

An Everlasting Name

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[0 : 00] There we go.

No? There we go. Hello, St. Silas. I'm Martin Ares, Senior Pastor here. If you're watching at home, you're hugely welcome. Glad that you could join us. Great to see people here who have been coming many years.

A number of guests here this morning are hugely welcome. We're going to be sharing the Lord's Supper together. And as we head towards that, we have this time in God's Word. Let's have our sheets open at Isaiah 56.

And there's some points there, so you can see where we're going with that on the other side. Or if you're at home, if you could grab a Bible. We're in Isaiah 56, as Alan read for us. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to His Word.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your Spirit, the Lord and giver of life. Thank you that He takes your Word and makes it a present Word to us today.

[1 : 06] So we pray, Holy Spirit, would you be with us now? Give us ears to hear your voice. Heads that can understand your truth. And hearts moved to respond in obedient trust.

For we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're starting a new series this morning in this final section of the book Isaiah.

Isaiah is a big book. He's an Old Testament prophet getting messages from God around 700 BC. And we've looked at this book in sections. So this morning is a new series in this last section.

And it runs from chapter 56 to the end of the book. And right at the center point of this section is a prophecy about a promised one who will come, a Messiah.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He's anointed me to preach and bring works from God of salvation and vengeance. And it's that prophecy right at the center of this section that Jesus used to launch His adult ministry.

[2 : 15] We read in Luke's Gospel how Jesus was in the synagogue and He took that reading and He read it. And He put down the scroll and the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on Him.

And He said, today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. So I take it that if we want to understand who Jesus really is and why He came, if we want to know the real Jesus on His terms, we need to understand this section of Isaiah.

This was where He pointed people to, to understand His person and work as He launched His ministry. And the people who originally got this prophecy were in a very similar position to us. It's not hard for us to apply these words to us today. Because it was written initially relevant for the people who came back into the area around Jerusalem.

They were God's people, Israel, but they'd been exiled. And they'd come back into the promised land around 550 BC. And so they're living as God's people, but life was a real struggle.

[3 : 25] It was hard. And they hear in this section promises from God about the future that God's going to bring for them and for the whole world. And they're told as well, how should we then live if we trust those promises?

So for us today, lots of the promises that we read in this section are a future for us as well. We're living in a more privileged position than them because we're living after Jesus has come, the Messiah.

And we see lots of promises fulfilled in His first coming and His dying and rising again. But like them, we're waiting for God to come and put the world right. And we're asking, how should we then live while we wait for Him?

And so this morning we get a call, the reason for the call, and the power to follow the call. So the call on how to live, the call to do what's right, comes in verse 1.

If you just have a look again. This is what the Lord says, maintain justice and do what is right. There's the call. And that's about how we treat other people, that we'd be concerned for justice.

[4 : 30] But the vertical dimension to the call comes in verse 2. So you see there, blessed is the one who does this, the person who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it and keeps their hands from doing any evil.

Now, honoring the Sabbath for God's people before Jesus came, that was a God-centered command. That's the vertical dimension to the call. So thinking about those in turn, doing justice, verse 1, is a call for us to reflect the character of God in how we treat each other.

And the Old Testament word for justice there, it's not just about making sure that people who do wrong are punished and maybe the people who do right are rewarded. It's more than that.

It's living with a concern for social justice so that in God's ideal community, people wouldn't need to be punished for doing wrong and people wouldn't need to be sued to make things even because the people of God, God's new community, would live with a generosity towards one another and a sense of equality and fairness and treating everyone with dignity.

And those values would penetrate the whole of society and there would be harmony among God's people. Now, these issues are massive in our world today, aren't they?

[5 : 59] This week we had the verdict come in on the killing of George Floyd, that it was murder and his brother said, now we can breathe again. And we've seen this great rising up across the world over the past year in fury about injustice, especially racial injustice in the world.

We've been praying about some of these issues together as Ruth led us. If you think about British politics, there's a lot of talk about leveling up, about how some people are marginalized, not necessarily in our country.

The leveling up language is not so much about racial injustice, but about the way that there are certain classes in our society who are left behind and not treated with the same opportunities, not given the same opportunities.

So there are deep concerns in our world. And for us as Christians, the primary place we practice this is in the family of believers. God's calling us as his people to be a community marked by the way we treat each other and the way we welcome anybody who wants to join us.

We treat everyone well, with value, as God's image bearers, and we're kind to each other. It's worth saying, I think, that in a British context in church, some of us have a problem with this that we just need to be aware of, which is that you get some churches that move away from having the Bible as their authority and kind of drift from believing in the meaning of the cross and the need for forgiveness and the exclusive claims of Jesus and heaven and hell.

[7 : 43] And sometimes you get churches that drift from that, but they keep busy being concerned with helping the poor and with campaigning for justice issues.

