

New Heaven and New Earth

Isaiah: Strength for the Weary

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Gracious God and ever blessed Father, we thank you for the Scriptures. We pray now for the ministry and blessing of the Holy Spirit that we might, once again, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

Our Scripture reading comes from Isaiah 65. This is the last in our short series of great texts from what is more or less the second half of the prophet Isaiah. This morning Isaiah 65 and verses 17 through 25.

17 "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. 20 No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed. 21 They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. 23 They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the LORD, and their descendants with them. 24 Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear. 25 The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain," says the LORD.

Amen. May the Lord add his blessing to the reading of his holy and inerrant word.

Human beings are hope-shaped. We were created to have hope, to have a sense of destiny, to know why we are here, what God intends for us. Augustine caught it when he

said famously in his "Confessions" that our hearts are restless until they find that rest, that sense of purpose, that sense of being, that sense of fulfillment, that wholeness, that shalom that can only be found in God alone. When John at the end of the first century wants to give Christians hope, they are facing persecution, they are facing death, they are facing the ill treatment of a Roman empire and what does John do? Well, he goes to this passage. He goes to Isaiah 65 and he cites this passage of hope, "I will create a new heavens and a new earth." And it was that hope that people saw. It's the reason, I think, why the church grew at the end of the first century, spread throughout Europe and beyond, because people saw that Christians had hope. They had a sense of purpose.

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth." You notice the text begins with the word "For." It's giving you a reason. It's explaining how the promises that are spoken of in the preceding verses, verses 13 through 16, are going to come true. What are those promises? Well, briefly he talks about those who are hungry and those who are thirsty and they will eat and they will drink. There are those who cry now in anguish but they shall sing for joy. If you look at verse 15, for example at the end of the verse, "his servants he will call by another name." It's a promise that God's people are going to be called by another name, reminding us, I think, of the story of Abraham. Then you notice in verse 16, "the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my eyes." Isaiah, of course, is speaking in a context where there is Babylonian captivity either on the horizon or it has already begun and Isaiah is speaking into that context. There is trouble in the city, there is strife and discord, there is an ugliness about it, and he's making a promise here, God is making a promise here through the prophet Isaiah of a time when joy and singing, when troubles will be no more, when God's people will be given a new name.

The passage that precedes the one we're looking at this morning divides very clearly between those who can be assured of these promises and those who cannot. There are two ways, there is a broad way and a narrow way and he's speaking here about the narrow way that leads to eternal life. He says three things in this passage that I want us to think about. First of all, in verses 17 through the middle of verse 18, a new creation. Then from the middle of verse 18 through verse 20, a new city. Then in verses 21 through 25, a new community. A new creation, a new city, a new community.

He begins with a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth. And you'll notice three times in these verses you have the verb "I create." It's the same verb that opens the Bible in Genesis 1, that God created the heavens and the earth. Isaiah, I think, is quoting the passage in Genesis 1 but he's talking now about a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth by the sovereign power of an omnipotent God. He will bring into being new heavens and a new earth.

He's not talking here about heaven. If I were to ask you this morning what you believe about heaven? What happens, say, to a believer who trusts in the Lord Jesus? And what happens to that believer a second after they have died, after their physical bodies are dead? And we believe that their souls go immediately into the presence of the Lord Jesus and there to await the resurrection of the body, the second coming of the Lord Jesus, and so on. But that's not what's in view here. He's not talking about heaven, he's talking about

the new heavens. This is Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." He's talking about the sun and the moon and he's talking about this planetary system of ours, and he's talking about the galaxies, and he's talking about the universe, the universe that you and I can see and touch and feel. He's talking about that kind of environment, a new heavens and a new earth. It will be new but it will also be physical and temporal and spatial and there will be laws of physics, but perhaps a newness to them, stretching our minds, stretching our ability here to understand.

I'm often asked the question and we've been here before: are there dogs in heaven? We're not talking here about the intermediate state, we're talking about the final state in the new heavens and the new earth. Will there be dogs in the new heavens and the new earth? People ask me that question. I've been asked it many many many times and my answer is always the same and it's, "Of course there will be. Why would there not be? What kind of new heavens and new earth are you expecting?" Because the Bible here is talking about something tangible and something physical. He's talking about a restoration of creation. Creation is currently under a curse. Creation as Paul says in Romans 8, creation groans and travails in birth waiting for the renewal of all things. At the present time, creation is subject to what Paul calls a futility. There is something frustrating about creation in its present existence. It promises things but it doesn't provide them. There is a principle of frustration endemic within creation as we know it.

And here the prophet is, well, he wants to take you on a journey. He wants to take you to another realm. He wants to, as it were, pass between a parting in the curtains of space and time and he wants to take you to somewhere else and he's saying God is going to create a "new heavens and a new earth and the former things shall not be remembered." The word "former" in verse 17 is reflecting the use of it back in verse 16 because the "former troubles are forgotten." This existence is full of trouble and trial and difficulty and pain and heartache and loss and frustration but all of those things will be forgotten in the new heavens and in the new earth. It will be perfect. There will be no sorrow and no pain and no hurt. You won't remember them.

