said, “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” (Luke 12:4-5).

## C. Look to the Cross

This theology is not only difficult for us to grasp, it is difficult to maintain in the midst of suffering. The only way you can sustain it in the midst of trouble is to stay focused on the cross, otherwise you will quickly lose your bearings and your confidence. When you come to the life of Jesus, ask yourself these questions:

- Whose evil intent plotted his execution?
- Why was Judas free to carry out his plot?
- Why didn’t Pilate have enough backbone to stand up to the Jews?
- Why didn’t Peter have the courage to testify for him?
- Who made the cross as a form of execution?

- Who oversaw the forging of the spear that pierced his side?
- Why did the devil have the freedom to play every card in his hand?

After Pilate had Jesus flogged, he questioned him,

**“You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?”** Jesus answered him, **“You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”** (John 19:10-11)

Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, affirms the same theology, knowing that God overruled the evil intentions of men: “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” (Acts 2:23). Paul lived by the same theology. If he thought that God was sending him the trouble that he endured, he would have never survived:

**Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.** (2 Cor 11:24-27)

Paul knew that nothing could separate him from the love of Christ (Rom 8:31-39), and that God would overturn and transform all the evil assaults on his life for the benefit of the kingdom. And it was so.

#### IV. An Abiding City (Isa 54:17b)

**This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD and their vindication (righteousness is) from me, declares the LORD.** (v. 17b)

The term “heritage” (*nah<sup>al</sup>lâ* – “possession”) comes from the root that means “to obtain something as a possession,” and most often refers to an “inalienable possession, thus enduring land.”<sup>9</sup> Here it is redefined in purely relational terms, as an abiding peace and security being rooted in God’s righteousness. “If Cyrus restores God’s people to their physical inheritance, the Servant restores them to their spiritual inheritance.”<sup>10</sup> Motyer sums up the manifold blessings of God’s New Covenant with his people:

All the blessings the poem has described (the city and its strength and the incontestable right to citizenship) now belong to the *servants of the LORD*. Up to this point Isaiah has used ‘servant’ only in the singular, but from now on it is used only in the plural. The saving work of the Servant creates *servants*. Whatever their blessings, their chief dignity is to share his title... Their status before God could not be more honorable (servants), nor could their acceptance before him (‘righteousness’) be more complete.<sup>11</sup>

*Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.* (Heb 12:28-29)

1. “Masada,” *New World Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Masada>.

2. Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 401.

3. J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 449.

4. Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Int; Louisville: John Knox, 1995), 173.

5. John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 540.

6. Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55*, 540.

7. John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 429-30.

8. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 430.

9. ‘G. Wanke, *nah<sup>al</sup>lâ* “possession” TLOT 2:731-34.

10. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 431.

11. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 451.