



Steve Mann

Our devotions for this week come from Isaiah 54:1-56:8. Based on the content, the ancient audience likely feels hopeless and inadequate. Considering the historical setting of these words, this makes sense because the first audiences for this passage are Judean exiles living under Babylon's control. They would have had good reason to feel hopeless and inadequate, as they (and their ancestors) had failed to follow God's instructions and were thus reaping what they had sown (see the book of Deuteronomy). Years of selfish living rather than living for God had resulted in God exiling them from the land of Canaan to a foreign country. In Babylon, foreigners from Judah were marginalized, belittled, and mocked (e.g., see Psalm 137 and Lamentations). So the people of Judah had failed. It looked like God had abandoned them, and they could hardly blame him.

Have you ever failed God? Have you ever felt hopeless and inadequate as God's people? If so, this poem may also be for you! One thing about poetry is that it takes on a life of its own; it is not usually intended for just one audience.

I believe that the thrust of the poetry in Isaiah 54:1-56:8 is similar to the invitation that Jesus makes in Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 54:1–3

What gives value to human life? One of the best answers to this question is found in Genesis, which affirms that all humans have value and purpose because they are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–28; 9:6). But societies (ancient and modern) seldom answer this question by looking to the Bible. In the ancient Near East, a person's value was based on what they could produce. For example, a woman who had borne no children would have little value in the eyes of her society. In Isaiah, Israel is characterized as a barren, desolate woman. In herself, she has no hope of reversing her shame.

Sadly, our society also values people based on what they produce. In business we celebrate top earners, in academia we celebrate peer-reviewed publications, in grade school we celebrate the student of the month. People sometimes (often?) fall into the trap of comparing their accomplishments to those of others. Have you ever felt inadequate? Have you ever felt the pressure to produce in order to be noticed or valued? If so, this poem is for you!

In this metaphor the unmarried, barren woman is invited to sing, because she will have many children! Indeed, God says that her children will outnumber those of the successful women, so she should enlarge her tent. Her dependence on God will be rewarded, and she will boast in the Lord!

SONG: He Abides

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I know that your love for me is not based on my accomplishments, but sometimes I still feel inadequate. I cast this burden at your feet and place my trust in you today.

—Steve Mann

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 54:4–10

“For a brief moment I abandoned you.”

God’s statement here is surprising. Modern readers might think of the famous Christian poem, “Footprints in the Sand,” in which God affirms that he never actually abandoned the poet. Ancient audiences might think of times in the book of Joshua where God says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Despite its strangeness, the idea of God abandoning his people is not entirely foreign to Scripture. God’s people are invited to pray in such a circumstance (e.g., Psalm 22), and in Deuteronomy, God warns his people that he will send them from their lands if they turn against him and follow other gods (Deuteronomy 4:25–28; 29:19–29). The Babylonian exile was a time in which God did abandon his people. For a brief moment.

“But with deep compassion I will bring you back.”

While God admits that he *briefly* abandoned his people, the point here is that he is going to show compassion on them! Despite their unfaithfulness which led to exile, God affirms that he is still their Creator and Redeemer who will act in “everlasting kindness” (v. 8). He compares his commitment to them with the Noah covenant, a divine commitment that was unearned. Psalm 30:5 says that God’s “anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”

The band *U2* has a song titled, “Stuck in a Moment.” Are you stuck focusing on your failures? God isn’t. He may consider them for a moment, but his commitment extends past it and is everlasting!

SONG: Amazing Grace

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Our God, thank you for your grace. Please help me to live in response to your love today.

—Steve Mann

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 54:11–17

In the past few months, natural disasters have dominated the national news. Hurricanes have devastated Houston and Puerto Rico, and deadly wildfires have raged out of control in my own state of California. In the wake of these and other tragedies, some communities are fighting for daily survival. Eventually they will face the challenge of rebuilding, a daunting task that cannot be accomplished alone.

While the above conditions differ from Israel's situation in Isaiah, ancient communities likewise found themselves in need of rebuilding. Here God tells Israel that he will direct the rebuilding process, providing labor and materials. Furthermore, God will spare no expense!

God will also help them rebuild their society by teaching their children (v. 13). In Deuteronomy, God emphasized the need for Israel to teach their children well. This ensured that subsequent generations would follow him, resulting in blessing for the community. One of the failures that led to God's people going into exile involved their inability to adequately teach subsequent generations. Now God himself will become their teacher, and he will succeed in bringing *shalom* (peace) as well as establishing the community in *tzedaqa* (righteousness). This is good news—who wouldn't want God as a substitute teacher! This passage concludes with God assuring his people that when they face adversity, Israel will prevail against these forces because Yahweh will fight for them. He will not only rebuild their community, he will sustain them.

Are you trying to face a daunting challenge alone?

SONG: I Surrender All

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I know that there is no challenge too big for you to handle. Please take it from here.

