

Gospel and Culture

Introduction: Every culture on earth is God-given. But sin distorts every culture, and culture can oppress you instead of displaying God's love and beauty. Today, many Asian people think that Western culture is better than theirs. But that is not true. Western culture has many good things, like cleanliness, good educational institutions and great opportunities for those who work hard. But they also have many problems like racial discrimination against black people, loose morality, unsatisfactory family relationships, etc. Asian culture (including India) has different good and bad things. Many Indians (and other Asians) think the Gospel is of Western origin and say gospel believers adopt Western culture. Unfortunately, the Indian Church has extensively adopted Western culture (including their dress) because Western missionaries believed almost everything here was evil. But the truth is that the Gospel will transform every culture (Eastern or Western) while retaining the beautiful things within that culture. What we need to do is to present Jesus to every culture and let Him transform us. The Gospel is "good news" of God's actions in Jesus Christ. And believing the gospel will transform your life. In Isaiah 54, we will examine two beautiful transformations.

Outline

1. The Gospel gives you a new identity in your heart
2. The Gospel changes the values in your heart

1. The Gospel gives you a new identity in your heart

Isa 54:1-5 "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labour; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the LORD. Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back, lengthen your cords, and strengthen your stakes. ³ For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities. ⁴ "Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. ⁵ For your Maker is your husband — the LORD Almighty is his name — the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth.

To understand this passage, we must know how vital child-bearing was in ancient cultures when farming and cattle breeding was the main occupation. Briefly, the more children you have, the more your family prospered — because:

- More children meant you had more labour to work on your farm; therefore, you had more income and were more successful in the eyes of your society.
- The tribe with more children would conquer the tribe with fewer children.
- When you become old, your children will look after you. If you wanted three adult children in your old age, you must start with having 8-10 children because many would not survive.

That would put much pressure on women to produce children. And if they were barren (childless), they would be worthless according to their culture. In Gen 30:1, Rachel cried to her husband Jacob to give her children, or she would die. She illustrated a fundamental principle that if you build your identity and self-worth on anything outside God and don't get it, you will face mental and social death.

In the Bible, written at least 2000 years ago, we don't read of women with weight problems because their identity mainly depends on the number of children, not their figure. In general, whether you are a man or woman:

- Old cultures say that your worth (identity) depends on your family or caste.
- Modern culture or City Culture says that your worth (identity) depends upon your looks, money, accomplishments etc

But every culture, whether Ancient or Modern, Eastern or Western, City or Rural, puts pressure on you to build your identity on something or the other. And every culture forces you to fit in and seek approval from others. It is **"almost impossible"** when everybody goes after these objects not to go along with them.

But the good news (Gospel) is something **completely different**. It gives you valuable self-worth apart from your cultural pressure, NOW!

In Isa 54:1-4, God says He will give you beauty, honour, self-worth, identity etc., apart from what is valuable in your culture. And how does He do that? — *"Your maker is your husband"* (Isa 54:5).

Consider a usual marriage. A moment **before** you take your wedding vows, your status is single. The moment **after** you take your wedding vows, your status changes completely. You're married. And if your husband is a great man, your significance is automatically upgraded. But the Gospel offers you something no religion or culture can offer. The moment you commit to Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, **God joins you to Him**, and you have the delight of your Maker. God delights in you just like a husband delights in his bride.

So, God says, "Don't look to anyone and anything else for self-worth. I am your value. What value can you have more than what I give you? Don't seek value from anything that the world gives you".

Now that you are free from the pressure forced upon you by your birth culture, you can start loving it. All cultures contain something beautiful. But your birth culture will not oppress you anymore by its expectations to fit in. **The identity** you once got from fulfilling those cultural expectations is not essential anymore to you. It is not number one in your heart. Instead, you base your identity on your relationship with God (*Your Maker is your husband*)—and that identity is now number one in your heart. So, the Gospel gives your heart a new identity. You can live in your birth culture and enjoy its beauty, but it won't enslave you anymore.

2. The Gospel changes the values of your heart

Isa 54:11-12 Afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will rebuild you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with lapis lazuli. ¹² I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. Now, Isa 54 has two pictures of redemption:

- A barren woman singing for joy (*Isa 54:1-5*), which we have already discussed
- The afflicted city rebuilt with beauty and perfection— *Isa 54:11-12*. We will discuss it below.

Such a city never existed in history, so where do we find such a city? We see it in the Book of Revelation at the end of this age. Such a city comes down from heaven (Rev 21:1-5, 10-21). It tells us that God will recreate the world how He wants it to be. And He invites us to participate in that project by preaching the Gospel. It is through the Gospel that we are a new creation.

Cor 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

But God does not use the wise and strong of the world; instead, He uses weak and humble people to build His kingdom.

Cor 1:26-27 Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential, few were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

Our Lord Jesus achieved our salvation through the weakness of the cross, which is the complete opposite of worldly values. On the cross, God openly demonstrates His love and intention to transform us from self-seeking, proud people to new people that will have His heart and values. When we believe in Jesus, He transforms our hearts—He gives us a new heart with new values. Race, caste and class, superiority, money, power, beauty, hunger for popularity and recognition—all these things are values of the world and opposite of the values of people changed by the Gospel. Such a changed person will view life differently:

- They will look at people of other races, classes, professions, and castes and will look at them as brothers and sisters of the same human race that God created.
- They will have cultural freedom because they don't make their culture an idol.
- They will look at money differently because it no longer gives significance and security.
- They will pour out their lives to bring about, bit by bit, the city that God is building and will eventually complete at the end of this age.