

Autumn 2025 Communion - Preparatory Service

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[0 : 00] Well, for a short time, please turn with me to Isaiah 44, Isaiah chapter 44, and we'll read again at verse 21.

! Throughout the book of Isaiah, we find some devastating critiques of idolatry, and he's not just criticizing the nations around, the pagan nations around Judah and Israel.

Well, he is actually coming to focus on the idolatry within Judah itself, because, as you know, sadly they imported many of the practices and the idols of the Canaanites, of the Canaanite religion round about them, and imported these into their observation of what they regarded as the worship of the Lord.

But nevertheless, of course, as the prophets in the Old Testament show us very clearly, they had departed from the ways of the Lord, and they had followed these inventions of human beings as idols for themselves.

And the issue for Isaiah in this passage, you could summarize in the way he contrasts formed gods, the idols that were formed in idolatry, the idols versus the God who forms his people.

[1 : 53] Formed idols as against the God who forms his people into the people they are spiritually. That's why he says here, You are my servant Israel.

I formed you. And throughout the chapter, in common with much of Isaiah, we find how he so devastatingly shows the idolatry, the foolishness of idolatry, that we find emphasized there, where he says somebody takes a tree, nurtures it carefully while it grows, until it reaches a certain point in maturity, then cuts down that tree, and most of it he actually uses to warm himself, making a fire, to use it for cooking.

And then Isaiah says, And of what's left, he forms into a god. And you can see how much that really is a killer blow to the whole issue of idolatry, and the foolishness of idolatry.

Now last night we said we'd follow the theme of remembering, of remembrance throughout these services, between now and tomorrow evening, God willing. And last night, you remember from Psalm 103, we looked at the emphasis there on the remembering of us, that we are dust, God remembering us, and God's remembering of us, bringing us the salvation in his pity, in his mercy, in his compassion, bringing us the salvation that's available to us, and provided in Jesus Christ.

Well, here's another passage emphasizing, remembering. Here is God calling upon Israel, Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant.

[3 : 48] When he says remember, he really means call to mind, think about these things that I'm saying. Remember them, you are my servant, but these things I'm setting out for you, so that you'll call them to mind, not only what I did for you, how I rescued you, how I became your redeemer, but what you have done in the way in which you have departed from me into the practice of idolatry.

And all the way through that passage from the beginning of the chapter, we've seen how Isaiah sets about that great task. And he begins, as we saw at the beginning of the chapter, again emphasizing that these people were the servant of the Lord.

He had taken them to himself, he formed them, he made them, and he's calling upon them not to fear, and yet to return to himself. In verse 22, return to me, for I have redeemed you.

And that combination is something that you find very often. As we look at the first point here, which is really emphasizing God, the creator of his people. Now, there's an overlap with some of the things we saw last night, but there's no harm in doing that.

The Bible does that for us anyway. An overlap with an emphasis on God as the creator of his people. The creator of the universe, the creator of everything physical that we know in, the creation, as we call it.

[5 : 16] But here, there's an emphasis alongside of that on God as the creator of his people. His creation in redemption. His creation in saving them. His creation in forming them into a people for himself.

And that combination is often the case in Isaiah, elsewhere as well, where God as the creator of the physical universe, of the creation, creation.

And what he did in doing that, in bringing the creation into being, is then set beside him as the creator of his people spiritually, bringing them to become a people that he has created for himself.

As he says here, I formed you, I created you, you are my servant. I have blotted out your transgressions, your sins like mist.

And the words that you find in the Old Testament for creating and forming, take us right back to Genesis. I think we mentioned this last night as well. But in the early chapters of Genesis, where you have an account of the creation, God creating the universe and creating us as human beings in it, we saw that when the psalm says he remembers that we are dust, we were created from the dust.

[6 : 37] And the word that the Old Testament uses for creating, such as here, creating and forming, the word creating is with an emphasis on a new beginning or something that God brings into being.

And that verb is used only of God. Where the Old Testament says God created something, using this word, it doesn't apply to anyone else.

And that shows us the uniqueness of God as our creator. Nobody else can do what he's done. Nobody else can do what he is doing in creating a people for himself.

It's entirely his work. It's uniquely his work. It can't be repeated. It can't be something that is actually copied because nobody has the capacity or the ability or indeed the wisdom to bring that about.

