



COVERED

Isaiah 4:2-6

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Recently some friends in the church asked for prayer because of major damage to their home. They filed a homeowner's claim, but they didn't know if the claim would be honored. After a few days I received a follow-up message from them: "Praise the Lord, we're *covered*."

Covered. It's a great way to think about the Christian life. Sin left us raw, exposed and vulnerable, but Jesus came to cover us. The blood of Christ covers our sin, so that we may be forgiven and healed, sheltered and protected. Instead of living in shame and fear, we can live joyful and courageous lives, knowing that in Christ we're covered.

Last Sunday marked the end of the Jewish high holy days with the end of *Sukkot*, the Feast of Booths. *Sukkot* is the apex of the Jewish liturgical year. It was intended to be a seven day festival, in the seventh month of the year, with seven times as much food and drink as normal. Also known as "The Season of our Rejoicing," the Feast of Booths happens when the weather is perfect—not too hot and not too chilly—and at the very tail end of the harvest, when people could genuinely relax. The best part is that it's a huge campout. People build makeshift outdoor shelters and decorate them in a big way, like many of us do up Christmas. Then for the week of *Sukkot* they live outside in these shelters. Why? Because, ever since the days of Moses, the Feast of Booths was to be a reminder that God covers his people.

Isaiah 4 follows the logic of the Jewish High Holy Days, culminating with imagery from the Feast of Booths. As we look together at this passage, we'll see how God's covering can be ours too, and what a difference it can make in our lives.

THE MEANING BEHIND THE JEWISH HIGH HOLY DAYS

Everybody has problems, and all our problems appear to be different and unique. Yet underneath the surface, what we all have in common is a feeling of vulnerability. We're insecure, whether because of the bully at school, or crushing debt, or enduring loneliness, or career stagnation, etc. To some extent we all carry around anxieties that stem from our feeling vulnerable in the world.

The reason we all feel so vulnerable, according to the Bible, is because we are so vulnerable. We were created to live under *God's* protection and care. Instead we've chosen autonomy, saying, "Thank you very much, God. We can take care of ourselves." We've stepped out from underneath God's covering thinking that somehow... we could cover ourselves? How does that work? It doesn't.

Feeling that we've burned our bridges with God, and also feeling bare and exposed under our own flimsy self-covering, we do what human beings have always done. We fashion surrogate deities out of whatever we can find that looks god-like. Then we try to climb underneath them in hope of shelter. This is what the Bible calls idolatry, and it never, ever works. It's a mere distraction from our vulnerability. No matter what the idol, sooner or later we discover that we're still raw and exposed apart from the covering of the Lord.

Back in the days of Moses, God gave the Israelites a liturgical calendar to remind them of their identity and purpose. There were two major holiday cycles, one in the spring and one in the fall. Christians usually are more familiar with the springtime festivals of Passover and Pentecost. The High Holy Days in the fall are a lot more mysterious. We should learn about them, because they help us understand the Bible, especially as they culminate in a weeklong celebration of God's covering. They're actually pretty easy to understand if you know the Christian liturgical calendar.

There's a logic to the Christian liturgical calendar: as it moves from Ash Wednesday to Easter to Pentecost, it flows from repentance to redemption to rejoicing. The period before Easter is called Lent. Beginning with Ash Wednesday and continuing for forty days, Lent is a season for fasting and repentance. Lent is about turning away from our idols and to the Lord, so that when Good Friday comes, we might experience it as Jesus' death *for us*. Then the calendar culminates with the Easter season, a fifty day period of feasting. These seven weeks stretching from Easter to Pentecost celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead and his promise of new life to those who repent and believe in him.

REPENTANCE → REDEMPTION → REJOICING
FEAST OF TRUMPETS → DAY OF ATONEMENT → FEAST OF BOOTHS
ASH WEDNESDAY → GOOD FRIDAY-EASTER → PENTECOST

The Jewish High Holy Days follow the same logic. The seventh month begins with the Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah), in which the blowing of the shofar or trumpet calls people to **repentance** in anticipation of the Day of the Lord. The next ten days are a lot like Lent, as it's a season for confession and repentance from idolatry. In Jewish tradition, the Book of Life lays open during this time, and those who repent of their sins have their names written in the book. Then on the tenth day of the month is the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), symbolizing **redemption** from sin. In ancient Israel, the Day of Atonement was the one day of the year when the high priest would go inside the Temple's Holy of Holies and make atonement for the sins of the people. It was a symbolic cleansing from sin, anticipating Good Friday, when Jesus would wash away our sins. Then finally there's the Feast of Booths, beginning on the fourteenth day of the seventh month, and lasting for seven days (symbolizing completion and perfection). It's a time for **rejoicing**, like our Easter season, except that it's supposed to be a weeklong vacation camping out under the symbolic cover of the Lord.

