

Waiting in fear is the worst kind of waiting. Waiting for Dad to come home and see that you broke the lamp tossing the ball around in the living room is the worst kind of waiting. Waiting for the principal to return to his office for your “talking to” is agonizing, the worst kind of waiting. Waiting at the hospital for news from the doctor makes time stand still and your heartbeat like a drummer boy. Waiting for bad news to come is a powerless, fearful, and lonely feeling. Waiting in fear is the worst kind of waiting.

The people of Israel were waiting with a lot of things to fear. They had just been told that there were days of crying and mourning and pain soon to come. How long it would be they didn't know, but God was going to cut them down like a tree. It was inevitable and they deserved it. They had brought it on themselves. Now came the wait.

This was the period of waiting for Israel right before Assyria and Babylon were about to come at God's direction and trounce them. There was going to be abundant amounts of crying and mourning and pain when they were captured and deported as slaves to foreign lands. Their majestic temple would be leveled, and their city besieged. Finally, the walls and strongholds would be destroyed and the whole land would be handed over to their enemies. That was all to come, but for now they were left to wait, the worst kind of waiting.

Isaiah was the prophet who had just given them all these oracles and judgments about their impending doom. He had made it clear that it was the consequence of their unfaithfulness, the result of their cheating on God with other gods. Then fast on the heels of all this doom and gloom and dissonance, Isaiah's tune suddenly changes.

In chapter 11, Isaiah prophesies to them about the branch from the Root of Jesse that is going to stand as a banner for the people and all exiles of Israel will be gathered and led back to Israel on a miraculous highway through the desert. This highway reminds Isaiah of the highway that God miraculously opened through the middle of the Red Sea when they came up from Egypt long ago.

And all of this brings to Isaiah's mind one of the songs he'd known since he was a boy. It was the same song, in fact, that Moses and the Israelites sang right after walking through the Red Sea. The walls of water had just fallen down and crushed the army of Pharaoh and so the Israelites sang, **“The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation.” (Exodus 15:2)**. Maybe you have a melody that sticks in your head like the one I remember from when I was a boy. *“Surely it is God who saves me, I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior.”* Isaiah takes that song refrain and writes new words to address God's people in the time he is living and then he teaches it to the people.

It's a very interesting time for him to do this since as we said before, Israel had lots of things to fear. They had defeat and hard days to come. The strongholds in their city would be destroyed. But suddenly in the midst of their fearful waiting for destruction and doom, God decides to have Isaiah teach them a song about salvation, deliverance, and joy. Let me illustrate how strange the timing for this song is.

There's a much different song sometimes heard at high school sporting events. Just as the final seconds are ticking off the clock, the cheering section from the winning team starts to sing what's known as the “Scoreboard Song”. The winning cheering section asks everyone in attendance, “Do you see the scoreboard? Do you see the referee? Do you see the winning team? Do you see the losing team? Then the winning crowd reminds everyone in attendance of those facts again. Scoreboard! Referee. Winning team! Losing team! And then the crowd goes wild jumping and hollering.

Generally, if you're going to be so bold as to sing the Scoreboard Song, you had better make sure you are indeed the winning team and that the game has in fact been won. You'd look pretty foolish if you were singing the scoreboard song just as the other team was putting the winning points on the scoreboard.

But imagine if it was the second quarter and your team was getting beat up on going into halftime? Do you think that would be a good time to break out the Scoreboard Song, down big in the second quarter and the outcome looks fearful at best? Of course not! That'd be incredibly foolish, if not ridiculous and embarrassing. "Who do they think they are?" everybody would think. "Are they watching the same game? They're losing!"

That's about where Israel was at, losing big halfway through the second quarter with more drubbing to come, and that's when Isaiah starts teaching them the "Scoreboard" song of salvation. **"In that day you will say: 'I will praise you, LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation.'"**

Even the people themselves might think, "We can't sing this song. Look what is going on. Look what we've done. Look what is about to happen. We are losing." But God had told Isaiah otherwise. He has shown Isaiah the end, the final seconds ticking off. Isaiah had seen God take the field as Stronghold, Savior, and Defender and become salvation for his people. He had seen the Branch from the Root of Jesse lifted up for all people. And so could teach them to sing with confidence even while they wait for the fearful things to come. *"Surely it is God who saves me, I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense. And he will be my Savior."*

Yet even our version of that refrain is just a little bit inaccurate, as if Jesus will only be our Savior in the future. But two times in those verses we hear otherwise. **"Surely God is my salvation,"** and again, **"He has become my salvation."** Past, present, and future. He's it. He's my only hope to win, and he's the surest bet this world has ever known. And so, Isaiah starts teaching the people how to sing the song of salvation early, because no matter how ugly the score is at the moment, the outcome is decided, salvation won, joy attained. Scoreboard, referee. Losing team. Winning team!

That's a much easier kind of waiting, waiting when the end is a certainty, and the outcome is good. And though Isaiah has been teaching God's people that song for 2,700 years, sometimes you wouldn't know it by looking at us. Downcast and ridden with guilt, holding on to the sins God has forgiven. It's like we prefer to wait in fear rather than with confidence. We'd rather play it out a few more minutes on our own and see how we do before we let God step in. We'd rather go back to keeping score against ourselves as if God is keeping that same score against us, as if he's tallying the record of our wrongs and bottling up his anger for the day he unleashes it on us.

But to go on in that kind of fearful living is to close our eyes to the mercy of our God who tells us not to fear. **"If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness."** We shouldn't be able to stand before him without his anger obliterating us. But if he's God and he's the one who tells us that "he himself will redeem Israel from all their sins," then who are you to pretend that he won't forgive you, that he hasn't forgiven you, that he can't. Don't talk back to God, he's forgiving you. He already has. And so Isaiah says, **"Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid."** (Isaiah 12:1,2)

Life is lived differently when you're not waiting in fear for an angry God to punish. When you know what is going to be on the scoreboard at the end, then **"with joy, you will draw water from the**

wells of salvation.” (Isaiah 12:3). You can start singing the song of salvation while you wait, and that makes the waiting so much better.

There was a man hundreds of years after Isaiah lived who was waiting for what God had promised to come true. His name was Zechariah. He was also waiting and hoping to have a son, but he and his wife Elizabeth were past the age of childbearing. It was then that the Lord revealed to Zechariah that he would have a son who would prepare the way for the Lord, who, as long foretold, was now going to come and become salvation for his people. When Zechariah heard this news, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and began to sing, **“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel because he has come to his people and redeemed them.” He has come “to rescue us from the hand of our enemies and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”**

That song is exactly the kind of song Isaiah promised that believers would sing **“in that day.”** Remember Isaiah’s words, **“In that day you will say: ‘Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.” (Isaiah 12:4-6)**

That last line is really what we are waiting in stillness and confidence to celebrate—when the Holy One of Israel comes to dwell among his people. The first time he comes it’s to become sin for us that so he can also become salvation for us. The second coming of the Holy One is not again to bear sin, but to bring salvation for those who are waiting for him. Here’s what that day will look like, when the Holy One of Israel returns.

The Apostle John records it in Revelation 21, **“Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” He said to me. “It is done.” (Revelation 21:3-6)**

On the day the Holy One of Israel comes to be with his people again, there will be no more stillness or waiting, or crying or mourning or pain. There will be nothing but shouts of joy and celebration. Until that day, remember what it says on the scoreboard. **“It is done!” He won, you won. Winning team!”** That makes it so much easier in the meantime to wait in stillness for the God of our salvation. Amen.