

**“A Message for God’s People in Babylon” | Isaiah 55:6-11
(Scripture Set to Worship)**

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(Discussion questions on page 11)

Today we’re looking at a passage that gives God’s message to the people of Israel during a time when they were a cultural minority living in a self-confident, aggressive, and hostile pagan culture.

A cultural minority in a hostile pagan culture.

That should sound familiar.

We are moving in our society to a situation similar to the one Israel faced in Babylon.

And if you weren’t convinced of that yet, all you had to do to be convinced was watch the Olympic opening ceremony last week.

- Ceremony evoked Christian imagery in sacrilegious manner
- Then transformed that Christian imagery into a celebration of the pagan god Dionysius
- Dionysius is the pagan god most associated with debauchery, especially debauchery that involves distorting created categories

Back in 1940, over 80 years ago, the Nobel-Prize winning poet T. S. Eliot wrote that Western societies faced a choice “between the formation of a new Christian culture, and the acceptance of a pagan one.”

- If he could have seen that Olympic opening ceremony, I wonder which path he would have thought we chose

Eliot wrote, way back in 1940, “the problem of leading a Christian life in a non-Christian society is now very present to us” (“Idea of a Christian Society, pp. 10, 17).

The problem of living a Christian life in a non-Christian society.

The more our cultural situation becomes like the one Israel faced when they were a cultural minority living in Babylon, the more the challenges they faced become our challenges.

Today looking at a message God gave his people in that context

- This is a passage that shows up in the Anglican liturgy arranged to music, and recommended for use in weekly prayers
- The Book of Common Prayer calls it the Second Song of Isaiah
- It comes right at the end of a long section of Isaiah, chs. 40-55, that lay out the message God has for Israel to help them to survive and thrive while living in exile in Babylon
- Works as a conclusion to that section, summarizing and encapsulating the message to God's people living in Babylon

We'll see first the basic thrust of the message

- living in Babylon forces upon Israel the clarity that comes from knowing that they must make a choice.
- They must choose one of two paths.

Then we'll see two things God provides to help his people

- as they take up the journey of walking the correct path

II.

Look with me at Isaiah 55. It's on page 615 in the pew Bibles.

Isaiah 55:6–7

[6] "Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;
[7] let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

These two verses work together to communicate a single point, and that point is that the people of Israel face a choice.

- Whether they like it or not, they have to choose between following the ways of Babylon and following the Lord.

That's a choice that had been haunting Israel for a long time.

- The whole story of Israel from the time of Moses on is the story of Israel rejecting the Lord and choosing the ways of Babylon and the other pagan nations surrounding them

- God uses the pagan nation Babylon to judge Israel
- As an act of judgment on his people, God raises up Babylon to conquer Israel
 - o They systematically destroy the city of Jerusalem by fire
 - o They pull down its walls
 - o Then Babylon did something it often did when it conquered other kingdoms:
 - it deported the most prominent citizens of Judah: professionals, priests, craftsmen, and the wealthy. The lower classes, referred to as the "people of the land," were allowed to stay.
 - Babylon would do this to conquered peoples to break their independence. The idea was that the people left behind would be without cultural leadership and would quickly assimilate, while the segments of the society that drive culture would melt into the pagan metropolis of Babylon
 - So Babylon takes the leading people of Israel, the cultural and political leaders, and marches them 500 miles, largely across desert, to reach the destination Babylon has designated for them to settle: the Chebar Canal, which is south of the city of Babylon.

And now that Israel has faced this cataclysmic judgment, God is telling them: finally you must realize that you have to choose

- While in Israel, you paid lip service to me but actually followed the ways of Babylon
- Now you are in Babylon, in the belly of the beast
- Will you let the beast chew you up and digest you, assimilate you?
- Or will you finally forsake your wicked ways and return to the Lord

There's an ancient rabbinical commentary that describes, right near Jerusalem, a temple the ancient Israelites built for a pagan god. That temple had seven chambers, and in the innermost chamber there was an idol, a statue with its hand outstretched holding a large copper plate, and on the copper plate was a pan to light fires in. No one could enter this chamber without bringing a child.

