

INTRODUCTION

You've probably noticed we have some tents set up on our campus this morning. I'll resume my teaching series through Colossians in a few weeks, but for the next few weeks, I'm going to be teaching from Isaiah along the theme: "Enlarge the Place of Your Tent" as part of our For the Joy of All Generations campaign.

How many of you have ever spent the night in a tent? Hold up your hand. I didn't ask, "How many of you have ever SLEPT in a tent?" Because spending the night in a tent and sleeping in a tent are not necessarily the same thing. In 1992, I took our family to a summer mountain vacation in Angel Fire, New Mexico. Jenni was about fourteen and Laura Grace was about eleven. I suggested we take an overnight horseback ride that included camping out in the mountains. Cindy opted out and suggested it would be a good Father/Daughters memory. We started out on our excellent camping adventure led by a couple of old crusty guides. It was a wonderful day, the mountains were beautiful, and we saw herds of elk and other wildlife.

After four hours in the saddle, I gingerly got down from my saddle and was reminded horseback riding utilizes different muscles than golf! After a night around the campfire of food and tall tales, it was time for us to head to our tent. Laura Grace noticed the guides collected our leftover food and trash and locked it into a heavy steel box attached to a tree. She asked what that was and the guide said, "Oh, that's a bear box. We put all our trash in there so the bears can't get to it." Both my girls got wide-eyed and asked simultaneously, "You mean there are bears out here?" The old guide grinned and said, "Sure 'nuff. The woods are full of 'em. But don't worry, if'n any bears come near, the horses will make plenty noise to warn us."

Jenni and LG joined me in the tent and got in their sleeping bags fully clothed (in case they had to jump up and run.) They pulled their sleeping bags so close to me they were almost squeezing the breath out of me. Unfortunately our tent was right under where the horses were tied. All night long the horses made noises, and every time they huffed, or stomped, Jenni and LG sat up and said, "What was that? Is that a bear?" Between them and my sore muscles, I can report I've spent the night in a tent, but I've never slept under a tent!

In Bible times, God's people spent their entire lives living in tents. You might say they "lived in-tents lives." In fact, before the Jews built the Temple in Jerusalem, the worship and sacrifice of God was carried out in a tabernacle, which was just a big fancy tent.

Our theme verse for the next few weeks is found in Isaiah 54. God makes a powerful promise we should study.

Isaiah 54:1-2: "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; 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, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left.'"

A few chapters later, God speaks within in the same context of darkness and despair. Isaiah 60 is

another challenge to maintain faith. God says in Isaiah 60:1, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you." Then we find these remarkable words God speaks in Isaiah 60:15, "...I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations." God still speaks as loudly and clearly as He did twenty centuries ago. There are three powerful truths I want us to consider from these verses:

1. GOD WANTS MORE CHILDREN IN HIS FOREVER FAMILY

God says, "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy." (Isaiah 54:1) When you read the Bible, remember there are always several layers of applications. First, there is always the immediate, historical application. In this case, God was speaking to Israel during a time when Israel was on the verge of occupation by Babylon and Jerusalem would become a barren, desolate city. God was saying, "Even though things look tough, don't stop singing. Instead shout for joy because I'm going to give you children."

In the Bible, barrenness was considered a reproach, and it produced sadness and anguish. Do you remember the story of Sarah? She was barren and didn't give Abraham any children for many years. God promised her she would shout for joy and sing, because she would have a child. By the time she received the promise she was so old and skeptical that she laughed out loud—but God fulfilled His promise. When she was in her 90s she gave birth to a boy, whom God told her to name "Isaac" which means "laughter." When God promises children, HE never breaks His promise!

There's another layer of application for Isaiah 54—a prophetic application. God is predicting a time in the future when Israel will turn to the Messiah. The barren nation will give God true spiritual children.

But there is a third, and wider application to Isaiah 54. It's the personal application for us. This is a prophecy about us—the church. God opens His heart to reveal that He wants more children in His family, the church. The Bible says when a person becomes a Christian; they become a child of God. The Bible says, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will—but born of God." (John 1:12-13) That's why Jesus came—to add more children to God's family. Hebrews 2:10 says Jesus came to "bring many sons into glory." My favorite picture of the New Testament Church is as a family. The church isn't a building, it isn't an institution, or even it's an organization, we're a family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ because we have the same Father.

