

Isaiah 61 – Part 3

God as the Initiator

I want to begin my sermon this morning by recognizing three special individuals who are with us this morning. They are all members of The Vine community who we are blessed to have using our facility each Sunday evening at 5pm. I'd like to ask **Rodney, Anne** and **Dominic** to stand up briefly. Two weeks ago I was privileged to attend their worship service during which these three individuals were baptized into the Lord right up front here in our baptistery. What a great celebration that was. Please give them a round of applause as we recognize both their decision to be baptized into Christ and also to recognize God's work in bringing them to this point and making the point of baptism so significant through Christ's death on the cross for our sins. You can be seated.

Watching someone accept Christ as their Lord and Savior and then to evidence that decision through the act of baptism is all about why we do what we do here day after day and week after week. It's what we strive for. But what struck me two weeks ago was the reminder of how involved God is in even bringing any of us to this point in our lives. And I know that but it was really clear two weeks ago when I heard a bit of the **back story** to what led up to the three of them getting baptized that Sunday night.

Rick Wipf, the pastor of The Vine, had told me two weeks earlier that a young boy was going to be baptized. And so, I'd arranged to have the baptistery cleaned and filled for that day. You see, we don't always keep the baptistery filled with water. We fill it when we anticipate that someone might be getting baptized. So, from our side, we were preparing for a baptism that Sunday night. But about halfway through the week Rick informed me that instead of one baptism there were now going to be 3 baptisms!! I didn't know any details about the other two baptisms until the night of the actual event. At that time Rick explained that the Sunday previous to the baptisms taking place, Rick had announced to The Vine that the next Sunday they were going to be having a baptism and that if anyone else wanted to get baptized as well to let him know.

However, this is where the story really gets interesting. **Anne** and **Dominic** weren't in attendance that Sunday, so **they were unaware of the planned baptism**. Unknown to Rick, Anne and Dominic had been studying the Scriptures on their own and both come to the conclusion that they needed to be baptized as an outward sign of their commitment to the Lord. And so early in the week Anne contacted Rick and told him of their decision and so, if there were a time in the near future that The Vine was going to be having a baptismal service, they would like to be a part of it. When I heard that backstory that night I was struck once again with how amazing God is. He not only initiates drawing us to Himself but He knew that the baptistery was going to already be filled that Sunday night in preparation for Rodney's baptism so **He timed** the prompting of Anne and Dominic's decision to exactly match that timing!!! As I often like to say, in quoting **Graham Cooke**, "**God is so previous**," meaning that God works behind the scenes laying all the groundwork down for what He wants to accomplish in and through us. And this is one more example of that.

And as I reflected upon that amazing example of that I was reminded of other examples of that in the Bible. I was drawn to **Acts 8** with the amazing story of the first Gentile convert. Listen as I read about this amazing encounter initiated by God.

Read Acts 8:26-29 Don't miss God's timing here. He knew the exact time when this chariot was going to be going down on this road. Any earlier or later Philip wouldn't have been standing there. So, God instructs Philip at just the right time to be at this location. And Philip doesn't know why he's going to this exact location, he's just been told to go there. So Philip has no idea what he's supposed to do. But then God points out to him this chariot with likely a whole entourage accompanying it, and instructs Philip to go stand by it. Let's see what Philip's response is. Notice, God doesn't tell Philip what to say, He just directs him to go hang out by that chariot. And that's how God often works. He doesn't provide us with step by step instructions on how to live our lives. But He directs us to things or areas and then let's us trust Him as we continue to move forward. When God called Abraham and Sarah to pick up their possessions and move, He didn't tell them where they were moving to, but just to pick and move. With instructions with lack of "what's next" God builds our faith in His goodness and guidance. We follow His

lead and then trust as we move forward. That's what we see many times in Scripture and it's what we see here with Philip.

Read Acts 8:30-35 Without hesitation Philip runs up to this chariot and asks him if he understands what he's reading. And what are the odds that of the entire Old Testament available for this man to read, what are the odds that he'd be reading a passage directly talking about Jesus? Does anyone else find the orchestration of this amazing? Let's read the climax of this story? While standing by the chariot, Philip overhears the eunuch reading about Jesus and begins to ask questions (which is always a great method of witnessing and the method Jesus often used). Asking questions is a great way to draw people deeper.

Read Acts 8:36-39 We don't have the privilege of knowing all that Philip told him about Jesus, but somewhere in that message it included instructions about the command to get baptized as part of the process of accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and just about that same time, the eunuch looks up and sees a body of water and wants to be baptized. How amazing is that? God's timing, God's initiation is all over this story as well as so many other stories.

If you turn over two chapters to **Acts 10** you'll see a very similar story of God's coordination of events to bring about a group of individuals accepting Him and getting baptized. This story involves a man by the name of **Cornelius** and his family and a bunch of close friends.

