

God's Great Reversal

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Text: Isaiah 65:17-25

Entropy, a word we may not all know, is a reality we cannot deny. It refers to how things in our world, when left alone, tend to disorder. Marriages crumble much more easily than they are built, and aging slowly reduces our physical capability. Yet, with these realities filling our lives, Christians know that such degradation is not ultimate and insoluble. Greater than these problems are for our small lives and short existence is the God whose creation this is and before whom nothing is without perfect and final resolution.

Yet, as we struggle against these and other experiences, we are often prone to put great people of God on a pedestal as if they stood above and outside of actual reality. We tend to over-glorify people like Moses, David, Isaiah, and Paul, somehow thinking that things for them were just a bit better than for us. But we are corrected through the record of their glaring personal weaknesses and horrible sins. In addition, we are also shown what they looked for and saw by faith. They were always directed to look forward beyond the pale of their age dominated by sin's entropy to the age of God's intervention when He will set things back to order. However, this return to rightness isn't just a return to what once was; it is the higher and greater reality of what God had planned from the beginning.

Our text takes place in the times of Isaiah, when the scene was bleak. Things in the nation's religious life had gone from bad to worse and the surrounding countries were ready to be God's instruments of judgment. The first verse of the prophecy tells us when this was spoken—during the reign of four kings—from approximately 740 B.C. to at least 680 B.C. The theme

of the first 39 chapters of the book is widespread and overwhelming judgment and woe upon those who reject God. The last 27 chapters of Isaiah give the glorious hope of God's restoration through redemption performed by His Servant for His people. This work will usher in ultimate glory.

Isaiah 65:17–25 vividly pictures a new creation brought about by the sovereign and timely intervention of the Lord. With grandiose language, great progression, and glorious associations, Isaiah takes believers to the future age of which the coming of Christ is the beginning and the return of Christ will be its full realization. And what marks this age? Final reconciliation with God and an experiential communion initiated by God with His people, enjoyed in the context of a restored Paradise. Here are matters so great and profound as to raise us up to a new level of spiritual enjoyment in God so that the entropy in us and around us must gradually fall away and we may enjoy the One who never gives in to disorder but constantly renews those who enjoy communion with Him.

A reversal upon creation

In our text, we are immediately confronted with the wonder of a new creation! But, lest we rush ahead too fast, we need to stop and think of the connection with what precedes, indicated by the little word “for.” This small connective word shows the reason why “the former troubles are forgotten” and how “they are hid from mine [the LORD’S] eyes” (verse 16). In the preceding verses we read the narrow division between the godly servants of the LORD who will be abundantly blessed and the wicked idolaters who are forever cursed. To magnify the blessings of the righteous, Isaiah moves from former troubles to the wider view of the future glory that provides the ultimate picture of blessing. Our text is teaching us that we do not need to surrender to

the "old" ways of sin and servitude to Satan. Even as we are convicted of the reality and power of sin, God's Word brings the greater power of God to perfectly deal with our sin!

So God lifts up Isaiah's eyes and heart with the words, "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth." We clearly see the echoes of creation, but what is in focus here? Well, it is the same as the focus of the original creation, the express will of God to make Himself known. The eyes of faith are different from the natural eyes of sense that focus chiefly on the creation. Above and behind and through creation, we find the Creator and His glorious "I create." The verb is used only of God and draws our attention to the Creator. When God wants to reveal Himself; no one can stop Him, for nothing is greater than His sovereign initiative.

Further, the word "new" shows that the revelation is heightened to a superlative degree. God never just works chronologically. He always makes qualitative improvements through time, and Isaiah is using the language of total new creation to depict the level of cosmic development that God would sovereignly usher in. It would be like a young man many years ago anticipating a very nice horse-drawn carriage for his birthday. It would certainly be better than what he had used up until then, but imagine if his birthday comes and, instead of a carriage, he discovers a shiny new car in the driveway! This car is not just better than what he had before; it is an improvement (most would say) over the finest carriage. God is not just ushering the finest means of transportation, but the finest world ever!