Like our Easter season, the High Holy Days move from repentance to redemption to rejoicing under God's covering. If you get the logic of the High Holy Days, then you'll have no problem making sense of Isaiah 4. It follows the same logic, and I think it's intentional, since God made the seasons to reflect his glory.

GOD CALLS US TO REPENTANCE (ISAIAH 4:2)

After three chapters of sober warnings regarding the Day of the Lord, Isaiah offers some good news in 4:2 for the remnant preserved in Jerusalem. As God prunes the city, they are the branch that he doesn't cut off:

In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious... (Isaiah 4:2a ESV)

The survivors of Israel—the branch of the Lord—will be truly beautiful and glorious. These are the very characteristics that the people of Jerusalem had been seeking. Having turned away from God's covering, and then discovering how insecure they were on their own, they devoted themselves to idols that made them feel beautiful and glorious. For example, in Isa 2:12-17 God condemned Jerusalem's idolatry of glory. Isaiah's message in that section was that on the Day of the Lord all the so-called tall things of this world will become small in comparison with God's glory. Then in Isa 3:18-24, God condemned Jerusalem's idolatry of external beauty. Isaiah's message was that on the Day of the Lord, all their finery would be as filthy rags in contrast to God's beauty.

Throughout Isa 1-3, God's message has been consistent. It has been the call of the ram's horn on the Feast of Trumpets, i.e. the call to repentance. For three chapters, God has been calling his people to turn away from worthless idols that leave them bare, and come underneath God's safe covering.

In Isa 4:2 God reveals what will come of that repentance on the Day of the Lord. Guess who will be beautiful and glorious on that day? It is not those who trusted in idols who will be beautiful and glorious, but rather those who repented.

Especially when it comes to glory and beauty, repentance is counter-intuitive. Instead of beautiful adornments, repentance leaves us with ashes on our foreheads. Instead of honor, we experience humility as we confess our sins. But the *fruit* of repentance is precisely the opposite. Whenever we return to the Lord, we come under his covering. God cleans us up and he gives us his dignity. Take a look at the second half of Isa 4:2:

...the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. (Isaiah 4:2b ESV)

The Hebrew words translated 'pride' and 'honor' (literally 'stature' and 'finery') in 4:2 are the very words Isaiah used in prior chapters to describe those things Jerusalem had been seeking apart from God. Thus, Isaiah's argument here in 4:2 is that those who responded to God's call to repentance—even those who had been caught up in the idolatry of stature or beauty—would find what they were seeking *in the Lord*. On the Day of the Lord, not only did God cover them in terms of preservation and protection, but he also blessed them with stature and beauty. What wonderful gifts! What a marvelous God!

Part of what this means for us today is that those admirable qualities we so long to find in ourselves and others are gifts of God, through humility and repentance. The person you want to be, the person you want to work for, the person you want your kid to be, the person you want

your kid to marry, and on and on—is a humble, repentant follower of Jesus. The most honorable, the most beautiful people in the world are those who repent of idolatry and return to the Lord.

GOD REDEEMS US (ISAIAH 4:3-4)

One of the most wonderful things about Christianity is that God doesn't require us to clean ourselves up before turning to him. In fact, we can't cleanse ourselves. Like giving birthday cake to toddlers, the kids will stay messy until someone else cleans them up. When God calls us to repentance, we're reminded that we can't save ourselves. We need God to cleanse us.

The Day of Atonement, during the Jewish high holy days, is all about how God cleanses his people. In ancient Jerusalem, the Day of Atonement was when a substitute was sacrificed in place of God's people, and through the death of the substitute their sins were washed away. According to Jewish tradition, the names of those who were washed clean were recorded in the Book of Life (cf. Ps 69:28, Exod 32:32-33).

Isaiah 4 pictures God's redemption this way:

The one who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. (Isaiah 4:3-4)

As on the Day of the Atonement, when the people were cleansed and their names were recorded in the Book of Life, so on the Day of the Lord. Isaiah also makes reference in 4:4 to a spirit of 'judgment' and of 'burning,' two words used in Isaiah 1 to describe God's wrath against sin.¹ Taken together, Isa 4:3-4 point to Jesus, who suffered God's wrath in our place so that we might be cleansed and that our names might be forever recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev 21:27).

