

Title: Far as the curse is found
Text: Isaiah 65.17-66.24
Theme: God looks to the humble, forever
Series: Isaiah #56
Prop Stmnt: Our standing before God has never been based on what we can do for God, but is based on what Christ has done for us, which can only be understood when we give up trying to do something that God needs.

We have come to the final sermon in our series through the book of Isaiah. Days like this are sobering. Having begun my 24th year caring for you and being cared for by you, preaching to you and listening to you, I know that I have preached more sermons in my past than I will in my future. In the days to come I will preach my last series, and one day, I will preach my last sermon. So, I am burdened. My concern is first of all personal. I never want to preach because it is my job. I do not want the task of preparation to replace my soul's engagement with the text. So, I come to the end of this book with questions. How has the truth of this book gripped my soul? Are my affections for Christ, are my desires and longings for God's fame, is the true appetite of my soul more set upon God and his promises or was I satisfied with just doing my job for another year? (I was grateful for the note from one of our 5th graders last Sunday who told me that she was hoping that I would keep my job this year.)

I cannot ask these questions of us as a congregation unless I ask them first of me. It is not enough for me to be moved emotionally in the delivery of a sermon. The truth of God's word must grip my very affections. I remain one, who is constant need of grace, in constant need of change preaching to brothers and sisters who, like me are in constant need of grace and constant need of change. I know, theologically, even to a certain level experientially, that my only hope and your only hope of grace and change is in Christ. My hope is not found in you thinking well of me, or of my delivery. You, thinking well of me will not rescue you from yourself and it certainly will not rescue me, but you thinking rightly about Christ, and trusting him, and delighting in him, and embracing him, and resting in him, and enjoying him and seeing him for who He is; Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Suffering Servant, Mighty Warrior, and Coming King will rescue you. Therefore, I wonder; have I pointed you to Christ? Have you seen Christ with the eyes of your heart in this book? He is on every page. His promises, his ministry, his passion, his kingdom, his plan, his purposes, his heart, his character, his birth, his life, his preaching, his death, his resurrection, his restoration of all things is all here. In amazing detail, it is all here. 700 years before he was born, Isaiah wrote about him because Christ is infinitely more important than the northern kingdom, the Syrians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the exile and restoration. World empires and colossal battles are blips on the screen of history when you realize that history is His story. Have you seen Christ? Do you trust Christ more than you did before, or do you still trust your job? Do you trust Christ more, or do you trust your skill? Do you trust Christ, or do you trust your friends, your reputation, your money, your savings, your success, the success of your children, your negotiating abilities, etc.? Do you trust Christ?

I know that going through Isaiah at times may have felt like protestant purgatory, because the emphasis of this book in the beginning was decidedly on judgment. But the depths of God's righteous judgments only made us aware of what we have been rescued from and it revealed the heights of our salvation and the sweetness of our redemption. Isaiah shows the hope of God's grace, even in the midst of God's righteous judgment. The stage was set in chapters 1-5 as we are made aware of a people whose religion was a formality. It was their tradition. It was their national identity But God was not truly their hope. Their religion was a means to make them great. Preaching to people who do not realize that they have a problem is nearly impossible. Isaiah needed to see his problem before he could address others. So, Isaiah was given a vision of God (6) and was commissioned as a prophet. He was charged with declaring God's Word until the cities were wasted and the land was desolate and the people were taken away. Isaiah was true to that calling and wrote and preached a message of warning (7-39) about what would happen if, instead of trusting in God, the nation of Judah chose to trust the other nations and their gods. The warnings are clear because every nation, every person who puts their confidence in anything other than God is literally without hope. But, judgment will not have the final word. Chapters 40-48 begin to unpack why there is hope, even in the midst of judgment. That hope is found in God's unmerited grace. That grace is revealed pre-eminently in the Servant, the Suffering Servant who will come and bear the sins of God's people (49-55), thus showing the righteousness, the grace and the Sovereignty of God to the nations (56-66). So, today we come to end. This last section captures the entire theme of this book without sounding like a summary.

