

Listen Up Isaiah 51:1-16

Introduction

Hearing vs. Paying Attention: My wife can attest that sometimes I have a problem listening. But it's not a *hearing* problem. There's a difference between hearing and paying attention (e.g., pastoral counseling is often not about *information* but about self-awareness, paying attention, seeing what is really going on).

Listen: The prophet Isaiah is in the counselor's chair trying to get the people of God to **listen up**, to pay attention. "Listen to me" (v. 1), "give attention to me" (v. 4), "Listen to me" (v. 7).

What Grabs Your Attention?: We've known this for a while, but the media, even those with the best practices and highest standards of journalism are caught in the ratings trap (e.g., commercialization of news). The internet has made this issue more clear (e.g., "clickbait"). The internet just puts the folly of humanity on display to a wider audience.

- Three kids jumping. Headline: "When You Find Out What These Kids Are Jumping Into, Your Jaw Will Drop!" Is it a pit of snakes, an active volcano, etc.? Spoiler alert, it's a swimming pool.
- Picture of a Sandwich. Headline: "When You Read These 19 Shocking Food Facts, You'll Never Want to Eat Again." Spoiler alert, some foods have a lot of calories.

In our world, the shrillest voices (e.g., headlines) get the most attention (e.g., **shrillcity (n)**: easiest to hear but the most painful to listen to).

- The Coronavirus puts this on display. I'd encourage you to listen to a whole press conference from the CDC, the White House, etc. (I recommend Dr. Fauci) then read the headline (e.g., "Will Americans Ever Get to Leave Their Houses Again," "Arrested for Opening the Windows", etc.).

Isaiah's Plea: I think Isaiah is begging us, pleading with us, in the midst of the craziness of this world, in whatever suffering or difficulty we find ourselves, no matter the enemy or oppression we face, to listen to the voice of God rather than the voices of the world or the accuser. Pay attention to the mighty acts and faithful character of God. **Build your life on the unchanging truth of your faithful God.** One of the best ways to do this is to remember his faithfulness in the past. We can take comfort in current times of distress because God has proven His faithfulness in the past.

1. Hope is Multiplied (vv. 1-3)

In God, your hope is multiplied:

¹ "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the LORD: look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. ² Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who

bore you; for he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him. ³ For the LORD comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Who's He Talking To?: (Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the LORD) This is written to the believing remnant, those who are God's people. God has a people (e.g. "save *his people* from their sins"). God gives grace to every person (e.g., sun, rain, breath, etc.) but he offers hope to those who are his, who believe in him, who call on his name.

- This may sound exclusive if you don't believe (e.g., "Are you telling me I have no hope?"). Yeah, it kind of is (e.g., "I am *the way, the truth, and the life.*"). But it's not ultimately an obstacle, it's an **invitation** (not "you're out" but "come in"). It's an invitation to experience refuge, rescue, and hope in Jesus. Do you know him?
- For those who trust in him, God is saying to "open your ears" (Listen to me) and pay attention.

Where Do You Turn in Times of Trouble?: (look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug) Where did you receive salvation? How did you become a part of God's family?

- "You did not choose me, but I chose You" (John 15:16a)
- "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved" (Eph 2:4-5a).
- The Lord is often called a rock (e.g., Rock of Salvation, Deut. 32:15, etc.).

In the midst of a crisis you need to look to your foundation. **You were made by God and for God, why are you looking elsewhere?**

- One author calls these idols, these false gods we pursue instead of the true God, **functional saviors**. When you are stressed, afraid, or anxious what do you pursue instead of Christ (e.g., alcohol, pills, relationships, money, retail therapy, Netflix, naps, etc.). These are your functional saviors (Powlison).
- These idols are insidious. They promise deliverance they can't give and demand more than you can pay. Only Jesus provides real deliverance and demands nothing but your trust in him. It's a choice between true and false saviors. Where do you turn?

Abraham Has Something to Teach Us: (Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him) Abraham had no potential for greatness yet God came and made a promise to him.

- "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Gen 12:1-3).

He and Sarah were barren, yet God came to him and promised to bless him, to multiply him greatly.

- “When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly’” (Gen 17:1-2).

Old and barren, yet God made a promise to multiply them—and he did! Through this one family, all the nations of the earth are blessed by the Messiah. to Abraham no potential (e.g., human helplessness).

- “Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Gal 3:6-9).

The earliest command in the Bible is to “be fruitful and multiply” but it’s the one thing that Abraham can’t do. He’s helpless until God comes along and makes it happen. We see this throughout the Bible, Adam can’t obey, Moses can’t obey, Israel can’t obey. Yet Abraham is able to be righteous not through perfect obedience but through faith. **And the same is true for us.**

Redemption Pictured: (For the LORD comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.) Like Sarah, God multiplies from our barrenness. He takes the desert and makes it a garden. Where there is grief and heartache, he promises joy and gladness.