I am the creator. And here he says, I have formed you. You are my servant. Now when it uses the word formed, it takes you back again to Genesis where you find both words used.

[7 : 49] He formed human life, human beings. He created them. That's his unique work. But when it uses the word formed, it really emphasizes the way in which God skillfully crafts something, gives it shape, gives it meaning, gives it purpose, where the wisdom of God is applied in that formation.

He creates. That's an emphasis on bringing it to being. He forms. That's an emphasis on the careful craftsmanship of God where he brings by his own skill a people for himself into being.

So you know, you come to prepare for the Lord's Supper. All who are going to come to sit at the Lord's table to confess Jesus as their Savior are able to say of themselves, to some measure at least, that we are his workmanship, as Paul puts it to the Ephesians.

We are the skilled work of his hand. We are the outcome of his wisdom. We are the outcome of his ability in forming a people for himself. We are the evidence that God doesn't just exist, but he exists as the God of the Bible.

He exists as the God whose skill and his power and his ability brings a people and forms them for himself to be his servant, to be his people.

[9 : 17] Power and purpose. And you bring these to the Lord's Supper. You are there by his power. You are there by his purpose.

His power has brought you the life that you confess to have in Christ. His purpose has brought you why you actually come to be a people for himself.

He has a purpose, as we sang in the Psalms, glory to the Lord. All the Psalms we sang have something to do with references to idolatry and the foolishness of idolatry and how that is contrasted so much with God and how it is to God that we owe the worship that is due to his name.

Bring glory to him. Don't spend your energy on something that doesn't bring him that glory. Now, when we come to think of idolatry nowadays, we perhaps tend to think that idolatry is pretty much what you find here in the likes of the Old Testament or in the New Testament where you find, for example, Paul in Acts chapter 17 in the city of Athens surrounded by all of those man-made objects that were idols for the people of the time and where Paul himself applied God's given wisdom to him to preach against these.

We may think that that's primarily what idolatry is in our day as well, that you find it in different nations of the world to this day, pagan religions and other practices that have objects like that that are venerated by human beings.

[11 : 07] That would be a great mistake. because idolatry in our day as it's been in every day is as much to do with ideologies and different systems of belief and practice that you find human beings following to this day.

The ideologies that oppose the gospel, the ideologies that actually elevate man himself and his wisdom and that wisdom as it comes to be shown forth in the practices that the Bible calls sinful in the ways in which people have departed from Scripture founding and grounding in Scripture to their own wisdom.

And you look out over our own society tonight, there are a multitude of idols, a multitude of things that people fall down before and exalt as worthy of their praise and worthy of their following and worthy of their adoration and place in direct opposition to the blessing and the teaching of the gospel.

People prefer, as Isaiah himself put it, the work of their own hand, the thinking of their own minds, the superior way in which they regard the world and everything around them compared to what they regard as the foolishness of the Bible and of course it's the other way about actually, as Paul again put it to the Corinthians.

Well, here is what Isaiah is saying. He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart has led him astray and he cannot deliver himself or say, is there not a lie in my right hand?

[12 : 57] And the sad thing is, and we pray so much about the situation and we pray in regard to this as well, that the majority of the people of our own society simply do not realize that they are holding a lie in their right hand, that they are following a lie, that they're falling down before a lie, that they're exalting a lie, that they're trampling on the truth, that as Isaiah puts it elsewhere, truth has fallen in the street.

It's collapsed. And when truth collapses, idolatry is exalted. Well, there's Isaiah's critique, Isaiah's polemic, and very briefly, how it applies to our own day as well.

And as we gather, God willing, for the Lord's Supper tomorrow, we are gathering in a way that contrasts with the idolatry of the world. We're falling down in adoration of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Not of the elements that are used in the Lord's Supper that represent him, but the person of Jesus himself. And as you fall down before Jesus and thank the Lord for what he's done, and receive to yourselves the elements of bread and wine that represent him in his death, as you do so thankfully, you do so also with the conviction that God has redeemed you, that God has delivered you from your own idolatrous heart, that we follow ourselves until God comes and changes us inwardly, and that instead of the pride that fashions God for ourselves, we actually have the God who fashions a Savior for us in Christ, and fashions us to be his servant, his people.

Well, there's God as the creator, I said a bit more than that than I intended, and second point is God forming of a people for himself. Now, there are two things he mentions here important in God forming a people for himself that you carry with you to come to the Lord's Supper to God willing.

