

# Chapter 8

## Hope on the horizon

Those who try to heal the fractured societies spoken of in the last verse of the Old Testament do so at a cost, but it is more costly to resist change.<sup>1</sup> A curse does fall when personal preferences ignore those of others, damaging or breaking up healthy relationships. Yet at source, there can be a hunger for love.

A report on the radio reported how shocked a mother was to find that her son had joined a local gang that threatened violence and robbery. Because she loved him, she asked him to bring all the gang members home, cooked for them and showed them motherly care. As a result, the group broke up and a past member said, ‘She gave us what we had been wanting but had never had before.’ He was not just talking about the hot dinners, but of the selfless love with which she had served them despite all the risks she had taken in the process. What had evidently been her costly Christian love had worked the miracle.

Are rebellion and breakup inevitable in our societies? Or may someone like that mother come to the rescue, caring enough to bring healing to damaged communities and peace of mind and heart to those who had none? Here and there, the Old Testament prophets gave a few glimpses of such hope.

### Hints of relief ahead

Many of us will have heard or perhaps sung in Handel’s famous oratorio *Messiah* and been stirred both by its music and the quotations from Isaiah’s prophecy, looking ahead to the birth of a special child. The choir sings with obvious joy, ‘The government shall be upon his shoulder’ and proclaims how the child would be known as ‘Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’.<sup>2</sup> Little wonder that many Jews interpreted this passage to mean that the future Messiah would come as a mighty freedom fighter to restore peace and power to the kingdom of Israel. Yet Isaiah also described

one who would come as a man of sorrows, to be 'led like a lamb to the slaughter', bearing 'the sin of many.'<sup>3</sup> We are reminded of the sacrificial lambs of the Old Testament and it later became clear that Isaiah's description found perfect fulfilment in the person of Jesus. He came to earth as that long- promised child but was also the long-awaited Messiah, the anointed one, also known as the Christ.<sup>4</sup> Later to be called the Lord Jesus Christ, his arrival came centuries after it was foretold in those ancient prophecies.

So what about the promises God had made to bless all nations, for example through Abraham?<sup>5</sup> Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and then Moses had made covenants with God by which their trust and obedience would find his blessing in return. This choice was then offered to the whole nation, with the unhappy consequences we have seen as they repeatedly failed to keep their part of the agreement. Failure to love God and neighbour has always spoiled the intended harmony between God and humankind.

The old covenant had not been a hopeless error of judgment on God's part, but it became a lost opportunity for the nation to flourish under his loving rule. It also gives us a prolonged demonstration that none of us will ever be able to keep God's laws in our own strength. Yet looking at the hints in Isaiah, there is a glimmer of hope that help was on the way. It took a long time for that light to get stronger, but once more we find that times of waiting are times for God's purposes to mature. There were good reasons for his biding his time.

### Hope for a fresh start repeatedly disappointed

Acts of heroism or generosity impress us, as when soldiers under fire go into dangerous territory to rescue a wounded friend, or a relative is willing to donate a kidney for someone who would die without it. We may feel more critical if, in our judgment, those at the receiving end did not deserve such sacrifices.

Let us for a moment imagine how this could work out. Suppose that an overweight family had been prescribed a diet necessary to keep them fit and well, but time and again they gave it up. They were warned that

serious heart or lung problems and even an early death could lie ahead, but they took no notice and kept on eating what they liked. Their slim and healthy dietician may give them an excellent model for aiming at a balanced diet and taking exercise, but all in vain. At this point some would give up trying to help, but not our dedicated dietician.

She knows the risks they are running and decides that the only way to keep this fat family healthy would be for her to move in with them, empty their cupboards and supply them with good food, paying for it all herself. She may also fund the entrance fee to a sports club but then would need to stay alongside to keep encouraging them to hold to her regime. What a commitment! Yet they could still give it all up and sneak off to the fish and chip shop when her back was turned. Had she lacked judgment even to try, or been moved by the best of motives? Many would think her a little mad.

