

Isaiah 54: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 54. Sing, O barren one who did not bear. Break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labour. For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord. Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out. Do not hold back. Lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes, for you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities. Fear not, for you will not be ashamed. Be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced. For you will forget the shame of your youth and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name, and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.

For the Lord has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your Redeemer. This is like the days of Noah to me, as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth. So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you. O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted. Behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of agate, your gates of carbuncles, and all your wall of precious stones. All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children. In righteousness you shall be established. You shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear, and from terror, for it shall not come near you. If anyone stirs up strife, it is not from me. Whoever stirs up strife with you shall fall because of you.

Behold, I have created the smith who blows the fire of coals, and produces a weapon for its purpose. I have also created the ravager to destroy. No weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their vindication from me, declares the Lord. In Isaiah chapter 53, the figure of the servant was portrayed, and his great work, the work by which the Lord's hand was laid bare before the nations, was described. In chapter 54, we see a woman who corresponds in many respects with the servant of the preceding chapter. John Goldingay writes, After the concentration on Miss Zion, in most of chapter 49 verses 14 to chapter 52 verse 12, the passage brings about a sharp transition in the focus on a male servant. The female figure then reappears in chapter 54, and as chapter 52 verse 13 to chapter 53 verse 12 follows on from chapter 52 verses 7 to 10, and develops some of its motifs, so does the portrait of the restored city in chapter 54 verse 1 to 17a, in relation to chapter 52 verse 13 to chapter 53 verse 12.

As the servant is the object of contempt, the woman is the object of shame. As the servant is to be exalted, the woman is to be beautified. As the servant will see offspring, so will the woman. As the servant will confound the nations and gain them as spoil, the woman will dispossess nations and settle towns they abandon. As the servant brings about shalom, the woman will enjoy a shalom covenant. With chapter 55, this chapter presents the glorious fruits of the Lord's redemptive work in his servant. Its opening might recall chapter 49 verse 13, which comes at the climax of the description of the work of the servant in verses 1 to 12 of that chapter, Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth. Break forth, O mountains, into singing. For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.

This chapter celebrates the wonder of the Lord's deliverance and the blessing of a renewed relationship between him and his people, after they have been put in right standing with him through the work of his servant. In earlier chapters, Zion was pictured as a woman who was bereaved of her husband, was sent away from him, and robbed of her children. In chapter 51 verses 17 to 20, for instance, Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering. There is none to guide her among all the sons she has borne. There is none to take her by the hand among all the sons she has brought up. These two things have happened to you. Who will console you? Devastation and destruction, famine and sword. Who will comfort you? Your sons have fainted. They lie at the head of every street like an antelope in a net. They are full of the wrath of the Lord, the rebuke of your God.

[5 : 20] However, the barren and forsaken woman would be marvelously restored, something already described in chapter 49 verses 18 to 23. Lift up your eyes around and see. They all gather, they come to you.

As I live, declares the Lord, you shall put them all on as an ornament. You shall bind them on as a bride does. Surely your waste and your desolate places and your devastated land. Surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away. The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears, The place is too narrow for me. Make room for me to dwell in. Then you will say in your heart, Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away. But who has brought up these? Behold, I was left alone. From where have these come? Thus says the Lord God. Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples. And they shall bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders. Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground, they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord. Those who wait for me shall not be put to shame. Barrenness is a very common theme in the

Bible, most notably in the story of the great matriarchs of Israel, Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. It is also a prominent theme at the beginning of the story of the kingdom, in Hannah, and at the beginning of the story of the gospel, in Elizabeth. The Lord's overcoming of barrenness also connects with his gift of children of promise, not children born merely of natural virility and fertility, but children that are born through the Lord's overcoming of the weakness and insufficiency of the flesh. As in chapter 49, the woman who thinks that she has no children will have to enlarge the place of her habitation to accommodate all of her offspring. In this she will be glorified beyond the woman who was married with many children. Her land would be repopulated, and her shame would be overcome. The shame of her barrenness and the disgrace of having seemingly been cut off by her husband for her unfaithfulness would no longer be brought to her mind. The explanation for all of this is found in the fact that her husband is the Lord. He is the one who both made her and will redeem her, and as the creator and lord of the whole earth, his power is sufficient. As when the prophet

Hosea took back the unfaithful Goma, the Lord would call back Zion to himself. Verses 7 and 8 contrasts the briefness of the period of time for which she was cast off, and the anger of that moment, and the everlasting love and the great compassion with which she will be restored.

Her restoration will not just be temporary. The Lord recalls the covenant with Noah, the promise that he would never again destroy the world with a flood. In a similar way, the overflowing flood of the Lord's wrath would never overwhelm and destroy Israel again.

[8 : 1 0] The commitment of the Lord's steadfast love for his people is firmer and more enduring than the mountains and the hills. Having compared Zion to a forsaken and restored unfaithful wife, in verse 11 the imagery shifts to that of a city. The Lord's re-establishment of Zion is going to be a great glorification. The Lord will rebuild it with precious and glorious stones placed in the most attractive settings. Zion's foundations and walls will be like the skilled work of a master jeweller, precious in his sight, something that he takes considerable care over, and a manifestation of his close concern and attention. Within the portrayal in Isaiah, Zion's relationship with her children was one of the most tragic aspects of her plight. Her children were taken away from her, they were unresponsive to teaching, and they suffered great hardship. However, now her children will be taught by the Lord. In this we might think of the children of Zion taking on the character of the servant, who is presented as the great example of the attentive and obedient son. As John Goldingay notes, the transition from the stones of the city to the children of the city is a shift that might be eased by the similarities of the words in the Hebrew. As the children of Zion are taught by the Lord, the healthy succession of the people is secured. One of the great tragedies of a nation or a people is when the relationship between the generations breaks down, either in decadence when the older generation does not lay up and prepare and advance itself into the future, or in revolution where the younger generation either turns its back upon or seeks to overthrow the legacy of their fathers.

A situation where each generation makes sacrifices for the next, while delivering a harvest on the sacrifices of the previous generation, is the ideal. The city will be established in righteousness.

This righteousness might be the saving justice of the Lord, or perhaps it is the uprightness of a city that is ordered after his law. The Lord would protect the city from all its foes, and any that rose against them would be destroyed. The Lord assures his people that because he is the one who created the weapon and the one who wields it, no weapon raised against them will be successful.

Likewise, all of their accusers would be dumbfounded by the Lord's vindication of his people. Many elements of this chapter might recall the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 to 37.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their guard, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, the Lord of hosts is his name. If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever. Thus says the Lord, if the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord. In reading the end of this chapter, we should recall the end of the preceding chapter concerning the work of the servant. The servant would make many righteous, and the end of this chapter talks about the vindication of the people of the Lord. We should connect the two. Likewise, we should see the servants of the Lord, as in some sense a multiplication of the servant himself. This is the seed, this is the generation of the servant that was promised. A question to consider. In Galatians chapter 4 verse 27, the apostle Paul cites verse 1 of this chapter. How might an understanding of the context of the verse in this chapter help us better to understand what Paul is doing with that text in his epistle?