AN UNEXPECTED RETURN

Isaiah 52:7-12

God created humans to enjoy a relationship with Him, but humanity rebelled against Him and His plan. God nevertheless remained committed to His purpose and entered a covenant relationship with the Jewish people, choosing them as the nation through whom He would work to resolve humankind's insurrection. The purpose for which God selected the Jewish people encountered an obstacle – they rebelled against God just like the world God appointed them to help heal.

After enduring the Jewish peoples' rebellion for many centuries, God commissioned Isaiah to deliver a message of future judgment and captivity (*cf. Isaiah 1:1-31*). A couple of factors, however, complicated his mission. First, Isaiah received his mission more than 150 years before the events God tasked him to announce, which he declared to people living in peace and prosperity (*Isaiah 1:1-31; 2 Chronicles 26:1-15*). Second, God informed Isaiah that he would give his message to people with hardened hearts and that he would have to keep delivering it "until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste"[1] (*Isaiah 6:8-13*). Despite the longstanding hardheartedness of the people that prompted His message of judgment, God also commissioned Isaiah to announce His plan to protect a remnant of those He would send into captivity and to return them to both their land and their place in His plan.

This lesson will consider Isaiah 51-53, a section focusing on God's plan to bless the Jewish people. Those chapters reveal that God would bless them by returning to them and leading them out of their captivity, but that He would do it in an unexpected way – through a suffering servant (*Isaiah 52:13-53:12*). Therefore, we will consider Isaiah's presentation of God's surprising plan and how it establishes a precedent for His similarly unlikely plan for Christians.

"Awake, awake, put on strength O arm of the LORD" (*Isaiah 51:9-11*)

- Having announced the captivity into which God would send the Jewish people, Isaiah records their future complaint – they called upon God to "awake" and help them (*Isaiah 51:9*).
- Good reason motivated their expectation of rescue – God previously brought the Jewish people out of captivity in the exodus (*Isaiah 51:9-10*).
- The Israelites thus expected that God, in faithfulness to His covenant promises to the nation, would again lead His people in an exodus (*Isaiah 51:11*).

[1] All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

"Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem" (*Isaiah 51:17-52:6*)

- God responded to the peoples' complaint by redirecting it– they were the ones who needed to 'wake up' (*Isaiah 51:17*).
- God reminded them that the "devastation and destruction, famine and sword" they would experience came upon them as a "rebuke" for their rebellion against Him (*Isaiah 51:17-20*).
- The people also needed to 'wake up' so they would see what God promised to do – He would remove His wrath from them and put it upon their "tormentors" (*Isaiah 51:21-52:6*)

"The return of the LORD to Zion" (*Isaiah 52:7-12*)

- The promise to remove His wrath from the people led to God's second call for the people to "awake, awake" so they would be prepared for the redemption He promised to bring them (*Isaiah 52:1-6*).
- Isaiah clarified the "good news" of God's promised redemption – God would assert His sovereign rule and return to Zion, to Jerusalem to dwell with His people (*Isaiah 52:7-12*).
- God portrayed His promise to return to Zion and dwell with His people as a new exodus (*Isaiah 52:11-12*), a portrait that answered the people's complaint in Isaiah 51:9-11.

"Behold, my servant" (*Isaiah 52:13-53:12*)

- God's planned exodus and return, Isaiah revealed, would happen in an unexpected way – God would accomplish them through a suffering servant who would stand in His place (*Isaiah 52:13-15*).
- God's servant would not only stand in His place, but he would also stand in the place of the captive Jews – he would take upon himself the peoples' sins and allow himself to be killed so they could be healed (*Isaiah 53:4-12*).

Applications

- Isaiah announced that God would return His presence to His people through an unlikely figure – a suffering servant the New Testament identifies as Jesus (*cf. 1 Peter 2:21-25*).
- In a similarly unexpected way, God returns His presence to the world today through the lives of Christians, sinful people united into an unlikely family through Jesus (*Ephesians 2:11-3:10; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19*).
- We, therefore, serve as agents of God's rescue and play a key role in His plan to bless the world.
- We should be humbled and encouraged by the realization that God chooses to work through us.