Well, will there be a memory of bad things in the new heavens and new earth? Yes, I think there will be. We will remember the cross. We will remember forever, I think, what was done to the Lord Jesus on our behalf. We will always have that memory but what about bad things that happened to us? And I think the sense of it here is that the good and the joy and the perfection of it will so overwhelm us that it is as though the bad things will altogether have been forgotten. They don't rise to the surface anymore because the good and the joy overwhelms.

And you notice in verse 18 he uses the word "forever." This is an eternal existence of a new heavens and a new earth. Lewis Carroll, the author of "Alice in Wonderland," Lewis Carroll has a wonderful line in the book in which Alice is talking to the White Rabbit and she says to him, "How long is forever?" And the White Rabbit says, "Sometimes it lasts only one second." And the White Rabbit is reflecting what "forever" means when we sometimes use that word. "I love you forever," and then within a second we have broken it. The promise is gone. It lasts only for a second. But here forever means forever. It

means eternity. It means everlasting. God is going to create a new heavens and a new earth.

Well, you either believe that or you don't. You either live, as it were, with your minds locked, as it were, in what you can now see and what you can now understand, or you can believe in the transcendent. Or you can say, "No, there is more to life than what we can see. There is more to life than what we can touch. There is more to life than what we presently experience." There is a hope here and it's altogether a marvelous and exquisite hope, a new creation.

And secondly, a new city. A new city and you see that in the middle of verse 18, "for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy," and then the beginning of verse 19, "I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people." He's talking about a new city. You remember, of course, how John, the Apostle John takes this up in Revelation 21 and he describes the new city. Ezekiel does something similar in the closing chapters of his prophecy. And John describes the city in terms of gems and so on, and a sea of glass and so on, and a river that comes out of the city, and he describes it in all of its detail.

A city. Cities are places of great potential and influence. They bring together talent and enterprise. Cities can do things because of the collective that the individual cannot. Man's first attempt at a city was the city of Babel and it wasn't, I think, that there was something wrong with the formation of a city, I think we were always meant to have cities, but it was the use of the city in a way that defied God and brought down the judgment of God and the division of languages and so on as a curse. Isaiah, of course, is referring to that as he talks about not Babel but Babylon and the eventual destruction of Babylon and how John in the Apocalypse in the book of Revelation also speaks about the destruction of Babylon.

A new city. We talk these days about urban development and the social reconstruction of the city and so on, and city renewal and revival. We talk about revitalizing the heart of the city and sometimes that works and sometimes that hasn't worked quite so well. And people talk about, well, they talk about bringing culture back to the city. Whatever that means. Bringing culture back to the city and it sometimes has been somebody else's idea of culture. Well, God is going to create a new city. Some of you are civic leaders and some of you work in the city and some of you are engaged in revitalizing the city and as Christians we have a part to play in that, I think, and God has strategically placed us here in the very heart of the city and we have a responsibility to the city. And there is a responsibility that the elders of this church take very seriously, and one of our greatest responsibilities, of course, is to bring the Gospel to the city; to see the city renewed spiritually and by the power of the word of God and the transformation of the city.

Well, God is saying here through the prophet Isaiah, "I'm going to make a new city." He calls it Jerusalem. I don't think he's talking about literal Jerusalem. This is a figure, this is a metaphor of a gathered people, "my people," his covenant people dwelling together. Notice what he says about the city, there shall be heard in it, "no more the sound of weeping and the cry of distress." Of course, Isaiah is speaking in the context of a

Babylonian invasion and destruction of the city of Jerusalem. There was much weeping in the city of Jerusalem as Isaiah sees the future, as he saw the destruction that Babylon brought upon Jerusalem, and he's using that now as a metaphor. People had fled the city. People had been taken away from the city, the city that they loved. Some of you are back here for Thanksgiving and you wish you lived in Columbia. Well, perhaps. These exiles in Babylon wish they were back in Jerusalem, back home in the city that they knew and the city that they loved, the city with which they were familiar, and that's a concept that Isaiah is using here.

What will the new heavens and the new earth be like? Well, it will be like the city and it will be like the city of Jerusalem, and it will be like the city that I'm familiar with only better and without the weeping and without the pain and without the loss. He says here, "I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people."

A new creation and a new city and then, thirdly, in the latter section of the text in verses 21 through 25, a new community. "They shall build houses and inhabit them." He's talking about fruitfulness. You notice how he goes on, "they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit." Well, that's part of the problem of the world in which we now live, we do things but we don't often reap the rewards of what we're doing. There is often a frustration. We do something but it doesn't grow. I planted rhubarb in my garden and but it never grew. I spoke to it and gave it all kinds of things and looked up stuff on the internet but it never grew. It's pathetic. I think it's barely still alive but it won't grow and it frustrates me because I like rhubarb.

But there will be a fruitfulness to what God does here. They shall enjoy. I think what he means here in verse 21, "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat," but in the new heavens and the new earth we will enjoy life to the full. I think that's what he means. To the maximum. We will get out of it much more and then some from the labor that we put in.