In Hebrew, the Day of Atonement is the day of *Kippur*, an ancient Semitic word that originally meant *to cover*. Through the centuries, one of the primary ways that Christians have understood what happened on Good Friday is that Jesus' blood somehow covered us, such that the Father no longer sees our sin. Think of all those things left undone that we ought to have done. Think of all those selfish things we've done that we ought not to have done. We all have memories of missteps like these, and if we're honest, they're the things that keep us up at night. But at the heart of Christianity is this great hope: if you give your life to Jesus, all these sins will be forgiven in the only court that ultimately matters. Why? Because on Good Friday, that great and terrible day, Jesus died for his people, so that our sins might be rendered forever invisible. He covered us, once

¹ In Isa 1:18-20, God said that if the Jerusalemites repented and returned to him, then they would *eat* the good of the land, but if they refused and continued to rebel, then they would *be eaten* by the sword. For unknown reasons, in Isa 4:4, the ESV translators chose to render the same Hebrew word as a "spirit of 'burning'" rather than *eating*, as the same word is translated in 1:18-20. In Isa 1:27, God promised that, "Zion shall be redeemed by *justice*." The same word occurs in 4:4 to describe a spirit of 'judgment.' The repetition of these two words underscores how God faithfully keeps his word.

and for all. And just like my friends who were rejoicing that they were covered by their homeowner's policy, what an incredible relief it is to know that we're covered by Jesus.

Jesus' covering changes the way we see one another within the church. We no longer regard one another with contempt, consistently assuming impure motives. Rather, we endeavor to see one another with the Father's eyes, i.e. under Jesus' cover. We try to think the best, hope the best, and believe the best for one another. It's a kind of holy optimism that comes from trusting that Jesus has covered us all.

REJOICING IN GOD'S COVERING (ISA 4:5-6)

The High Holy Days move from repentance to redemption to rejoicing. After the Day of Atonement (i.e. the day of *covering*), the Jews were to begin fashioning a makeshift shelter for rest and renewal in the Lord. Then they would celebrate the Feast of Booths (*Sukkot*): seven days during the seventh month enjoying a sevenfold harvest feast in the security and blessing of God's covering.

In Isa 4:5-6 we find language that reminds us of the Feast of Booths but also points us past the types and shadows of the festival to the real meaning behind it:

Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain. (Isaiah 4:5-6)

Isaiah says that the Lord's *sukkah*, or booth, will provide shelter in all seasons, rain or shine. But it won't be a makeshift shelter like what people constructed every year during the festival. It will be the Lord himself, as he revealed himself during the Exodus as a pillar of fire and smoke.

Isaiah also says that the *sukkah* ('booth') will be a *chuppah* ('canopy'). In a Jewish wedding, the *chuppah* is the wedding tent under which the bride and groom are united (and traditionally under which their union was consummated). The *chuppah* symbolizes the great union between God and his people, when faith is replaced with sight at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:6-9). Thus Isaiah 4:5-6 points through the Feast of Booths, that annual celebration of God's covering, to the Consummation and triumph of God's covering when every tear is wiped away and sin is no more.

CONCLUSION

Clearly we still haven't reached the consummation. We still walk by faith, not by sight, as we await that great wedding feast. Meanwhile, all around us people are fashioning their own inadequate shelters apart from the Lord. Driven to anxiety by our own insecurities, burdened by the weight of our own sins, we too keep turning away from God to the idols of our day. But there's no beauty or dignity or peace to be found among them.

Listen to the trumpet sound of God's word, the call to **repentance**, sounding the alarm that the only adequate shelter in all the world is the Lord himself, through the covering of our risen Lord Jesus Christ. In him we have **redemption** from sin. In him we have protection in all seasons, rain or shine. Under his covering, we can rest, relax and **rejoice**.

If you've put your faith in Jesus and been baptized in his name, he invites you to feast at his table. The Lord's table is very long, with a great many seats. It stretches from Good Friday all the way to that great Wedding Feast. Looking back to Good Friday, we eat and drink in Jesus' name to remember the facts of history, that Jesus died on a cross in first century Jerusalem in order to cover our sins. Looking ahead to the Wedding Feast, we eat and drink in Jesus' name knowing that we *will* see him face to face, and from that day on we will live with him forever. And perhaps most importantly of all, we eat and drink in Jesus' name for the sake of today. We trust that it is Jesus who sustains us in the faith, to keep us from falling back into the worthless idols that once enslaved us. We rest in the good news that God has us covered. Nothing can happen that will separate us from the love of Christ—neither tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor danger, nor sword (Rom 8:35). No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us and covers us.