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Isaiah 54:4-10

15th Message

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# A NEW COVENANT, A RESTORED RELATIONSHIP

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

A good friend of mine recently received word that his older brother, whom he loves very much, was leaving his wife and children. Later the same week he learned that his sister's husband has been unfaithful to her for more than 15 years. Two broken relationships in the span of one week. The covenant between his sister and her husband was actually no covenant at all. It had the appearance of faithfulness, but deep down one party was feeding on a secret idol. It began with a look, and then a taste, which turned into a meal, and before long the idol became a voracious beast. Many Christians who find themselves in similar circumstances discover that, rather than their feeding their idols, their secret idols begin feeding on them. Soon, matters are out of control. They give themselves over to compulsive behavior that seems to have no limits. At last, however, everything is made public. The hidden secrets of their hearts are exposed to shame, humiliation and disgrace that has an impact to the third and fourth generations.

Is there any hope for someone who sinks into that condition? Is it possible to restore a covenant once it has been broken? Our text from Isaiah 54 this morning resounds with good news. Earlier, in chapter 53, the prophet wrote about the suffering Servant who would undergo a humiliating death on a tree, but who came back to life in a glorious resurrection. Then in chapter 54, Isaiah revealed that through his resurrection the Servant gave birth to a whole new age, one which not only fulfilled the Old Covenant, but which was so much greater than the old, which once had glory, seemed to have no glory by comparison (2 Cor 3:10). Then the prophet went on to take every aspect of the Old Covenant—the promise of a seed, a land, a love relationship between Israel and her God, a city, an education, etc.—and compared them with the far more glorious and transcendent promises of the New Covenant.

Last week, we saw that the promises of the seed and the land are fulfilled in Christ. Today, we will look at the marriage covenant between God and Israel. Are there people here this morning whose Christian lives are a sham of hypocrisy and fakery? Are you tired of turning over a new leaf, only to return to your shame again and again? Are you living with guilt and failure because of your compulsive behavior? Take heart. This is your text. In this beautifully poetic passage, a marriage is reenacted. At Mt. Sinai, God and Israel entered into a marriage agreement. God liberated Israel from the bondage of Egypt, and in response, the nation was to give him her whole heart. But Israel was an unfaithful spouse. The faithful Husband was forced to give his wife a bill of divorce and send her out into the wilderness because of her long history of adultery and prostitution. There she was stripped naked and abused by her lovers. Even though God was the wronged party in this marriage, however, he still has deep compassion for her despite her filth and shame. He initiates reconciliation by searching for Israel in the wilderness. Once he finds her he cleanses her of all filth and defilement, and they renew their wedding vows. But this time everything is different. This time, because of the work of Christ, Israel has a new heart. This time, she partakes of a New Covenant, one which will outlast history. Now she is able to respond to the love of her husband.

What, then, are the reasons this marriage will work now? It is because in this New Covenant God, through Christ, has met Israel—and us—at the point of her four deepest needs to restore what she by her own behavior had ruined. In 54:4, we find that the first of these new gifts is cleansing: our guilt is removed.

## I. Its benefit: Cleansing! (54:4)

**“Fear not, for you will not be put to shame;  
Neither feel humiliated for you will not be disgraced;  
For the shame of your youth you will forget,  
And the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.” (NASB)**

### A. Ends all guilt for past shame

Here, the prophet is saying that from her youth, when she wandered aimlessly in the wilderness, until her widowhood, when God was forced to abandon her to abuse by her new lovers, all that time, from the wilderness to Babylon, Israel had been an adulteress. To help us feel the weight of Israel's sin, and the sense of shame which God in Christ has cleansed her of, substitute your own name instead of her's as I read from the book of Ezekiel:

**“Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem, “Your origin and your birth are from the land of the Canaanite, your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not rubbed with salt or even wrapped in cloths. No eye looked with pity on you to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you. Rather you were thrown out into the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.**

**“When I passed by you and saw you squirming in your blood, I said to you while you were in your blood, ‘Live!’ I made you numerous like plants of the field. Then you grew up, became tall, and reached the age for fine ornaments. Your breasts were formed and your hair had grown. Yet you were naked and bare.**

