

This morning we're looking at Isaiah 65-66. Make sure you've got your bibles or devices open so you can follow along. It's good for you to see what God is saying through Isaiah, not just hear it from me. I'll be reading from the ESV.

What we're going to see this morning are back and forth, ping-pong descriptions of judgment and hope. For the servant of God, hope is on the horizon. But for the rebel, judgment awaits. Parts of this text are pretty heavy, but do not fear! The hopeful blessings described will blow your hair back and be a source of great joy and encouragement as you journey with Jesus.

Fakes & Followers (65:1-16)

Here I am! (65:1-7)

Take a look at the first seven verses of chapter 65. [READ]

I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that was not called by my name.

² I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good,

following their own devices;

³ a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks;

⁴ who sit in tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat pig's flesh, and broth of tainted meat is in their vessels;

⁵ who say, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you."

These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all the day.

⁶ Behold, it is written before me: "I will not keep silent, but I will repay; I will indeed repay into their lap

⁷ both your iniquities and your fathers' iniquities together, says the LORD;

because they made offerings on the mountains and insulted me on the hills, I will measure into their lap payment for their former deeds."

Right out of the gate, we've got judgment. And verse one is a direct refutation to the Israelites who, in chapter 64, are complaining that God has hidden His face from them and that's why no one calls on or follows Him anymore (64:7). But God says, I presented myself to you repeatedly and said "Here I am! Here I am!" but you completely ignored me. There's even a whisper in the last part of verse 1 that points to the book of Acts where the Gospel is shared with the Gentiles. God is earnestly seeking those will call on and walk faithfully with Him.

The Persistent Problem (v 2-7)

The problem is that the Israelites, for the most part, aren't interested in following God wholeheartedly, but going through the motions. They're more interested in the *ritual* of God than a *relationship* with God. They want to do what *they* want to do—follow their best ideas, pursue idols and pagan (little g) gods and allow the culture around them to influence them more deeply than their covenant promises with Yahweh. They're living like the world around them but still want to call on the name of God.

Their pretending, their faking it, is so bad that they present sacrifices to Him not because their hearts are in it, but to appease Him in an attempt to secure His blessings just like the pagans do with their idols. They're treating God like a divine vending machine. I do *this* for God so that He will do *that* for me.

And God says it makes Him sick. They might as well go all the way and sacrifice to idols and eat a ham sandwich. It's all a charade. It's all fake. They say the right things and do the right things but their hearts are far from Him. They don't want what He wants, they want what *they* want and they're trying to use God to get it! They want security. They want stability. They want abundance. They don't want God they want His blessings.

'I want what I want, and I'll do what I want, but I'll give a nod to God just to be safe.' And God says, 'No!' That's not how this goes. Their works are like acrid campfire smoke that won't stay out of your face. Their pretending

provokes Him to anger, so judgment for the fakes, posers and pretenders is inevitable. In fact, because there are so many fakes mixed in with the true followers, the faithful remnant will have to ride the wake of the judgment too before they're delivered.

We must choose to follow God wholeheartedly—not just go through the motions. The Israelites knew that. The Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"¹ was prayed twice a day. It's a call to listen and respond in wholehearted obedience. But, as was Israel's habit, they forgot their covenant with God and began pursuing the idols and practices of the culture around them.

Promises for the Faithful (65:8-16)

Gratefully, verses 8-10 are more hopeful. God says that He won't destroy *all* the people, but will pick the good grapes out of the bunch to save them—the remnant. He promises that His true servants will enjoy abundance and the best of the land.

But then Isaiah turns again toward the fakes. Look at verse 11 and following. [READ]

¹¹ But you who forsake the LORD, who forget my holy mountain, who set a table for Fortune and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny,

¹² I will destine you to the sword, and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter, because, when I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not listen, but you did what was evil in my eyes and chose what I did not delight in."