That's the kind of practice Moses warned about in Deuteronomy 12, as Israel was standing on the edge of the promised land, about to go in after crossing the desert from Egypt. Moses told them, when you go into the land, don't ask about the gods of the nations who live in the land, and don't copy the way they worship their gods, because they do for their gods every abominable thing that the Lord hates. And he says they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. (Deut 12:29-32)

There are good reasons the apostle Paul says that there is no agreement between God and idols (2 Cor 6:16).

Pagan gods have not historically been very interested in protecting infants, or children, or the disabled, or the poor, or the vulnerable.

In fact, the Old Testament tells us in detail that Israel engaged in all kinds of pagan worship and occult practices. And it led them to serious moral failings, in basically two categories.

- The first category is the kind of thing just mentioned: the perversion of justice and the abuse of the vulnerable
- And the second category is the wild promiscuity that the pagan gods encouraged
 - o That was promiscuity of all the types we might think of today
 - o And it was not just off in the shadows—it was, just like Moses said in Deuteronomy, performed for the pagan gods, meaning incorporated into religious ceremonies and done openly and celebrated

Today we're seeing those same kinds of things more and more.

But even eighty years ago, T. S. Eliot saw clearly the problem of leading a Christian life in a non-Christian society. And he wrote, "As for the Christian who is not conscious of his dilemma—and he is in the majority—he is becoming more and more de-Christianized by all sorts of unconscious pressure: paganism holds all the most valuable advertising space" (Idea of a Christian Society, 18).

Israel needed the clarity that came from being certain that they must choose—if they just muddled along, they would be assimilated into Babylon.

We need that same clarity.

- It is one thing to choose to be a Christian in a non-Christian society; it is another to live a Christian life in a non-Christian society
- The rest of our passage points to two things God provides us to help us

III.

Look back to our passage with me. Isaiah 55, v. 8.

[8] For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

[9] For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

What is God providing Israel with here in these words? A fixed point. The Greek philosopher Archimedes once said, “Give me a fixed point to stand on, and a lever, and I can move the Earth.”

God himself is the only truly fixed point, the only truly objective standard by which everything else can be judged.

So God points Israel to his own surpassing superiority in goodness, knowledge, and power

- God is asking Israel to compare their own character, and the moral character of Babylon, to his own
- Compare vv. 7 and 8—the ways and thoughts of the wicked, the ways and thoughts of God
- God wants us to compare the thoughts and behaviors we find in the world to his
 - o so that we can know his glorious superiority
 - o and so that the problems in what the world is offering become apparent

Think about what happens when you catch a cold or some other virus. Viruses produce proteins with structures that are similar to those used in our own cells. And they do that in order to fool our immune system, so that it doesn’t recognize them as foreign and try to resist them. To prevent itself from becoming sick, your body needs to be able to tell differentiate the virus proteins from the authentic, healthy proteins of your own cells.

Or consider the experts who identify forgeries in art. It can be hard to detect a forgery—but if you’re able to place the suspected forgery up next to the authentic work of the artist, you can start to notice differences in the brushstrokes, the shapes, the color variations.

Think about those exhausted Israelites finishing their 500 mile march across desert, away from a Jerusalem burned to the ground. Think about them arriving in Babylon.

