Isaiah 61:8-9

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[0:00] I had promised myself I would resist making any reference to Christmas until the penultimate Sunday before the day. So, if we're talking about Sundays, that would be the 16th of December.

That's two weeks today. However, as I gave thought to how I would introduce this morning's sermon that deals with a wonderful promise that God makes to His people, the thought that came to my mind was that Christmas is all about God keeping His promises. It's all about, in fact, God keeping this promise that we read on in the two verses that we're going to be focusing our attention on this morning. So, there you have it. I've mentioned Christmas, and I've failed to keep my promise to myself, though it was a rather foolish promise in the first place. As we consider verses 8 and 9 of Isaiah 61, and I would encourage you if you do have a Bible in front of you to have it open in the chapter, particularly those verses, because we'll be referring time and time again to the content of them, and just to have even that in your mind's eye and being able to look back, I think, will help as we go through the sermon. And as we consider these two verses in Isaiah 61, we'll organize what is to be said under three headings. First of all, we'll think about the promise that God makes. In these verses, there is very clearly a promise that God makes. We want to think about the promise, discover what is this promise, what is God promising. So, that's where we'll begin. But then we'll consider, secondly, the grounds of God's promise. On what grounds does God make this promise? We're really there asking the why question. Why does God make this promise? Why does God keep His promise?

So, we're going to consider what the promise is, but then we'll move on and think about the why, the grounds upon which the promise is made. And then thirdly, we'll look at what the passage says concerning the outcome of the promise. You know, a promise is made, and that's good and well, but what is the outcome? When is the promise kept? How is the promise fulfilled? So, that's what we'll be thinking about under the third of our three headings. So, we'll begin with this first heading, the promise that God makes. And we find that in verse 8, in the second half of the verse, where we read, I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. God is speaking about His people, and He is making a promise concerning His people to His people. I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. The first thing we can notice there is this language of reward. God promises to reward His people. You see that there in verse 8, I will reward them. Now, that very language is intriguing and challenging in its own way, and we'll come back to the language of reward in a moment when we're looking at the grounds of God's promise. So, just keep that filed away. We're not going to talk about it right now, but we'll come back to it, this language of reward. I will reward them. But then what does God go on to say in this promise? I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. And in fact, this everlasting covenant effectively is the reward that God is speaking of. What's the reward? Well, it's this reward that He will make with His people an everlasting covenant. And that leads us really to the question we want to pose at this point. What is this everlasting covenant promised to God's people? Well, God is promising to accompany His people. He's promising to be in a relationship with His people forever. That's what a covenant is.

It's the meaning of the word. It's the meaning of the word. A covenant is a relationship between two parties or two persons. In this case, a relationship between God Almighty, the living and true God, and God's people. They are to be in covenant. God is promising that He will be in a relationship with His people forever. It's an everlasting covenant. But let's explore a little more about this everlasting covenant that God promises. And we'll do so by noting how the same expression, the same language, is used elsewhere in this same book of Isaiah, where Isaiah treats this same theme.

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[5:31] And as we do explore this in Isaiah, we're going to notice that there are three aspects of the covenant that we're going to highlight. We could say more about it, but there are three that we're going to notice as we look where this language is used elsewhere in the book. The first thing that I want to say about this everlasting covenant in terms of characteristics of it is that it is grounded in and sustained by God's love. Just turn back to Isaiah 55 and verse 3. Isaiah 55 and verse 3.

And you'll notice the very same language is used in this verse, and it allows us to draw out this truth about this everlasting covenant. Notice what is said there. Isaiah 55 verse 3, Give ear and come to me, hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you.
It's exactly the same thing that's said in chapter 61. I will make an everlasting covenant with you. My faithful love promised to David. And the striking thing in that verse is that the expression, my faithful love, serves almost as a synonymous term for an everlasting covenant.
It's as if God, as he makes this promise, I'm going to make an everlasting covenant with you, he's anticipating maybe a question, well, what is that? And he says, well, this is what it is.
It is my faithful love. You want to know what the covenant's all about? This is what it's about. It's about my faithful love. This covenant, this everlasting covenant, this promise that is made, is the means whereby God demonstrates and showers his love upon his people. What kind of love? Well, his faithful love, his dependable love, his reliable love, his never-ending love.
[7:32] So this everlasting covenant is grounded and sustained by God's love. But another thing we can say about this everlasting covenant is that it is secured by the giving of God's Son, Messiah Jesus, to bring God and his people together. Again, if we look in Isaiah and then on this occasion in chapter 42, where the same language is used. So Isaiah 42 and verse 6. And let's just read what it says there. You'll notice that the chapter is entitled, The Servant of the Lord. So it's really speaking about this same messianic theme of the coming of Messiah. And notice what it says in verse 6. I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness. God the Father is speaking to his Son, to the Messiah. I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness. I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles. So here we have in this chapter God speaking to the servant of the Lord, the messianic figure we know to be his Son, our Savior Jesus. And what does he say to him?

