

June 26 Lesson 4 (NIV)

GOD OFFERS DELIVERANCE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 51:1–8

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 51

ISAIAH 51:1–8

¹ “Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness
and who seek the LORD:
Look to the rock from which you were cut
and to the quarry from which you were hewn;
² look to Abraham, your father,
and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
When I called him he was only one man,
and I blessed him and made him many.
³ The LORD will surely comfort Zion
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;
he will make her deserts like Eden,
her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.
Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of singing.
⁴ “Listen to me, my people;
hear me, my nation:
Instruction will go out from me;
my justice will become a light to the nations.
⁵ My righteousness draws near speedily,
my salvation is on the way,
and my arm will bring justice to the nations.
The islands will look to me
and wait in hope for my arm.
⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
look at the earth beneath;
the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment
and its inhabitants die like flies.
But my salvation will last forever,
my righteousness will never fail.

⁷ “Hear me, you who know what is right,
you people who have taken my instruction to heart:
Do not fear the reproach of mere mortals
or be terrified by their insults.
⁸ For the moth will eat them up like a garment;
the worm will devour them like wool.
But my righteousness will last forever,
my salvation through all generations.”

KEY VERSE

Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn.—Isaiah 51:1

PARTNERS IN A NEW CREATION

Unit 1: God Delivers and Restores

LESSONS 1–4

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HOW TO SAY IT

SelaSee-luh.

wadiwah-dee.

Introduction

A. Look Both Ways?

We've heard this since we were small children: "Look both ways before crossing a street, and then cross when it's safe." That's still good advice, but it is not adequate for the present culture. Why? One reason is that there are so many more ways to be distracted than in the past.

The distractions take place for those who walk, for drivers of automobiles, and those who ride bicycles. At intersections it sometimes appears as if nobody looks. The pedestrians seem oblivious to traffic lights, stop signs, and walkways. They are focused on things such as making calls, reading text messages or e-books, or listening to a podcast or music. Those on wheels are also seen looking at a device instead of at the road. The "look both ways" admonition is no longer enough. People also need to stay aware of their surroundings. The result is that the old saying could be changed to "Look up, and then look both ways before crossing a street."

This lesson will develop three "looks" that were given to the people of Judah: to look to the past, the future, and straight into the present.

B. Lesson Context

The opening lines of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* are easily recognized by many readers: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." The same words could be used to describe Judah during Isaiah's ministry (see lesson 3 Lesson Context). The best of times were reflected in Judah's economic and military prowess (Isaiah 2:7); the worst of times were marked by the sin of idolatry and consequent exile in Babylon (39:6–7).

In many ways, Judah's punishment was an indictment of their false gods and of the sins those "gods" condoned. The people had turned from the true God in spite of the great acts of deliverance they had experienced as a nation, and the admonitions in the Ten Commandments to have no other gods or graven images (Exodus 20:3–6). And the exile did have a purifying effect. Following the Babylonian captivity, Jewish idolatry was never a serious problem again (though of course other issues arose). The Jews who returned stood firm on their faithful foundation (see Isaiah 51:1b–2, below), no matter what foreign invaders tried to tempt them with new gods. Though they had suffered through the worst of times, even better than their previous best times were still ahead.

We can also assert that Babylon was punished for following their false gods. Had their worship been rendered to God and concerned with justice and righteousness instead of acquisition and power, the story of the Babylonian Empire would have been very different. In Isaiah 46–47 God mocked the Babylonians' idolatry and its associated practices (see lesson 1). The idols have to be carried, but God's judgment would have them carried *away* (Isaiah 46:1). Though the people

bowed to gods that they made, the God of the heavens had declared their end (46:10). Their “best of times” was about to come to a permanent close.

I. Look to the Past

(ISAIAH 51:1–3)

A. The Follower, the Seeker (v. 1a)

1a. “Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD:

Our text contains three calls to *listen* (see Isaiah 51:4, 7, below; compare 51:21; 52:8; see also lesson 3). Each call in our text is followed by a two-part description of the people who are being addressed. In each instance, the two phrases augment each other, adding depth to the portrait of the listener.