To the nation of Judah who will be conquered by her enemies and will go into exile into Babylon because of her rebellion against God, there yet remains hope. God will not leave her there. God will not only bring her back to her land, but God will come to her because she cannot save herself. She cannot stop making a mess of her life and nation. God is going to provide for her what she cannot provide for herself, and what he is going to do for her, he is going to do for people all over the world. God is sending a Savior! There is yet hope even in judgment because our God saves. He will use judgment upon his own Son, the Messiah who will come and will die on a cross as the sacrifice in place of sinners, as the means to effect and provide a salvation that will satisfy his justice and unleash his grace. It is God who will secure this pardon, because people cannot do it. But, this pardon that God secures does not rescue everyone. This pardon, while sufficient for all, is only applied to those who humble themselves and in faith accept it. So, here is the big idea of this final text and this book. God guarantees a glorious future for those who are truly humble and will restore them in a way that gloriously exalts his grace and truth.

Isaiah is preaching a message of hope to people who are going to lose everything and go into exile. Most of them will die in Babylon. He continues to preach a message of hope to those who are returned to the land, but discover that Judah does not retain her former glory, and continues to be at the mercy of her enemies. Over and over he pleads with them, in spite of the ongoing rebellion around them, even by their own people, in spite of the continual oppression by their enemies, to hope in God. He even promises (65.16) that one day the former troubles will be forgotten and will be hidden from our eyes. Can we really believe that? Is that really true? Is it really true that one day, all of my struggle with

sin, all of my shame, all of my hurt, all of the sorrow, the relentless hound of illness, and the disappointment that I (we) experience not only in others, but in ourselves, will finally be done and over with? How do I know that this will be true? (v.17) The only way is if God remakes us and this world. He is remaking us through Christ, and will do the same to this world. That is why...

1. **God guarantees a glorious future...** (65.17-25)

Are you surprised to read here in Isaiah of God promising to create a new heavens and a new earth? Isn't that something that God promised in the book of Revelation? As you can imagine this entire section has been studied in detail in attempts at trying to figure out whether this is referring to the eternal state, to the millennial kingdom or to something else. I am not going to take the time to give you the arguments for all of that because that would distract us from focusing on the main point that Isaiah was making. While the details are not spelled in with exact precision (which I believe is how God usually reveals prophecy that foretells an event), what is abundantly clear is that God is promising that the scars of sin, the ruts of evil, the curse of living in a world that is cursed by sin, the plagues of doubt, the battle for faith and all of the memories of remorse and shame will be completely eradicated and will never, ever return to haunt our lives or thoughts again. I take v.18 to be a reference to the New Jerusalem; the eternal dwelling place of the people of God. The place is a joy and her people are a gladness. Do you realize what this means? This means that the exhilarating satisfaction, the deliriously, overwhelming and captivating delight for your entire being is securely guaranteed as an inheritance for you.

Imagine this. Imagine that you were given 10 million dollars. Now, initially, that seems exciting, or thrilling, or freeing. But hold the phone. Do you really find the money itself to be exciting? No! It is not the money; it is what you imagine that the money will procure. Money is enticing because you think that it will be able to purchase things that will make you happy. It can purchase experiences that will make you feel important that will make you happy. It can purchase medical security for you, or your family that will make you happy. It can give you extra resources that you can give away to help others that will make them happy, and making them happy will make you happy. Do you see my point? We value money because it is a means for us to attempt to secure happiness for ourselves and others. But, what if, happiness for yourself was already secured? What if eternal joy, eternal security, eternal gladness, eternal delight was already guaranteed for you in a heavenly vault that could not be broken into, nor ever taken away? That is what God is promising. All of these delights are not found ultimately in the gifts that he provides, but in HIM the Giver! (19) God rejoices in his people because they are rejoicing and delighting in him. This relationship of eternal delight between the Creator and those in his creation who love him glorifies, delights, exalts, and makes much of the Creator Who in turn provides all that we need and could ever want. What if, you will never have to fear someone dying when they are young or building a house that someone else lives in, or working hard for something that someone else takes? These hopes mean something deeply to us because they uncover some of our greatest hurts? We know that life is fraught with pain. (23) There is pain for those couples who cannot conceive. There is pain for those couples who conceive and the child dies during the pregnancy. There is