- One of the primary results of faith in Jesus is joy and gladness (even in the midst of suffering). Full of life and **song** (singing matters).
- Look at your present heartache, in Jesus, you will have joy multiplied and overflowing. Your ruins will be restored. “There will be a day with no more tears.”

How Did Jesus Do This?: He came to inaugurate the kingdom of God, bringing healing and overflowing joy (e.g., freedom from sins, a community of being known and loved, etc.). If we would learn to **condition our hope by the promises of Jesus** we would be able to have joy despite our current circumstances. **Which is more certain, God’s proven faithfulness or your current circumstances? Your circumstances will change but God never will.**

2. Salvation is Forever (vv. 4-8)

In Jesus, we not only have hope in the moment but salvation that lasts forever.

⁴ “Give attention to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation; for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples. ⁵ My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples; the coastlands hope for me, and for my arm they wait. ⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner; but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed. ⁷ “Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear not the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings. ⁸ For the moth will eat

them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool, but my righteousness will be forever, and my salvation to all generations.”

Salvation: (“Give attention to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation; for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples. My righteousness draws near my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples; the coastlands hope for me, and for my arm they wait) Our world is filled with injustice, brokenness, fear, etc. We all long things to be “made right.” If there is no justice, if this is all time plus chance, then things just are the way they are. We can’t complain or expect them to be different. But all of us long for a “world made right” (e.g., like dream or a song, *a la* N. T. Wright). Isaiah was promising the people of God that his righteousness and justice would draw near (e.g., inaugurated kingdom).

- When Jesus came, God became King. Jesus brought the rule and reign of God, the rules of the KoG came into play (e.g., no more tears, old is gone; e.g., healing sickness, disease, sin, etc.).

And we now live in the curious in-between of the inauguration and the consummation of the kingdom (i.e., the in-between of the kingdom come and the kingdom coming).

- We (i.e., “my people”) are called to pay attention now, to live now, according to the rules of the kingdom that is coming. It is hard to live according to our future promise. We’re “made for spirituality, [but] wallow in introspection. Made for joy, we settle for pleasure. Made for justice, we clamor for vengeance. Made for relationship, we insist on our own way. Made for beauty, we are satisfied with sentiment. But new creation has already begun. The sun has begun to rise. Christians are called to leave behind, in the tomb of Jesus Christ, all that belongs to the brokenness and incompleteness of the present world ... That, quite simply, is what it means to be Christian: to follow Jesus Christ into the new world, God's new world, which he has thrown open before us” (N.T. Wright).

Salvation is Eternal: (Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed... For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool, but my righteousness will be forever, and my salvation to all generations.”) *Pay attention*, look around at all of creation (e.g., heavens and earth). Think of the greatest created thing (e.g., nation, army, star, solar system, galaxy, etc.). All of it is like “smoke that vanishes,” like clothes that “wear out” compared to God and his salvation.

- JFK’s monument at Arlington National Cemetery has an eternal flame, burning continuously since 1963 (temporary) or 1967 (permanent). **Except**, on December 10, 1963, a group of Catholic schoolchildren were sprinkling the temporary flame with holy water when the cap came off the bottle and water poured onto the flame, putting it out. In August 1967, an exceptionally heavy rain extinguished the flame. A nearby electrical transformer flooded as well, depriving the spark igniter of power and preventing the flame from being relit. **But God’s salvation never runs out of steam.** It is eternal like it’s source – God.

What Do You Fear: (Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear not the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings) If God is this powerful and you belong to him, you don't need to fear anything else. Why do we fear human beings (e.g., creatures)? Why do we fear discomfort? Why do we fear pain? Why do we fear death? "The devil has won a victory if he can get us to fear anything more than God." Isaiah is trying to recalibrate our sense of power, salvation, and fear. Because God is all-powerful and all-good we have no need to fear anything else. What can man do to us? Bankruptcy can't touch what we have in Jesus. Disease can't touch what we have in Jesus. Isolation can't touch what we have in Jesus. Death can't touch what we have in Jesus.

- Corona realignment (in a week we lost the idol of sports, the security of the economy, and the certainty of health by scientific advancement). If this situation doesn't cause you to take stock of where your hope is, I can't imagine much else will. All of a sudden some of the lesser, petty things we worry about don't seem so important.