Here Isaiah is standing on the threshold of this creative act. God is inaugurating it, and the former rebellion, idolatry, and iniquities will not be remembered. What preceded is encapsulated in the first verse: the people wanted nothing to do with God. Creation was abused (take note of the number of place names,

references to mountains, gardens, animals, etc.) and God was spurned times without number. The beauty of God's redeeming grace is found in His ability to take the crooked and perverse former things and make something new. The amazing thing is not that man would not remember the former, but that God would not remember it, though it was marked by revolt against Him. In this new creation, God is manifesting a heart that forgives and a posture that has accomplished reconciliation. If God can say this on a cosmic scale in creation, does that not of necessity include His posture towards His contrite people? More than likely, you struggle with your past—mistakes you made, habits you formed, destruction you caused. But here we see that God is so taken up with His “new” work, even as it may be taking place in you, that there is no room in His purview for bringing the “former” back to mind. After all, His new work dealt with the totality of believers' lives in a final way!

What will occupy the Lord's attention? It is His Jerusalem. Notice that the former was marked by the fall of Adam as the covenant head of all people, while the latter is marked by Jerusalem under the leadership of David's Son and including all of God's elect. The spotlight is on Jerusalem, the place where God's name was placed, the place where the people of God met with their King, the place where reconciliation ultimately was made—the the center of Palestine, the center of the world. The garden of Paradise was marred when an intruder came to spoil it, but the Jerusalem fortress created by God is impregnable and eternally safe.

But is Jerusalem just a place? No; Jerusalem symbolizes many things in the Bible, one of which is the rule that God has established there. This is shown by the height of the city itself and especially the establishment of David's throne there. Jerusalem is a picture of creation restored in obedience to her rightful King.

This is why there can be so much rejoicing and joy, because the wrongs have been righted and we catch a glimpse of creation returning to order from rebellion. It is like David dancing before the ark, knowing all that was portrayed in the re-entry of Jehovah as King into His city and His temple. No longer will the "voice of weeping" or the "voice of crying" be heard, for those are indicators of distress. Rather, there is God rejoicing as King, showing His delight in His "new" Jerusalem.

Now we need to ask how the Jerusalem image bridges the gap between the "former" creation and the "new heavens and new earth." And at the same time comes the personal application of how sinners today may be included in that new creation, the Jerusalem of God. The way that the Lord as King establishes rule of His creation and His people is not told to us, but we find a clue in Isaiah himself. He was the prophet sent by the heavenly court (Isa. 6) to kings in the former Jerusalem to declare this newness, a newness that he could not usher in, but God would. The Messiah as the Son of David, and the greatest King, who Himself as the Son of God was "first rank" (Col. 1:15) at creation, came embodying the new creation and making it a reality for those who trust in Him. This conflict of the former and new ages was resolved at Jerusalem, where tears would be shed as the messianic King bore the weight of the former age upon Him, right to the cross where forgiveness is merited and into the tomb where the former is buried. In the day of resurrection, the new creation is ushered in, with joy replacing weeping in the very city of Jerusalem. Now it is through the gospel message of the new creation in Christ and faith in Him that this creation is entered and enjoyed. As we see in 2 Corinthians 5:17, the beauty of being a Christian is not found in faith itself, but the work of God on which it is based!

A reversal of the curse

Verses 20–23 turn our attention to life in that new creation, described as “Jerusalem.” The main point to grasp here is that while the aspect of creation focuses our attention on God as King reestablishing His primacy and rule, these verses show how life will be in that kingdom viewed from the perspective of believers, the people included in the word “they.” When God does an objective work, the subjective experience of His people must change. How does it change? Isaiah highlights three aspects: longevity of life, satisfaction in labor, and the blessed line of people.

