

Memorial Day 2014

Look To The Rock

It is Memorial Day weekend. Although it has become just another three day weekend and a time for relaxing, the original intent was to provide a time to especially remember and honor those who fought and died for our freedom in this nation. Throughout the wars fought in behalf of the United States, countless men and women have made that ultimate sacrifice in the cause of freedom. Perhaps some were your family members and friends.

I had the privilege this week of reading a letter sent to the family of a young navy seaman. This young man, Elmer Porter, was the brother of Dorothy Tuley and was killed in October of 1944 when his ship was attacked by an enemy suicide plane. He was buried at sea, somewhere east of the Philippine Islands. The letter describing the events leading to his death was sent to Elmer and Dorothy's father. It was the last paragraph of the letter, written by a Lieutenant Edmond Walsh, that gripped me. "Nothing I say can beguile you from your grief. Yet, when your neighbors exult in the victory that awaits us and enjoy the liberties of free men, know that all these were purchased by the heroism of men like your son. Sincerely yours..."

We all enjoy the liberties of free men and women today, and those liberties were purchased by the heroism of men and women like this. I want us to stand for a moment of silence as we remember, honor and give thanks for those who gave their lives for their country and for the cause of freedom.

On Mother's Day I used a verse of Scripture from Isaiah 51 and I mentioned then I thought I would use this passage again. Turn with me to Isaiah 51. On this Memorial Day weekend as we remember and honor not only the men and women of the armed forces, but as we honor the memory of all our friends and loved ones who have gone on before us, we find ourselves looking back. As you get older I suppose you do more looking back, remembering things as they used to be. That can be enjoyable and it can also be painful. It can also affect and influence the way we face and encounter the future. What we are looking back at makes a difference. The prophet Isaiah tells us to look back at some things in order to find hope and encouragement to face the future.

Isaiah had been warning the kingdom of Judah that judgment was coming. The Assyrians carried the Northern Kingdom of Israel into exile and threatened the southern kingdom of Judah.

Judah escaped the Assyrians but would eventually fall to the Babylonians and be exiled themselves. Isaiah warned of the judgement that would come but then spoke words of comfort and assurance that in the future God would deliver and restore them. It's like he is writing words of encouragement that are to be read in the future, 60 or 70 years in the future. He tells them the day will come when after living all these years in exile in Babylon, God would bring them back to Jerusalem, back to their land and he would once again raise up the nation and the people of Israel. He has good news for us as well, for Isaiah speaks prophetically not only of deliverance for the nation of Judah from exile, but he speaks of the future coming of the ultimate deliverer, the Messiah who would come to set all of the captives free, including us.

But can you imagine for these people? After 60 or 70 years God tells you you're going home. "Home? What home? I can't even remember what home looks like? It looks like Babylon. I can't remember Jerusalem. I can't remember what it was like when things were easy, when I felt safe, or happy, or free." It's been 70 years of silence, isolation and despair. And even if you start to remember something about home after all those years, you think, "It can't happen. It would take a miracle. It's too late. It'll never happen." They couldn't even imagine it.

Imagine Isaiah speaking to the prisoners of Auschwitz. "The day will come when God will lead you from this place and take you home. But this time, not to Poland but to your own land, to Israel, and you will prosper in that land and I will make a great nation from you. You will never be hungry again." How could that be? They couldn't even imagine that day coming.

Maybe you can relate. Perhaps you've been in your own kind of exile. You've spent a long time waiting for deliverance, waiting for answers, for healing, for salvation for a family member, for depression to lift and you think, "It can't happen. It would take a miracle. It's too late. It'll never happen." You can't even imagine what it would be like to be free or whole again. Look at what God says through the prophet Isaiah.

"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn..." Isaiah 51:1

"Listen to me." We are frightened, anxious, sick, we are busy blaming, accusing, pacing and God starts by getting our attention. Before we look, we listen. He takes our face in his hands, looks us in the eye and says, "Calm down, stop talking and listen to me. Stop pacing and worrying and listen." If we are waiting for help and deliverance and feel like we're in exile,

maybe we need to make sure we are listening to the Lord! It's time to tune our hearts and our attention to the Lord. It's time to listen to him rather than the mocking voices of our exile. Pay attention to God and his word.

Now that he has their attention he tells them to look to the rock from which you were cut and the quarry from which you were hewn. **Look and remember where you came from!** The preacher said, "he's brought me a mighty long way." Look back today and you'll discover the same is true for you. He's brought you a mighty long way.

Remember the pit from which he dug you. Remember how lost you were when God found you, dug you out of the quarry and redeemed you? Remember how hopeless you were? Now realize God isn't finished with you. He didn't dig you out of the quarry to leave you where you are. He has a greater plan than you can imagine just now. Listen and look and trust and obey. He's telling you it's time to prepare for the next step, the next move, so get ready! It's been a long time coming, yes, but a new day is about to begin and you are on your way home. There are better things ahead. But remember where you came from and then you can rejoice in where you are going!