3. Comfort is Real (vv. 9-16)

⁹ Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? ¹⁰ Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? ¹¹ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. ¹² "I, I am he who comforts you; who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass, ¹³ and have forgotten the LORD, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, and you fear continually all the day because of the wrath of the oppressor, when he sets himself to destroy? And where is the wrath of the oppressor? ¹⁴ He who is bowed down shall speedily be released; he shall not die and go down to the pit, neither shall his bread be lacking. ¹⁵ I am the LORD your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar— the LORD of hosts is his name. ¹⁶ And I have put my words in your mouth and covered you in the shadow of my hand, establishing the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, 'You are my people.'"

Move Forward By Looking Back: (Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?) Wake up and pay attention. Rahab here is another word for Egypt (רהב [Prostitute] vs. רהב [False God, Pride, Egypt]). Look what God did to bring his people out of bondage in Egypt (e.g., plagues, pillar of cloud/fire, split the sea). God redeemed his people then and will redeem his people now.

Look to the Past to See How Bright the Future: (And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away) Waymaker lyrics ("waymaker, miracle worker, promise keeper, light in the darkness, my God **that is who you are**... even when I don't feel it/see it it you're working). He was faithful then and he'll be faithful now because his faithfulness flows out of his character. He hasn't changed.

- Are these “Corona Virus” times unprecedented? Yes but no (e.g., Spanish flu, black plague, etc.). Then think about the Bible (e.g., slavery, exile, etc.). This is not bigger than God. This does not surprise God. When we are uncertain, he never is.

Never Forget: (and have forgotten the LORD, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth... I am the LORD your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar— the LORD of hosts is his name) The reason we fear and worship the wrong things is that we are forgetful. God hasn’t changed but we have forgotten. We need to be reminded (e.g., a parent reminds you of the rules when you forget, ouch!).

- “When we have the wrong idea of what God is like, the things he does surprise us” (Alex Hanevich). We have been swimming in the culture of this world so much that we have neglected to learn and know the character of God.

Suffering Reveals: (who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass... and you fear continually all the day because of the wrath of the oppressor, when he sets himself to destroy? And where is the wrath of the oppressor?) God can use suffering in our lives as a grace to reveal our false beliefs and call us to himself. This time of suffering should push us **toward** God. It should cause us to evaluate where we put our trust. We should see how fragile the things of the world are and that our only hope in life and death is that we are not our own but we belong to God!

- It’s amazing how fast our society went from, “You do you! You are the boss of your life!” to, “You have a moral responsibility to care for your neighbor by abiding by these rigid rules” (Summer White Jaeger). Crisis clarifies real beliefs. But God knew!
- “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (Jas 4:13-14).
- Darkness and suffering allow us a chance to demonstrate that our hope is in God alone. “Hope is like a star: not to be seen in the sunshine of prosperity, only to be discovered in the night of adversity” (Charles Spurgeon).

God Comforts: You are not alone in the darkness of suffering. (“I, I am he who comforts you... He who is bowed down shall speedily be released; he shall not die and go down to the pit, neither shall his bread be lacking) Our God is a “God of comfort.” He comforts us. He longs to comfort us. He desires you to draw near and receive his comfort.

- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” (2 Cor 1:3-4).
- “The cumulative testimony of the four gospels is that when Jesus Christ sees the fallenness of the world [around] him, his deepest impulse, his most natural instinct, is to move toward that sin and suffering, not away from it” (Dane Ortlund).

You Are Mine: (And I have put my words in your mouth and covered you in the shadow of my hand, establishing the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, 'You are my people.')

God's claims on you make your position secure. You are not loved and chosen because of your ability, but because of God. That is why nothing can separate you from God, no one can snatch you from his hand. Your position is secure not because of the strength of your grip on God but because of the strength of His grip on you.

- Toy Story: After failing to fly, Buzz realizes the truth that he is not a true space ranger, but "just a toy." Grief-stricken and disillusioned, Buzz hangs his head in resignation, declaring, "I'm just a stupid, little, insignificant toy." – But Woody implores him, "You're his toy." Written on his shoe is "Andy" (Buzz's owner's name). "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:33). You are made by God and for God. You belong to him!

Conclusion

I want you to listen, to pay attention, to be reminded that God is a faithful God. He is powerful and good and he loves you. He has proved himself faithful in the past and will be faithful in the future. Receive his comfort. Rest in his arms. Take a deep breath of grace and exhale your fear and anxiety. "Cast your cares on him because he cares for you." This reorientation will allow you to reflect God's comfort to others in your world (i.e., to be a non-anxious presence in an anxious world). See the faithfulness of God and have your faith in him "clarified, and deepened. You need God. You know God. You love God." You don't become "detached from the storms of life" but you "are becoming a wiser human being" and you can live with "more clear-minded hope" (David Powlison *adapted*).