

The Restoration of Israel

A Study in Isaiah chapters 43, 53 and 59

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A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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This text has been edited from a transcript of talks given by David Gooding at the annual meeting of his home assembly, Apsley Street, Belfast, on 21 February 1991.

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Myrtlefield catalogue no: isa.003/bh

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Isaiah 43:7–13; 53:4–7; 59:20–21

Chapters 40–66 of the book of Isaiah are perhaps some of the most beautiful, and some parts of them the best known, of all the prophecies of Old Testament. From there comes the delightful chapter we have read about our blessed Lord Jesus, how he was wounded for our transgressions, the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed.

The chief delight of these chapters is that they prophesied the restoration of the nation of Israel. First of all, Isaiah prophesied that the nation would be restored from their exile in Babylon, but then carried along by the Holy Spirit he prophesied of an even greater restoration, the restoration of Israel that shall take place when the Lord Jesus comes at his second coming. There shall come out a Deliverer and a Redeemer from Zion and turn away iniquity from Jacob (Rom 11:26). The mere mention of it gives your heart a flutter, doesn't it?

As Paul thought of the sorrow of Israel, who had rejected the Messiah and rejected the gospel, he pointed out that their fall, their casting away, has been the riches of the Gentiles. And if their fall and their casting away has been the riches of the Gentiles, what shall their coming back again be? It shall be such a veritable harvest of the grace of God as shall make it like the very resurrection of the dead (vv. 12–15).

The restoration of Israel, then, is the great topic of these chapters. And as we think of Israel and the gloomy events in the Gulf,¹ and we know from Israel's prophets the terrible anguish that the nation of Israel must yet pass through before the Lord comes, isn't it marvellous to have these bright prophecies, the sun shining behind the storm clouds, that one day God's wrath and his chastisement of Israel will be over, and he shall turn to comfort his ancient people?

These chapters tell us what will be involved in Israel's restoration. There are, so the experts tell us, three major parts to this final section of Isaiah, where Isaiah points out that Israel's restoration will involve their rediscovery of God.

The rediscovery of the greatness and the purpose of God (ch. 43)

Isn't it interesting that we should be able to talk of Israel's rediscovery of God? All down the centuries Israel were supposed to know God, weren't they? Right from the time when God called Abram out of Ur of Chaldees and made himself known to him as the true and the living God. Ever since that time, Israel has stood conspicuous among the nations. All the other nations were bowed down in miserable and crude idolatries, and Israel stood for belief in the one true God, Creator of heaven and earth. What a mission it was, but they failed.

As someone has put it, in the first generation you have men and women who have a conviction. So often in the second generation, conviction has deteriorated to be a mere doctrine; and what in the second generation is a mere doctrine, in the third generation it becomes merely an opinion, one among many.

¹ This message was preached three days before the First Gulf War began.

Israel were called to this sublime privilege to witness in the world to the one true God, but they compromised their message, both in their mixture with pagan idolatry and in the grievously sinful way that they lived. In the end, God turned them out of their country and sent them down to Babylon. When they are restored, it won't be just a coming back to their land; their restoration will not be accomplished without their coming to rediscover God.

We haven't the time tonight, obviously, to go into Israel and her future. By permission, we may apply it to ourselves, and I'm not suggesting that you have apostatized in the months of the past year, or compromised your message, or anything of the sort. It's been marvellously interesting to hear of the endless labours that have been done, the work for the Lord and the generous giving, and the hard back-breaking labour; and perhaps tonight we're feeling a bit tired. There's a big future ahead of us. Where shall we find the strength and the grace to rise up and surge forward in the work of the Lord? I suggest to you that we shall find it where Israel one day will find it, in the rediscovery of God.

So in chapters 40–48 of this great book, we read how Israel will again discover God as Creator; and not just the doctrine that God is Creator, but they shall discover it in their own experience when God recreates Israel. And it will not be simply that Israel will tell the nations that God the Creator is the true God, they themselves will be the chief exhibit. The nations shall look at Israel and see the reality of God, for God has recreated his people. Israel is encouraged with these wonderful words that we read from chapter 43, 'But now thus says the LORD, he who created you . . . I have called you by name, you are mine' (v. 1). As God recreates Israel among the nations, their very recreation will be a testimony to the living God.

And what will happen to Israel in some part has happened to us, hasn't it? May we prove its reality more and more in the year to come. Just let me remind you what a lovely thing it is: 'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them' (Eph 2:10). Sometimes, as we get busy working for the Lord, it's our effort that comes to loom large in our minds. They are lovely occasions when we may sit back and remember that it's not merely what I am doing for God, but what God is doing through me and in me and every one of us. Isn't it true? You, sir, and you, my dear good sister, are a creation of God.

There are occasions in this city when the fashion designers are invited along to witness their new creations for the season, and they parade down the walkway and back again in these new creations. 'If anyone is in Christ,' says Paul, 'he is a new creation' (2 Cor 5:17). Nestling underneath the externals of our bodies, there is this miracle of divine grace. You have been created in Christ Jesus, and if any person is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. May God help us to lay back upon it and discover again the reality of God as our Creator.

