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Outcast and Stranger

Isaiah 56

Introduction

Have you ever been in the situation where there's a party coming up and you are not invited? Many Scotland fans have felt like that for the last 27 years. There have been 6 World Cup finals in countries all over the world, and Scotland weren't invited.

Now in Scotland's case we weren't invited because we weren't good enough. But imagine not being invited to a party for something that wasn't your fault: something different about the way you look, or the way you act. Something that others point out to make you feel an outsider.

And then imagine the situation being reversed. To be included, valued, befriended, brought into something you didn't think you could be a part of. Wouldn't there be a great joy in that inclusion? The Scotland fans certainly seemed to feel joyful on Tuesday night.

This morning's passage looks at two groups of people who have been excluded from the sanctuary, and how that situation is going to be turned around.

Context

We're starting a new section in Isaiah here, at least by the way some people divide up the book, so let's take a look where we are.

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah warn of coming judgement, but also promise a coming saviour. The judgement comes in the form of the Assyrians carrying away the northern kingdom of Israel, never to be returned, and then the Babylonians carrying away the southern kingdom of Judah.

The first time I spoke here was from Isaiah 39, where Hezekiah had visitors from Babylon. He showed them all his treasures, and Isaiah warned that the Babylonians would return and destroy Jerusalem.

Chapters 40 to 48 are written to a people in exile, comforting them with the news that God hadn't forgotten them. He was a better God than the false gods of the nations, and he was going to restore them to their city.

The last time I spoke, we were looking at chapter 49, the start of a section from 49 to 55 looking at God's rescue plan - the Messiah. He was to be a branch, an arm, a servant, an anointed king, and he would save his people by suffering for them. And not just them, but for the nations.

We're now entering the final section, chapters 56 to 66. Now some of the commentators say this section is kind of reflective: it follows a pattern into the middle and then reverses that pattern on the way out. Think of it like a sandwich:

The bread outsiders are the start of chapter 56 and the end of chapter 66. The theme in these passages that hold the rest of the section together is that of all nations joining in God's covenant family.

Inside these crusts we have a layer of contrasts. Chapter 56b to 58 and 65 to 66a look at how God deals with the wicked and also with the righteous, who he calls his servants. Maybe with these extreme opposites we can think of this as a layer of marmite.

Inside the marmite we have two prayers, in chapter 59 and 63 to 64. They're essentially prayers of repentance, turning to God, so maybe we can have a slice of cheese in our sandwich, since that's milk that has turned.

And, right in the middle, we have pure honey: three beautiful chapters from 60 to 62 looking at God's servant announcing God's kingdom.

So we have a marmite, cheese and honey sandwich. I don't expect you to think that's going to be a tasty sandwich, but I'm hoping you might remember it as you go through the next few weeks.

What Does God Want?

The first two verses in this chapter are basically God's recipe for success for the faithful person. What does God want from the believer? A heart for what is right. Notice this isn't a call to piety, sacrifice or ritual, but just to do what is right, to treat people justly, to give to the Lord what is rightfully his and to stay away from sin.

This isn't a recipe for salvation, it's the recipe for the life of someone already saved.

Brought into the Fold

And now the Lord come to the big news for this chapter:

> *Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,*
>
> *"The Lord will surely separate me from his people";*
>
> *and let not the eunuch say,*
>
> *"Behold, I am a dry tree."*
>
> *[Isaiah 56 v 3]*

This is a huge turnaround. These are two cases of people who "weren't invited to the party". The foreigner was very much seen as separate from God's people. They even had a word for it: gentile. You were either a Jew or a gentile, and if you weren't born a son of Abraham, you were excluded from some of things of God. Likewise if you were a eunuch, or not whole in body some other way, you weren't allowed in to experience the same blessings as those whose bodies were complete. In particular for eunuchs, they would miss out on the blessing of children, and that was important for the Jews.

It looks like God is going to turn things around here. "Let not the foreigner say", "Let not the eunuch say". Well, let's take a closer look. We'll start with the eunuchs.

The Eunuch

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron, saying, None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.

[Leviticus 21 v 16-20]

That's a list, isn't it? Some of these are quite obvious conditions, and some are more hidden. And when we start to examine ourselves we might find that many of us would fail the test. Any blemishes? A birthmark, a spot, a mole? How big a blemish does it have to be to before it's disqualifying? I'd certainly fail because I'm colour blind and short sighted. But would any of us pass? Surely every one of us has something wrong with us.

And maybe that's the point. God has a standard for those who may approach him. But that standard is perfection, and it's impossible to reach. The Jewish priests must have come to some practical compromise, but the picture was still there: none of us are worthy to approach God.

I often wonder about the sacrificial lamb too. The priest had to examine it to make sure it had no spots or blemishes. But again, if you look close enough, you can always find something that's wrong. None of the priests really deserved to be there, and none of the sacrifices could really pay for our sins.