**“I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you [at Mt. Sinai] and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine...then I bathed you with water, washed off your blood from you, and anointed you with oil [the Exodus]. I also clothed you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands, and a necklace around your neck. I also put a ring in your nostril, earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head [the days of David]. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your dress was of fine linen, silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour, honey, and oil; so you were exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty [the time of Solomon and the temple].**

**“Then your fame went forth among the nations on account of your beauty...you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your fame, and you poured out your harlotries on every passer-by who might be willing [during the period of the Divided Monarchy]. You took some of your clothes, made for**

yourself high places of various colors, and played the harlot with them...you also took your beautiful jewels made of My gold and of My silver, which I had given you, and made for your male images that you might play the harlot with them...Were your harlotries so small a matter? You slaughtered My children, and offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through the fire. And besides all your abomination and harlotries you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare and squirming in your blood.

“You adulteress wife, who takes strangers instead of her husband! Men give gifts to all harlots, but you give your gifts to all your lovers to bribe them to come to you from every direction for your harlotries. Thus you are different from those women in your harlotries, in that no one plays the harlot as you do, because you give money and no money is given you; thus you are different.

“Because your lewdness was poured out and your nakedness uncovered through your harlotries...So shall I gather them [all your lovers] against you from every direction and expose your nakedness to them that they may see all your nakedness...I shall also give you into the hands of your lovers [the Assyrians and the Babylonians], and they will tear down your shrines, demolish your high places, strip you of your clothing, take away your jewels, and will leave you naked and bare...because you have not remembered the days of your youth.”” (Ezek 16:3-43)

How many of you entered into a similar relationship with God under the Old Covenant? God loved you and saved you, and then you took it upon yourself to love him in return. You tried hard, but even as you tried outwardly an inner idol was consuming you all the while. Your second state became worse than your first, so you entered into deep shame. The impediment to new beginnings, of course, is that sense of past shame that consumes us and makes us feel hypocritical in our attempts to begin anew. That shame of the past must first be dealt with. Examine what Isaiah says: “Fear not...for the shame of your youth [in the wilderness]...and the reproach of your widowhood [in Babylon] you will remember no more”—all because of the blood of Christ. Painful memories plague our soul, but an amazing thing happened on that cross: the blood of Christ is so powerful it can wash more than the skin; it cleanses hearts from even the memory of all past shame—“for the shame of your youth you will forget, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.”

## B. Ends all fear of future disgrace

But it goes even further. Not only is the past cleansed, the future too is taken care of—you will never again fear humiliation. The alcoholic is forever recommitting himself to a change of lifestyle, but he always carries with him his past shame. Because of his failures, he is fearful to try again lest he subject himself to shame once more. This is how it was with Israel under the Old Covenant. Under that arrangement, despite God’s gracious acts of salvation, the nation still lived in fear of humiliation and banishment if she lapsed into idolatry again (see Deut 28:15ff). But God said, “Enough of that.” Under the New Covenant, the blood of Christ will so cleanse you, and the gift of the Spirit so change you, you will never again fear another terror (like the Assyrians) or an exile (under the Babylonians). Jesus took our shame, humiliation and disgrace on the cross. No longer do we need to live in fear of future humiliation, or fear of being abandoned by God in another exile. We can begin all over again, this time without fear.

There we have met the first of our deepest needs—cleansing from our guilt. The glory of the new covenant is the deep cleansing that washes and cleanses our defiled flesh from past and future sin.

How can this be? What is new about this New Covenant? Our past history makes us feel inadequate, and we are fearful to enter into

this new arrangement. Why will it be different this time? We find the answer to our fears in verse 5.

## II. Based on the Lord’s resources, not Israel’s (54:5)

“For the husband is your Maker,  
Whose name is the LORD of hosts;  
And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,  
Who is called the God of all the earth.”

