

Pentecost 7 / July 16, 2023

Isaiah 55:11

“My word 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.”

My Word Shall Not Return to Me Empty

The section of Isaiah in which our text is found, begins with chapter 40. It speaks to Israel exiled from the land God promised their ancestor Abraham, living in captivity in the Babylonian Empire. Isaiah is a complicated book. It has at least three distinct sections and several subsections. The book speaks to events beginning around 740 BC, concluding around 586 BC. The book begins with Israel and Judah facing existential threat from the Assyrian Empire. The first section concludes with the northern tribes of Israel dispersed and the southern kingdom of Judah miraculously preserved by the mighty hand of God. Both Israel and Judah were punished for breaking the covenant and turning their backs on the Lord to worship false gods. Judah survived, but Israel would never be reformed as a kingdom. Judah remained as the only tribe to bear the name Israel, the people of God.

Chapter 40 begins with the Lord speaking peace to Jerusalem in ruins and hope for the Jewish people, as they now would be called. The prophet cries, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.” The captivity of the Jewish people ended seventy years after it began. The Lord overthrew the Babylonians through the Persians. He moved the heart of the Persian King to allow the captive peoples to return to their homelands, including captive Israel. The Lord called the Persian King His servant, anointed to redeem His people. The redeemed of the Lord would return with singing. Gladness would be in their hearts. Everlasting joy would crown their heads. Against all odds and in the face of the greatest adversity, the Jews were set free. Judah would again be inhabited by Abraham’s children. The temple would be rebuilt. The Lord would again dwell in the midst of His people. How would the Lord accomplish this great feat? He would do this by the power of His word. His word never returns empty. It always accomplishes what He desires and achieves the purposes for which He sends it. Salvation in time and life in eternity!

Empires rise and fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever. As in ancient times so today, powerful forces align themselves against the Lord, His people and His word. Psalm 2 sings, “The kings of the earth set themselves...against the Lord and His anointed.” Like the Assyrians and Babylonians, they succeed for a time. But like the grass that withers and the flowers that fade, in time they pass away. The word of the Lord endures forever. Throughout history there have been many moral, philosophical and political agendas that have sought to captivate the human imagination and turn people away from the word of the Lord. They come and they go, but the word of the Lord endures forever. The word of the Lord never returns to Him empty. Like the rain and the snow, it always accomplishes His purpose and achieves what He desires: The preservation of His people in time and salvation of believers in eternity.

Isaiah speaks to events occurring between 740 and 586 BC. He speaks to life situations in 2023 AD and beyond. In every place and at all times, believers need to hear the Lord’s words and take them to heart, especially in times of trouble when faith is under threat. Our text assures us of the power and effectiveness of the word of the Lord. Even as the rain and snow are always effective in the purpose for which God sends them, to water the earth so that it blossoms and flourishes, so His word always accomplishes His desires and achieves the purposes for which He sends it. The redemption of Judah and Jerusalem in ancient times. The preservation of His church in time. The salvation of believers for all time through the redemption that is in Israel’s greatest Son, Christ Jesus our Saviour and Lord.

It’s awkward to say, but in many ways Isaiah is the greatest book in the bible. Picking a favourite book is sort of like picking a favourite child. They are all dearly loved and of priceless value, but the book of Isaiah reveals so much of the power, promise and purpose of God’s words. The book shows God’s power to speak from the past to the present and distant future. The book covers a time-period longer than the natural life span of a human being, one hundred and fifty years minimum. Skeptics ask, ‘Could one man have lived through all that time!’ Yet, the book is not about the lifespan of a prophet. It is about the power of God to see all time in a moment and tell it to future generations. A prophet’s pedigree was proven when his or her words came to pass. God shows His divine power by telling of events in the distant future. In speaking of future things before they happen, the Lord shows that He alone is God and that He alone is to be worshipped as God. The Lord’s purpose in Isaiah is to show Himself the only God and the world’s only Saviour!

Perhaps you have heard the expression, “God works in mysterious ways.” That expression is fully expressed in the history of the Jewish people in the span of the book of Isaiah. The faithful in Israel were saddened and dismayed by the idolatry of their sisters and brothers. It hurt them to see the Lord’s covenant despised, His laws mocked and His holy temple turned into a den of thieves. But it hurt them even more when the Lord allowed Israel to be dispersed, Jerusalem to be destroyed and Judah to go into exile. The faithful in Israel and Judah suffered because of the faithlessness of others.

The psalmists lamented, asking, “What has happened to your mercy which was of old? Has the Lord forgotten to be merciful?” It seemed the Lord had forgotten to be merciful. But, He hadn’t. He would display His mercy in the most mysterious way, so people would know He had done it. He accompanied Judah into exile. He cared for His people in captivity. He brought justice to the empires that had crushed His people. He returned the Jewish people to the land of Abraham. Most importantly, He displayed His mercy by sending the Christ through the line of King David. God’s word reveals Christ as the Saviour of all people. He brings redemption from sin. He frees those who believe from captivity to the devil and death. He gives eternal salvation to all who take His words to heart, believe and receive Him as Saviour.

Isaiah speaks from the last days of Israel, to the return of the Jews held in Babylonian captivity. He speaks of the redemption of human beings from sin, death and the devil. One of the most important sections of the second part of Isaiah are the four servant songs. The servant songs speak to Israel’s purpose: To make the Lord known to the nations. Their failure to do this. And the promise of a special servant who would fulfil Israel’s purpose, make the Lord known in the world and accomplish universal redemption through the sacrifice of His life. Isaiah chapter fifty-three clearly and concisely speaks of the suffering of Jesus for our salvation, five centuries in advance. The prophet sings, “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.” Jesus fulfilled the Lord’s words. Jesus reveals Himself in the word as our God and Saviour.

The most important purpose of the Lord’s word is to reveal Jesus as God’s Son and to open our hearts to receive Him as Saviour. Isaiah speaks of many things; the redemption and renewal of the Jewish people, the renewal of all people as God’s people in Christ and the renewal of heaven and earth as the home of righteousness. The most important subject of which He speaks is our need to receive Jesus as our Saviour and to abide in His word. The words of scripture lead us to Jesus. The words of the Lord show our need for Him to be our Saviour. Through the word and by the working of the Holy Spirit, the Lord opens our hearts to believe and preserves us in faith until the Lord fulfills all His words in our share of Christ’s resurrection to everlasting life. The word that goes forth from His mouth will not return to Him empty. It will accomplish what He desires and achieve the purpose for which He sends it.

May His word accomplish what He desires and achieve His purposes in our lives; faith in time and life in eternity. In Jesus’ name. Amen