And because we see that happen, the temptation is that if we walk into a church that's making a lot of noise about helping the poor and mercy and social justice, we think, ah, this must be one of those drifting churches.

They've got distracted. They're not proclaiming Jesus to the people around them and saying, he's the way that you get saved to have eternal life with God.

They've just stopped believing that and they've watered it down to just being nice to people. And so we have this kind of filter that means that when we hear justice and mercy and help the poor, we sometimes, some of us would be tempted to think, oh, is that a distraction?

Whereas Isaiah 56 shows us, we hear God saying to us that concern for justice is part of being an all-of-life disciple.

[8 : 55] It's part of being an authentic follower of the living God. And if we're going to orient our personal lives and our community around the Bible, one of the fruits of that should be a concern for justice in our world.

Now, what might it look like? Primarily, then, it is about our own community. That's where it starts. The people then, Israel, with a believing community being called to maintain justice within themselves, it's less for them, then, about going to the pagan nations and seeing justice done around them, and more about getting their own community marked by justice.

And that, I think, we can bring across to us today, that it begins with how we treat one another in church. And maybe as restrictions ease, just one practical way that we reflect God's character in this, is that we come to church thinking, it's not just about seeing my mates coming to church. Maybe you could pray as you walk into church. God, please show me who you want me to serve today. And be consciously looking for the outsider. Who do I sit with? Who do I talk to outside? God, please.

[10 : 38] That we can do our job distinctively to people around us because of the way we value everybody with great dignity and the way we're looking to love people.

Maybe if you're a school teacher and there are children from less advantaged homes that you can show concern for in the way that you teach.

Not, of course, that people who are not Christians wouldn't do that. But as Christians, the Lord calls us to maintain justice in the way we go about our everyday lives.

We could think about our own, what God's given us and see this as a call to generosity with what we have. I feel slightly embarrassed saying this because one of the principles, right, when you're learning to teach the Bible in churches, a big principle is make sure you're never the hero of your own illustrations.

Okay, so I am aware that this is about something we've done. But I know that we don't get a lot of it right in my family. I know that I don't get a lot of this right. But just to share that one thing that's been a great joy for us as a family in the last couple of years is sponsoring children through the Christian charity Compassion.

[11 : 51] And it's a brilliant thing to get involved with because it personalizes the way you can show support for poor people in other parts of the world.

And you give money each month on the Compassion website. They have children on their waiting list in different countries of different ages. And you can sponsor a child and you give money, but you can write to them.

And they write to you and you get photos of them. And their well-being is cared for. Their family is cared for. They're given an education. They're introduced to the Christian faith. It's a wonderful thing.

And we found that great with our own children, that they've got a focus in their prayer lives, the children that we sponsor. But there are all sorts of ways, aren't there, that we can be generous with the money we have and the resources God's given us to help others.

I'm thankful that people in our church led our recent support for the night shelter for asylum seekers. And we've given that a great deal of support, actually, to one of the local high schools so that they can give it to families that they're aware of that needed food parcels.

[13 : 03] There are just ways that we can demonstrate and display God's heart for justice with the resources and the jobs and the relationships that God has given to us.

The second side of the call is in verse 2, and it's keep the Sabbath in verse 2. And you can see that it's a theme in verse 4, keep my Sabbath. In verse 6, keep the Sabbath without desecrating it.

It looks as though it was a litmus test for the people at that time. If they're keeping the Sabbath, it demonstrates that they are God-centered, that they are fearing God, trusting Him, waiting for Him. At that time, God's people Israel, under the Old Covenant, the Sabbath was a set day each week, from sunset on the Friday to sunset on the Saturday, where they had to rest from their work to remember that God reigns as King and to celebrate their rescue, their deliverance.

And the key for us is that connection between keeping the Sabbath and it proving God-centeredness. Because you could observe the Sabbath and not be God-centered.

[14 : 19] You could miss the point. And Jesus, in the Gospels, we see Him rebuking the Pharisees, the religious leaders, because they'd missed the point of the Sabbath. Boy, were they keeping it different.

They had hundreds of rules and restrictions that burdened people on what you couldn't do on that day. But it was no longer a day where they were enjoying God and taking time to worship Him and remember that He's King.

But true Sabbath obedience is about having a life centered on the reign of God and the rescue God gives us. So we have time woven into our lives where we rest and we enjoy God and we trust Him. Now Christians disagree on how the Sabbath comes through to us today. For some Christians, there is not... Some Christians think, as you read the New Testament, there's not a set day that we

have to keep anymore.

Rather, what we have to do is every day we have to rest in Christ, show that we trust Him and that we're waiting for Him to put the world right and bring the new creation where we'll rest forever.