[15 : 13] First of all is redemption. You're saying here in verse 22, I have blotted out your transgressions, like a cloud, and your sins like mist return to me, for I have redeemed you.

I have redeemed you. And I'm sure you know very well what that word redeemed means. Theologically, it literally means God purchasing us for himself by the price that Christ paid in his death.

God taking us back to himself, having been captive to sin, God paying a ransom in the blood of Christ. That's how the Bible puts it.

Remember, that's how Jesus himself put it, the Son of Man, in the Gospel of Mark, how the Son of Man has come, not to be served, but to be a servant, the servant, and to give himself, to give his life, a ransom for many.

money. The price of our sin has been paid. What we owe to God that we could never give, that which would ransom us and deliver us from sin, from the penalty of sin, from the eternity of hell that sin deserves.

[16 : 37] God has done that, and you come to remember him who remembered you in this way. And these words you carry with you tonight, remember these things, O Jacob, remember this God who has created you anew in Christ, remember this God who has brought you redemption, who has purchased you back from the enslavement of sin, who has set you free to be his own servant, who has redeemed you, as 1 Peter puts it, you remember you were not redeemed with corruptible things, such as silver or gold.

And again, Peter most likely is referring there to the substance of which idols were made, silver, gold, as well as wood, as Isaiah puts it.

You were not redeemed with corruptible things. He's pointing to the pagan nations around them. These people were scattered in Peter's day, these Christians throughout all of these regions that he mentions at the beginning of his epistles, Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia.

He's writing to God's scattered people, but he's saying you are the people of God wherever you're placed, and together you form this people. God has formed you into this people.

And it doesn't matter where you come to be, and however distant you may come to be from each other, you are still a people of God, spiritually united together, redeemed, freed, not by corruptible things, but by the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish, without spot.

[18 : 17] we were freed and redeemed by a substitute taking our place, brilliantly shown in the Passover celebration, the Passover action in the Old Testament days, beginning with the Passover in Egypt just prior to them leaving.

they were actually ransomed by the blood of that lamb that was given as a substitute for them. And all the details there are very much there long before the New Testament came to be written.

This Passover lamb, the blood of it used and put on the doorposts and the lintels of the door, every single soul within the building, within the house that was marked by that blood, was safe from the angel of death as the angel of death went through the land of Egypt, striking down the firstborn throughout the homes of the Egyptians.

There is actually a death in the homes of the Israelites as well, but it's not their death, it's the death of a substitute, the death of the lamb that provided the blood that was assigned to the angel of death.

You don't touch them, they're safe, they've been sealed, they've been redeemed, they're God's people. And through that same door, with that blood above it and on the doorposts, those people of Israel then went out through that same door to walk with God through the desert on the way to the promised land.

[20 : 13] That's how it is for you as well. I have redeemed you, says God. I have taken you from idolatry, I have bought you for myself, I have redeemed you by the blood of the Lamb of God, and through that blood you go forth as my servant on your journey on to heaven.

and until you come to the end of your life in this world, that's the pattern you follow. You come to bless the Lord, you remember these things, and you remember them with thankfulness.

When he says here, I've blotted out your transgressions, he redeemed us by a way that included the forgiveness of our sins.

Christ died for our sins, as we'll see God willing tomorrow, in accordance with the Scriptures. And when Christ died in accordance with the Scriptures, that death of Jesus secured our forgiveness, secured our redemption, secured our freedom, secured heaven itself for us.

And that wiping clear of our sins forgiveness, is by the substitutionary blood of Christ we come to have his forgiveness.

[21 : 40] Pardon, I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud. In other words, there's a picture for you of something that's written on a page, writing that's been set out on a page, and it's erased, it's blotted out, it's wiped clean.

It doesn't appear there anymore. And if you think of carrying that imagery forward, what you're coming to remember in the Lord's Supper and remembering the death of Christ is remembering the very thing that led to your sins being wiped clear, wiped clean.

The record between yourself and God, where all your sins were listed, and where the word guilty is written at the end of the page, it doesn't exist anymore.

God has wiped it away. But it's not a page that's now empty, because God doesn't just wipe away our sins and leave the whole thing blank.

He puts something else in its place. And the record between us and God, when He forgives our sins, instead of your sins being marked up against you, and the word guilty, what you find is the righteousness of Christ put in its place.