—Steve Mann

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 55:1–2

The first verse of today's reading sounds too good to be true. We might wonder if Isaiah is about to give us a special credit card with a low introductory offer. Or, perhaps, we think that he is about to advocate raising taxes. Ancient audiences would likely also raise their eyebrows at this invitation. After all, how can you buy something without money, without cost? In fact, this invitation is similar to the vision found at the beginning of chapter 54, which speaks of having children without going into labor. The poet is trying to free the audience from a human perspective, a human imagination. It is not possible to do these things on our own power, but Isaiah's audience has been invited to live with Yahweh in charge. Jesus puts it this way, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26, NRSV). What if you didn't need money to afford to eat? What if you didn't need money to buy groceries?

The second verse seems to be directed to a different group, people who have money but do not spend it on food. The invitation here is to listen, spend wisely, and to enjoy the food!

Are you poor? Do you lack financial means? This does not stop you in the kingdom of God. Do you have money? Are you relying on your money instead of God? Come to think of it, if you have money, why not use it to sustain those who have no money? Money can be a blessing, but it is not the source of that blessing.

SONG: Softly and Tenderly

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, thank you for providing for our needs. Please help us to be wise with everything you give to us.

—Steve Mann

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 55:3–5

A recent Google search for Bible action figures yielded results that were predominantly action figures of David. While I am surprised that a Jesus action figure didn't come up, I'm not surprised at the marketability of David. I like David! If you're a Christian, there's a high probability that you like David, too.

The Babylonian exile took place some four hundred years after David's reign. Nevertheless, David still captivated the imagination of the Judean exiles. As they remembered the unconditional covenant that God had made with David (2 Samuel 7), some Judeans dared to hope that God might act in accordance with this covenant for David's people in Babylon (see Psalm 18:50; 89:3, 35, 49).

So when God extends to the Judean exiles the very covenant that he had made with David (v. 3), the community is given even more than they had dared to hope for! What an honor for this downtrodden and beleaguered group! Yahweh is speaking to lowly foreigners who have no social status, limited resources, and little hope—and yet God speaks to them as if they are world leaders who will be his ambassadors. They are to be a witness about Yahweh to the nations, who will respond to their call with great enthusiasm (v. 5). It reminds me of when Paul calls believers Christ's ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), and when Jesus tells a bunch of nobodies to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

We might think that successful ministries involve famous, influential leaders. But God often chooses to use those of humble means to reach the world he so loves.

SONG: Find Us Faithful

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, thank you for choosing me. Please help me to live as an ambassador of Jesus today.

—Steve Mann

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 55:6–13

The saying that God’s ways are higher than our ways is well known. I’ve noticed that this saying is sometimes used to answer questions concerning why God allows suffering in the world, or to deflect complaints about God.

The saying is used in this passage to explain divine actions, but they are positive actions stemming from God’s grace! The statement appears immediately after the invitation: “Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them...for he will freely pardon” (v. 7b).

We might wonder how God can freely pardon those who forsake their wicked ways (see v. 7a). And yet God will abundantly pardon the wicked. This is one of the scandals of Christianity: How can someone who has been wicked their whole life repent and turn to Jesus and receive life? When you see him in heaven, feel free to ask the criminal who said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” as he hung next to Jesus (Luke 23:39–42).

In yesterday’s passage, God describes the lowly Judeans as his witnesses to the world. Today’s passage is more instructive, so I wonder if the exiles are embracing their role as God’s ambassadors. After all, this invitation is both for God’s people and for the world (the “nations” in verse 5). These Judean exiles know from experience that Yahweh will abundantly pardon because he has done so for them! Still, this grace does not make sense. It is like expecting to have children when you have never been pregnant. It is like purchasing the finest food without money. How can this be?

SONG: And Can It Be That I Should Gain?

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, thank you for your grace!
Please help me to share that grace with everyone I meet.*

—Steve Mann

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 56:1–8

In this week's Scripture readings, we have seen Judean exiles receive the good news that Yahweh loves them and has a mission for them. Whereas yesterday's passage speaks of this ministry to the nations in a general way, today's passage extends the invitation to two specific groups: eunuchs and foreigners. Like the exilic community described as a barren woman in chapter 54, eunuchs might think that they have no value or purpose because they cannot reproduce. Foreigners are similar to the Judean exiles because they are at the margins of the community. God not only gathers the outcasts of Israel, but other outcasts as well (v. 8). Do you know anyone who would identify as a foreigner? I suspect that you do.

Do you know anyone who would identify as a eunuch? You may think not, but I suspect that you do. In the ancient world, a eunuch did not readily fit into the categories of male and female. Statistically, eunuchs would have been a small percentage of the population, so it is striking that the Bible makes sure that these humans are invited into the community of God's people (see Acts 8:27–39).

Here in Isaiah, one way that these outsiders could become a part of Yahweh's people involves keeping the Sabbath. Stopping on the Sabbath became a distinguishing marker for the Judean community in Babylon because no other group followed such a practice. Here Yahweh says that he will accept the worship of the eunuchs and foreigners who join with Yahweh's people, "For my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (v. 7).

SONG: I Want To Be More Like Jesus

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, please help me to see people as you see them. Jesus, please help me to show your love to the outcasts of my society.

—Steve Mann