Calling himself “The Lord of Hosts,” God declares here that he used all his resources as Creator when Israel was first created as a nation. He had at his disposal all the armies in creation, among the nations, and the angels to accomplish his task. All of these groups came into play in the Exodus. The sun grew dark, various plagues of frogs, gnats, etc., tormented the Egyptians. The angel of death went through the camp of the enemy and killed all the firstborn. The wind and the sea obeyed God’s command and Israel crossed the Red Sea on dry land. Pharaoh’s army appeared right when God called, and his chariots were submerged in the sea. All of creation obeyed the voice of the Lord when he judged Egypt, and this is what it took to create Israel. They were in exile now, not because God was weak, but because they had broken the covenant. But he had not stopped loving them. When he redeemed them, he would use all those resources once again, everything that he had at his disposal in heaven and on earth, this time not just to remake the nation, but to make them holy.

Consider what this task required: God became a man. The glory of the New Covenant is that God not only keeps loving man faithfully, but Christ takes on the role of Israel, the bride, and loves God in return. Thus the equation is complete: God loves man, and man loves God. We are placed in Christ. He lives in you and me, and everything God now asks of you he will do in you by his Holy Spirit. How different from the Old Covenant! Under that arrangement, to illustrate, the believer is like a man sitting in a boat, trying to row from the East Coast to England. Try as he might, the Gulf Stream keeps drawing him off course. That’s the Old Covenant; the Law is the sextant which shows him how far off course he is, but which gives him no power to propel the boat. No matter how many courses one takes on “motivational rowing” or “team rowing,” there is no hope! Enter the New Covenant. The oarsman discovers that his boat has a mast and a sail, and that he can use a heavenly resource—the wind—to take him to his destination, contrary to the Gulf Stream. No more rowing! He still feels the pull of the currents trying to draw him off course, but the new resource speeds him on to England.

Where does this come out ethically in the New Testament? If a couple who are both believers choose to divorce, the Bible says they may not remarry: “let them remain unmarried, or else be reconciled” (1 Cor 7:10-11). Why? Because in the New Covenant God has done everything needed to create and sustain love. Though couples feel the constant urges and pulls of the flesh (like that hidden Gulf Stream) they can choose to make a continual presentation to the Lord within (like hoisting the sail on the boat); he will cause them to make continual progress in their relationship (like sailing against the current), and they will ultimately experience the fruit of joy and fulfillment. If there is any hardness of heart resulting from a lengthy period of drifting (which happens when we drop our sail) in order to satisfy the urges of the flesh, the Bible casts the sole responsibility on us. There may be a need in some cases for a time of separation so that God can work on the one who has hardened his or her heart, but to eliminate the possibility of reconciliation with a Christian spouse is a denial of what God has already provided in the New Covenant. If they cannot love now, it is either because they do not know about the New Covenant, or they choose not to appropriate it.

Thus the New Covenant not only deals with our guilt but also our inadequacy. It inaugurates a supernatural cleansing of the past, and freedom for change in the future.

But, someone says, how can we be sure that God will take me back when I have failed so many times? How can I be sure he's not mad at me? Some Christians feel that God is forever waiting around the next bend on the road, big stick in hand, ready to chastise them when they fail. The next verse has an extremely helpful word here.

### III. Initiated by the Lord, not Israel (54:6)

**“For the LORD has called you,  
Like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,  
Even like a wife of one's youth when she is rejected,”  
Says your God.**

#### A. Israel as the wife

Israel, the wife, is the guilty party in the breaking of the covenant, but in her destitute state she is powerless to do anything about her condition. Without a divine miracle there is no hope for her. I have counseled many wives “forsaken and grieved in spirit” because their husbands broke their marriage covenant, and I can tell you it is a heartbreaking thing to see a woman forsaken by the husband of her youth.

#### B. The Lord as the husband

Notice that Israel is the guilty party. She wronged the Lord. She is the one who spent her life on her lovers. She was stripped naked, languishing in the wilderness, and sold on the slave market. The Lord was the wronged party who was forced to give his wife a certificate of divorce. Yet, he is still moved by Israel's grief and her deplorable condition. He responds by calling for her and searching for her with the same depth of compassion as if she was innocent!

God has the same compassion toward us. Just as it was with Israel, he initiates the process of reconciliation. The world knows nothing of this kind of love. The New Covenant is founded on the Lord's resources, not ours. Today God is calling some of you. He is initiating the process, and flooding love into your life. Will you respond to his New Covenant?

Finally, how can we be sure this new arrangement for living will last? Past failure makes us fear that God might give up on us. Verses 7-10 set out the fourth gift that is ours in the new covenant.

