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Isaiah 54:1-3

14th Message

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THE BIRTH OF A NEW AGE: A NEW PROSPERITY

SERIES: A NEW SERVANT, A NEW COVENANT, A NEW AGE

Some of the television preachers—televangelists, as they are called—say that it is God’s will that Christians be rich. If you send them your money, they infer, God will see to it that you become wealthy. This is known as the gospel of prosperity. Many of them are easy to write off since their greed is so blatant. But how do you respond to others who quote legitimate promises from the Old Covenant to back up their claims that the believer in Christ today is promised prosperity? Take for example, the words of Moses from the book of Deuteronomy:

“Now it shall be, if you will diligently obey your God...all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you...the LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your body, and the offspring of your beast and in the produce of your ground in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. The LORD will open for you His good storehouse, the heavens, to give rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hand; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow.” (Deut 28: 1, 11-12)

Now these are legitimate promises of blessing from the Old Covenant. The question becomes for us, “Didn’t Christ, in making a New Covenant, fulfill these Old Covenant promises and give us much more besides?” Believing that life ought to be as Moses described can often lead young Christians into shattered dreams when they experience real life. They are surprised and confused when, for instance, they suddenly find themselves unemployed. In our Wednesday morning men’s Bible study we are finding that the list of unemployed men is growing weekly. Some young couples anxious to begin having children are discovering that they are barren. Instead of earthly blessings pouring upon them, the heavens seem to be raining a curse. Many young Christians become disillusioned, therefore, when their dreams for themselves are unrealized. They can readily identify with the well known song, “I Dreamed A Dream,” from the musical version of Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*:

I dreamed a dream in time gone by,
When hope was high
And life worth living.
I dreamed that love would never die,
I dreamed that God would be forgiving.
Then I was young and unafraid,
And dreams were made and used
And wasted.
There was no ransom to be paid,
No song unsung,
No wine untasted.
But the tigers come at night,
With their voices soft as thunder.
As they tear your hope apart,
As they turn your dream to shame.

I had a dream my life would be
So different from this hell I’m living,
So different now from what it seemed.
Now life has killed
The dream I dreamed.

When Emily and I first got married, we did not have any extravagant dreams for the future, but we lived the carefree life of a young married couple, looking forward to what lay ahead for us. But suddenly it all came crashing down when we lost our firstborn son, and then a year later, our little girl, Jessica. Reflecting on those painful times the other day, Emily confessed to me that she felt something had died within her then. Our carefree, happy-go-lucky spirit toward life was over.

What then can the believer in Jesus Christ expect in life? What happened to the promises of prosperity in the Old Covenant? Is their prosperity to be found for the believer today?

These questions are the theme of Isaiah 54–55. Now that the Servant, “who combined in his person all the people of Israel, the prophet and prophetic institution, and the Messiah in His role as Servant”¹ has finished his work of atonement (Isa 52:12–53:12), the prophet announces that a New Age will be born! It begins with a shout of joy and acclamation as Isaiah depicts the glory of the Messianic Age of a new prosperity, a new covenant, a new temple, a new glory, etc. Each of these details is described in terms of the glory of the Old Covenant and then contrasted with the Old as being so much better. “For indeed, what had glory, in this case has no glory on account of the glory that surpasses it” (2 Cor 3:10).

As to when these things would be fulfilled, the Jews anticipated they would occur immediately following the coming of the Messiah. They saw life in a two-age scheme—“this age,” followed immediately by “the age to come.” Under the Lord’s teaching, however, the apostles saw that these promises were indeed fulfilled at the coming of Christ (as the book of Acts indicates), but they were not fully consummated. That is, the two ages overlapped, so that “the world to come” was realized now in principle and spiritually applied in the church, but it still awaits its final consummation at the second coming of Christ. All of this quality of life in the age to come, however, is a present reality in the believer’s life now, as it is imparted by the Holy Spirit. This is what eternal life is (literally “the life of the ages”)—living the life of the age to come, the age which the prophets wrote about—now, in the midst of this decaying world. The new age is being birthed in the midst of the old, but at the second coming of Christ it will descend from heaven in all its grandeur and glory.

In our text this morning we will look at two of the great promises which God made to Abraham—that he would inherit a seed, and that he would inherit a land for that seed. God told the patriarch that though his body was as good as dead, and Sarah’s womb was barren, she would yet have a seed who would outnumber the stars of the heavens or the sand of the sea, and they would possess a holy

land. This is the first thing Isaiah refers to in chapter 54. Christ fulfilled and transcended God's promises. Christians are given a new seed and a new land.

