

^{ESV} **Isaiah 49:7-13** Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: “Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.” ⁸ Thus says the LORD: “In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, ⁹ saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’ They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; ¹⁰ they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. ¹¹ And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up. ¹² Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.” ¹³ Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.

Dear Friends in Christ, Fellow Redeemed,

On November 4, 2016, five million people attended the Chicago Cubs World Series Parade for what the Guinness Book of World Records ranks as the seventh largest gathering in human history. It's estimated that only half of those in attendance were actually residents of Chicago-Metro. Which means that about 2.5 million people made a special pilgrimage to see their beloved Cubbies celebrate their first title in 108 years. That's a lot of people coming together from great distances!

In this day and age, these strange times we're living in, large social gatherings have quickly become a thing of the past. Today there aren't any parades, or concerts, or ball games taking place for you to attend. It's getting kind of dreary, isn't it? But guess what? I have good news!

In God's Word for this morning, you're invited to a special gathering. And you don't need to worry about social distancing, there's no danger of infection. In fact, it's just the opposite. The place where we're going is a place of healing and restoration. In our text for today, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, inspired by the Holy Spirit, proclaims a Messianic prophecy about a gathering so large that it will shatter all previous records. It's a spiritual gathering of human hearts and souls. Today you are invited to...

Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain

The Suffering Servant comes as the LORD's Covenant (7-8)

The saved sinners come at the LORD's call (9-13)

When you look at the list of top ten largest gatherings in human history, it's interesting to note the wide variety of attractions that draw such huge crowds of people. A 1994 Rod Stewart concert in Brazil ranks 8th with 3 million people. The 1989 funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran ranks 4th with 10 million. A 2013 Hindu festival in India ranks 1st with 30 million. When we look at this great spiritual gathering prophesied by Isaiah, it's also important to note what that gathering is for—this gathering will come because of the arrival of “The Suffering Servant.” Who's the “Suffering Servant?”

Well, there are four different chapters of Isaiah which we call the “Suffering Servant Songs.” In each one, Isaiah describes with remarkable clarity the “Suffering Servant,” who would come down and suffer to serve the people. Obviously, the Suffering Servant is Jesus! 700 years before Jesus was born, Isaiah vividly paints the picture of His life—from manger to grave to resurrection. He wrote how he would come as a Servant, would be born of a virgin, how he would sustain the weary with his words, how he would keep silent when accused, and how he would be led to suffering and death.

Our text for today, Isaiah 49, is the second of those Suffering Servant Songs, and it begins with God the Father addressing Jesus. And from this address we begin to gather details about this Servant’s life... ***Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers...***

It’s not hard to figure out how these words would be true of Jesus. John 1:11 tells us, ***“He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”*** We know from our Bibles that Jesus was not welcomed as he should have been. Beginning with the Wise Men coming from the far east to find the newborn king, they went to Herod and asked where this Messiah was to be born, and the spiritual leaders essentially said, “Well, he’s supposed to have been born in Bethlehem, I guess,” and then no one goes with them to greet him! It continues throughout his life as he’s received by some as a teacher, but by many more as simply a miracle worker, and is outright rejected by many others. It continues on as he rides into Jerusalem to a royal welcome on Palm Sunday, and then those cheers turn into jeers of “Crucify Him.” Jesus would be deeply despised, abhorred by many, and He knew it long before these things ever happened.

Now, One of the most common criticisms of the Christian faith is that if the God of the Bible really existed, He would prove it. He could easily do something to prove to the world once-and-for-all that he really exists and is worth serving. Well, God DID reveal Himself 2000 years ago when Jesus came down to earth and took on human flesh. And when God Himself finally appeared to solve the world’s greatest problem (the death due to sin problem), how did His own people react? He was despised, abhorred by the nation. And then they killed Him.

And He knew that was going to happen. He Himself had spoken about these things through Isaiah the prophet. Yet, He came to Calvary’s Holy Mountain anyway. He came because He had made a promise, more than that... a Covenant. And God always keeps His covenant promises.

We read about that covenant in verses 8-9, where the Father addresses the Suffering Servant again: ***Thus says the LORD: “In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages,⁹ saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’”***

In days like our current times, you get a wide range of responses to God. There are those that say we should all be getting on our knees and praying to God, which I agree with. And there are those that say, “Clearly there is no God, since the strongest force in the world is a microscopic virus, and if there really was a God He wouldn’t be letting this happen.” We obviously all disagree with that, but don’t we sometimes fall into similar thinking? Sometimes even we will use how our lives are going as the gauge for “what God must think about me.”

For instance: things are going very well, promotion at work, happy family at home, cash reserves in the bank—“God must be happy with me because he’s so richly blessed me!” And then when all of that falls apart: job is lost, family is struggling, sickness comes—the temptation is to wonder if God is mad

at you for something. We must not look at God through these lenses, and I'll tell you why. Imagine if the Apostle Paul, going through all the pain and suffering he endured decided that meant God must not love him. And then he stopped bringing the Word of God to the world. What a tragedy that would have been! Think of that thorn in the side that he pleaded with God about, and God replied, ***My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*** (2 Corinthians 12:9) Imagine if Paul ignored that and rejected God because the pains of his body screamed to Him that God had rejected Him, when in actuality God was using these things for Paul's good!