Undoubtedly *you who pursue righteousness* are the same as *who seek the Lord*. Those who strive to be righteous want to live according to God’s laws and his will. In the case of Abraham, even before the laws were revealed or the prophets had spoken, faith was declared to be the basis of righteousness before God (Genesis 15:6; compare Romans 3:21–26; see Isaiah 51:1b–2, below). To seek is to have a goal and to search diligently to reach it. God is near those who look for him (Deuteronomy 4:29; Matthew 7:7–8; Acts 17:24–28).

We can note the many philosophers who have sought to define the good life without feeling the need to include God’s will in the equation. And we can think of people who say they seek God but do not seem inclined to obey his law, choosing instead a “god” of their own making. Any attempts that do not seek God *and* also strive to obey him will be lacking; these do not lead to true or eternal life (John 14:5–17).

B. Remember Origins (vv. 1b–2)

1b–2. “Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many.

We might expect *the rock* to refer to God here, and for good reason. This image of origin, deliverance, and safety in the Lord occurs with some frequency in the Old Testament (examples: 1 Samuel 2:2; Psalms 18:2, 31; 62:2, 6–7; Isaiah 17:10). In his farewell address Moses charged that Israel had become unmindful of the “Rock” that had begotten them and had forgotten that God had formed them (Deuteronomy 32:15, 18, 30–31). Isaiah might charge the people of his day with the same. It would be entirely appropriate for Isaiah then to call the righteous person to *look* to God as the one who formed and blessed the nation of Israel.

In context, *Abraham* actually seems to be referred to as the rock *from which you were cut*. This is appropriate for the faithful to whom Isaiah speaks, since all who put their faith in God and later in Christ are declared to be true children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7–9). In this way, Abraham is the *father* because God *called him* and *blessed him* and *made him many* (see Genesis 12:1–3; Romans 4:16; 9:8).

Sarah then is likened to *the quarry from which you were hewn*. This unusual parallelism would be a reference to her womb, which had to be emptied through birth in order for descendants to be brought forth. Though Hagar bore Abraham a son who was blessed by association with his father, Isaac was the child of promise through whom the promise of a nation would be fulfilled (Genesis 17:19–21; Galatians 4:21–31).

The rock imagery eventually extends to Christ himself (Luke 20:17; 1 Peter 2:4, 7; compare 1 Corinthians 10:4). In Christ God's people expanded beyond the boundaries of Abraham's family, just as God always intended. So it is appropriate to speak of being called in Christ alone, of his blessing in ministry and blessing to us through his resurrected life, and of the expansion of the church into all places. Remember the joy of salvation when you became a Christian? Look back to the beginning of your walk with Christ for a refresher.

C. Expect Comfort (v. 3)

3. “The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.

The destruction of *Zion* was complete and completely devastating—so much so that Judah broadly and Jerusalem specifically were *ruins* (Nehemiah 1:3; 2:3, 17; Lamentations 1:1; 2:8–9, 13). We might consider images we've seen of contemporary war zones to get an idea about the complete annihilation of Jerusalem. It was not simply left empty-but-intact when the people went into exile; the city was left in chaos, stones overthrown, buildings burned to the ground, and likely even unburied human remains in the streets.

Only by imagining how complete and brutal the Babylonians' conquest of Jerusalem was can we imagine how good this news is. *Deserts* where a city once was is a lonesome, haunting image; but a thriving *Eden*—a paradise—in its place is a hopeful, joyful image. In Eden, Adam and Eve had worked, but easily; the ground was not yet cursed and God provided every good thing they needed. They lived free of sin; they enjoyed each other's company and even walked with God (Genesis 2:15–25; 3:8). Nothing could be better for Jerusalem than for *her wastelands* to become *like the garden of the Lord*. Add to that people who had experienced life outside of such a paradise; the *thanksgiving* and *sound of singing* of returned exiles to such a place would surely be a symphony of *joy and gladness*.