[15:28] Others of us think that for us as New Covenant believers, there's still an ongoing command from God to keep one day special. That is my own personal view, that that's the best way to read the Scriptures on this.

But there's different views in our church and it's a difficult one to work out. So I think it's about looking at it for yourself and going with your conscience on it.

If you think that it's still important to God that we keep one day special, Christians tend to move it from the Saturday to the Sunday because that's the Lord's Day, the day that Jesus was raised.

And if we're going to celebrate and remember that Jesus is King, it's natural to do that on the Sunday, on the Lord's Day. So perhaps taking that day as a day when we prioritize worshiping with God's people and we set it apart as a way of showing that we trust God and we know that He's King.

Now whichever of those views you take of the Sabbath, the overriding point is having a God-centeredness to the rhythm of your life. We've all got routines in our lives.

[16:37] It's asking the question, when people look at my life, is the routine, the rhythm of my life marked by my faith in God, that I trust Him, that I believe Jesus is King and I believe that He's rescued me?

So that's our first point, the call. Secondly, we see the reason for the call. The first reason is because God is coming soon. Look at verse 1.

Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand. That is, God will come and He's looking for His people to obey Him while we wait.

The second reason is in verse 2. It's that God will bless people who display obedient trust. Blessed is the one who does this, the person who holds it fast.

But why is there a delay? Why is God delaying bringing His salvation that He mentions in verse 1? Well, in verse 3, He takes foreigners, those who are outside of the nation of Israel, and by rights, you can see what the foreigner should say in verse 3.

[17:44] The foreigner might say, by rights, verse 3, the Lord will surely exclude me from His people. They're not from the family of Abraham that received the promises of God's grace.

That was what Israel was. It was the ethnic descendants of Abraham. So if you were foreign, if you weren't ethnically Jewish, you were on the outside. And now, verse 3, the Lord says, let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, the Lord will surely exclude me.

And then have a look at verse 6 as He picks up those people again, outsiders. Verse 6, He talks about them being counted as God's people.

Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar. And the impact that would have on the people of God. My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.

And these were people who'd been gathered back together after the exile. But verse 8, the sovereign Lord declares, he who gathers the exiles of Israel, I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.

[19:12] So the house of prayer today isn't a building anywhere. It's the people of God. We're the temple of God. And we're being called to be diverse, to be a house of prayer for all nations.

And look, why is there a delay in God bringing the salvation He promises in verse 1? Why hasn't Jesus come back yet? The scoffer says, it's because it's not true.

Every day just goes on like the days before. There is no coming of the Lord. Do you sometimes wonder about that? Is Jesus really coming?

Isaiah says the delay, verse 8, is to gather. God is gathering. These are the days of gathering. A multitude that no one can count from every language and nation and tribe are being brought together as God's new community.

And our God Yahweh is saying, the Lord, if this is His attitude to the outsider, go and do likewise His people so that the world might be drawn in.

[20:19] The gathering can happen through us. On Thursday, one of my colleagues, one of the staff team here, asked us if anyone wanted an invite to join Clubhouse.

What is Clubhouse? I asked. Some of you might be asking. Others will think, I can't believe you don't know what Clubhouse is. So I found out it's an Apple-only community so that already there are

outsiders.

You have to have an Apple product. And to be on Clubhouse, you have to be invited to join Clubhouse by someone who's already in because they were invited.

So it's elitist, isn't it? It reminds me of the societies at my university. There was a dining society, the Asparagus Society. So pretentious.

How do you get into the Asparagus Society? You had to be invited. You couldn't be in unless you were invited personally. We were outraged by that. And then a couple of us got invited.

[21 : 21] And then suddenly, it seemed like a great thing. Elitism seems fine when you're on the inside. It's a terrible thing. Well, look, God's new community runs on the opposite principles to Clubhouse, if you like.

The vision is God chooses some outsiders and he brings them in to belong to him. And they display his concern to gather the nations by the way they treat other people.

people. They show always a warm welcome and they rejoice when people join them. Anyone can come in. The door is wide open. And as we show these values, as we display them, we shine in the world like stars in the sky.

And as we keep the Sabbath and do justice, people pick up as they see us that walking in the way of God's Word makes sense of the world. It's living well.

And they're drawn in and they become part of his temple, the house of prayer for all nations. And we rejoice that they've joined us. So that's the reason for the call.

[22 : 34] God calls his people to live in a way that draws others in. And as he's gathering the foreigner to himself, it takes sacrifice from us as his people to build our lives on him and show this kind of concern for others.

So why would we do that? We've heard the call and the reason for the call. Thirdly, we're going to think about the power to follow the call. So we've thought about the foreigner, but he also mentions another person in this section.

He mentions the eunuch. Eunuchs were castrated males and they weren't allowed under the Old Covenant, the Old Testament, to come into the temple. Like foreigners, they had to stay in the outer courts.