- They would have resented Babylon as an enemy
- But they would have been impressed by its size and power and attracted to its beauty and culture
 - o The same king that conquered Israel, Nebuchadnezzar, historians think built the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon

- Apparently he built them right during this period, maybe twenty or so years after the exiles from Jerusalem would have arrived and settled by the Chebar Canal
- To resist assimilation into Babylon, Israel would need to see not only its power and beauty but also the injustice and ugliness mixed in

To thrive in Babylon, Israel needed to have an analytical grid to use to evaluate every different cultural practice and belief they came across. And the place to find that grid is in God's transcendent character, that is so high above ours—as high as the heavens are above the earth—that when we hold up our world and ourselves against him, our sins and errors and imperfections stand out like bright neon lights

One of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century was a man named A. W. Tozer. Tozer became a Christian as a teenager. He was working at a tire company, and one day walking home he saw someone preaching out of the street. He stopped to listen, and heard the preacher say, "'If you don't know how to be saved ... just call on God, saying, 'Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.'" So he went home, went up to his attic, and prayed that prayer. Five years later, and with no formal training in ministry, he accepted a call to pastor a church. He spent about half a century as a pastor and an author and a theologian, right through the first half of the twentieth century into the 60s.

- The major concern that drove Tozer's writing and ministry was worldliness seeping into the church
 - He thought Christians were become de-Christianized by all sorts of unconscious pressures, just like T. S. Eliot had predicted they would
- And so the central focus of Tozer's half-century of study was the character and attributes of God
 - It's like we're on a muddy hill, and we can't get our footing, so we're sliding down
 - The very gravity of the culture pulls us down toward worldliness
 - And the only way to get our footing is to plant our feet beneath the mud on the solid ground of who God is
- Tozer wrote
 - "The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him."

As our culture changes around us, we need to follow Tozer's example and spend time studying God

- Study his attributes, his character, his actions and words in Scripture.
- Devote time to it every day, every week.
- Nothing else will anchor us like a clear vision of who God is.

So, the message to God's people in Babylon first of all provides them with the clarity of knowing that they must choose, for if they do not, the gravity of the society will pull them down that muddy slope into paganism bit by bit

- And to help them, he gives them the solid ground of his own surpassing greatness

IV.

The remainder of the passage points to a second thing God does to help.

Look at v. 10 with me.

[10] "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
[11] so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
[12] "For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

There's an analogy developed here between water and God's word.

- When rain and snow fall, they don't just disappear, they have an impact. They do not fail to water the soil and bring growth.
- In the same way, when God sends his word from heaven through his prophets to tell Israel that he will lead them out of Babylon, it's not like the prophets just speak those words and the sound fades and that's it. When God says something through his prophets, he is declaring that future will come about by his sovereign discretion.

And the future that God wants Israel to look to as they sit under the shadows of the ziggurats of Babylon is God's ultimate victory, over not only Babylon but all the world that is in rebellion against him and his ways.

- God will lead his people out of Babylon in joy and peace

- And he does, they return to Israel and rebuild the temple
- But he also uses the language of cosmic renewal, of new creation
 - the mountains and hills will sing, and the trees will clap their hands

God by his word delivered Israel from Babylon, and God by his word will bring heaven down to earth to cause it to bloom into a glorious new creation.

Archimedes said he could move the world if he was given a fixed point and a lever.

- The fixed point is God himself—his presence, his character.
- The lever is the word of God.

In an earlier chapter, the book of Isaiah says

[4] Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
...
All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
...
[8] The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.

The written word of God, his promises and teachings delivered through the prophets and apostles, is extraordinarily powerful

- Babylon's ruins are buried beneath the earth, but Isaiah's prophecy is preserved perfectly, word for word

The Museum of the Bible has on display a Bible that was printed in the Soviet Union, during the time when distributing Bibles, or bringing them into the country, or even leading a Bible study could get you put in prison, or worse.

- Christians came up with a method of printing called silk screen printing that used printing presses that were cheap to put together and quick to take apart. If the KGB showed up, you could just tear the whole thing apart and throw it all in the fire.
- The silk screen printing presses were an innovation that American Christians came up with, and they came up with it after they ran out of ways to smuggle Bibles into the Soviet Union.
- At one point Americans were using a remote-control boat to deliver Bibles. They would pilot it by remote to just off the Russian coast, and then press a button to make the boat sink itself. After it sank, it would release a homing signal that

would allow Russian Christians to find the boat and get the Bibles stored in water-proof containers.