[23 : 07] And at the bottom of that page, it's not just saying you're not guilty. It's going further than that. It's saying you are righteous.

It's as if you have never sinned at all. That's the beauty and the power of the blood of Christ. It doesn't go part distance towards your absolving of guilt and establishing of righteousness.

It is your righteousness. He is your righteousness. Your sins are forgiven. The record is wiped clean. And instead, this righteousness of Jesus, this worthiness of Jesus, is actually put in its place.

As Paul put it in the 2 Corinthians epistle chapter 5, He made Him who knew no sin to be made sin for us, so that we might be made or become the righteousness of God in Him.

The righteousness, the perfection that God requires of a human life. We don't purchase that. We don't create that.

[24 : 21] It's created for us. And it's created for us through the blood of Christ. His righteousness becomes ours.

And it remains on that page forevermore. I very often go back to these passages in the book of Numbers, where you find Balak, the king of Moab, as the people of Israel are making their way through the desert.

God, he comes to see them as a threat, so he hires this soothsayer, this evil man, Balaam, and he says, come, curse these people for me.

And Balak takes them up to a mountain, and he sees the people below him, the people of Israel. He sees them down on the plain, and he says to Balaam, now curse me, these people.

people. And God comes, and he puts a word in Balaam's mouth, and Balaam has to confess to Balak, who's hired him for this purpose, how can I bless or curse whom the Lord has not cursed?

[25 : 33] And how can I curse whom the Lord has not cursed? How can I bless if the Lord has not blessed? In other words, Balaam is forced to this magnificent confession, though he's an evil man.

He is saying, these are the people of God. If he's blessed them, there's no way I can touch them. I can't get near to them. I can't reverse what God has done.

And when you come to remember the death of Jesus in the Lord's Supper, you carry that conviction with you. You say of yourself as I say of myself, I have still so many faults.

I still find myself doing things, thinking things that I know are sinful, that I know are wrong. Every single day I live, I come to confess that I sin against God in thought, word, and action.

And God takes you to the blood of Christ. And God says to you, look at what I have done. Look at what's on your page. Look at the blessing with which I've blessed you in eternal life, in forgiveness of sin.

[26 : 41] And believe this, he says, nothing can reverse that. Nothing's going to undo that. That's going to be your page throughout eternity, what he has done.

He's blotted out your transgressions as a cloud that he's passed away. The pardon, the redemption, salvation, that is involved in God's forming a people for himself.

God, the creator, God forming a people for himself. And in New Testament terms, you could say 1 John is one of the great examples where John is pointing out that if we say we have no sin, we lie and do not the truth.

If we say that we have not sin, we make him a liar and the truth is not in us. But you see, he then immediately goes on to say, I write these things to you so that you sin not.

But if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one, and he is the propitiation for our sins.

[27 : 54] What does he mean, the propitiation for our sins? He means God's provision against his own righteous anger so that it doesn't fall on us.

We have instead his righteousness, his worth, his merit, everything to do with our sin in his forgiveness is accounted for already in the death of Jesus.

But what about the consequences of God forming a people for himself? If he does this as our creator, redeemer, and if it involves redemption redemption and pardon, what about the consequences of that?

Well, verse 21 sets that out for us as well. Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant. I formed you.

You are my servant. servant. That's the consequence of God forming a people for himself. We commanded his ownership.

[29 : 01] We come to be not just bought spiritually by him, but we are now the people of his possession. Sometimes that's the way it's translated as a peculiar people, the Old Testament translation in the AV.

It comes to be a people of his possession, a unique people, a people that belong to him. That's the seriousness of idolatry as Isaiah is setting out throughout this wonderful book of his.

He's pointing out again and again to the people of Israel, not just the foolishness of idolatry, but to fall down before an idol is really pretty much saying, I belong to you.

Whereas what he's saying is, you belong to God. He has redeemed you. He's made you a people. Put your idolatry away. Get rid of all this ridiculous practice of using things which God has formed, which God has created, and falling down to them as if they were your creator.

He has formed us for himself. And it's quite right that we read in the Old Testament of the likes of Isaiah ridiculing idolatry.

[30 : 22] There's nothing wrong with showing how ridiculous idolatry is. It's serious. It's not fun. It's not something that people should stand on a stage and make jokes about.