I. A new seed: From barrenness to fruitfulness (54:1)

**“Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child,
Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have
not travailed,**

**For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous,
Than the sons of the married woman,” says the LORD.**

A. Zion's present pain of barrenness intensified three times

Zion is depicted as a barren woman with no children, and her resultant pain is contrasted with the joy she will experience in the future. Notice that her barrenness is described with three different terms, and that each term indicates an intensification of the pain.

First, Zion is described as “barren.” Like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah, her womb was closed; she was unable to have children. Second, Zion is described as, “You who have not travailed.” She had never writhed in labor pains, or never miscarried. She had never even started the hormonal process of nurturing or mothering. And third, she was “desolate.” The only woman who is thus described in the OT is Tamar, David's daughter. She was raped by her brother Ammon, and afterwards, it says, he hated her with a greater hatred than the lust he had had for her, and he threw her out of his presence. 2 Samuel 13:20 says of her, “So Tamar remained and was desolate in her brother Absalom's house.” She had no future possibility of marrying or having children because she had been violated and defiled.

The wonderful OT story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, captures the intensity of this pain which Zion was suffering. Hannah too was barren at one time, and everything about her life was focused on the pain resulting from her barrenness. The yearly feasts which she attended with her husband only served to intensify the pain which she felt. She was silent at the feast because she felt no joy; and she could not eat, which meant she had no fellowship. Her husband, in an effort to console her, made matters worse by saying, with typical male insensitivity, “Am I not better than ten sons?” The year we lost our first child, each of the younger pastors on the staff had healthy babies, and this only served to intensify our grief. Many couples in our own church are struggling with infertility. Statistics indicate today that almost 20% of American couples have problems in this area.

Yet, Isaiah speaks to this one who was barren, this one who has never writhed in labor, this desolate one, saying, “Shout for joy.” Who is this “barren one”? When Isaiah wrote these words, there was a remnant of physical seed in Israel, but at the time of Jesus' birth, Israel had several million children born according to the flesh. But there was One born who represented Israel in his body. He never married, never had any physical seed, and he died on a tree, forsaken, barren and desolate. He is the “barren one” in this context, the Servant of Isaiah 53, the Lord Jesus himself. “He shall see His seed,” says Isaiah 53:10—although he never had any children. The cross not only made salvation possible, but it also secured salvation for his seed. In the new age, everything is radically new and different because of the resurrection of Jesus.

B. Zion's new joy intensified three times

“Shout for joy, . . . break forth into joyful shouting, . . . cry aloud!”
Each level of Zion's pain is now matched with joy.

C. The reasons for her joy

The reasons for her joy are twofold. First, this new seed will be supernatural in origin; it will not be born according to the flesh. Israel is pictured like Sarah of old—barren and childless—but she will be blessed with seed born supernaturally by the Spirit. Now every child will be like an Isaac, who was born from a dead womb—children born of promise, not of flesh. John wrote, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God. . . who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13). To inaugurate the new age, God chose Elizabeth, who was barren, and Mary, a virgin, to demonstrate that the new seed which was coming would be supernatural in origin. Paul was referring to all of us when he wrote, “Even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together in Christ” (Eph 2:5). The apostle quotes our text in Galatians 4: “The Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. For it is written, ‘Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; for more the children of the desolate, than of the one who has a husband.’ And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise” (Gal 4:26-28). Paul is saying that the present Israel, born according to the flesh, are really descendants of Ishmael; they are not true Israelites. But Gentiles and Jews who trust Jesus Christ are like Isaac, born according to promise, born in Christ raised from the dead.

And secondly, says Isaiah, this new seed will outnumber Israel of old. In the upper room, Jesus blessed his twelve apostles. But he did not do this with the intention that they have many children according to the flesh. When the gift of the Spirit was given without measure, the blessing of fertility was far greater for the spiritual seed than for the physical seed of ancient Israel. Peter discovered this when he preached on the day of Pentecost as he witnessed the birth of 3000 believers in one day! A nation of twelve patriarchal heads became 3000 after they heard him speak. A short time later, 5000 more came to Christ. This is God's wondrous grace of the New Covenant. In Romania we witnessed this same truth. From Lord's Army, a denomination persecuted almost to extinction, one man, Traian Dorz, survived. Yet God produced from that one man a movement of some 300,000 to 500,000 believers in one generation. We think of Mother Teresa. She never married, and yet she has tens of thousands of children in the New Covenant.