My wife works on religious persecution cases in the Middle East, and she's mentioned that in many places Christians distribute Bibles printed in invisible ink.

- You use a black light to read them.
- When authorities come, they look just like any blank notebook

Because God's Word will not return to him empty, God's people can never be entirely discouraged. We know the end of the story, and we know we're walking toward that end as we attempt to obey the Word, even doing so in countercultural

But it isn't just through the written Word that God will accomplish his purposes

- The Word became flesh, and we have seen His glory (that's John 1:14)

Our passage is in Isaiah 55. Just a couple of chapters earlier, Isaiah introduces a figure, the suffering servant.

- Isaiah tells he will be high and exalted
- But he also says that he will suffer horribly
 - o he says all of our iniquities and sins will be laid on him
 - o and by his wounds we will be healed
 - o it's because of what we learn in Isaiah 52 and 53 about the suffering servant that Isaiah 55 can so confidently proclaim God's mercy toward those who turn from their sins
 - o The great colonial era preacher Charles Spurgeon once said that the words, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways" can be applied to the cross. He said, "The atonement was a thought which never would have crossed man's mind if it had not first of all been revealed to him by the great Father. The divine way of lifting up the poor from the dust and the needy from the dunghill, by his rich, free, omnipotent grace, is ... far above human invention, and out of man's range of thought."
- Isaiah tells us that this suffering servant will rend the heavens and come down, bringing heaven down to earth and pulling up from the earth the glorious mountain of God where all of God's people will dwell with him in glory forever
 - o The book of Revelation gives us an image of heaven opening as a rider on a white horse appears. And it says his name is the Word of God. And from his mouth comes a sharp sword to strike down the nations.
 - o Babylon would surely have appeared intimidating to the small and social marginalized Israelite remnant living there

- In ancient documents, Nebuchadnezzar, the king who brought Israel into exile and built the hanging gardens, was referred to as “King of the Universe”
- But Revelation 19 says that emblazoned on the robe and on the thigh of the Word as he rides his white horse to bring heaven down to earth is the title, “King of kings and Lord of lords”

V.

I had coffee with a friend recently, and we were talking about current events and things going on in the world

- And over the course of the conversation three separate times he came back to the same thought. He said, “I keep reminding myself that my first citizenship is in heaven.”
- The world is changing around us, and it can be disorienting and disconcerting
- We should count ourselves blessed, though, to be living in a place where no one would dream to need to print Bibles in invisible ink
- And if we compare the church today to the beleaguered remnant of Israelites huddling on the outskirts of Babylon, the difference is staggering, in terms of numbers and power and influence and the degree to which our tradition has shaped our society
- And yet T. S. Eliot’s words from nearly a century ago look prophetic today
- So we must take seriously the similarities between our own circumstances and those of Israel in Babylon
- In Isaiah, God speaks to those circumstances
- He points out to us that we must definitely and intentionally choose to follow him, not only as one-time profession of faith but also as a constant and repeated habitual selection of one path, one manner of life rather than another
- As we walk that path, his own transcendent superiority is the only thing that can steady our feet
- And we can look forward toward the vision of the rider on the white horse bringing heaven down with him to establish the glorious city of God

Pray with me. Lord, you are great and greatly to be praised. You number our days. By your providence you have brought us here to this place in this time. Guide us by your transcendent goodness and power and fix our eyes on your Son our Savior, the Word of God, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Why was the choice facing Israel something that has caused them so much trouble for so many years?
2. What parallels do you see between Israel's situation in Babylon and ours today?
3. When have you seen situations that illustrate the need to make a choice between the world and the Lord?
4. How can studying and meditating on the transcendent nature of God help us to sift through the various movements and practices that we find popular in our culture?
5. In what situations have you found it important to hold on the reality that God's final victory is assured by his Word, written and incarnate?
6. In what ways have you or people around you compromised with worldliness, and what steps can you take to get yourself back on the right path in those areas of your life?