He says to Jesus, I will make you to be a covenant for the people. So Jesus is so central to the covenant that he is identified as the covenant. Jesus is pivotal to the fulfilling of this promise. When God promises an everlasting relationship, what we're discovering is that that will only be possible given what Jesus does to make it happen. Without Jesus, there could be no relationship with God, period. Never mind an everlasting one. And so this everlasting covenant is secured by the giving of God's Son and by the work of God's Son. That's why I said at the beginning that Christmas is all about God keeping his promise. He sent his Son to secure the covenant, to fulfill the promise that he had made, to remove all the barriers, and so to establish this everlasting relationship with his people.
So this everlasting covenant, what are we discovering about it? This relationship between God and his people. What we've discovered that it's grounded in and sustained by God's love. It's secured by the giving of God's Son. Another thing I want you to notice, because it's very relevant and practical for us today and now. And that is that this covenant, this relationship is open to all who respond to God's invitation. And we turn back to Isaiah 55. We looked at Isaiah 55 a moment ago and we return there now.
This relationship that God promised is no closed shop. This covenant, this relationship with God is offered to all who are thirsty. It's offered to you today. Just listen to the words of Isaiah 55, reading from the beginning. Come all you who are thirsty. Come to the waters. And you who have no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me and eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest affair. Give ear and come to me. Hear me that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you. My faithful love promised to David. The language time and time and time again is language of invitation. And so when God speaks of making this covenant, he is saying, it's for all who thirst. It's for all who would come. None are kept out. None are excluded.
We simply need to come. We need to come and to receive. Have you come to Jesus? You see, this relationship with God that is spoken of, this everlasting covenant is a covenant that we enter into as

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we come to as we come to as we come to as we come to as we come to as we come to as we put our trust in him. So we are brought into this relationship with God. And so the question I ask you is, have you done that? Will you do that? Are you thirsty? Come to the waters and drink. This is God's promise to make an everlasting covenant. But let's move on to the grounds of God's promise. So having identified at least in some measure what the promise is, let's think about the grounds of God's promise.
[12:46] And here we are exploring why God makes the promise and why God keeps the promise. Now we've already highlighted God's faithful love as a ground for God's promise. But in our text, we are given further insight into the grounds, the why of God's promise. And the crucial words to notice in verse 8 of chapter 61 are the very first two words. Verse 8 begins with these words, for I. This wee word, for, introduces an answer to the question, why. You know, why has God made this promise? For, because, that's the sense. So what follows is giving us that explanation as to why God has acted in this way, why God has made this promise, why God keeps this promise. For. And the wee word, for, is followed by an even weir word, I, which flags up a key truth. The making and keeping of promises is grounded in the character of God. For, I. You see, when God goes to explain to us why He promises these things and why He will keep His promises, what He immediately does is identify what He is like. He tells us what His character is like, because His very character, who He is, constitutes the ground of the promise. For, I, the Lord. For, I, the Lord.

And what aspects of His character are highlighted in our text? Well, particularly His justice and His faithfulness. There we see it. For, I, the Lord, love justice. And then He goes on. In my faithfulness, I will reward them. So these two aspects of God's character are highlighted as explaining why He makes the promise and why He keeps the promise, His justice and His faithfulness. And let's look at both of these. First of all, His justice. Notice how in the verse there is a, I think we could call it a necessary symmetry, an internal coherence to God's justice. He loves justice, and He hates injustice.
Injustice. Notice there the juxtaposition of these two words that seem and are opposites, love and hate. For, I, the Lord, love justice, and I hate robbery and iniquity. Or if we were to simply maintain the symmetry and still do justice to the text, I love justice, and I hate injustice.
There is this coherence to God's justice. He loves justice, and He hates injustice. I wonder if some of us sometimes struggle with the very notion of God hating. But it could be no other way. Think about it. How can you love justice and not hate injustice? The two must and do go together in God. And of course, the hatred of injustice has consequences. The hatred of wrongdoing has consequences.
In this chapter, we've already heard the Messiah speaking of the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God. You see that there in verse 2, that one of the things that Messiah would do would be to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God. You have these two sides.
[16:26] God loving justice and hating injustice. These are the two sides of the coin of God's justice. But how does God's love of justice explain and ground the promise of God to make and keep an everlasting covenant with us, which is what we're trying to establish? We can see, I think, how God's justice would result in a day of vengeance or punishment. Punishment serves the cause of justice. We may find punishment unpleasant, but I think we would acknowledge that it serves the cause of justice when it is deserved. And so punishment serves the cause of justice. We can see that. That makes sense. But how does rewarding sinners serve the cause of justice? You see, we come to that word that I indicated a few moments ago could create some difficulty for us. Where God says there in verse 8, in my faithfulness, I will reward them. And so my question is this, in what way is it just to reward sinners? If the wages of sin is death, which it is, and if I am a guilty sinner, and I am, how is it just for God to grant me forgiveness and cleansing and the precious privilege of an everlasting covenant relationship with Him? And to make matters even more difficult, this language of reward, the word there we find in verse 8, has the sense of payment due to the beneficiary. It's not a gift, but a payment that has been spoken of in this verse. Now, the Bible does use the language of gift on other occasions, but on this occasion it is using the language of reward or payment due.