Or on the flip side, imagine you rob a gas station, and you get away with it, and the investigation stops as the leads dry up, and you now have all this extra money, your family is doing well because of it—how wrong that would be to think, "God is favoring me because he's making this all work out for us!" Using bad times as proof of God's negligence—using good times as use of God's favor—we need to find another source of proof. And that's what God is pointing to here! Let's stop looking at the supposed evidence of our lives. Want to know if God favors you? Listen to what He says.

Speaking about His Son, God the Father says ***in a time of favor...he gives his Son as a covenant to the people.*** A covenant is a contract between two parties. God's old contract which He had given to Moses on Mt. Sinai was "You be faithful people of God and you be perfect and you be separate from the world, and then you could continue to be God's special people." And mankind failed miserably, just as we have all continued to do.

So God presents a new contract. You know how you are in God's favor? You know how we know God has not rejected us? Because that new contract came in the form of His only Son, and it was signed in his own blood. God would take care of every stipulation in the contract through Jesus, leaving nothing up to us. In God's new contract he demanded not just goodness, he demanded perfection. He demanded perfect, unshakeable trust. He demanded death for sin. And he demanded it all of Jesus. Jesus, the suffering servant, went obediently to the cross of Calvary, taking care of every one of God's demands. And His death ushered in the New Covenant under which we are justified – declared not guilty – by God's grace and mercy. Now He proclaims ***to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.'*** He proclaims to you to come out of your prison of guilt. To step out of the darkness of your shame over sin. For you've been Redeemed, Restored, and Forgiven. God invites you to Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain!

As I was reading about the Cubs' parade in 2016, I came across a number of street interviews asking people how far they had come to be a part of the historic day. Answers ranged from "down the street" to Florida to Canada and even one man who had flown in from Australia. I guess when the event is that exciting and that historic, people will go to incredible lengths to be there.

Well, there is no more exciting and historic event than what Isaiah prophesied was going to take place when the Suffering Servant would ascend Calvary's Holy Mountain. And Isaiah tells us that saved sinners from all over the world will come at the LORD's call: ***Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.***" He's describing sinners who flock to Christ's cross from all around the world, not because he promises abundant wealth or perfect health or anything like that, but because he offers better blessings, eternal blessings.

Let's take a look at those blessings as Isaiah describes: ***They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture;***¹⁰ ***they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.***

There's a recurring focus throughout this text on the land that God is giving to us. You know, when Europeans were colonizing America, people from different countries tended to settle in different areas, because they were looking for something that reminded them of home. So for instance, in Wisconsin, German heritage is still very prominent today because many Germans settled there as it had a similar landscape and climate as Germany.

When the people of Judah and Jerusalem were carried away by the Assyrians into captivity, the King of the Assyrians assured them their new land would be like their home country. He promised it would remind them of home. He said in 2 Kings 5 they would be taken to live in a "***land like your own land, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards.***" He was mistaken. Their land in Israel wasn't home because of the food and abundance available there, it was because it was the promised land! It was the land where God promised to come to his people as the Suffering Servant! There was not plot of land on earth which could replace that which God had promised.

Similarly today, people the world around want to create this world as a sanctuary; as a veritable Garden of Eden where there is no more war, no more hunger, no more poverty, no more death. People are looking to create heaven on earth, and that's why times like our current state of affairs are so troubling for many, because it awakens them to the fact that this is a fallen world, and we are not in control of these things. It shows them that the earthly comforts that they build their life around can be yanked away in a second. And that's ok, because even if this world could possibly achieve something resembling a paradise on earth, it still could not replace our Homeland which God has promised us. We have a better country than this one, a heavenly one.

The best this world has to offer, the comforts that people in this world look to for peace, that's what Isaiah is describing when he uses terms like "***the ways...the bare heights...the scorching wind***"—the things this world offers are vanity, and can offer no real comfort. But even here, EVEN at this particular time of world history, as Christians, we are still being well fed and led. We have a loving God that is guiding us to pasture and daily nourishing us with his life-giving Word. Even in a world that cannot offer lasting comfort, God continues to point us to our home country of heaven, an inheritance which can never spoil or fade, comfort and peace which will remain.

And so Isaiah concludes, ***Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.*** He invites us to gather before Him at the cross of Calvary. "Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain, sinners ruined by the fall," for here we receive pardon and peace knowing our sins are forgiven. Here we can bring our sins and our guilt and our troubles, and leave them at the feet of the Savior whom we know loved us even unto death. By faith, we now gather together with all the saints of God, singing praises to the Lamb who was slain, bringing us the victory over death. He assures you today, that when you come to Him, He has comfort and compassion for you, to mend your broken hearts.

Yes, it may be some time before life resumes back to normal, it may be sometime before we can start gathering together again as we once did. But nothing can stop you from answering God's invitation to Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain! The Suffering Servant went there. And He went willingly, despised and rejected. But He went. He went as the literal Covenant of God's grace – and He established that Covenant of Grace forever! And now the saved sinners come too. Because we have been called by this gracious good news! Thank God for inviting each one of us to this glorious gathering. Amen.

And the peace of God which surpasses all our understanding will guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.