Idolatry is of the utmost seriousness. And that's why in the Old Testament you find the likes of Isaiah. Or take, for example, Elijah on Mount Carmel.

There he is in the prophets of Baal, these false prophets of Ahab, king of Israel, that he has hired to tell him what pleases him. There they are on Mount Carmel.

There's Elijah calling upon them, come on, appeal to your God. Appeal to Baal. Where is he? Build your altar.

Father. Then appeal to him. See if he'll answer with fire. So all of these appeals from the prophets of Baal go up without response.

[31 : 23] And they become increasingly frantic about it. They cut themselves with knives. They go into all of these sort of sinful excesses, seeking to actually rouse Baal to life.

nothing happens. And Isaiah ridicules them. Sorry, Elijah ridicules them. At one point he says, maybe he's asleep.

Maybe he needs to be woken up. Cry louder. Silence. And then Elijah draws near to God.

And he says, God of Israel, Isaac and Jacob. Hear me.

The answer comes. The fire descends. The sacrifice is devoured. The people bow their heads and say, the Lord, he is God.

[32 : 30] Sadly, they don't keep to that afterwards. Afterwards. But there's the demonstration. The foolishness of idolatry. It can't save anybody.

However classy an ideology it is in our day. However many millions of people follow it. However many celebrities actually commend it. It won't save anybody.

It won't last for eternity. It won't take you into heaven. But this will. Remember these things, O Jacob. You are my servant.

I have created you for myself. You are under my ownership. You belong to me. And when you come to the Lord's table, you don't come regretting that you belong to God.

You don't come reluctantly acknowledging and confessing, I am God's servant. I am pleased to be his servant. You come thankful that that's the case.

[33 : 33] Because it's not just ownership, it's also security. See what he's saying here. Remember these things, O Jacob. I have blotted out your transgression.

Return to me, for I have redeemed you. But see the end of verse 21, you will not be forgotten by me. They have forgotten him.

At least they've turned away from him. He's appealing to them through the prophet to come back to him. He's emphasizing how much he has done for them in redeeming them, informing them, creating them a people for himself, blotting out their transgressions.

Now he says, return to me, for I have redeemed you, for you will not be forgotten by me. Remember me, he says, because I will not forget you. And that's surely one of the most precious things you carry with you to the Lord's table tomorrow, that God has demonstrated by the death of Jesus that he's not in the business of forgetting his people.

How can anyone possibly think that when God has done what he's done through the cross of Christ, that he's going to forget his people? Whatever your circumstances tonight, however difficult and challenging they may be, and they will be that at times, however much it hurts you, what you're going through just now, however much you as a Christian would say, well, I'd rather it be not like this.

[35 : 15] I would not have chosen it for myself. But God is saying to you, remember these things, because I will not forget you.

I will never turn my back on you. I have redeemed you. You belong to me. You're precious to me. I have given my son for you.

He has died the death you deserved. And now, now, do this in remembrance of me.

May God bless this word to us. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we give thanks tonight for the wonder of your redemption, for the wonder of your forgiveness and cleansing us of our sins, for the way that that assurance is fed into our experience through your word.

We pray tonight, Lord, as we prepare for the Lord's Supper, we pray that you would continue to assure and to reassure us as we place our trust in you, that the enemy of our souls, however much he may harass, and cause us distress, can never reach us, so as to remove from us what you have planted in our hearts and what you have made us out to be.

[36 : 34] Bless us then, we pray, and pardon our sin now, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Our final psalm tonight is Psalm 97. Psalm 97, and that's in the Sing Sam's version.

And we're singing verses 7 to 12. All those who worship images are put to everlasting shame. Their worthless idols are their boast.

You gods bow down before his name. To Zion hill and Judah's towns, your judgments, Lord, great joy supply. Above the earth and all the gods, exalted is the Lord Most High.

And so on to the end of the psalm. Psalm 97, All Those Who Worship Images. All those who worship images are put to everlasting shame.

Their worthless idols are their boast. You gods bow down before his name.

[38 : 03] To Zion hill and Judah's towns, your judgements, Lord, great joy supply.

Above the earth and all the gods, exalted is the Lord Most High.

evil you who love the Lord His faithful wounds he will defend And from the hands of wicked men men to them deliver He will send upon the righteous light will shine shine and joy on those of upright ways!

New righteous In the Lord rejoice! And to His holy holy holy more. Amen.