And we find similar language and a similar difficulty, I suppose we could call it, in the passage that we read in 1 John chapter 1, where we read concerning God's dealing with repentant sinners. And what does it say in verse 9? It says, if we confess our sins, so I'm in 1 John chapter 1, if we confess

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our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. There John is grounding God's forgiveness on His justice in the same manner that Isaiah does here in this chapter. But the question is this, why is this justice? We can say it's grace, we can say it's love, but why is this justice? It's justice because of what Jesus has done. You see, Jesus has paid the price. He's done the time. He has paid in full our bill. And having paid the price in full, He has secured our reward. The reward that is given to us is not for anything that we have done, but for what Jesus has done on our behalf. Given what Jesus has done, it would be unjust of God the Father not to receive and embrace those for whom Jesus lived and died. For He did not live and die in vain. If He has paid the price, if He has lived the life, if He's died the death for us, then justice demands that those for whom Jesus died be received and embraced by the Father. Justice demands that we be embraced by God.

And as our text reminds us, God loves justice. So what are the grounds of His promise and the keeping of His promise? Well, it is grounded in the justice of God, but it is also grounded, we notice, and much more briefly, in the faithfulness of God. That's the other aspect of God's character that is highlighted in verse 8. In my faithfulness, I will reward them. God makes, and in particular, God keeps His promises because He is faithful. He is true to His covenant commitments. He has promised to be our God and has freely and permanently committed Himself to us. He has made promises. And He has made this promise, and He will keep this promise because He is faithful. And so when we ask the question, why does God make this promise? Why does God keep this promise? Well, this promise is grounded in His faithful love, as we saw in the other chapter in Isaiah 42, but it is grounded in our text in the justice of God and in the faithfulness of God.

Which leads us to the third thing we want to just notice, and that is the outcome or the fulfillment of God's promise. How was and is this promise being fulfilled? This promise to make an everlasting covenant with His people.

[21:30] How is it being fulfilled? Well, the promise was fulfilled by the giving of Jesus to secure the covenant, to secure our relationship with God, our friendship, our restored friendship with God.

But as we focus on our text, what do we discover in verse 9 about the outcome or the fulfillment of God's promise? Notice what is said there in verse 9. And you'll notice as you read verse 9 that it's all about a people, the people of God. And we can notice, I think, five truths about this people of God spoken of in verse 9 that are the outcome of the promise, the fulfillment of the promise. Very quickly running through these.

First of all, we can say that we are the people spoken of. The outcome of God's promise is a people, His people, you and me. Believers, Christians through time and across the nations, we are the fulfillment of the promise. We are the descendants spoken of. Their descendants will be known among the nations. Their offspring among the people. Who are they? We are the people. That's the first thing we can say. This is what God promised to Abraham back in the day, that He would be the father of nations. And we are the descendants promised to Abraham. So we are the people. But the second thing I think we can say is that we are a people united. I'm not saying we are a united people, though I hope that's true. But I'm saying we are a people united, and particularly united to the Messiah.

Focusing on the language there, verse 9, of seed or offspring, where do we first come across this language in the Bible? Well, it's back in the Garden of Eden, in Genesis chapter 3, following the fall of Adam and Eve. And you remember the promise that is given to those who had fallen. The promise is given of an individual who would win the decisive victory over the devil, who would crush his head.