I know what some of you may be thinking. "Pastor, you're really trying to twist this scripture to fit our situation. Maybe those words were intended for Israel. How do you know it *really* applies to the church?" Well, if I'm mistaken, so was the Apostle Paul, because when he wrote to the church at Galatia, guess which Old Testament verse he quoted to describe children of God? Read Galatians 4:27-28 and see for yourself, "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband. Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise." Sound familiar?

We are children of promise. God wants more children, and if we share God's heart, we'll have a passion to reach and disciple more and more people. Over the past few weeks I've been made aware of the statistic that on any given Sunday morning, within a thirty-minute drive, there are 60,000 people who don't attend church. As a church, we cannot be content to limit God's family to those of us who are already here. Jesus told His disciples, "Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." (John 4:35) He wasn't talking about corn or wheat—Jesus was talking about people who needed to have a relationship with the Living God. God wants more children in His forever family. Here's the next truth:

2. A GROWING FAMILY NEEDS A LARGER PLACE

Even before the promised children were born God gave them these instructions, "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide." (Isaiah 54:2) In Bible times, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants lived in tents and moved from place to place. It's hard to believe, but three thousand years later, there are still families in Israel who live in tents. They are called "Bedouins." As you drive from Jerusalem to Jericho, you can usually see four or five Bedouin encampments. These nomad families move from place to place in search of better pastureland. You can see their tents along with camels, chickens, dogs, and sheep around the tents. However, they aren't completely primitive. You often see a van or a dusty old Mercedes parked over to the side, and I've even seen a satellite dish on top of one of the tents!

We don't live in tents, and we don't worship in a tent, but God has sent so many new members to our Green Acres family, we are following God's orders and enlarging the place of our tent. Do you realize how much God has blessed us? In just the past five years, our membership has grown by 31%. In the same five-year period, our worship attendance has leapt by a whopping 51%. But the rate of growth for our Sunday Morning Bible Study attendance has only grown 17%. The reason we haven't been growing as fast in our Bible Study ministry is because our tent isn't big enough! We're completely out of space for discipleship. We have enough space to grow in worship for the next four or five years, but we are out of space to begin new children's Sunday School classes. We don't have any available rooms at 9:45 to start new adult Bible Study groups.

As we launch this emphasis, I want to remind you buildings aren't the focus of this project. We're focusing on people, and the ministry will take place in these facilities. In other words, the TENT isn't nearly as important as the PEOPLE who gather under the tent and what happens when they gather.

1. A family is a place where you should find love

The same is true of churches. The buildings aren't what's really important. We're not in the building business. We're in the PEOPLE business and our only business is MINISTRY. Since we're a family, the same things that happen in a healthy family describes the ministry we offer to people. For instance, there are at least three things you should find in a healthy family. A family is a place where you should find: Love. We're building a bigger tent so people can come and experience the love of Christ demonstrated by His children. We love to welcome new members to the family, because when we were strangers, alienated from God, He showed us His

unconditional love. There are thousands of people out there looking for love in all the wrong places—we want to be the right place for them to find real love.

2. A family is a place where you should find acceptance

A family is also a place where you can find acceptance. Dysfunctional families may kick family members out on the street, but healthy families provide a place where a child can find acceptance even if they're different. And we're all different. When I re-read Brennan Manning's book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, a few months ago, I was reminded we're all misfits in one way or another. We are all bruised and battered by sin. But Abba opens His arms wide and says, "Come to me, all you who are misfits, and I'll give you rest." When we fall into His arms, we finally discover His arms are a perfect fit for misfits. We can accept others because we have been accepted by God.

3. A family is a place where you should find instruction

Finally, a family is a place where you can find instruction. As children, we learn to walk and talk from our family members. One of the most important things we do as a church family is to provide biblical instruction for believers. It's not enough for a person to come to a big crowd of several thousand people and sing and hear me speak. For every man, woman, boy and girl to become a fully devoted follower of Christ, they need to connect with a smaller group of people who can nurture and encourage them. That's why we're enlarging our tent—we're out of space or discipleship and fellowship.