At least for some who had physical ailments, there was a small hope. Maybe their sons would be allowed to take part. For the eunuch though, even that hope was lost. He could have no sons. His line would end with him.

But what message is this that Isaiah brings from the Lord?

For thus says the Lord:

"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,

who choose the things that please me

and hold fast my covenant,

I will give in my house and within my walls

a monument and a name

better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name

that shall not be cut off.

[Isaiah 56 v 4-5]

What a turnaround. For the ones who had no hope there was now hope. For the ones who would be cut off, they will be given an everlasting name. "In my house", "within my walls". The eunuchs, who were definitely not invited to the party, would now be invited in.

And that's good news for all of us, because we all have our flaws, we were all excluded really, and now there is a way, a new covenant, that means we can be brought into the sanctuary. And of course that way was the Lord Jesus Christ. Because he was flawless. Not one sin, not one blemish on his life. He was the only one able to walk into the Holy of Holies, through the veil, and pour out the blood of his sacrifice on the mercy seat.

Hallelujah, what a saviour!

Do you remember the story in Acts 8 of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch? When the good news had been presented to him from Isaiah, he believed, and said "what prevents me from being baptised". An Old Testament scholar might have said "well, there's only so far you can approach the Lord". But under the new covenant Philip could say "Come on in, Jesus has made you whole".

The Foreigner

Foreigners were to be treated well in Israel. They had much the same rights as the Jews and also had to abide by the same laws while they were in the country. But they were still separate from the children of Israel. Ezekiel made it clear that the foreigner shouldn't be allowed in the sanctuary:

"Thus says the Lord God: No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, of all the foreigners who are among the people of Israel, shall enter my sanctuary.

[Ezekiel 44 v 9]

But again Isaiah says there's going to be a change:

"And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples."

[Isaiah 56 v 6-7]

In our kids church sessions on Sunday mornings, we sometimes sing a song called Father Abraham. "Father Abraham has many sons, many sons has Father Abraham. I am one of them and so are you. So let's all praise the Lord". And the funny thing is we don't have any Jewish children in kids church. We have quite a multicultural church, so we have Scots, Afghanis, Azeris, Hondurans, El Salvadorans, Iranians, Nigerians, Portuguese, Pakistani, Sierra-Leonian, Mexican and even occasionally English kids. But none of them are physically of the line of Abraham, even though one of them is called King David.

And yet the Bible teaches that is we are saved then we are spiritual children of Abraham:

for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

[Galatians 3 v 26-29]

We are the children of promise, brought into the family of God, that his house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Isaiah finishes this section with verse 8:

The Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares,
"I will gather yet others to him
besides those already gathered."

[Isaiah 56 v 8]

The last time I came we were in Isaiah 49. God spoke to Jerusalem, the deserted city, and promised that she would be full of people again. Not only the returning exiled Jews from Babylon, but people from all nations would fill her streets. Here is that promise again.

End of the Wicked

The end of the chapter really starts off the marmite section of the sandwich. Isaiah is going to contrast the wicked with the righteous, and talk about how God deals with them. It starts here with leadership. They are supposed to guide the people, but also protect them. Isaiah compares them to watchmen and shepherds, who should always be on the lookout for danger, always ready to warn when trouble is coming and step in to defend them when needed.

How do Israel's leaders do? In verse 10 we learn they are blind, mute and lazy. What good is a watchman who can't see? Or one who can't shout a warning? Or even one who can't stay awake to watch out.

In verse 11 he says they are greedy, ignorant and selfish. What use is a shepherd who puts himself before his sheep? Who has no understanding of how to guide them? Who must be first in all things? We need leaders who serve, who care for the people, and who give of themselves for the sake of others.

And finally in verse 12, the leaders are drunken, caring not for what the future brings. After all, surely it will be much the same as today, and we managed today OK.

There's more to come over the next couple of weeks, but my takeaway from these verses is that we should look for leaders who will serve.

Conclusion

Sometimes people claim the Bible is full of contradictions. And it can seem that way. In some passages we find that those who are not whole in body should not enter the sanctuary. And those who are foreigners cannot enter in either. Here Isaiah says that both the eunuch and the foreigner will be brought into the holy place. How can both these things be true?

The important thing to remember is that God does not change, and his standards do not change. But God can change us. The physical rules are just a picture of spiritual things. No one who is imperfect in spirit can enter the kingdom of heaven, but God has made a way: his perfect son paid the price for our sins and made us righteous, perfect in God's eyes. The foreigner, not part of the family of God, can never come before God. But God has made us part of his family: by adopting us in we are now children of God, and spiritual sons of Abraham.

Just like the Scotland football team, we weren't invited to the party because we just weren't good enough. But by a miracle we have been made good, and are now invited in. Let's rejoice in that.