This is why Zion's joy is intensified threefold. When Israel enjoys this new fertility, she will burst forth into joyful song like Hannah of old (1 Sam 2:1-10) with joy inexpressible, and full of glory. Pain is not only the gateway to joy, it increases capacity for joy. No wonder John wrote, “Whenever a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she remembers the anguish no more, for joy that child has been born into the world” (John 16:21).

In order to enter into true prosperity in this age, God wounds us and breaks us in some arena of earthly productively. This in turn produces a spiritual productivity whose joy is unparalleled, a joy that transcends this age. This is why the early Christians not only endured suffering, they rejoiced in it because it was the gateway to heaven.

Thus we have seen the new seed, proceeding from barrenness to fruitfulness, in the new age. And this new seed needs a new land, which we discover in the next verses.

II. A new land: Boundless and free! (54:2-3)

“Enlarge the place of your tent;

**Stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not;
Lengthen your cords,
And strengthen your pegs.
For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,
And your seed will possess nations,
And they will resettle desolate cities.”**

A. The command to enlarge your vision

Here the metaphor changes from a mother who has just given birth, to a homemaker creating a nest for her new family. One of the most painful experiences Emily and I had was putting the baby furniture away after our child died. The second time we were faced with this task I found I could hardly do it. I told Emily we should leave it just as it was. I began to sense that God had another program for us, and that he would do something we were not expecting. Two weeks later we adopted our daughter Rebecca, a marvelous new gift, a new seed we had not counted on. This experience is so much like life in the new age. This new nation will be so fertile, says our text, she is told to expand her dwellings beyond measure, to not spare any effort, material or expense. Jerusalem, once desolate (Lam 1:1-5), will be revitalized and teeming with people. Thus, she is commanded to make preparation to expand her dwelling beyond her wildest dreams. This is what our own Ethel Smith does with her Eastern European refugee ministry. She keeps calling us up, telling us that new people, new families, new children are arriving, and she needs furniture, clothing, food and housing for this new seed. When I was college pastor, I asked my friends, Lee and Colette Cort, if I could use their home on the Stanford campus for our Tuesday evening Bible study and fellowship time. They not only obliged, but they got a contractor to enlarge their living room and kitchen to meet the needs of the 80 students who came every week to study together. Each week, two students cooked dinner in their kitchen for this group, and then we sang together and studied the Scriptures. This couple truly “enlarged the place of their tent, and stretched out the curtains of their dwellings, sparing not,” so they could accommodate these children of the new age.

We need this exhortation today. We tend to look only to our own physical seed, seeking to arrange everything just right for them. But when we do this, we miss out on so many things that are ours to richly enjoy in this new age. May God help us to broaden our vision!

B. The reasons to enlarge

**“For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,
And your seed will possess nations,
And they will resettle desolate cities.”**

Here, Isaiah is expanding on the Old Covenant promise which was given to Jacob. The old holy land had boundaries, but the new inheritance will know no geographical limits. When the holy land was first given, the whole earth was the Lord’s, but only Israel was holy. When Israel went into her inheritance, she was told, “You will pass through the territory of your brothers the sons of Esau who live in Seir; and they will be afraid of you. So be very careful; do not provoke them, for I will not give you any of their land, even as a little as a footstep because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession.” The messengers whom Moses sent to the king of Edom said, “Please let us pass through your land. We shall not pass through field or through vineyard; we shall not even drink water from a well. We shall go along the King’s highway, not turning to the right or left, until we pass through your territory” (Num 20:17). But in the new age,

because of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, something happened to change all this. Jesus did not merely defeat some local tyrant; he dealt with the ultimate enemies, the devil, the world, and the flesh. This is why he could say to his apostles and disciples, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20). Now there is endless, boundless freedom, because the enemy behind the nations has been dealt with.

Thus there is no room for timidity. Christians can go anywhere, live anywhere, taking the message of the gospel of peace with them (just make sure you go in two’s!). The whole earth is his possession and one day it will all be holy. Go to the right, go to the left. Don’t fear entering any office, any workplace, any neighborhood, any country. The cross not only made possible the salvation of the saints, it also secured it. The apostles preached with boldness, and they suffered, but when they were finished preaching, Luke wrote, “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). This is why Christians have the freedom to go anywhere God calls them to—to liberate those whom he has chosen, those who are waiting for the good news of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Don’t be timid! Don’t be tempted to build new Christian monasteries and ghettos. Get out there and liberate the captives!