I mentioned the Bedouins earlier. They are legendary for their incredible acts of hospitality. In the hostile environment of the desert, a guest was always welcomed and treated with kindness. On one of my trips to Israel I experienced this hospitality firsthand. A Bedouin merchant in Jericho lived in a tent, but sold artifacts and trinkets on the square in Jericho. Because I brought several previous tour groups to his location, he remembered me and treated me with great kindness. On this occasion, he let his sons sell the trinkets and he invited me to visit in his tent. He treated me like a king. When we entered the tent, he commanded his wife (or wives) to bring us something to drink. He directed me to sit on a pile of pillows, and then introduced all the people in the tent to me. Then he ceremoniously poured a little cup of something black and thick for me. It had the viscosity of about 30 weight motor oil. I knew it would have been an insult to refuse, so I asked the Lord to protect me, and I took a breath and took a sip. POW! It tasted like a combination of cough syrup and strong coffee with a fragrance of perfume mixed in. It wasn't that bad, and when he offered me seconds, I accepted. Then I enjoyed a third cup. After those jolts of caffeine, I think I stayed awake straight for the next 48 hours!

As I thought about that experience, it occurred to me we should be doing the same thing here under our tent. It is a desert out there. It's dangerous. It's scary. We need a vision to enlarge our ministry and enlarge our tent so we can welcome more people and show them the kindness of Jesus Christ. Remember, what takes place inside the tent is much more important than the tent itself. Here's the final truth:

3. A FAITH-FULL FAMILY DEPENDS ON A FAITHFUL GOD

God also tells us in Isaiah 54:2-3 to, "lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left." If we're going to enlarge our tent, it's critically important to extend our tent ropes, and to drive down our tent stakes deeper into the ground. Tent ropes remind me of the breadth of our ministry, and stakes speak of the depth of our faith. Our tent ropes reach further than you may think. In addition to our East Texas television audience, we are now reaching millions on FamilyNet television and Sirius Satellite Radio. But you may not realize our website is one of the busiest church websites in America. So far this year we have had 6,124,162 hits on gabc.org, and the hits come from countries all over the world, including many from the Middle East! We're lengthening our cords.

Driving down spiritual stakes reminds me of the importance of deepening our faith. How deep is your faith in God? If you have a shallow faith, then when the high winds of adversity blow into your life, then don't be surprised if your tent collapses.

Have you ever wondered how ancient people constructed tall buildings and wonders like the great pyramids? They discovered the power of leverage. The Greek mathematician, Archimedes, (287-212 B.C.) once boasted: "Give me a fulcrum that's strong enough and a lever that's long enough, and a place to stand and I will move the earth." That was a pretty safe boast, because it couldn't be disproved. But he understood the power of using a lever and fulcrum to move the heaviest weight. If you're going to trust God, you've got to understand our fulcrum is the Word of God—and it's pretty strong! Everything in this universe hinges on the power and strength of God's Word. But a fulcrum without a lever is useless. Our lever is faith—and the reach of faith is limitless. Archimedes never moved the earth, but Jesus promised if we have only a little faith, the faith of the size of a tiny mustard seed, we could move mountains.

Key Question: How big is your God?

The most important question is NOT how big is your faith. The key question is: How big is your God? Only a little bit of faith in a great big living God can leverage heaven and earth. Do you remember our study of Joshua? When the spies scouted out the Promised Land, they found it was full of giants—huge, ferocious soldiers. The other spies suffered from what I called a "Grasshopper complex." They said, "We looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes." The spies said, "Look how much BIGGER they are than us!" But Joshua and Caleb had faith. They said, "But look how much SMALLER they are than God!" And a big God delivered them into the Promised Land—not by their might, but by *His* mighty hand.

Do you ever find yourself lamenting, "Look how big my problems are?" I don't know how big your problems are, but I do know God is bigger than your problems. Do you believe God is bigger than your problems? Do you believe God is "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us?" (Ephesians 3:20) Yes! Do you believe God can do MORE in this church than He's ever done in the past? Let's personalize it: Do you believe God can do more in your life than He's ever done before? We're facing the biggest challenge we've ever faced as a church. There aren't many churches in America who have ever tackled a \$40 million project before. This is a God-sized challenge, but the good news is we serve a big God. He sent me here to remind you if God be for us, who can be against us?