There will be none of the pointlessness. You know, this world, how does the book of Ecclesiastes talk about it? It talks about that word "hevel" which is translated "vanity." All is vanity. All is pointless. There is a pointlessness. There is a frustration. There is a vanity to work and play and all that we do in this world but in the new heavens and the new earth, there will be fulfillment and fruitfulness.

Again in verse 23, a familial blessing, "They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the LORD, and their descendants with them," reflecting something that he has said back in verse 20, "no more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days." Well, that speaks to some of you who have lost children, who have lost little infants, mothers who have miscarried. And in this new creation, in this new city, in this new community there will be none of that.

And he uses a metaphor and this is a metaphor about people living to 100 years old. Of course you will live forever but it's a metaphor. We will live out the fullness of our existence like trees that are hundreds of years old. That's the metaphor that he uses. There will be no death. Donald Gray Barnhouse, a minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church in the early middle period of the twentieth century, he lost his wife and was raising a daughter and one day as he was trying to minister to his daughter about the loss of her mother, they are driving along and a removal truck passes them by on the road, overtakes them and the sun is low in the sky and it passes a shadow, the truck passes a shadow on them and it suddenly occurs to him and he says to his daughter, "Which would you prefer, to be hit by a truck or to be hit by the shadow of the truck?" And the daughter, of course, immediately said, "To be hit by the shadow of the truck because it cannot hurt you." And he said, "Yes, and that's what happened to mama. She was hit by the shadow of death but death couldn't hurt her." It's a little glimpse of what is being promised here.

Then in verses 24 and 25, fruitfulness, familial blessings, fellowship. Fellowship. Well, what young folk today call community. A sense of belonging together. And this community, first of all, with God. "Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear." I think what Isaiah is trying to say here is that in the new heavens and the new earth, our minds and our affections will be so at one with God's will that as soon as we speak God will answer. No, that's not true here, is it? We sometimes are trying to perceive what is God's will because we lack wisdom but there as soon you speak God will answer. Such will be the communion, the fellowship that we enjoy, the intimacy that we enjoy with God.

And not just with God but within creation itself. "The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox." And this is reflecting something that the prophet has spoken of earlier in chapter 11 of the prophecy, "The child shall put his hand in the cockatrice den," and so on in that passage. What does this say? Does this mean that in the new heavens and in the new earth animals will all be herbivorous? I don't know. That's the metaphor that's being implied here and perhaps we shouldn't stretch the metaphor too far. Perhaps the metaphor is suggesting harmony and fellowship and communion. A world of perfect peace and tranquility.

What could possibly bring such a state about and who can possibly do that? And the answer is, "I will create it," God says. Three times he says it at the beginning. "I will bring it into being. I will speak and it shall come to pass, a new heavens and a new earth."

And to what purpose? You remember Peter in his second epistle in the final chapter of that epistle, Peter cites this passage about God creating a new heavens and a new earth and he says, "Since all these things are going to be destroyed, what manner of people ought you to be in all holiness and godliness?" What is the purpose here? What is the point of what Isaiah is saying? So that you and I might live with the hope and an expectation. The world is looking for hope. We have been through a year of politics where people have no hope. They have no sense of fulfillment. They have no sense of wholeness. Live for that which lasts, that's what Peter is saying. Work for that which lasts which has an eternity to it.

We were created, you see, we were made to have a story. We're not just the blind accidents of a universe that is always churning, to quote someone. That's what someone said, that we are just blind accidents of a universe that's always churning. We are more than that. We were created with a sense of purpose. We were created in the image of God. We were created with a sense of desire for fulfillment.

So is all this just a pipe dream on this Sabbath morning after Thanksgiving? Is this just another example of Christianity's pie in the sky? You either believe this passage or you don't. There is no middle ground here. And the prophet is saying to you and Peter is saying to you at the end of his epistle and John is saying to you at the very end of the Bible: we were created for more than this. This too shall pass. And if you allow your minds for a minute to expand, an existence that you cannot even begin to fathom is coming at the second coming of the Lord Jesus. A new heavens and a new earth in which those who trust in the Lord Jesus, and those only, will enjoy this gladness, this fulfillment. It's a hope. It's a certainty. The question is this morning: is it yours?

Father, we pray this morning as we reflect on this passage, there are aspects of it that just completely takes our breath away; to imagine living in a world where there is the complete absence of pain and sin and disease. We read in this passage the curse will still remain on the serpent and all who follow him. There is a heaven and there is also a hell. But we thank you, thank you this morning from the very bottom of our hearts for our hope, a certainty that in Jesus Christ there is the promise of a new creation and a new city and a new community. Lord, so grant to anyone here this morning, listening this morning whose lives have no sense of fulfillment, who have no sense of hope, who are caught in the frustration of life under the curse, that you would arrest them today, bring them to Jesus Christ that they might see in him the purpose of life, the meaning of life, the purpose of their own existence, to repent of sin and to trust in him and to know and experience the joy of anticipating that one day we shall dwell in the new heavens and the new earth in which glory and righteousness exists. So grant it we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.