This unlikely story parallels the repeated failure of God's people to keep his rules for life, despite the warning note with which the Old Testament ends. After that for hundreds of years we have no record of any more words from God. Does this silence mean that he had washed his hands of such rebellious people and left them to die in their sins? Or do the hints made by Isaiah suggest that God, like that imaginary dietician, had already considered moving in with fallen humanity to show them how to live, and to save them from spiritual death? The time was coming for him to act.<sup>6,7</sup>

### An amazing volunteer

Let's now go back to listen in to a theoretical consultation between God the Father and his only Son. At the start it must be stressed that this is an entirely imaginary conversation, yet no doubt something was agreed between them, for Paul tells us that the gracious divine plan to grant eternal life was made 'before the beginning of time'.<sup>8,9</sup>

Suppose God had said, 'My Son, we have designed a beautiful universe and plan to create a people to live on the planet that will sustain life, on planet Earth. They will be so much like us that our image in them will be easy to see and we'll really enjoy each other's company.'

‘That’s a great idea,’ said the Son. ‘We’ll put them in a garden where there will be food for their bodies and beautiful plants and animals for them to enjoy. Let’s start with a man and then give him a wife, visiting them every day so that they grow wise and spiritually strong in our company. When they have children they’ll be able to hand on to them what they have learned from us.’

‘It will be good for the children to get to know us for themselves, too’ said the Father, but added, ‘There is one snag. We must design them free to choose whether this is the kind of life they’d like or instead want to go their own way. It will be up to them whether they stay close to us or fall out with us, in which case they’d wither away without our care. They must choose with open eyes so we’ll need to tell them that early on.’

‘Yes, we must take the risk of letting them choose’, agreed the Son. ‘Otherwise they’ll just be robots with a built-in automated programme. As well as walking and talking with them in the garden, let’s prepare a handbook that will tell them how to behave. If they no longer agree with us and have to leave the garden, the book would explain how to bring our relationship back to life again.’

‘Before the whole book is ready’ said the Father, ‘we’ll recruit and train prophets to take them the message about our love and concern but also warning them what will happen if they stay out of contact with us. We’ll ask the prophets to write parts of the book.’

‘Yes’, replied the Son, ‘But what if people don’t want to listen to us, or for that matter, the prophets? Some will respond, but others may get angry about being told what to do, and anger in the heart would end with blood on their hands. In fact, for them to do anything wrong will spoil our image in them, their spirits will be damaged and die and, in time, their bodies too.’ ‘We don’t want them to die cut off from us’, said the Father thoughtfully, ‘so we must work out how to save them from that. I have had an idea...’

‘...I know what we could do’, the Son said quickly, ‘How about if I go and live with them? Because you and I are so completely at one,

I could show them the best way to live, loving each other just like we do. Because we also love them so much, this would be a great way to show it.'

'True', replied his Father, 'but then you'd be taking another big risk. Just think what it would mean for you to leave here to live among them on our so far beautiful earth. Although still my Son, you'd need to start off as a baby in a human family but grow up thinking and behaving very differently from everyone else. If you were to go with the radiance we share now, people would be blinded and scared. You'd have to put that aside.'

'I can see all that, but if I become one of them it gives them the chance to listen better to what we want to say. To join in their life would be much better than just staying here and watching them go wrong.'

'Even so', said the Father thoughtfully, 'Because you'll still be speaking with our authority, some religious leaders among them will feel threatened, especially when people choose to listen to you more than they listen to them. They could even want to kill you when you speak of me as Father. That would be a big price for you to pay.'

'That's all the more reason to keep on loving them and give them a chance to turn back to us. In any case, you'll be with me all the time. We'd be in this together.' replied the Son.

'And suppose most of them don't listen to you and do kill you? Their attitudes and actions will already have taken them so far away from us that their spirits would die. There's only one way we could turn this around...'