Joy is one characteristic of Christians (Galatians 5:22–23). Philippians 4:4 gives a double command to rejoice, and in 1 Thessalonians 5:16 the admonition is to rejoice always. When our life or our world seems like devastated Zion, our joy comes from the knowledge that God has a greater plan. The destruction is not the end; and knowing that, we can experience joy, no matter our temporary situation.

II. Look to the Future

(ISAIAH 51:4–6)

A. “My People, My Nation” (v. 4a)

4a. “Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation:

Listen and *hear* constitute one call to pay attention (see Isaiah 51:1, above). *My people* and *my nation* continues to address the Jews, specifically the exiles in Babylon. In 51:1b–2 (above) it's clear that this call is to the descendants of Abraham; Isaiah does not need to be so explicit here because of the specificity before.

B. Coming Light (vv. 4b–5)

4b. “Instruction will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations.

This verse has parallels to a prophecy made in Isaiah 2:3—that God's *instruction* would go forth from Zion (see Micah 4:2). The servant was previously identified as the one to “bring forth justice” and “[establish] justice on earth” (Isaiah 42:3–4). This is once again an indication that the Lord does not intend to hide the *light* from the nations but instead to draw them to himself (compare Matthew 5:13–16).

5. “My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.

The pursuit of *righteousness* (Isaiah 51:1, above) is about to be rewarded. *Salvation* in the Old Testament frequently refers to a very physical, earthy deliverance from evil and harm (examples: 1 Chronicles 16:35; Psalm 27:1–9; Habakkuk 3:13). For this reason, many misunderstood Jesus' mission of salvation as being one of political liberation in the vein of other rebellious “messiahs” before him (example: Acts 5:36–37). In hindsight, however, we see that this salvation is essentially spiritual in nature, given how Jesus would call people from all nations—here *the islands* (compare Isaiah 11:11)—to come to him for deliverance from sin (Acts 13:38–48). Only through spiritual wholeness can any other kind of thriving be anticipated.

Elsewhere the Lord directs the people to “Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed” (Isaiah 56:1). There he explicitly welcomes both strangers and eunuchs—people typically excluded from being part of Israel—to be integral members of his people when they keep his law. One of Jesus' final commissions to the apostles shows a fulfillment of what had been prophesied by Isaiah. Just before his ascension, Jesus said that the apostles were to be his witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the entire world (Acts 1:8). In Romans 1:16 Paul summarized these concepts when he wrote that the gospel was for everyone who believes, to Jews and also to Gentiles.

The *arm* of the Lord is often associated with deliverance and justice (examples: Isaiah 30:30; 59:15b–16; Jeremiah 21:5; Ezekiel 20:33–34). Here his judgment is linked to the people's *hope*. Without the Lord's promise to judge, it would be impossible to trust him. After all, how could a good God who loves righteousness simply ignore evil? And if he did not have the power to judge, that would be another reason for mistrust. But this God has the authority, the will, and the power to judge the wicked and will protect all who place their trust in him.

C. Everlasting Reign (v. 6)

6a. “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies.

To the casual observer *the heavens* and *the earth* seem permanent. But *smoke* drifts on the wind and then dissipates. Wearing out *like a garment* suggests hard use, tearing, ripping, outgrowing. These analogies suggest that, far from lasting forever, both heavens and earth are quick to fall apart. Other passages also describe heaven and earth as being temporary (Psalm 102:25–26; Matthew 24:35; 2 Peter 3:10). All creation only lasts as long as God chooses to sustain it (Colossians 1:15–18).

Life is also described as fleeting (Job 7:7; Psalm 39:5, 11). Like the speed with which smoke disappears or an old garment falls to shreds, so will *its inhabitants die* (Ecclesiastes 3:19). In context, this refers to all living creations—death is the end. There’s no doubt it will happen; there’s no preventing it.

6b. “But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.