This is a description of people who are everything *but* faithful to God. They don't have a true relationship with God and it shows. They're chasing fortune tellers, trying to secure a hopeful destiny, and God says, 'Your destiny is the sword. You've set yourselves up as my enemies, not my people.' For some listening today, that might be a cold bucket of water in the face. Whoa! Maybe God's been calling & calling & calling you, but you've just ignored Him.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4-5

We want to believe the myth that we are in control. We think it will bring security. So we try all kinds of things. Doug talked about seeking little saviors, Brian spoke about pursuing idols, and Dillon warned us about trying to fill the void with all kinds of things. The only One who's ever been in control is God—despite appearances, right? Still we try to choreograph, plan, manipulate and work angles to feel in control, instead of trusting and following God: who *always* and *only* has our best interests in mind. Life is hard, but His promises never fail.

In verses 13-16 we see what the experiences of faithful and unfaithful will be like:

¹³ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD:

“Behold, my servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry;
behold, my servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty;
behold, my servants shall rejoice, but you shall be put to shame;

¹⁴ behold, my servants shall sing for gladness of heart, but you shall cry out for pain of heart

and shall wail for breaking of spirit.

¹⁵ You shall leave your name to my chosen for a curse, and the Lord GOD will put you to death,

but his servants he will call by another name,

¹⁶ so that he who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the God of truth, and he who takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of truth; because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my eyes.

God's just saying it straight. The people can't say, 'I didn't know!' God's servants will have abundance and security. The rebels will lose everything.

Verse 16 is a great reminder: people will see how you genuinely live for God and be drawn to Jesus. They'll come to know and praise God because of you. How you live for Jesus each day can make an eternal difference for someone. That's absolutely how I came to know Christ. A couple faithful, imperfect, wholehearted followers of Jesus just lived for Him—and I *knew* they had what I needed. I praise God for those faithful friends.

In the End (65:17-66:24)

65:17-66:24 begins and ends with hope. Sandwiched between them are two judgment descriptions and between them another bit of hope. God is using Isaiah to continually remind them that both hope and judgment are before them. "Destruction is not God's ultimate goal, but life and fullness are. It may be necessary to go through terrible loss to reach that goal, but God's people dare not forget that hope is what God's work is always about."²

New Heavens & Earth (65:17-25)

Take a look with me at chapter 65, verses 17-25. [READ]

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.

¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.

¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.

²⁰ No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

²² They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

²³ They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the LORD, and their descendants with them.

²⁴ Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.

²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

This beautiful piece of poetry could be confusing if we don't understand the images that Isaiah is seeing. We see words like, 'new heavens and a new earth' and our minds often jump to where we'll spend eternity in Heaven. Or the Millennial Kingdom, where Jesus reigns and there is

² Oswalt, John N. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998), 675.

peace on earth for 1000 years before the final destruction of evil and the establishment of where we'll spend eternity with Him.

But let me encourage you to think about it more like this: inspired by God as he writes, Isaiah is looking toward the future through a telescope and he's seeing everything all at once—almost like a composite image. He's seeing the believer who is part of the Kingdom of God and the world to come as a new creation in Christ. He's seeing the Millennial Kingdom; he's seeing the eternal new heaven and earth because the first has passed away and the new Jerusalem coming out of heaven.³ These are all in view in this text but the most important thing to hold onto is that God's power is so great that not only can He deliver, but He can create all things new and dismiss the heartache of history. This is the God we choose to follow, obey, serve and proclaim. He is the only One who has *all* power and authority.

Resist the temptation to build a map or rigid this-means-that based on these verses because they're designed to point to the fact that God has the power to completely reset the universe—not just deliver from trial or Babylonian exile—but totally re-do! God will eliminate sin and sorrow forever. Futility and frustration will be cancelled. God says we'll be like trees planted next to a stream that bears fruit season after season. We'll actually have time to enjoy the fruit of our labor.

These verses paint a picture of how vastly different life will be one day for those who faithfully follow the Lord.

We have so much blessing ahead of us that in v18-19 God tells us to start celebrating *now*. He wants our joy to bubble-over as we think about all He has for us! Jerusalem and what happens there will be a joy and will bring joy to the Lord. Much like a groom rejoicing over his bride with an eager sense of anticipation to be together, God rejoices over His people. "From Genesis 3 onward, he has been working toward this day, a day when what was marred in creation will be fully restored. He will rejoice

³ Hebrews 2:5, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Revelation 20 & 21

because his compassionate heart will no longer be wrenched and torn by those things that wrench and tear at ours.”⁴ Soak in that for a moment. That’s how God feels about you. We don’t know when this will happen fully, but as Christ-followers today, we’re experiencing His redeeming, renewing, re-creating work in us even now. We’re new creations, being transformed by the renewing of our minds, filled with His Spirit and equipped to live fully and freely in Him right now...imagine what’s still to come! It’s almost overwhelming to think about all that God has planned for those who love Him.

Against Ritualism (66:1-6)

Verses 1-6 in chapter 66 take us back to the judgment side of things. God says that there’s no ritual, no act of piety or even a structure that He wants or needs. No outward thing does He desire. What He really wants, verse 2, is a person “who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.” The only thing God really wants is your humble, repentant, obedient heart. God’s sanctuary is supposed to be your heart. If He’s not living there then every act of ‘worship’ is pretend and useless. Unclean hearts can never present clean offerings to God. “Offered out of an unclean heart, an ox is no different from a man, a lamb no more clean than a dog whose neck has been wrung, the firstfruits of the grain are no more pleasing than the blood of a swine, and a memorial offering of incense might as well be given to an idol.”⁵ Samuel said it to Saul, ‘to obey is better than sacrifice, to listen and do what God says is better than the fat of rams presented in some ritual.’⁶

God is looking at people whose lives declare, ‘I want God’s blessing but I don’t want God.’ They go through the motions, pretend, and try to work the vending machine to get what they want. They’re transactional with God: ‘Since I did A for God, then God should give me B.’ But that’s not

⁴ Oswalt, 658.

⁵ Ibid, 668.

⁶ 1 Samuel 15:22

how God works. The pagans believed they could manipulate their gods like that, but that's not how Yahweh functions. That's not how Jesus is. Blessing comes when we choose to align ourselves with Him—that's it. And you align yourself with Him by trusting Him and walking in obedience.

We must choose humble relationship over empty ritual. Those who read their bible, go to church, participate in a small group, give and serve might think that God really likes them because of all they're doing. 'See all the good stuff I'm doing, God?' But if all that is just an attempt to earn God's favor, to force Him to accept you, it won't work. God wants full residency and ownership of your heart! It's entirely possible for someone to do all that I just mentioned and not know God at all because they haven't trusted Christ; their heart isn't His. So what does that make them? Those who choose ritual over relationship are enemies of God who will face judgment. All that they're trying to accomplish by currying favor with God, trying to protect themselves, cultivate security and stability and alleviate fear will fall back on them. It will backfire. But, if you realize that you've been pursuing ritual over relationship, it's not too late. Humble yourself, repent and ask God to take up residence within you and help you to live in obedience to Him. Put your faith in Jesus, not your best efforts and plans. That's what He's wants most. He wants you. He built you to be in relationship with Him—everything else falls short.

Hope & Plenty (66:7-14)

Verses 7-14 take us back to the hope side of things. Jerusalem/Zion is portrayed in a motherly way. God will work so profoundly at the renewal of all things that Jerusalem, and everyone who remembers all that she's been through, will overflow with provision and abundance.

No more will a mother's milk dry up from famine and siege. Jerusalem's abundance will be so over-the-top that she will care for her people like a tender mother for her child. The infant needs only to rest and trust its mother's ability to provide for all its needs. When God creates the new Jerusalem, she will be a blessing to *all* His servants—to *all* who come by

faith in God. And the overflowing provisions from Jerusalem will be yet another demonstration of how God blesses those who humbly and obediently follow Him.

But God takes it even further in verses 13-14. Take a look. [READ]
As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

¹⁴You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bones shall flourish like the grass; and the hand of the LORD shall be known to his servants, and he shall show his indignation against his enemies.

So, God will provide amazingly for His people through the new Jerusalem. But, even more, God says that *He* will be Jerusalem's comforter. Not as their mother, but as their compassionate and caring God. This is an expression of the intimate involvement of a loving, personal God with His people. Under His comfort and care, lives will flourish and joy will overflow.

