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What's the Point?

Isaiah 51:4 – 6

It was 1998, the year of the Karlstad Family Reunion at Camp Luther, in British Columbia, Canada. Everyone had begun to arrive, and we were excited! The cousins, the aunts and uncles from across the States were all there – the only slowpokes left to arrive were Grandma and Grandpa Karlstad. (pause)

We waited and waited, but they didn't come. No one seemed to know anything. (This was the age before cell phones, so all we could *do* was wait.) And then we received a phone call that my grandma had fallen and hit her eye. They were in the hospital. They discovered that her heart had stopped, and my fragile grandma hit the side of her face on a curb. And she might lose her eye.

I was in junior high at the time, and I remember praying fervently for the first time in my life. Through *tears*, I prayed that God would heal my grandma and allow her to keep her eye. I walked away from that time of prayer, hoping that God had heard me, but I feared the worst. I told my mom that I didn't think that God would heal grandma, because healing was something that I wanted. I told her that I believed that God wanted us to suffer.

I still remember the look of shock on my mom's face. "That's a pretty sad theology," she said. But what was I supposed to tell her? That's what I thought. I had begun to notice that pain and hardship were part and parcel of life, and it seemed to me that Christians experienced even *more* hardships than others. I didn't know *what* to think of God, especially when bad things happened to the people who loved God. (pause)

Based on our life experiences and personalities, we can conclude a whole *panoply* of things about God that may not be true or are simply incomplete. Perhaps we conclude like I did when I was younger, that God is a cosmic sadist, desiring to inflict pain on us. Or, we can conclude that God is distant and doesn't interact with our world. (This is called Deism.) Or, we believe that God's purpose is to support and comfort us; His purpose is therapeutic. Or, that God's purpose is to ensure our happiness and accumulation of things. (This is called Prosperity Gospel.) This is a small snapshot of the options; there are *so* many things that we can think and conclude about God, when we look to our experiences.

And we are fools if we *don't* take experience into account; experience is the way we learn who and what we can trust. It's *important* to pay attention to our experiences and what they teach us about the world.

Experience is important, but it's limited. Our memories aren't perfect, and our vision can be narrow. How often have you thought back on an experience, and you realize that you didn't quite have all the information? That now that you have this or that detail, it all makes so much more sense? That now that you have grown, you think *differently* about what happened? (pause)

We need *more* than simply our experience, something *more* reliable to anchor us and guide us, to teach us about who we are, who God is, and what the point of it all is. We need Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We recognize that we will never see everything or know everything perfectly in this life, but we continue to learn, to grow, and to be shaped by the Holy Spirit. As the Apostle Paul

writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). So, we approach life and one another in humility, recognizing that we are all in process, every last *one* of us. And we are gracious to one another and to ourselves, as we continue on life’s journey. Because we have a lot to learn, and we need the Master Teacher. (pause)

In Isaiah 51, God’s people had been scattered, and many of them lived in a foreign land, under foreign rule, in Babylon. By this point in the book of Isaiah, it had likely been a couple of hundred *years* since their exile and the destruction of Jerusalem. It had been so long, so it seemed only *natural* for the people to wonder whether or not God would in fact make good on His promise, to bring them back home. It would make *sense* if they wondered whether or not God could be trusted. Their experience for a couple of hundred *years* proved their situation unchanged; they were *still* in exile. If there was *anyone* who had reason to give up hope, it was God’s people.

But verse 1 of chapter 51 indicates that there is *still a remnant* of those who have hope, of those who seek the LORD. “Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many” (Isa 51:1 – 2). The LORD calls His people to remember, to go back to their beginning.

God called Abraham and made a promise to him, that he would be the father of many nations. Many years passed, and Abraham and Sarah were very old, and they did not have *one* child, much less many nations. And in the most *comedic* timing, in their *geriatric* years, God promised them a child, and God made good on His promise. If God could be faithful to fulfill His promise to a geriatric couple, *surely*, God would be faithful to fulfill His promise to His people.

God wants them to remember His faithfulness. He wants them to remember that Abraham was the rock from which they were cut, and Sarah was the quarry from which they were hewn. God’s people are the *fulfillment* of that promise from long ago! God is *faithful* to His promises!