### IV. Established by a love greater than His judgment (54:7-10)

#### A. The permanence of His love contrasted with His wrath (54:7-8)

**“For a brief moment I forsook you,  
But with great compassion I will gather you.  
In an outburst of anger,  
I hid my face from you for a moment,  
But with everlasting lovingkindness (loyal-love) I will have compassion on you,”  
Says the LORD your Redeemer.**

At times, the OT prophets refer to Israel's exile when they want to contrast the new, Messianic age with what occurred in the past. Here, God's love is contrasted with his wrath, under which Israel suffered for 70 years in the exile. In Lamentations, we have a graphic illustration of the magnitude of his wrath:

**“See, O LORD, and look,  
For I am despised.”  
“Is it nothing to all you who pass this way?  
Look and see if there is any pain like my pain  
Which was severely dealt out to me,**

**Which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.  
From on high he sent fire into my bones,  
And it prevailed over them;  
He has spread a net for my feet;  
He has turned me back;  
He has made me desolate,  
Faint all day long.” (Lam 1:11b-13)**

The phrases, “I will gather you,” and, “in great compassion,” describe, in contrast, God's love. Ezekiel wrote, “As a soothing aroma I shall accept you, when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you are scattered, and I shall prove myself holy among you in the sight of the nations” (Ezek 20:41). Here is a NT example of a usage of the word “gather,” from John's gospel: “[Caiaphas] prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nations, and not for the nations only, but that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:51-52). And God always looks upon his children with compassion, in the same way a mother looks upon her nursing infant. He is always moved to compassion at our helplessness.

Yet, compared to God's everlasting loyal-love, the 70 years of exile in Babylon will seem like a “brief moment,” like “an atom in time” (Acquila). Ezekiel gives us a description of the duration of this love: “Then they will know that I am the LORD their God because I made them go into exile among the nations, and then gathered them again to their own land; and I will leave none of them there any longer. And I will not hide My face from them any longer, for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel.” declares the Lord God” (Ezek 39:28-29).

#### B. The permanency of His love compared to His oath with Noah (54:9)

**“For this is like the days of Noah to me:  
When I swore that the waters of Noah  
Should not flood the earth again,  
So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you,  
Nor will I rebuke you.”**

Isaiah looks into the past of Israel's history “in search of a turning point comparable with the one which now confronts Israel,” and he finds none! “He has to go further back to that turning-point in primeval times which marked the end of catastrophic events involving the whole human race!” Thus the magnitude of events are of the same order as the promise to Noah after the universal flood.<sup>1</sup>

The mercy shown to Israel after the captivity parallels the mercy which God demonstrated toward mankind following the flood. Then, God established through an oath that he would never again destroy the earth by a flood. In Noah's day, the reason given for God's mercy is that judgment did not change the heart of man, as Genesis records: “I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth.” (Gen. 8:21.) In like manner, judgment did not change the heart of Israel, but loyal-love will accomplish this. This is why we do not get abused or sent into exile by God—he has made an oath that he will never again do this.

#### C. The permanency of His love contrasted to His oath with Noah (54:10)

This New Covenant even surpasses the covenant God made with Noah. It will outlast history.

**“For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake,  
But My lovingkindness (loyal-love) will not be removed from you,  
And My covenant of peace will not be shaken,”  
Says the LORD who has compassion on you.**

The New Covenant is greater than the Noahic covenant, because God's new people outlive the old, created order. His love has created within them new hearts, therefore they forever remain secure in his abiding love. So while God's judgment did not change the hearts of men, his love did! Therefore God's people remain secure in his love forever! This is what the apostle Paul is referring to in Romans 8: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39). There is nothing to compare with the depth of God's love for his people, with its permanence and security for the believer. It covers our guilt, our inadequacies, our sense of acceptance, and our sense of security.

It is almost impossible to comprehend the glory of the New Covenant that the Servant Jesus inaugurated through his death and resurrection. What is clear is that those who do begin to comprehend and taste of its glory live radically different lives. People who have been living for years under the Old Covenant, seeking to please God by trying harder every year, suddenly discover the transcendent love of God for them and they become radically different as a result.

How are they different? In four ways, I believe.