Now, why is that? There were lots of reasons in the ancient world why someone might become a eunuch. And most of them were bad reasons. There were beliefs around at the time that the body was bad and the spirit was good.

And so there was these kind of false beliefs that sex was bad. And so if, sometimes people would, males would get castrated to go and serve in pagan temples with these kind of wrong ideas about the body and about God.

[23 : 47] Other people might become eunuchs to get up in the world because you could get a significant job in government or power by becoming a eunuch. You were more trusted. And the Lord wanted to distinguish his people from these kind of practices.

So it was in the law that eunuchs were excluded. But alongside that if you were if you were childless for any reason a different reason in these ancient cultures you basically felt like you were a nobody. And that was true even among God's people that without children especially as a woman you felt you didn't have an identity. We see it in Hannah in the book 1 Samuel. She's childless not just because of her own sense of loss of wanting to be a mum but because she's a nobody in the world's eyes.

She's looked on as a nobody without children. There's a song isn't there you're nobody till somebody loves you. That's a song in our culture. And that's because in our culture we idolise romantic love.

We think unless you find a romantic partner you're not complete. That's a message in our culture. It's an idol. It's a false god in our culture. So we have you're nobody till somebody loves you.

[25 : 05] In more traditional cultures they might go further and say you're nobody until you have children. So that the eunuch that's the background to the eunuch saying in verse 3 I'm only a dry tree.

You see that? That's the eunuch saying because I won't have a dynasty because I won't have children who have children I'm a nobody. So what does God say?

What does God say for them for whom it was they were complete outsiders of God's community for they were outsiders in their culture what does he say for any of us for whom these issues are

painful?

God says when you come to me and you let go of your culture's way of becoming a somebody of having a name for yourself I give you something far greater.

So look at verse 4 but this is what the Lord says to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths who choose what pleases me who hold fast to my covenant to them I will give within my temple and its walls.

[26 : 17] So you see that's God saying the eunuch comes right in now access to God right into the temple I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.

You see what he's saying the one thing they most felt they wouldn't have when they come to God God gives them something far greater than that that more than fills them.

So here's the power to be transformed to be a community marked by different values when we realize that when we come to God and trust him God gives us an everlasting name.

These promises this prophecy this chapter has this incredible fulfillment displayed in Acts chapter 8 when Luke tells us about Philip. Philip is an early Christian evangelist he's probably judging by his name he's a he's a middle class well educated Jewish man who's seen that Jesus is the Messiah and he's taken to this road leading out of Jerusalem and he sees a chariot and he meets an Ethiopian eunuch.

So this is a foreigner and a eunuch who's come he's an important man he's the chief treasurer to the queen Candasi of Ethiopia and he's on his way from Jerusalem south to Gaza heading back to Ethiopia and he's reading the scroll of Isaiah this scroll maybe he's read this promise in chapter 56 why has he gone to Jerusalem?

[27 : 59] Luke tells us he went to Jerusalem to worship God maybe he'd read Isaiah 56 and seen that God welcomes the foreign eunuch but whatever reason he'd gone it was a dangerous journey it was a long journey and when he got there he would not have found what he was looking for because this is the temple that just a few years earlier Jesus had gone in and driven out the traders from because they're trading in the outer courts and there's no room for a foreigner or a eunuch so he's on his way back reading the scroll of Isaiah and he's reading chapter 53 just a few chapters before this where God speaks through Isaiah of a man who is pierced for our transgressions and by his wounds we are healed and find forgiveness and Philip Luke tells us takes that scroll and that passage and he explains to the Ethiopian eunuch all about Jesus and how now that Jesus has come as that one who was pierced for our transgressions anyone can come to God it doesn't matter your status it doesn't matter your past

God can wipe it away and God will write down your name forever in his book of life and the Ethiopian eunuch believes so Philip sees some water along the road and he says and he goes to baptize the Ethiopian eunuch so just picture the scene the middle class well educated Jewish man whose culture has told him his whole life to stay away from the foreigner and he's in the water embracing a sexually altered African man to baptize him and he goes down in the water with him and he brings him back up why would he do that all the cultural values of that time are turned upside down in the Christian message what makes it possible it's because they have the same name now chosen by God in Christ they are both brothers beloved children of God members of God's family forever it's when we can grasp the grace of God to us how deeply what Jesus has done transforms us what is achieved for us that it drives us to welcome the outsider and seek justice for them let's pray together maintain justice and do what is right for my salvation is close at hand gracious God and loving heavenly father we praise you that you are a saving God we praise you that your salvation is close at hand and we pray that you by your spirit would empower us and move us and enable us to keep the Sabbath and maintain justice and do what is right in your eyes and that through us you would gather still others to you besides those already gathered we