The LORD will comfort them and will look with compassion on her ruins. “Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing” (Isa 51:3b). They will know the LORD’s goodness and faithfulness, and the LORD’s justice will be a light to the nations. Even the ends of the earth will wait in hope for God’s justice.

As God’s exiled people heard this, they likely had a particular view of what God’s justice would look like. Perhaps it sounded something like: blessings for them and curses for all who were against them. But Isaiah points to a different kind of vision, a vision of God’s justice being a light to the nations, a light to the entire *world*. God’s purpose was not just for the Jews; it was for *all people*. As the LORD told Abraham when He called him, his purpose was for all of the peoples of the earth to be blessed through Abraham. *Blessed to be a blessing*. (pause)

Blessed to be a blessing is a calling that many at St. Timothy’s take seriously. We want to steward this property well, so we host a large number of groups on campus, and even a church plant at Carter on Sunday mornings. We want to make sure that our neighbors are well-fed and treated with dignity, so we’ve expanded the facility of our FISH Food Pantry and placed it at the front of our campus. We want our neighbors to know that they are welcome here. The 126

quilts that our quilting group has so beautifully sewn will be given in love to our FISH clients. The boxes for Operation Christmas Child represented here is a small fraction of the 257 boxes assembled by St. Timothy's this year. Those boxes will be sent to children around the world, who will hear of the love of Jesus for them. The frozen poultry in the barrels will go to ensure that guests of CityTeam and FISH will eat well this holiday season. I've just brushed the surface.

There is so much, *constantly*, that is happening at this church, to love and serve our neighbors. And we want to ensure that what we're doing, we're doing not only with good *intentions*, but *wisely*. So a cohort of us are processing the book, "When Helping Hurts," honestly assessing our mission ministries, so that we can indeed be helping, and not hurting. (pause)

I am so thankful that this outward focus is the orientation, the vision, of so many at St. Timothy's. Because the point is *not* a Prosperity Gospel, the accumulation of wealth for ourselves. The point is *not* to live this life on our own, to just be happy, to simply be comforted by God, or even to receive the wrath of God. The *point* is for the kingdom of God to come on earth, as it is in heaven. It's not about me and it's not about you; it's about *all of God's creation*. It's about God's justice for *all people*. (pause)

The failure of God's people to enact justice was the *reason* for their exile. In Isaiah chapter 1, the LORD said that He was *tired* of their sacrifices, and their incense was *detestable* to God. He could not *bear* their worthless assemblies. In verse 15, God says, "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isa 1:15 – 17). (pause)

But despite God's pleas, they continued to take advantage of the poor and the marginalized. They refused to truly love what God loves, and they were exiled. Hundreds of years later, God was *finally* ready to bring them back, but He wanted them to understand the vision, that His justice would be a light to the nations (Isa 51:5). His salvation would last forever; His righteousness would never fail (Isa 51:6). (pause)

About 500 years later, God became flesh and went from place to place, preaching and healing. "The kingdom of God has come near," he [proclaimed]. "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mk 1:15b). In Luke 4, we find Jesus opening the scroll of Isaiah, and reading from chapter 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk 4:18 – 19). He rolls up the scroll, hands it to the attendant, and sits down. Everyone's eyes are fastened on him. And then he says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21b). And it doesn't take long for them to try to throw him off a cliff. (pause)

The *point* is the kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven. The *point* is God's justice for all people.

At times, it's difficult to *believe* that this is the point, because our life experience seems to prove otherwise. The poor get taken advantage of, and the church that we read about in the news, seems to care less. It seems *more common* to hear of churches trying to become big, important, have the biggest platform, or do whatever they want. It seems fewer and farther

between, to hear of churches whose purpose is to love their neighbor, and to be agents of God's justice.

But when we read Scripture and hear Jesus' words, we receive a consistent message, that the point is for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Justice, and our care for the poor and marginalized, is therefore the *fruit of our faith*. As James writes, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (Jas 2:17b).

So we pray that God's kingdom will come, on earth as it is in heaven, that Christ will be king from shore to shore! We pray that we will be the hands and feet of Christ, that justice would roll like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:24). This is the promise of victory: "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun does his successive journeys run; his kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moon shall wax and wane no more."¹ Amen!

¹ https://hymnary.org/text/jesus_shall_reign_whereer_the_sun