The second reason Israel was to enlarge her vision was that the vision of restoration would be much better than she ever dreamed—the new inheritance will include all nations as well as Israel. The Jews had a dream that one day God would restore things to how they were in the days of David, Solomon, Joshua, and Moses. Like many people today, they were nostalgic for the old days. The old generation wanted to go back, but in the new age Israel would not only resettle the cities left desolate by her exile (Isa 1:7), she would expand the kingdom to include all the Gentile nations. So it was not only restoration, but new, transcendent reunification!

Don’t ever go backwards in your spiritual life; this is what kills spiritual growth. God is always doing something new! The book of Acts demonstrates how hard it was for the apostles to grasp this truth. Peter refused to go to the home of Cornelius, a tanner, an unclean occupation. God had to show the apostle a vision to get him to do what he wanted done, which was to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. The apostle Paul was one of the few who clearly grasped the vision of this new Zion, yet he was often unappreciated for his efforts. One of the most painful scenes in the book of Acts is when he brought to Jerusalem with him the representatives of the Gentile churches—the real temple made of living stones to visit the old temple (a mere shadow of the new!). Rather than rejoicing in this new work of God, the Jews rioted because a rumor spread that the presence of these Gentiles within the temple precincts had defiled the temple. But in the new age they were the new temple! Paul ended up in prison, unappreciated for what he was trying to convey to the Jews.

How often do we try and hold on to the past and miss the new thing God is doing? We must enlarge our vision. It’s only going to get better until the day you die. God’s ways of working are new and fresh every day.

This is the new seed, supernaturally born, as numerous as the stars. And the new land is boundless and free; it knows no limits.

III. Implications to those hungering for true prosperity

A. Expect to die

We must remember that this text was addressed to the barren one, the childless, desolate one. Earthly barrenness, therefore, is the doorway to spiritual productivity. Thus, we must expect to die. Don't fight it. Don't hang on to what is earthly. Let go. Because this is the norm, we must learn to be a weeping community. Weep, therefore, knowing that will open the door to heaven. Suffering is what opens the door to this new, transcendent joy. Without it there is no joy.

B. Enlarge your vision

Don't be so bound up with your vision of your own physical family. Remember the words of Jesus to his apostles, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30). God has blessed us with three girls, but as a softball coach, I have 13 more, and I'm praying for each one of them. This week we have a young French girl coming to live with us for three weeks, and later this year one of our girls will go to France for three weeks. Let us enlarge our vision.

C. Rejoice

Pain not only opens door to heavenly affections, it increases our capacity one hundred fold. In the one area where I was most wounded—my longing for a son—I recently received one: my own father, who came to Christ at our men's retreat earlier this year. In appreciation, I wrote a poem about his conversion, and I sent it to a friend in far away Romania. For the past two weeks, I have been flooded with letters from that country. They have translated my poem, and they are singing its praises across the seas. I do not have the words to adequately express the joy I have experienced through these letters, but, in closing, let me read to you one which I received just a few days ago:

Dear Brian,

When we open the wings of hearts that miss you, we have begun a trip of love from the Eternal One. This road across the ocean is so very known to our prayers.

From this date a joy of oceanic dimensions soars in a unique flight to Peninsula Bible Church where those eyes, blue like the skies, overflowed with so many holy tears of joy over the salvation of your father.

We give glory to the God of patience for this wonderful victory. Oh, if only we had been there to share in this inestimable joy.

There is no one as wonderful as our Lord who causes all things to work together for good for those who love Him. Truly we are witnesses of abundant miracles.

Don't forget, holy brothers, that we carry you in our unceasing prayers because we cannot do otherwise. We will not forget your warm love which made you leave your pleasant surroundings there to spend your time and money, to risk so much and to accept our modest conditions here.

Lord, we don't have other possibilities, but we ask You, repay the incomparable love from the warm heart of our brothers which consistently remains with us. In their limpid eyes I saw the love of Christ.

With a burning desire we await the moment when we shall once again be together. Until then, don't forget that we often visit you through our prayers. In your secret moments only listen attentively, and you will hear us.

Remembering all of you for all that you have done for us, as much spiritual as material, we embrace you with love,

Violeta and Ioatan

P.S. Until we see each other again, if all goes well, we will receive another child from the Lord. We would like very much for her to be a girl.

Is there prosperity for the believer today? Yes indeed, a transcendent prosperity the world knows nothing of. Rejoice, O barren one. In this new age God will make you a mother whose children are so numerous they cannot be counted, and a homemaker whose nest knows no limits. Amen.

1. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward An Old Testament Theology*.

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