And we know that the one promise, the seed of the woman, the offspring of the woman, we know that He is Jesus. But as those united to Jesus, we are also, in a real sense, part of that seed, part of that offspring that was spoken of way back at the beginning of time. So we are the people. We are a people united to the seed of the woman. What else can we say about this people that is the outcome of the promise? Well, notice also that we are, I think, what we could call a scattered people.

[24:14] Notice the language there in verse 9. Their descendants will be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples. So there's this stress on the sense or the reality that God's people will be found among the nations, among the peoples. And at the risk of perhaps loading onto the word among, a burden that it's not able or intended to bear, I do think that this looks forward to the New Testament age, when the people of God will no longer be a nation

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confined to one particular geographic location in the Middle East in Palestine, but a people scattered among the nations.

And it is striking, though time doesn't allow us to explore this this morning, it is striking how in the New Testament the picture of God's people being scattered by God is a recurring and deliberate one. God scatters His people. You remember the day of Pentecost, how there were representatives of the nations of the world, and then they were scattered back to their home. You remember the persecution of the early church and how that served to scatter God's people across the known world. Why? That God's people might be among the nations, that God's people might be among the peoples, mixing with them, visible to them, a scattered people. This is our calling and identity, to be among the nations, a salt and light, a signpost pointing to Jesus. A scattered people, and related to that, and I suppose a necessary corollary to that is that we are a distinct people. So we're among the nations, but we are different from them. We are to be distinct, and that distinctiveness is very evident in the verse.

Their descendants will be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples. But what is being said is that God's people will be identified by those looking on as different, as distinct. We're not going to assimilate. We're not going to assimilate and become like the peoples that we are amongst. We are a holy people set apart by God and for God, and we must be visible. That's the very heart of what verse 9 is saying, that we will be seen, we will be noticed. We are to be visible.

We are to be seen by the world and to be perceived as different, as distinct. What was said of Peter and John as they lived their lives as disciples of Jesus. Remember in Acts chapter 4 and in verse 13, what does it say about them? There's that very striking expression used of them by those looking on. Let me quickly just find that verse. In Acts chapter 4 and in verse 13, we read as follows, when they saw the courage of Peter and John. So these are those who are looking on. These are not part of God's people. These are the people among whom God's people are moving and going about their business. And it says, when they saw the courage of Peter and John, that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished. And they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

[27:33] This is what set them apart. This is what was noticeable. They took note that these men had been with Jesus. They had that look about them. They had that manner about them. Their conduct, their conversation led people to conclude that these men had been with Jesus.

And then remember what Paul says of every Christian when he writes to the Corinthians in his second letter and in the third chapter, he uses this language of Christians as letters, as living epistles to be read by everybody. That's the exact language that he uses. He says, we are read by everybody. We are living epistles, living letters read by everybody. We are distinct people that are to be visible by others. Of course, the challenging question for us to ponder on is, what do others read when they read us? What do they read when they read you? We are the people. We are the outcome of this promise.

We are a people united to the Messiah. We are a people scattered by God among the nations. We are distinct people. And finally, we are a blessed people, which is the other thing that is stated very explicitly there in verse 9. Their descendants will be known among the nations, their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed.

The very distinctiveness that sets us apart is not a reason for pride. It's not a badge of merit that we can display. It is rather evidence of God's blessing upon us. In the measure that we are distinct, in the measure that it is possible for people to conclude that we have been with Jesus, in the measure that what they read in these living epistles is up-building and true and pure, it is because God has blessed us. It is because God has been good to us. And so we are and are acknowledged as being a blessed people. So we have a wonderful promise. I will make with you an everlasting covenant. I will enter into a permanent relationship with you, grounded in love, secured by my Son, Jesus, open to all. Why does God do these things? Because of His love, because of His justice, because of His faithfulness, and with what purpose in mind? To draw together a people to Himself, a people united to Messiah, a people scattered among the nations, a people distinct and visible and blessed. Praise be to God for His promise and for the keeping and fulfilling of His promise in us. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your great promise that You made through the prophet Isaiah that we have read and given thought to this morning. In my

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faithfulness, I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them.
We thank You for your God. We thank You for your God. We thank You for your God. We thank You for it.
[31:13] We pray that we would ponder on and consider seriously the challenge of what is identified as the outcome of this promise, that we would ponder on and the world. We pray that we would be that people that is in the world, but not of the world, that we would be that people who are distinct in our conduct and conversation, that we would be a people that is not only blessed, but of a blessing, that we would be that people of whom others can say and take note that we have been with Jesus. And we pray these things in His name. Amen.

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