Greater is He who is in your than He who is in the world!

This is a big project for a big cause. On November 12, I'm asking each of us bring a big offering for our big God. As we begin this process, I want to be totally straightforward with you. I want to hammer down four stakes repressing four fundamental convictions that will guide us through this process. As I introduce each conviction, I want you listen to me carefully, if what I say isn't true, I want you to stand up right here and now and say, "That's a lie!" Ready?

(1) God knows what the need is, and can meet it

God is speaking when He instructs us to enlarge the place our tent. Do you think God is in heaven wringing His hands saying, "Uh oh! My family called Green Acres needs \$40 million. What am I going to do?" You may be thinking, "Pastor, look how much BIGGER that amount is than anything we've ever done before!" My response is, "Look how much SMALLER that amount is than God's riches!"

(2) If I ask Him, God will tell me what part of that need He wants to meet through me

Anyone want to disagree with that? God says, "Call to me and I answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you did not know" (Jeremiah 33:3). If anyone asks me, "Pastor, how much do you think I should give?" My answer will be, "Don't ask me. Ask God. I have no idea what you have, and what represents a sacrifice for you." But God knows and He will tell you if you ask Him. If you haven't already started, I want you to start setting aside time every day and get alone with God and your family, and ask Him what part He wants you to play in what He is doing.

(3) What God lays on my heart to give will cause me to depend totally on Him

At times like this when God is giving us a big challenge; He will give you an amount that at first will seem impossible. In fact, it *will* be impossible for you to do without His supernatural power. If you come up with an amount and your first impression is, "Sure, I can do that, no problem" then you probably haven't heard from God.

A farmer named Sam had three sons, and while their friends were playing video games or running around time in their pickups, he required his sons to work in the fields on Saturdays. Another farmer said, "Sam, with all the harvesting equipment we have now, you don't have to make your boys work on Saturday." Sam replied, "I'm not raising corn, I'm raising sons."

God isn't raising money, He's raising our faith. This process isn't about fund-raising, it's about faith-raising. God is raising sons and daughters and He's teaching us we should trust Him instead of money and possessions. Go ahead, trust Him.

(4) When I give what God tells me, I get the joy and He gets the glory

Your offering will go to further God's causes in discipleship and ministry, but that's not the ultimate goal. Our main purpose is to glorify God with our lives and enjoy Him forever. Some of

you have never discovered the joy of making a real sacrifice to God.

Now, I've been around the block a few times. In fact, this is about my eighth capital stewardship campaign. I know some of you are going to stay away for the next few weeks. I'll be talking about giving and making a sacrifice to God, and you don't want to hear it. Here's my advice to you: Have a nice time, and I'll see you around Thanksgiving. Let me be totally honest with you. What you do not give willingly or joyfully God neither wants or needs. Meanwhile, the rest of us are going to be here and we're going to witness a miracle. We're going to stand in awe as our great, big God does a work that is so awesome, we'll all have to fall on our faces and sing that song, "How Great is Our God. Sing with me, How Great is our God. And all will see how *great* is our God."

God wants more children in His forever family. If you aren't part of God's family, then I invite you to come and find out how you can join His family this morning. We're following God's orders and we're literally enlarging the place of our tent. Will you join as we honor God and trust Him once again to show Himself mighty in East Texas?

OUTLINE

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"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will—but born of God."
John 1:12-13

2. A GROWING FAMILY NEEDS A LARGER PLACE

A family is a place where you should find

1. Love
2. Acceptance
3. Instruction

3. A FAITH-FULL FAMILY DEPENDS ON A FAITHFUL GOD

Key Question: How big is your God?

Fundamental convictions:

- (1) God knows what the need is, and can meet it
- (2) If I ask Him, God will tell me what part of that need He wants to meet through me
- (3) What God lays on my heart to give will cause me to depend totally on Him
- (4) When I give what God tells me, I get the joy and He gets the glory



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes