

Dec 14/25 – Leaders Guide

Isaiah 12: Pondering Joy with the Prophet

Isaiah teaches us to sing a song of future joy in our present pain. A song of changed perspective, claimed salvation, and a communal chorus.

Read Isaiah 12

1. The modern person responds to suffering with the agonizing cry – “Why would a good God allow suffering”? This is a very contemporary question. What about our cultural moment gives rise to this question?

Unlike other cultures and other times we are far removed from death, disease, war and scarcity. Those who are closer to this reality come to the conclusion that the world is broken, suffering is part and parcel of life, and meaning comes not from avoiding suffering but from facing it with courage.

Our question – why would a good God allow suffering arises from our commitment to such things as:

Individualism – my personal happiness is the highest good

Secularism – this world is all there is so suffering has no meaning

We are a therapeutic culture – anything that damages my sense of well-being must be wrong

And we are committed to a doctrine of progress – life should be getting better and better

2. (vs. 1) Isaiah teaches us to sing a song of changed perspective. Not to be surprised by suffering but to be surprised by grace. Why is grace so surprising?

Suffering isn't surprising as is part parcel of a world where humanity is living out of step with the fabric of our world.

Grace is surprising in this context – why would a good God love me a sinner? Why would God seek to save a world that has so rejected

him? As Paul puts it – on the cross God displays his love for us in this that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

3. What things do we look to to sustain us in the midst of suffering? How does suffering expose those things as bankrupt, unable to sustain us?

There are many things we look to. In the sermon Tim reflected on three things. Here is an unedited section of the sermon that unpacks those three things as well as helps with the next question:

Let me show you what I mean - because we always try and hold onto to something to sustain us - be it an identity - a security - a joy - and suffering exposes each in turn

I remember reading a true story of a woman who was really struggling to get over a breakup - she went to a counsellor - and the counsellor rightly saw that the pain of the breakup was lingering because it went to the core of who she was - her sense of self - of worth - there is a sense in which she was living into the song Dean Martin made famous - you're nobody til somebody loves you.

So the counsellor invited her to consider her job - you have an amazing career - you're excelling at your work - root your sense of self - of worth there - that will help you move through the pain of the breakup.

It did - until she lost her job

Suffering exposes what we root our sense of self in - revealing it cannot carry the weight - Isaiah fixes our eyes on grace - so that we might lay claim of an identity we can never lose - will never change - for in him we are known - forgiven - loved - chosen - and so much more

Not only do we hold onto an identity to sustain us we also cling to control - believing life will hold together as long as we hold it together - I mean all of us if things aren't going well scramble for control don't we - my family knows when I've had a bad day because they'll find me at home anxiously cleaning the house - I'm not in control over there - but I feel in control here - suffering breaks the illusion that we're in control

Isaiah fixes our eyes on a God of grace - that we may lay claim to the only one who holds all things in his hands - who is coming again in Jesus to put all things right.

Not only identity - control - we also seek solace in earthly joys

The English writer and philosopher C.S. Lewis - who you may know from his Narnia series - came to faith by way of discovering a joy no circumstance could take away - he reflects on it often in his writings - how so many things would stir up in him this longing for joy - but as he pursued them they would never fully materialize - they wouldn't give him what they promised - but when he discovered a joy in God - ah - this is it - this is what I was made for - led him to see every other human joy as simply a pointer - a pointer to the true joy that we can have in a God of grace - and he says - if we mistake the pointer for the real thing - if we try and hold onto it - it will slip through our fingers - deepening the sorrow

Suffering reveals that everything we hold onto eventually gives way - everything other than a God of grace

4. Isaiah wants to keep our eyes on grace because it is the only thing that can sustain us in the midst of sorrow. How can a God of grace sustain us?

I've included the corresponding sustenance that the grace of God provides in the above answer.

5. How can being in the context of community help to keep our eyes on grace when we struggle to do so?

The Psalms, the prayer book of the people of God gives expression to every human emotion: anger, hatred, envy, revenge, doubt, fear but often those psalms end with: but I will remember, I will lift my eyes up to behold God. A remembering, a beholding for the healing of those emotions.

When we can't a community around us can point us to the grace of God so that we might remember, so that we might lift our eyes up.

6. (vs. 3) How does a community joyfully drawing on the wells of salvation reveal the goodness of God?

When our joy as a people is found in God, found in his future kingdom we want more of it, we yearn for it. As a result we begin to pattern our lives now in anticipation of that kingdom for joy's sake. The world sees in the church joy. The world sees in the church a foretaste of that future kingdom for that is where our joy is located.