We have to remind ourselves how the sinful disruption of creation affected the experience of humanity. At the Fall, a right relationship with God was ruptured and therefore the right to life was lost; death became dominant in man’s experience. While life was given to be enjoyed eternally with God, sin brought death and decay and a downward slide in the length of human life. Genesis 6:3 restricts human life to 120 years from the 800-900 year average before the flood. Then to Moses’ words in Psalm 90:10, the days are further subtracted to “three score years and ten [70]; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore [80] years....” This trend continues to its lowest point, at the time of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the time of the birth of Christ, when infanticide further lowered the average lifespan, especially of males. Does not your life show marks of brevity and significant shortening?

Verse 20 supplies the answer of the Lord for this longevity problem created by the Fall. Admittedly, the words are hard to put together, but the general sense is captured by this paraphrase, “In that place there shall be no more an infant who lives but a few days, nor an old man who doesn’t live out his years. Those who die at 100 will be as youth [they had far more life to live], and the sinner who dies before a hundred is considered

accursed." It is as if the Lord is saying that, unlike early in history, when believing Abel was killed young and unbelieving Cain was spared to live, the righteous will enjoy a full and satisfying life in the Jerusalem of the future, the place of the Lord, while the wicked will die under the curse, even if they live long.

We note a few things here. Firstly, death is still pictured. This death, though, has been changed and emptied of its dominating grip. At such a time there is the fullness of life, even with the reality of death not being totally exterminated. The guarantee that stands behind even the reality of death is that all past, present, and future wrongs shall be righted and righteousness shall reign. Secondly, this leads us to what the New Testament calls "eternal life." This is not to be conceived merely as the time after Christ comes again, but also now, when a full and abundant life is available in Christ. This is true because the eternal kingdom, the Jerusalem of God is being built now. Therefore, if you are a believer, you have everlasting life; death, the devil, or anyone else cannot take it from you. Thirdly, for some time, even after the breaking in of this blessed life into human experience, there will be a "rubbing shoulders" with those who are sinfully resistant to the kingdom. They may taste something of outward, overflowing blessings, but they have no part in the experience of God's grace. If you are enjoying life and holding out against God's work of change, no matter how long you live or how wealthy you get, you are under God's wrath and only receive your current blessings because of God's overflowing goodness to His own people. There will come a time when even the outward blessings will be removed and your only portion will be unmitigated wrath as you bear the curse eternally.

In addition to the reversal of longevity, the Lord points us to a satisfaction in labor in verses 21–22. At the creation of man, God gave Adam a mandate that

follows from God's very own creative ability. Man was not to be a creator, for that is God's exclusive domain, but man would be a builder, one who multiplies, replenishes, and subdues (Gen. 1:27–28). This is carried out initially in Cain himself, who builds a city, and calls it Enoch after his son. This, along with the history of Israel, shows us the curse that abides over all the efforts of obedience to the cultural mandate. In Deuteronomy 28:30, we read Moses' declaration of the curse that would result from the disobedience of Israel, "Thou shalt build a house, and thou shalt not dwell therein: thou shalt plant a vineyard, and shalt not gather the grapes thereof" (see also Zeph. 1:13). Because of the sin of humanity, we are never permitted to totally enjoy what we accomplish in this world.

But in the reversal of the curse that the Lord is revealing to Isaiah, there will come a day when there will be satisfaction in labor. This satisfaction is pictured by resting in the houses they build and eating the fruit of their vineyards. Much of our culture gives evidence that man has no final rest in the world under the curse, for we go from place to place, thing to thing, religion to religion, hoping to find the elusive satisfaction. True satisfaction with labor is pictured in work performed from the perspective of the Jerusalem that God is building.