Judgment & Hope (66:15-24)

But the story won't be as bright for those who insist on rebelling against God—whether they're Israelites or not. Ritualists, fakes, posers, pretenders, whatever you want to call them, don't have a relationship with God. They don't have faith in God. They trust their own best thinking and ideas. They try to use God, like pagans do their idols, like some sort of magic, to secure their futures and cities or have abundance in crop and family. When ritualistic behavior becomes the goal (instead of faithfully following God), then there's no difference between biblical ritual and pagan ritual. It's all hollow. It's empty. It's useless. And it makes God sick. Verses 15-17 and 24 describe what those who insist on rebelling against God will face. Check it out. [READ 15-17, 24]

"For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.

¹⁶For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many.

¹⁷ “Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating pig’s flesh and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, declares the LORD.

²⁴ “And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”

Fire, anger, and destruction are what await those who choose ritual over relationship. Those who have been saved by God’s grace through faith don’t have to fear the fire. But those trusting their own efforts, their ritual, will stand before Him and face the fullness of His righteous wrath.

In the end, the servants of God will look outside Jerusalem’s abundant walls, outside the city, and see all the bodies—not boast, but to witness God’s eternal, righteous victory over wickedness with their own eyes.

Just as the celebration and joy of God’s goodness and blessing will continue forever, so too will the wicked face eternal judgment. The ritualists, the posers, the godless used to think they had the ‘good life’ compared to the faithful. But now they’re seen for who they truly are; enemies of God.

Glory Revealed (v 18-23)

At the same time, because of His righteous judgment *and* how He’s rescued the faithful, God’s glory will be revealed to everyone. Check out verses 18-23. [READ]

“For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory, ¹⁹ and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations.

²⁰ And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. ²¹ And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD.

²² “For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD,

so shall your offspring and your name remain.

²³ From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD.

Whether Jew or Gentile, those who faithfully follow God are His servants. And those servants will be His witnesses to the farthest reaches of the world. Men, women, boys, girls, young and old from every tribe, tongue and nation will come to faith in Jesus like crazy; masses of people. God will even take, it seems, Gentiles to serve Him as priests and Levites. This *must* be a new earth, because that would have been unthinkable to the Jews. But remember, God commissioned the Jews to be His witnesses to the world from the beginning. They got all kinds of side-tracked and distracted.

But a handful of Jews, think Jesus' disciples, placed their faith in Christ. The Good News of Jesus spread from them to the surrounding regions. Gentiles heard the gospel because of some faithful Jews—especially Paul. If you're a Gentile Christian, it's because 2000 years ago some Jewish guys shared the Good News of Jesus with the Gentiles.

Isaiah is describing what happened in the New Testament and continues today. People from everywhere are coming to faith in Christ. He may even be pointing towards a greater, deeper reach into the whole world—that is still to come—where the Gospel will be proclaimed and people will turn to Jesus in swarms. All he's describing is to the glory of God. It's been God's plan all along to rescue and deliver, not just from earthly struggles and exile, but from the penalty and power of sin! God doesn't want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.⁷

Wrap

God offers hope or judgment. We've seen it repeatedly today and throughout the series. What we'll experience depends on whether or not we choose to faithfully, obediently follow Him. He knows your heart and

⁷ 2 Peter 3:9

when you have bad days, or even seasons. He knows you love Him even when you struggle. He's got you. And this is our reminder that we must choose to follow Jesus every day. We have to decide to follow His lead, His will, and His Spirit instead of our own.

If you've been faking it though, pretending, going through the motions with no heart for Him, He knows that too. But it's not too late to make a change—that's the Good News—He loves you and forgiveness and restoration are available. Tell Him, right now, that you want to faithfully walk in humble obedience with Him and align your will with His. Invite Him to move in and take up residence within you and to empower you to think and act in ways that honor Him. Give yourself completely to God today.

Those who faithfully walk humbly and obediently with God don't need to fear the fire of judgment. Instead, you get to look forward to the new heavens and new earth, the joy, the ongoing celebration, the elimination of sin and evil, and unhindered intimacy with the Lord. You'll be strong, vibrant and productive.

Sin will no longer be in the way of your relationships with family, friends and especially the Lord! You'll be able to worship Him in fullness like you've never known. You'll be in the company of people from every nation, worshipping the all-loving, never-changing, almighty God who made you and saved you just because He loves you!

We're going to worship in song as we wrap up this morning. Let's sing it out. Let's shout His praise. Let's rejoice in His loving-kindness because He *alone* is worthy.

Amen!