'You see,' says God to Israel, 'you didn't choose me. I chose you.' And the Lord Jesus said to his disciples, 'You didn't choose me, I chose you. I called you by my name. You shall show forth my praise, for I shall work and no one will hinder it' (see John 15:16; Isa 43:12–13). So as we face the slog of another year, let our inner hearts be learning evermore to rest upon God our Creator.

The discovery not only of God the Father, but the discovery of the person of the Son and the pattern of the suffering servant (ch. 53)

One day Israel shall discover again, not only God but they shall discover, some of them for the first time, the person of the Son. Zechariah tells us of that wonderful occasion when the Lord Jesus shall come and 'they shall look on him whom they pierced' (12:10). They shall see the one whom the nation despised, whom the kings rejected, and they shall say in their consternation, 'But we esteemed him, smitten of God and afflicted. We thought he was afflicted for his own sins. We held that he was a blasphemer.' When they shall see him whom they pierced, there shall be a day of great mourning and contrition, and they shall say, 'But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed' (v. 5).

What a day it will be when Israel discovers the person of the Son. When he was here on earth, they rejected him. They thought they knew all there was to know about God. There was one God. That was perfectly true, but their concept of one God was very limited. It's possible for all of us too, to think we know everything about God, but we shall never do that. Because Israel had got one part of the truth that God is one, they weren't prepared to open their minds to consider what that oneness might be. A blessed Trinity in one. One plus one plus one is three, but one times one times one is one, isn't it? One day Israel shall come with amazement to see that God was far bigger than they imagined him to be.

God help us, then, who already know him, and know the Son of God. In the days to come, may God grant us the spirit of wisdom and revelation, in the knowledge of him, to discover that God is bigger than we thought, and so is Jesus his Son. We have the gospel, don't we? What a wonderful gospel it is, and thank God if in Apsley Street still the gospel is preached. The Jew nowadays has no gospel, for he has no suffering servant to proclaim to the nation, no sacrifice to proclaim. He has no gospel, therefore all he can do is to preach his law and tell you to behave.

Alas, large sections of Christendom have lost their grip on the gospel, and therefore if they're given occasion to address the nation on the radio or television, they talk about the family, or looking after the poor. It's all jolly good, isn't it? Wonderful stuff, but sometimes they miss the opportunity to present the gospel. What our weary world needs more than anything else is, of course, the gospel. How he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon him and with his stripes we are healed.

The pattern of the suffering servant

But you know, if we're going to preach that gospel effectively, the gospel of the suffering servant of God, we must be prepared to follow the pattern of the suffering servant.

'Christ has left us an example,' says Peter, 'that we should follow his steps; he who "committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten"' (1 Pet 2:22-23). He was 'like a lamb that is led to the slaughter' (Isa 53:7); and he 'bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness' (1 Pet 2:24).

The suffering servant not only made atonement for sin; he left us an example that we might follow his steps. Says Peter to the slaves, 'You know, when your masters are unreasonable and they flog you even when you don't deserve it, and you could curse them, try and remember the pattern of the suffering servant. Where would you have been if Christ had cursed you when he suffered?' (see 1 Pet 2:18–20).

'And you women,' says Peter, talking to the married women who were converted and their husbands weren't converted, 'when your husbands are very difficult and they won't listen to you, try in your heart to remember the pattern of the suffering servant. Living like him, you could win your husbands by your behaviour, even if you can't win them by your words' (see 3:1–2).

Let's seek the rewards that are going. Don't let's be like James and John, who could think only of sitting on thrones in the day to come, and had to be taught that the Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life, a ransom for many (Matt 20:28). If we are going to be effective to preach to the world about a Saviour who poured out his soul unto death, the most effective way of preaching it is for us to be willing, likewise, to pour out our souls and our bodies and all we have for our fellow men.

The rediscovery of the Spirit of God (ch. 59)

And finally, in that coming day Israel will discover, rediscover perhaps, the Spirit of God. When the Redeemer comes, other prophets tell us that God will pour out his Spirit on the nation of Israel and his Spirit shall be in their mouths and with them forever (see, for example, Joel 2:28). What a wonderful day it shall be.

We already have that Spirit, don't we? Having 'his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee' (2 Cor 1:22), how could we possibly go about our work of being witnesses in the world if it all depended on us and our wisdom? Thank God it isn't so, and as we think about Apsley's future and the work that lies ahead, God give us to discover again and ever more deeply the wonder that God's Holy Spirit is with us and in us, responsible for directing the work of Christ worldwide. He's had two thousand years of experience of guiding the church so far; he'll be sufficient to keep Apsley on her tracks until the Lord comes and we go home to heaven.

The Lord bless this word of encouragement to all our hearts, for his name's sake.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.