

“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. “For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Every parent has had the experience, at some point in time, of dealing with the endless “why” raised by their children. I don’t hear that question the way I used to—after all, my children are grown up and don’t ask that question of me all too often; they answer it for themselves. But my grandchildren ask it, as do countless other children and grandchildren: We have to go to the store. “Why?” It’s time to go to bed. “Why?” Get ready for school. “Why?” No, you can’t go out and play in the rain. “Why?”

Of course, over the years the ‘whys’ change. As we learn more and understand more, we don’t tend to ask why quite as often. When that question is asked, it seeks the answers to deeper and more philosophical questions of “why”. We also attach it to a specific question now. For older children and youth it is questions like, “Why doesn’t that bully at school like me?” “Why do I have so much trouble with math?” “Why can’t I have the car tonight?” Then it is the adult version of the question: “Why is there so much hatred in our world?” “Why does it always seem that the furnace needs to be repaired right after we had to have the car fixed?” “Why can’t my children understand that I am trying to help them?”

In this world, so filled with confusion and uncertainty, we often wonder, “why?” In the ongoing struggles of our lives we want to know, “why?” More precisely, we ask, “Why, God?” “Why did mom get cancer?” “Why did my child have to be the one killed by the drunk driver?” “Why am I the one who has MS?”

Since the fall into sin people have asked that question: “Why?” We somehow feel that having all the answers is going to make a difference, as if having a logical or realistic reason and rationale for things is going to make it better. Experts may be able to determine why the Titan submersible imploded, killing the five passengers who were on a deep sea tour to the Titanic. Meteorologists can explain why tornadoes form, like the one in the Didsbury area or the one this week in Ottawa. But knowing these things doesn’t make us feel any better. It doesn’t rebuild the houses that were destroyed. Nor does it bring back those who have died.

What we need in the face of all of our ‘whys’ is the assurance of hope. That is what Isaiah offers us in our text today. This hope does not promise the answer to all our whys; it does not promise that God is just going to fix everything the way we like it. But it is the hope that comes from trusting that God knows the why and wherefore of all things. He has a plan and a purpose. More than that, His Word of power is always able to do what He plans and desires. His Word is able bring us the life He has made known in our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

There are three individual thoughts in our text today. The first has to do with the most direct answer to the ‘why’ of this life. It has to do with our sinful, evil ways. In Greek mythology, a girl named Pandora was given charge of a box that contains all the world’s ills—all the sorrows and sufferings and bad things of life. She was told that she is not to open the box under any circumstances. But she decides she just wants to take a peek, and as soon as the lid is unlocked, the evils within spring out like stinging insects, flying everywhere, biting and stinging all things. The truth is that evil has its beginning in the actions of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, as they sin by doing what God had forbidden, eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That sin, unleashed in the perfection of God’s creation, goes on to infect Adam and Eve and all their descendants after them, including you and me. This world is sinful. We are sinful. Sin brings with it the hurts, the consequences, the imperfections in our lives and in our world. It is the terrible reality of sin that creates the heartaches and the disappointments

of life, and which leads us to create heartache and disappointment for others. So Isaiah tells us: ***“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.***

When we come to God in repentance, acknowledging our own sin and disobedience, He is ready and able to forgive. He covers us with the blessed righteousness that is ours in Christ, who has destroyed sin and death through His own death and resurrection. In Christ, God draws near to us in the midst of our sinfulness, our problems and our cares, so that we can come to Him and to His healing strength. But forgiveness isn't simply a pat answer to the question of 'why'. We want the fact that we are forgiven to be a guarantee that God won't let anything bad happen to us. That isn't what God promises. Rather, He assures us that even in spite of the troubles and cares of this world, we have peace with Him through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the peace we have as God's forgiven children, we come to the second thought in our text: that we can leave everything in God's care. God's eternal will and even His specific plans for our life are often hidden from us. We ask why because we can't understand or accept what God allows into our lives. Yet God tells us in our text: ***For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*** God doesn't always tell us why. I'm not sure we really always want to know why. We do want to know that God knows and, thankfully, we can be sure that God knows. God knows that we are lost. He knows the pains and struggles we go through. He knows that He loves us and He knows He had to give His Son to save us. The psalmist said: ***“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!”*** (Psalm 139:17, ESV) Isn't that simple truth beyond our understanding? Why would the holy God who sees how we continue to sin against His will and holy law day after day still care about us? Why would the Eternal Son of God, who rules over all things, take on our human flesh and blood that He might give His life for the people who so quickly forget Him and ignore Him? It doesn't make sense that He should come to suffer and die for people who themselves cause so much suffering in the world. Yet Paul assures us in our Epistle lesson: ***“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”*** (Romans 8:16-17, ESV)

If God were to treat us as we deserve, there would be no hope of forgiveness for us. We cannot get rid of the condemning power of our sin. But God can—and does through the death and resurrection of Christ. In Christ, we see into the mind of God. We see that love for all people, even the worst of sinners. God is a God of compassion and grace, ***“who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*** (1 Timothy 2:4, ESV) In love, He calls sinners like you and me to leave our sin and our wicked ways, and to come to the blessing of life that He offers us.

That brings us to the third thought of our text—that God is able to do what needs to be done. Through Isaiah, the Lord promises: ***“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”*** We hear so many empty, meaningless words in our world. We are familiar with empty promises. God's Word is different. The inspired writer of Hebrews tells us: ***“For the word of God is living and active”*** (Hebrews 4:12, ESV) God's Word is power. At creation God spoke, and what He spoke came to be. What God declares in His Word is truth. He brings us life as the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts through the Word. In His Word, God assures us that all things are happening according to His divine wisdom and providence. More than that, Scripture tells us that Jesus is the living Word. Christ, the eternal Word came to accomplish God's perfect plan for us. He defeated sin, death and hell for us. In Christ, the living Word, we are sure of the deliverance and victory we enjoy as His children through faith. That is why God promises in our text: ***“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”***

So, what does all this tell us? Even when we don't know why; even when things don't make sense; even when we don't understand why God hasn't just fixed our problems, we can be sure that He knows the why and He is still at work to accomplish our complete and perfect deliverance. He calls us to trust Him, for He has the answers. The psalmist said: ***“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”*** (Psalm 42:11, ESV) We may not know why, but we do know this: through Christ the whys of this life will give way to the eternal joy of heaven. That is our hope, no matter what questions may be raised through the struggles of life. Christ is our answer. He is our hope and our victory. And nothing in this world can take that away from those who trust Him and follow as He leads us to His peace. Amen.