- **Cornelius** was a god-fearing man, not a Jew, and a high ranking official in the Roman military and God wanted him to come to know and accept Jesus Christ. So, he appeared in a vision and told him to send a group of men to Peter down in Joppa and have him come to him. So Cornelius does that.
- While these men were on their way, Peter goes up to the rooftop to pray and while praying he gets hungry and so asks for some food. And while the food is being prepared God puts him into a trance and gives him this very vivid dream of unclean animals being lowered down from heaven on a sheet and a voice instructs him to get up, kill these animals and eat them. Well, Peter, being a devout Jew said **"NO – I'd never eat anything impure or unclean."** God repeats this vision 3 times. And Peter's response is the same each time. And then the sheet was taken back up into heaven and the dream ended. Peter wakes up and is trying to figure out this dream.
- At the same time as Peter is wondering about the meaning of this dream, the 3 men sent from Cornelius, arrive at Peter's house and began asking about Peter. So, the Holy Spirit informs Peter that there are three guys downstairs that have come for him and go with them because the Holy Spirit has sent by the Holy Spirit. (Note the timing of this).
- Peter goes down, greets his visitors and after spending the night there they head off the next day to Cornelius' house. Upon arriving at Cornelius' house, he's invited in and Peter discovers that there's quite a large gathering there of Cornelius' family and a bunch of close friends. Again, at this point nobody has a clue as to what's about to go down, all they know is that God has been orchestrating this whole thing. And as Peter stands up to address this crowd of non-Jews the first words out of Peter's mouth are: **Acts 10:28-29 (NIV)** *He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"* Peter makes it clear his belief system about eating with non-Jews, but God is on the move – which changes everything. But can someone please explain why I'm here? Don't you love God's flair for the suspense and anticipation He's been intentionally building? It's almost like a blind date where neither party quite knows what's about to happen next.
- The problem is that Cornelius doesn't have any answers as to why God sent for Peter to come here. You get a sense that Cornelius was hoping Peter might know.
- So, Peter just begins telling them about Jesus. But he starts with the realization that *God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right.*" (10:35)

- As Peter is still speaking, God makes the next move. The Holy Spirit fell on all the Gentiles gathered in that room and they began speaking in tongues and praising God and it says that the Jewish believers who had come with Peter were amazed that God was showing His acceptance of these Gentiles.
- Upon seeing all of this happening right before his eyes, Peter states: *"Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."* And it says that Peter ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and they were. (Acts 10:47-48 (NIV). God is amazing and His timing is incredible and the ways that he works in drawing us into a right relationship with Himself is astounding. And then He continues to work in us and through us to accomplish His mighty will.

If you were to turn over to **Acts 13** you'd discover God moving and acting once again as the apostles were fasting and praising God suddenly God breaks in and tells them to set aside Barnabas and Saul for the work to which He had called them (Acts 13:2) and thus began the first of three missionary journeys of Paul in which the Word of God was spread all over that region and many heard the good news of Jesus Christ and Him as their Lord and Savior.

Listen to this quote from theologian **John Stott**: *"Many people visualize a God who sits comfortably on a distant throne, remote, aloof, uninterested, and indifferent to the needs of mortals, until, it may be, they can badger him into taking action on their behalf. Such a view is wholly false. The Bible reveals a God who, long before it even occurs to man to turn to him, while man is still lost in darkness and sunk in sin, takes the initiative, rises from his throne, lays aside his glory, and stoops to seek until he finds him."*

Christianity at its core reveals a God who initiates and man who responds. Other religions reverse this by making man the initiator who seeks to gain a response from God. In those religions, man earns the notice of God through his diligence in following rituals and his performance of good deeds. Christianity is totally different from that in that God precedes everything you plan to do.

Even Jesus lived His life under this principle. He said that he only did what He saw the Father doing. **John 5:19 (NIV)** *"Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."* Wouldn't that be a great way to live our lives as well. Since God is initiator of our salvation and wants to lead us from that point forward, why not learn to listen to the Lord's leading, just as Jesus did?

Listen to this profound quote from **Watchman Nee**:

"God is the only legitimate Originator in the universe (Gen. 1:1), and His Holy Spirit is the only legitimate initiator in our hearts. Anything that you or I plan and set on foot without Him has the taint of the flesh upon it, and it will never reach the realm of the Spirit however earnestly we seek God's blessing on it. It may last for years, and then we may think we will adjust here and improve there and maybe bring it on a better plane, but it cannot be done."

Origin determines destination, and what was "of the flesh" originally will never be made spiritual by any amount of "improvement." That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and it will never be otherwise. So anything for which we are sufficient in ourselves is "nothing" in God's estimate, and we have to accept His estimate and write it down as nothing. "The flesh profiteth nothing." It is only what comes from above that will abide. (Collected Works of Watchman Nee, vol. 33, "The Normal Christian Life," p. 161)

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So, our job as believers ought to be to learn to listen to the leading of God through the Holy Spirit and live our lives every day dependent upon that leading. Because God knows how He's created each of us and what He wants to do in and through each of our lives and how He wants to accomplish that.

Isaiah 64:4 (NIV) *Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.*

How exactly do you "wait on the Lord". I personally have often found that instruction a bit of a challenge because I'm not wired to wait. I feel like God has wired me to move. I feel much more comfortable moving then waiting. But God has slowly been teaching me the importance of learning to "wait" on Him, even in the midst of my moving. And while that might seem like an oxymoron I'll explain it more fully next Sunday as we jump into this concept of **waiting on the Lord, even while moving.**