In contrast to creatures, the earth, and even the heavens (Isaiah 51:6a, above), God’s *salvation* and *righteousness will never fail*. The purpose of the coming of the Messiah was to grant these things to the ones who come to Jesus through faith. In the end, no more will death or sorrow afflict his people, because all of that will pass away with all else that is temporary (Revelation 21:1–4; see lesson 10). And though sin has an end, righteousness will be the law of the heavenly land where the saints live with God (2 Peter 3:13).

The Bible uses the figure of a walk or road to refer to the journey of life (examples: Psalm 1; John 14:6). In the spiritual realms there are only two ways. The “wide” gate and “broad” road lead to destruction, and that is the easy way of life. It is the “small” gate and “narrow” road that lead to true life (Matthew 7:13–14). It requires serious dedication and effort to walk in God’s way, but it’s worth it.

III. Look Straight Ahead

(ISAIAH 51:7–8)

A. The Righteous at Heart (v. 7a)

7a. “Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have taken my instruction to heart:

For the final time in this lesson, the audience is commanded to *hear*. As before, *you who know what is right* are the very same *people who have taken God’s instruction to heart*. In Hebrew thought, the heart was not only (or not primarily) the seat of emotions but, instead, of reason and insight (examples: “conscience-stricken” 1 Samuel 24:5; 2 Samuel 24:10; “mind” Nehemiah 5:7). This is not to say that those who had the law in their hearts did not love it; plenty of poetry exists extolling God’s Word and its great benefit for those who learn from it (examples: Psalms 37:30–31; 40:8–10; 119). From the time the law was given, God instructed the people to hide it in their hearts and even gave them instructions on how to do so (Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Jeremiah 31:31–34). And those who took their studies of the law seriously spoke of the joy of a heart turned toward God (example: Psalm 119:2–3, 7, 10–11).

But for many generations, the people struggled to observe God’s laws the way they were meant to. This is what got them into exile in the first place! To hear that God was speaking to the

righteous who loved his law would be heartening to them. God had not abandoned them forever but had provided a way for them to return not only home but, more importantly, to him (2 Chronicles 6:36–39). When God spoke to the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord explicitly promised to give the people open hearts that would be disposed to hearing his word and obeying it (Ezekiel 11:19–20; 14:4–5; 18:31; etc.).

B. Do Not Fear (vv. 7b–8)

7b–8a. “Do not fear the reproach of mere mortals or be terrified by their insults. For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool.

Just like the earth and the heavens, *the reproach of mere mortals* and *their insults* last but a moment before inevitably coming to nothing (see Isaiah 51:6a, above). The scorn of people who do not seek righteousness, do not love God’s words, and do not care to follow the Lord is fleeting indeed. It won’t even take a ferocious bear or fire or other massive force to destroy them; *the moth* and *the worm* will suffice to judge those who speak against God’s people.

8b. “But my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations.”

Righteousness and *salvation* are once again declared to last *forever* (see Isaiah 51:6b, above). *Through all generations* is another way to express this unending time line. But the phrase might bring to mind God’s faithfulness from generation to generation (example: Genesis 9:12–16). Though he brings judgment, he forgives too (example: Exodus 20:4–6). This salvation is the last plan; there is no next salvation to come. Each generation is given the opportunity to accept the gift.

Conclusion

A. Which Way?

Looking to our past offers important insights: about faithfulness, examples to follow or deviate from, the people and events that have shaped us. Isaiah prepared the nation to look forward to Jesus, but we look to the past, present, *and* future when we look to him. The salvation work Jesus has done is the reason for our joy in the present and our hope in the future. So when you think about whether to look to the past, present, or future, the answer is: all three! Look to Christ and his ministry, his sacrifice, his death and resurrection. Look to the body of Christ that continues to call the world to repent of sins and be reconciled to God. And look to the glorious future when God’s promises of eternal life will no longer be a hope but our present, eternal reality.

B. Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for these reminders that you have always loved and admonished your people. As we leave class now, we ask for wisdom in making the tough decisions that are ahead of us this week. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Hear that? God is calling.¹

