

① 【The reason God deliberately allows suffering】

From Isaiah chapter 56 to the final chapter 66, biblical scholars refer to this section as "Third Isaiah." It was not written by Isaiah himself, but by his disciples who used his name. It was composed around the time the Israelites were liberated from their Babylonian captivity, returned to Jerusalem, and rebuilt the destroyed temple. The Babylonian Exile lasted seventy years. Seventy years is nearly a lifetime for a person, so by then, a foundation for life in Babylon had already been established. To abandon all that and return to Jerusalem required extraordinary courage and faith. Therefore, not everyone returned; it seems only a portion of the people did. And it was the people who remained in Persia who spread the faith of the Scriptures. This missionary work connects to the wise men who came from the East to worship the Messiah when Jesus was born.

Now, the people who returned rebuilt the temple, but it was crude. The land was desolate, and life was extremely difficult. Their hope that simply returning would solve everything was cruelly shattered. Their faith was in crisis. It is said that the Book of the Law within the Old Testament was written during this time.

● Yesterday, I visited Isshinji Temple for the general meeting of the Osaka Prefectural Religious Federation. Isshinji Temple was founded by the monk Honen Shonin, who lived from the late Heian period to the early Kamakura period. Honen Shonin spread the Jodo sect of Buddhism. Isshinji Temple is famous as a temple for enshrining ashes. It is said that from the late Edo period, Isshinji began holding daily prayers for the deceased, and as more people came to enshrine ashes there, they began creating bone Buddha statues. Currently, there are eight bone Buddha statues, and each statue is said to contain the remains of 230,000 people. In his opening remarks, a monk from Kyoto said, "This year was so hot that the autumn leaves aren't very beautiful. Autumn leaves become beautiful when there's a significant temperature difference between day and night. Nature is truly remarkable; suffering gives birth to beauty. Just as volcanoes create hot springs."

Hearing this story, I realized that nature too creates something out of suffering. The people of Israel were the same. They suffered in Babylon, and suffering awaited them even upon returning to Jerusalem. God did not readily grant Israel peace. We are the same. Yet I believe this was actually God's plan to cultivate faith. He constantly drives us into situations where we cannot survive without prayer. That was actually His grace. For God does not give us suffering alone; He always places treasure within it. Those who suffer will surely bear some beautiful fruit.

② 【The Birth of the New People of Israel】

As the law was written down, people like Gentiles and eunuchs began to face discrimination. To those who had lost hope, Isaiah proclaimed God's word: "This is what the Lord says: Maintain justice and do acts of mercy. My salvation is near, and my acts of mercy will soon be revealed." (Isaiah 56:1) He tells them not to give up, to keep doing justice and acts of mercy. Specifically, this means "keeping the Sabbath and not defiling it" and "guarding against evil deeds." For us today, it means keeping worship and keeping Christ's teachings. Verse 3 explains further: "Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people.' And let not the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.'" Foreigners, do not say, "We are not God's people. God has separated his people from us." Nor should you eunuchs say, 'We are withered and useless.' What is being said here is that whether you are a Jew, a Gentile, or a eunuch—in other words, whoever you are—if you keep the Sabbath, worship, do what God desires, and keep His teachings, you will be accepted by God, your prayers will be heard, and your name will be remembered. What matters is obeying God. Here, God is creating a new people of Israel. Originally, "Israel" was not the name of an ethnic group but the name of believers who trust in God. Therefore, we the church are called the "New Israel." And then comes the famous words: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (Isaiah 56:7) God's house is the temple and the church. The church is a house of prayer for all who seek to honor and obey God, and God hears the prayers of anyone who follows Him.

③ 【Let us rely solely on Christ】

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter and John encountered a man who had been crippled from birth. They said to him, "I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" (Acts 3:6). This man, who had relied on others for support his entire life, now changed his way of life to rely on Christ. When he believed in Christ, he was set free and began walking on his own feet. Here, a new Israelite people was born.

● On the 12th (Sunday), I attended the dedication service for the new sanctuary at Nishinoda Tsurumibashi Church. It was a splendid, spacious worship hall. They said it took 50 years to build the new sanctuary. A church member told me, "Pastor, it took 50 years, but once God moves, it happens quickly. It was over in the blink of an eye." Osaka Nishinoda Church merged with Tsurumibashi Church, and since Tsurumibashi Church's land and buildings sold for 80 million yen, things moved quickly from there. But reaching that point required the prayers, efforts, and sacrifices of many pastors and members.

●Mr. Eiji Enomoto, principal of Keiwa Gakuen High School in Niigata, says this: “Every human being experiences despair. Parting from close friends, loved ones, and separation from those we hold dear—it all comes. ... Yet when we commune with God, peace comes. This peace is not something humans build or accumulate. It does not come from our side; it is the peace that comes from God's side when our connections are severed. It is gained through communion with God. It is a peace that no one can steal or tear apart.”

When we despair or become disillusioned, it's usually because we're relying on things of this world. We rely on ourselves, on our family, on the people around us, on the circumstances surrounding us. Then we say, "Ah, this person can't be relied on either. Oh, this person won't help me either." We look at our circumstances and say, "No miracle will happen." We look at ourselves and say, "I have no money, no ability." And then we become depressed and despair. Hope does not come from looking at this world. Hope comes from God and Christ. And what comes from God does not vanish. It will surely bring something about, start something, and do something amazing. Therefore, we must not rely on this world. Let us fix our eyes only on Christ and rely solely on Him. When Christ moves, salvation comes swiftly. “Stop trusting in man, in mere mortals who breathe through their nostrils.” (Isaiah 2:22) I was almost caught in the devil's trap. Let us be careful.