pain for those couples whose child dies during labor, or dies in infancy, or dies in childhood, or dies as a student, as a soldier, as a young adult or adult. We live every day knowing at any second our phone could ring and our lives would be changed for the rest of our days. One accident. One diagnosis. One tragedy. We live on the edge. There is coming a day, when there are no edges! There is coming a day when the wolf and lamb are Facebook friends and the lion and the ox meet at Starbucks for hay. Notice by the way (25) that the serpent will eat dust. (Cathi is somewhat disturbed by this. Not by the snake part but she was convinced that heaven would not have any dust. Babe, if it is any consolation, I think this is a reference to dirt) But, this entire hope is not for all. It is only...

2. **for those who are truly humble...** (66.1-6)

These verses are devastating to those who believe that they can do something, build something, or perform some grand philanthropic fete in order to curry God's favor. This warning of judgment is aimed at those who think that they can put God into their debt by performing a service for him, like building (in this case re-building) the temple. When you presume that you can earn points with God, you vastly overestimate your contribution and vastly underestimate his glory. This is the very issue that we are going to see over and over in our study of Matthew. The enemies of Christ were not "the sinners" it was "the religious" people. Stephen quoted this passage to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7) and made the application to them. God is not impressed with their deeds. Trusting in your accomplishments only invites the judgment of God. They became enraged and killed him.

God is pointing out that it is impossible to contain him. While the earth is large, it is, in relationship to him, nothing more than the stool upon which his feet rest. This means that in comparison to God, we are like microscopic dust mites. Do you remember how the Bible describes the tower of Babel? This mammoth attempt to construct a building that would reach heaven was so puny, that Genesis 11.5 says that God had to come down in order to see it. In other words, it was in no danger of reaching heaven. God is not impressed with what we think that we can do no matter how moral, how religious, how dedicated and sacrificial it may seem to be. God is moved by the person who is humble, contrite in spirit and who trembles at his word. This verse reveals what true humility is. We may be tempted to think that humility is being self-effacing or is being quiet, shy, self-deprecating and perpetually discouraged. Humility is best seen in accepting God's evaluation and promise to you.

The person, who refuses to accept God's diagnosis of his soul's sinful condition is not humble, neither is the person who refuses to accept God's promise of forgiveness. Both claim to be exempt from God's Word. The humble person does give himself an excuse for disobeying God or for refusing to accept one of his promises. Some people claim to be so competent that they do not need God, while others claim to be so needy that they are beyond God's grace. The humble and contrite person trembles before God's word. This person places himself under the authority of God's word. If God reveals that there's an issue that needs to be addressed, this person accepts that and acts upon it. If God's word promises forgiveness and pardon, then, once again this person accepts that and lives

in light of that. If God promises joy and restoration through faith in him, the humble person accepts that and lives in light of that, even in the face of adversity. (5) Vs. 3-4 speak of people who appear to be very dedicated in their efforts and very zealous in their deeds, but, in their heart of hearts “have chosen their own ways.” (3b)

Take for example a person who volunteers to lead cleanup crews on work days at the church, who organizes storage closets, paints halls and gives generously in order to scholarship children to be able to go to summer camp. What do you do if this guy, who has helped pay for your child to go to camp, having no biblical grounds, decides to divorce his wife because they really do not get along? Do you feel the tension? The tension comes from thinking that because this person has been so dedicated in doing all of these things that the church should pretend that when he chooses to go his own way, that the church should simply look the other way. But, the person who, in knowing what the Bible says, refuses to submit to it, is not humble, nor contrite, nor placing himself under God’s word, but is expressing a heart of rebellion that is so offensive to God that God says (3) in essence that it does not matter how gifted, how dedicated, how sacrificial you are, your “ministry involvement” is as offensive as murder, defilement and idolatry.