### Implications of the New Covenant

First, they are free to expose their deepest shame because Christ took their shame upon himself. Christians therefore can be vulnerable, without fear of condemnation. Now, when we act in the flesh, in our own strength, unlike Moses, who covered his face with a veil to hide his fading glory after his encounter with God on Mt. Sinai (2 Cor 3:13), we can share our struggles and not cover them over with hypocritical devotion. We will not seek to deceive people by mixing self-effort with devotion to Jesus Christ. No matter how wretched we have been, no matter how often we fail we can always hoist our sails again and continue on, without condemnation (2 Cor 3:16). Our sin has been taken care of in Christ.

Second, a dominant characteristic of someone who is living under the New Covenant is an overwhelming sense of appreciation. Love for Christ burns in their breast, consuming all that it cannot love. Words can hardly describe the warmth and depth of this love. Nor can the mind alone comprehend it. It takes the very person of God living in our hearts to give us assurance of how much he loves us, as the apostle Paul wrote, "The love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom 5:5). We become so appreciative of God's secure love for us under the New Covenant, a love that sought us, bought us, washed us, and healed us, that new affections are created in the soul that we knew nothing of before. Writing in the 12th century in his book *The Fire Of Love*, Richard Rolle put it thus:

Concerning...the time I first felt my heart begin to warm I [was] amazed more than I am able to say. I felt it truly, not simply in my imagination, but just as though my heart was burning with a physical fire. I marvelled, you may be sure, at how this burning in my soul leapt up, and at its unanticipated comfort. It was so vivid an experience that often I put my hand against my chest just to see if I could feel any cause for the heat outwardly! But once I knew that it was purely a matter of inward, spiritual nature, and that the burning sensation was not from carnal love, I realized it had to be a gift from the Creator. Accordingly I was glad, and melt with a desire for a greater experience of love, especially on account of the inflow of

the sweetest pleasure and spiritual delight with which that spiritual flame comforted my mind. Before this comforting warmth came to me, shedding its sense of devotion within, I frankly believed that no such experience could come in our present state of exile, for truly it enflames the soul just as if a real fire were burning there.<sup>2</sup>

Third, if we live under the New Covenant, we, like Paul, will never lose heart (2 Cor 4:1). This is a preeminent theme in the new order. Although the world is falling apart, all is well, because nothing, not even our worst behavior, can separate us from the love of Christ. Thus we never lose heart. We do not have to be in control of everything, manipulating others so that they love us. We have love from the very Source of love himself, a purer, greater, more transcendent love than anyone else can provide us. This security allows the Christian to live in quietness and peace. Some Christians seek the limelight, parading their godliness for all to see, but not those who live in the New Covenant. The distinguished pastoral theologian, Thomas Shepard, wrote, "A Pharisee's trumpet shall be heard to the end of the town, but simplicity walks through the town unseen."

Fourth, New Covenant Christians are ardent lovers. They are neither possessive nor manipulative. They are pilgrims whose sweet glance and focused eye draw you not to themselves, but to the Savior whom they focus upon as they march toward Zion. Thus, love becomes the dominant mark of their lives. This is the glory of the New Covenant. May this be our legacy.

Traian Dorz, that great spiritual leader of the Lord's Army (an evangelical denomination within the Romanian Orthodox Church), found acceptance and security in the transcendent love of Christ during his 16 years in a Romanian prison. I will close by reading one of his poems, written from his prison cell:

Here where You are, O Jesus,  
I have all that is below and above.  
I have my home and my country,  
And all that I would ever wish for.  
Here, only here, where You are, O Jesus.

Here, when I sit and listen to You,  
I have all heaven and much more.  
I have brothers, mothers and sisters,  
Thousands times more than others.  
Here, only here, when I sit and listen to You.

Here, lost in happiness  
I behold the heaven—large and shining.  
I hear angelic accords,  
And feel heavenly embraces,  
And fellowship with God.  
Here, only here, lost in happiness.

Jesus, most sweet God,  
You are my only wealth.  
You—my love and my life,  
You—my glory and all I desire.  
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, most sweet God.

1. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 275.

2. Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, in *The Law of Love: English Spirituality in the Age of Wyclif* (ed. David Lyle Jeffrey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 183-184.