'...and that would be for my death to be in their place,' said the Son, warming to his subject. 'If they realised that our love for them is truly without limits, surely some of them would see why I am willing to offer myself to clear their record and repair our broken relationship. If they accept that and ask for forgiveness they could have a fresh start. We'd share our Spirit with them to help them stay close to us again.'

The Father looked very serious for a few moments. Then he said. 'We'd certainly be in it together, but your sacrifice would have to be once and for all – our last offer.'

The Son responded, 'When they see what we mean by it, surely at least some of them will be sorry and ask to be forgiven for turning their backs on us. Then we'll be able to welcome them back and love them just as much as you and I love each other.'

'That is certainly what we would have been wanting for them from the start,' replied the Father, 'In fact, I would like them all to become just like you!'

'Then I'll go if you say so,' said his Son, 'I'll go down and show them how to live our way, whatever it costs.'

'Go then, my Son. We are agreed. I'll see you off, we'll be in constant touch, and after your work is done, we'll surprise them'.

This imaginary conversation is not without foundation for it is true that Jesus Christ, Son of God, did agree to come and live on earth as God-made-man and was killed by – and for – those who rejected his love. Having offered himself to restore the broken relationship between God and man, his Father brought him to life again – the big surprise. Before that happened, Jesus had said:

'The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.'<sup>10</sup>

## The inside story

When he was on earth, Jesus gave more glimpses of the inside story. He taught that his coming to earth had been the result of God's love<sup>11</sup> and that he and his Father were one.<sup>12</sup> Their union was so close that although he was free to choose, even as he faced the horror of a cruel death, he accepted that he had come to give his life in this way.<sup>13</sup>

Right to the end of his time on earth he deliberately lined up his will with his Father's.<sup>14</sup> He always chose to obey his Father.<sup>15</sup> Instead of those Old Testament sacrifices, he was going to pay the ransom that would free those who believed from their impending spiritual death.<sup>16</sup>

An early Christian hymn, quoted by Paul completes the story of how God raised Jesus from the grave and took him back to his side once more, mission accomplished. One day everyone will confess that he is Lord and glorify his Father for such a wonderful plan:

*'Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.'*<sup>17</sup>

Jesus has promised to come back one day to take home with him those who have learned to love him.<sup>18</sup>

The whole story of the Bible shows how Jesus came to be the blessing to all nations that God had first promised to Abraham. The ritual sacrifices of the old covenant would never be needed again.<sup>19</sup> Instead, Jesus offered himself to take away the sins of the world, once and for all, and each of us is included in that offer. Before accepting such generous grace, we need to know more about the one who offers it. It is time to introduce you in more detail to the Saviour of the world, God-made-man, whose name is Jesus. In the New Testament we have first-hand evidence: those who knew him during his time on earth tell his story. We'll go on to consider this next.

For further thought

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- Have you had the experience of making, then breaking, a resolution?
- Have you become concerned about the disordered state of the society you live in?
- Are you a little clearer about why God stepped in and Jesus came?

## Further resources

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Inter-Varsity Press (Leicester) has produced many commentaries in their *Bible Speaks Today* series:

- Old Testament commentaries: Editor, Motyer A.
- New Testament commentaries: Editor, Stott J.

## References

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|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Malachi 4:6      | 11. John 3:16-18       |
| 2. Isaiah 9:6       | 12. John 10:30         |
| 3. Isaiah 53:7-12   | 13. Mark 8:31          |
| 4. John 1:41-42     | 14. Luke 22:42         |
| 5. Genesis 12:2-3   | 15. John 15:10         |
| 6. Galatians 4:4    | 16. Matthew 20:28      |
| 7. Ephesians 1:9-10 | 17. Philippians 2:5-11 |
| 8. 2 Timothy 1:8-10 | 18. John 14:2-3        |
| 9. Titus 1:2        | 19. Hebrews 8:13       |
| 10. John 10:17-18   |                        |