Then, too, there is a great divide. Some people will be left out from the blessings. This is in view in 22a, where other unbelieving people will not be allowed to pillage the people of God. Yes, while covenant breaking is a reality, there is some crossover; but there will come a point when a final separation will be made. God's people will enjoy the labor of their hands and be satisfied with rest, while the obstinate unbelievers will be without home and without food, without life itself. People outside of God's redemption must use the current time to not just get goods for themselves as they perish, but

to learn and love the God of grace and mercy, who gives them some of the overflowing abundance that He showers upon His people. They must repent and believe and take their place in the family of faith.

The final thing we read about satisfaction in labor is the foundation for it. It is pictured as a tree, showing lasting testimony and legacy. This would be a covenant reminder of the blessings that God gives to His people. Sometimes as my family walks through parks we see trees with plaques on the ground for who provided the funding for the tree. A small impact has been made through that gift, an impact that hopefully will last. Well, the legacy of God's people will last longer than any donated tree with its plaque. For their legacy stems from the electing purpose of God and leads back to Him whose purpose is sure. Their future is guaranteed because their past is governed by immutable decree.

The third aspect of the reversal of the curse is in the people themselves being called the "seed of the blessed of the LORD." One of the greatest results of the sin of man is not the short life, nor the difficulty and dissatisfaction in labor, but the double "seeds" that have resulted. There are two big families in the earth, which war against each other: the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. Both of these "seeds" came from Eve and both of these "seeds" exist today. The wonder of verse 23 is that our attention is focused on the "seed of the blessed of the LORD." As this Jerusalem is populated, believers may take great comfort from these words.

In these words there is the suggestion that the Lord is doing the spiritual begetting. The fountainhead of any life in this Jerusalem, and of any reversal of the curse, is the reception of life from the Lord Himself (see Psalm 87). The divine life is worked in hearts by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, as Christ explains it to Nicodemus in John 3. The Lord guarantees and

goes so far as to generate a posterity that are called His people. We see this in Abel and Seth and throughout the Word of God in the idea of the remnant. Your being of such a lineage as “begotten by the LORD” in a sense gives you a right to all the additional glories of the new creation of God.

There also seems to be a hint that the “blessed of the LORD” is not just a state of existence, but the name of a real Person—*the* Blessed of the Lord: the One who is God, and who was the Word of creation, whose days are eternal and whose power is unlimited. The seed is both One and many, and this One, who is peculiarly blessed of the LORD, is the divine Son incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ. Through faith, we receive the effects of a reversed curse because the “Blessed of the LORD” bore the curse on the cross. His days were cut off; He presumably built houses and yet had no place to rest His head; His days were marked by a tree—not as a memorial, but as the accursed death. This “Blessed of the LORD” is central to the program of God’s new creation; the most beautiful mark of a believing life is when we revolve around the same center as God. When our plans, passions, and purposes all take a Christ-exalting shape, then are we truly blessed.

The reversed curse concludes with the covenant hope for the future—there will be a full number of people in the city of God. This is indicated in the word “seed” and the phrase “and their offspring with them.” There is life in this line, not just because of the death that bore the curse, but because of the life that conquered the curse. There is not vanity or trouble but inextinguishable life that runs through the spiritual veins of all for whom He died, and so they will be brought to know and experience the life-changing grace purchased at such a dear price.

A reversal in communion

The culmination of the passage is indicated by the phrase “and it shall come to pass” in verse 24. With these words we are thrust outside of what we can easily describe and must be content for the blessed experience of the communion spoken of here. One of the great beauties of the Bible—and therefore of the Christian life—is the continual mystery that attends it. Too often, Christians live as though there were no remaining mysteries—as if we have it all figured out. But the beauty of true religion that comes from God is that the present mystery whets our appetite for future experience when the mysteries will be reconciled and the God of them eternally enjoyed. The believer must be filled with holy wonder as he or she reads these verses, just because it is so far beyond our current experience.