In our search process for an additional pastoral staff member, I was introduced to a young pastor who after graduating from Southern Seminary was pastoring his first church. There were three deacons, one of whom decided that he did not want to be married to his wife any longer, and filed for divorce. The young pastor appealed to him to no avail, and then appealed to the other two men to go this man and plead with him to repent of this. They refused. In spite of seeing clearly what the Word says about divorce and remarriage, leadership, integrity, and how to address problems, they refused. Finally the young man, married with two young children, with no safety net, and no plan B, said, if they refused to deal with this, then he could no longer be the pastor. They accepted his resignation and he left and they will attempt to hire another pastor. The brother who told me about this was providing counsel to this young man through it all and said that this young man handled himself with grace and humility. Do you see the warning in this text? Do you think that because these men are “deacons” that they are given freedom to ignore the word of God? Their “service” to God is so offensive to him that they might as well bow down before Baal. But, God knows. (5) And God will respond. (6) The glorious future is guaranteed to those who tremble before God’s word, not to those who make their own paths, even if they are marked by religious involvement and titles. God knows our hearts.

3. **and will restore them in a way that**...(66.7-14)

Verses 7-14 give us a depiction of Jerusalem as the city of God that he designed her to be. In Isaiah’s day, certainly our day, she is not this now, but one day she will be. The eternal state of the people of God is called the New Jerusalem. I believe that this text speaks of that and describes her as a recipient of the love of God, the peace of God, and the provision of God and then as a source of God’s love, peace and provision to all of God’s people. This is ours through Christ. This is ours, not by effort, nor race, nor reputation, but is ours through Christ.

Which brings us to the conclusion and it is a glorious and sobering conclusion. In this season when we see Christ as a baby, meek, mild, humble and vulnerable, it is tempting to say, “Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay, close by me forever and love me I pray. Bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and take us to heaven to live with thee there” and completely forget that this baby is the Mighty Warrior who judges the earth, whose decrees will not be denied, whose word will not be annulled, whose kingdom will never be stopped, and whose throne will never end. When God restores all things for the glory of His Son, we will see the righteousness and mercy, the truth and grace, the justice and love of God all put on display. That is what these final verses describe.

4. **gloriously exalts his truth and grace.** (66.15-24)

Those who refuse to submit to God, who think that they are a law unto themselves will face him with no defense (15-17). These verses describe a world that is made up, predominantly of people who are in rebellion to God; even the religious ones. But, in the midst of this is a remnant. God has a people. These are the ones who in spite of being outnumbered, of being ridiculed, rejected, persecuted, and abused, they believe. The rebellious receive justice. The believing, the humble receive grace. The grace and all of its promises are summarized in verses 22-23. The words of Isaiah conclude (24) with a word of warning, a word of justice, a word of truth. This verse is OT language describing the eternal condition of the rebellious. Jesus quoted from this verse when he warned of the reality of hell. This is no game, nor are these words an idle warning. The glories of heaven are joy beyond belief and the sufferings of hell are maddening to consider. God, has graciously, mercifully revealed himself to you. He has provided warnings to you about your sin and has amazingly provided a Savior to accomplish a salvation that you could never earn. It is yours by faith alone. But, only the humble will be believed. Only the humble will share in his joy forever and ever.

The English Puritan, John Bradford was burned at the stake for his faith in Christ at the age of 45. As the fires were being lit, turned to the other Christian, John Leaf who was condemned to die with him and Bradford said, “Be of good comfort brother; for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night!” A few weeks before he wrote these words, “I am assured that though I want (have needs) here, I have riches there; though I hunger here, I shall have fullness there; though I faint here, I shall be refreshed there; and though I be accounted here as a dead man, I shall there live in perpetual glory. That is the city promised to the captives whom Christ shall make free; that is the kingdom assured to them whom Christ shall crown; there is the light that shall never go out; there is the health that shall never be impaired; there is the glory that shall never be defaced; there is the life that shall taste no death; and there is the portion that passes all the world’s preferment. There is the world that shall never wax worse; there is every want supplied freely without money; there is no danger, but happiness, and honor, and singing, and praise, and thanksgiving unto the heavenly Jehovah, ‘to him that sits on the throne’, ‘to the Lamb’ that here was led to the slaughter, that now ‘reigns’; with whom I ‘shall reign’ after I have run this comfortless race through this miserable earthly vale.”

Our God saves. To him be the glory, both now and forever, amen.