

The God of our Salvation

In our First Reading today, Isaiah shifts our attention away from the world where God's people are in conflict with the enemies of God. In that world, the law thunders judgment and crushes human pride, while the gospel quietly makes God's former enemies into His people by faith. In this world, a ruthless people war against God and His people. Nevertheless, God protects His own people in that struggle. Isaiah now shifts our focus with the words "*On this mountain.*" The mountain is Jerusalem, Mount Zion, or simply Zion - terms that apply to the Church of God, the gathering of believers. The unbelievers fade away, and we see only the believers for a few verses. What wonderful blessings God has prepared for His people! The spiritual blessings described here echo throughout the entire Bible. They are dense and heavy with grace and rich with comfort.

First, note that the Lord acts in these verses. He will "prepare a feast," "destroy the shroud," "swallow up death," "wipe away the tears," and "remove the disgrace." We also note how Isaiah punctuates these promises by his familiar exclamation point, "*For the LORD has spoken.*" No human action occurs. All people receive what God graciously provides. Why does God do this? We must not lose sight of the object of God's actions. He does this for all people - "all peoples," "all nations," "all faces," "the whole earth." God has provided spiritual blessings not only for the nations of Judah and Israel. He has provided rich blessings for all people - all of humanity of all time. Such is grace.

God acted for no other reason than His own good pleasure and will. No one deserves what God has done. In fact, it is just the opposite, as this portion of Isaiah so clearly points out. How often God called upon this prophet to announce the great judgments to come. Judah and Israel deserved such punishment and judgment. So did Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon. Every human stands under the same condemnation; we are no better than any of them. Yet God prepared rich blessings for all people simply because He desired to love rebellious and sinful people. God is love, and because of His love, He provided this rich spiritual banquet.

The banquet Isaiah described is one of the richest the ancient world could imagine. The language emphasises that it is the best. The wine was aged in order to increase its colour and quality. The meat was the best that the ancient world could provide. It was fat and rich. In our day we are taught to avoid fat, but in the ancient world fat was highly desired. The banquet is the banquet of God's grace. The Saviour-God - the LORD Almighty - has prepared the best His love could offer: rich compassion, wonderful forgiveness, and every satisfying food for the soul. God's people eat of this banquet of grace every time they hear the gospel or make use of the sacraments. As God's people read and study the Word, they eat from God's banquet table and receive nourishment for their souls. Through the gospel in Word and Sacrament, God dispenses forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

And we find more blessings of God's grace. The words "shroud" and "blanket" here seem most naturally to be taken from the practice of wearing a veil when mourning the death of a loved one or wearing a covering when confronted by great misfortune and calamity. Death is the scourge of every society and every culture. Death's icy grasp shakes every culture. When it comes to a family, the survivors often cover themselves with clothes of mourning. The individual customs vary among all the cultures of the world, but the pervasive heartache and sorrow of death is universal. In our contemporary world where pictures carry poignant images across language and cultural barriers, none is more powerful than a picture of a survivor mourning a tragic death. But the covenant-God of Israel, the LORD, has an answer to death. "*He will swallow up death for ever.*" When one swallows something, it disappears and ceases to exist. Human effort cannot remove death. Medicine may prolong life and remove some of life's hurts and aches, but it cannot inoculate against death or radiate death until it disappears. Only God can swallow up death. And Isaiah tells us that is exactly what the Lord will do.

With death overcome, God takes one more step. He will "*wipe away tears from all faces.*" Human tears flow from hearts broken and aching. Children shed tears when they hurt. Adults shed tears in the face of great tragedy. Tears are often the only response humans can muster in the face of circumstances they cannot change. Death, of course, is one such difficulty, but we do encounter others. What comfort God offers to His people! He will wipe the tears from our cheeks. What a remarkable promise, and what a beautiful picture of the compassion of the Lord of the covenant! God Himself pauses to comfort His people and tenderly wipe away their tears.

These passages are among the most comforting in Scripture. The apostle Paul echoes one of these promises in his great resurrection chapter, "*Death has been swallowed up in victory*" (1 Corinthians 15:54). The apostle John echoes another in the last book of the Bible, "*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*" (Revelation 21:4). Jesus Himself demonstrated the truth of these promises when He told the mother of the young man of Nain to dry her eyes and then brought her only son back to life. Tears were removed, and death was swallowed up. Of course, the Lord's own resurrection demonstrated His absolute power over death. For all people of all time, Jesus Christ has arisen and overcome and defeated death once and for all. Only the Lord Almighty could accomplish such a feat.

Isaiah saw it all by the power of the Holy Spirit. The treasured promises of God's Old Testament people are no different from the promises we treasure in these days. The Bible's message is the same from beginning to end. The response of God's people to the blessings of His grace is the same too. Isaiah recorded a simple hymn of praise that God's people offer when all this comes to pass. The prophet began the chapter with his own confession of faith in the Lord and a word of praise. Now he pictured the saints of God offering their confession and praise. We may not always use exactly the same words, but we also have offered our songs of praise to God for the blessings of His grace - forgiveness, victory over death, and eternal life with Him. "*Look! This is our God. We have been waiting for Him to save us. This is the LORD, for whom we have been waiting. Let us rejoice and be glad that He has saved us!*"