Man created as the image of God means that God could have closest communion with man. Yet, we know that humanity forfeited that great privilege through self-centered sin. This did not ultimately end God's desire for communion with His creatures; it raised it to another level. God's answer to our rebellion is not ultimate estrangement but repeatedly returning to us, like we read in verse 1, “I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not” or in verse 2, “I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people....” What grace of God, to seek and strive with men! Even in light of this, the complaint continues as in verse 12, “Because when I called, ye did not answer; when I spake, ye did not hear; but did evil before mine eyes, and did choose that wherein I delighted not.” Judgment comes to those who continually reject the Lord and spurn His grace. As we have seen in these verses, judgment never has the last word; it only heightens the glory of final redemptive success.

It is that final redemptive success of the Lord that is in view in verses 24–25, where the intimate commu-

nion between God and humanity extends to the animal realm, like a glorified Eden. We are not told when or how these things will be fulfilled, but that they will be. This doesn't surprise us, for the Lord does not reveal all His glorious purposes at once. The features of this communion demand our attention.

The first feature that verse 24 gives is the intense spirituality of this communion. There is a closeness between the Lord and His people that surpasses language. All separation has been overcome and there is holy converse that depends not on physical circumstances or constructs. We see something like this in seasoned marriages, where the spouses only have to look at each other to know what their mate is thinking. Such an example is far less profound, though, than vibrant communion with the living God. Every Christian lives by tastes of this intimacy with God, where the Spirit bears witness with our Spirit that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16) and yet the fullness and finality of face-to-face communion remains reserved for the "not yet."

We then face the wonderful question, "How can this be true?" It simply seems too good! It indicates that there will be such a full provision made that this communion is the only possible result. This provision is essentially the fullness of the Spirit that Adam forfeited but was perfectly received by Christ as the second Adam, out of whom believers receive the Holy Spirit. In Christ, this intimacy of God and man is found, and it is not only through His two natures but by His Spirit. Therefore, these words, though wonderfully beyond our experience, ought to be expected by God's redemptive provision. Even before His people call, He hears; the Spirit of Christ puts that call in their hearts and that same Spirit continues to indwell Christ at the Father's right hand. When the Spirit puts the call in the heart, the Father hears it. What boldness ought to mark our

prayers! Even more than that, how ought believers to pray always by holding this holy converse with God wherever we are. It is a new covenant privilege that we too rarely appreciate.

This communion is a two-sided, growing delight as God reveals more of Himself to His people and as His people behold and enjoy more of the majesty of their God. God is glorified through the use of means like prayer, but prayer is not the final step in a Christian's communion with the Lord—it is just the beginning! It leads to growth in appreciation and enjoyment of God who still gives Himself fully to each of His people. Let these thoughts not just evoke more prayer and praise, but maximize your enjoyment of the new creation that God has made real through Christ. Just as the Lord could regularly walk with Adam in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8), so believers have that privilege restored in the experience of the new creation.

Just to prove it and put the icing on the cake, so to speak, we see an Edenic scene portrayed in verse 25. This is the final and consummate enjoyment of covenant communion, prophesied already in Isaiah 11:6–9. Perfect harmony reigns because all forces of destruction are defeated. There will no longer be any predators, for the wolf and the lamb shall feed together. The wolf will not feed on the lamb, but they will be eating side by side. There will be no primacy, for the lion shall eat straw like the bullock; the king of the beasts is like the ox of the field. All will be equally under the Lord and in harmony with others. There remains no prospect for the serpent, for he receives the same pronouncement as that in Genesis 3:14: “dust thou shalt eat.” And there is no perishing at all, “they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain saith the LORD.” None shall be destroyed or hurt, for the communion and peace shall be restored to that which followed the original creation.

So we conclude on the highest possible note: not with

animals at peace and rest, but the certainty that comes from “saith the LORD.” When He acts, He speaks, and when He speaks, He will certainly act. What is our responsibility? We must simply “behold,” for there is nothing better than beholding God as our God—as His new creatures in His new creation through Jesus Christ.