He said "Look to the rock from which you were cut." **Look and remember what you are made of!** I know it's not grammatically correct, but it makes my point: you are made of stronger stuff than you think. We start to think we can't make it, we aren't strong enough or capable enough. Stop and think about the rock from which you were cut. Think about what you are made of, what you are part of. Look back at your own family, at the obstacles and struggles and challenges they overcame. Grandparents and parents that overcame world wars and poverty and the great depression. You were cut from that same rock. Pray, trust God like they did, persevere and God will see you through. Look to the rock from which you were cut because you are made out of stronger stuff than you think.

"I don't think I can make it." Maybe you've forgotten the rock from which you were cut. Not just your biological family, but you are part of the body of Christ. Talking about you, the bible says, "**Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.**" **1 John 4:4.** "But I don't think I have what it takes." Doesn't the bible say "**I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.**" **Philippians 4:13** "I just can't imagine it happening." I'm pretty sure the bible speaks of "**Him who 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. I’m telling you (and me) that we were cut from a rock that is stronger than what we thought.

Let me tell you a little more about the rock from which you were cut. If you have placed your faith in Christ and made him the Savior and Lord of your life, then you are part of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. You look at your circumstance and feel overwhelmed, the odds are against you, but the bible says, **“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness.” 2 Peter 1:3.** He has equipped you with everything you need to live a godly life in this world. You are part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are more than a conqueror through him. You are an heir of God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ. He is the victorious king who leads us in a triumphant procession. Look to the rock from which you were cut. You are a part of the church that is marching toward eternity and will not be defeated. Jesus said not even the gates of hell could prevail against his church. That’s the rock from which we are cut. We are part of His church. Tyrants have tried to wipe us from the face of the earth. Hitler, Stalin, Marx and Lenin, Mao, Bin Laden, communism, socialism, you name it, they’ve tried and yet the church still marches on. Prison bars can’t stop the proclaiming of the gospel, beatings, torture, not even death can silence the church’s witness. Islamic thugs can kidnap 300 Christian girls in Nigeria but they can’t stop the advancement of the church. Culture can squeeze and pressure us to compromise and conform but read the book of Revelation and you will find us – the church – standing triumphant, our robes washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, worshiping at the throne of God. We are cut from that rock of ages that cannot and will not be crushed. You think you can’t make it? Look to the rock from which you were cut! You are part of the church of the Living God! You are made from better stuff than that! We don’t have to give in to sin. We are more than conquerors! Look to the rock from which you are cut! Then Isaiah reminds us:

“Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.” This little group of exiles faces this daunting task of trying to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and restore the nation. How can so few possibly do this? Penniless and powerless, just a handful of Jews returning to their land, how can we rebuild? The Lord reminds them of their miraculous beginning. They didn’t do it by their strength and power the first time. God did, with two old people – a wife of 90 and a

husband as good as dead at 100 and from this old couple comes a baby and a nation.

God points us to Abraham and Sarah to remind us of miraculous beginnings. When the devil tells you it can't be done, remind him of your miraculous beginning! When you think one or two people can't make a difference, look back to Abraham and Sarah. They believed God when everyone knew it was too late, it was impossible, it was laughable. They believed God when everything said forget about it. They still believed God could do the impossible.

The exiled people of Judah start packing their few belongings and heading south. They say to their Babylonian captors, "You'll be hearing from us. Keep watching. We are going to build a city and a nation." "You? This little weak, weird group of Jews? You?" "Just watch and wait. God says so."

Fast forward to the end of World War II. 6 million Jews have perished in the Holocaust. 2 out of every 3 Jews in Europe have died. And they say to the world, "We're not finished. Keep watching. You'll be hearing from us. We are going to build a city and a nation of our own." "You? This devastated little group of survivors?" "Just watch. God says so."

And the devil tries to destroy us, to defeat and discourage us, and a thousand critics tell you why it cannot happen, but look to the rock and look to Sarah and Abraham and know that God is going to do what he promised to do in our lives as well! "We're not finished. We're not defeated. Keep watching. You'll be hearing from us because God says so!" Here's what we know:

V3 "The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing." I know how bad it was, and I know how difficult it is right now, but by God's grace, I know how it is going to be!

God comforted Sarah in her old age and gave her a child and he will surely comfort Zion, his city. God promises to repair and restore and raise up what has been ruined and broken. Yes he is referring to Jerusalem the city that lies in ruin, but God is the repairer and restorer of broken and ruined lives as well. As surely as he comforted Jerusalem and the nation of Israel, as surely as they rebuilt and everything he promised has come true, he can and will restore you and your life. Joy and gladness and singing and thanksgiving will be heard from you.

Look what's coming: **v5 "My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on**

the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations.” It’s not disaster and defeat that’s coming, it’s salvation and deliverance! His salvation is utter, final, thorough, glorious, complete.

He is telling us to listen and look back to see what he has done so we can have hope for the future. The one who saved us will deliver us out of every trial and affliction. Help is on the way.

Here is how certain we are. The Lord says, **v6 “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath.”** Look at what is certain and constant in your life. Look at the heavens. Look at the sky, the sun and moon and stars. We say, “as sure as the sun will come up in the morning.” There is nothing more certain than that the sun will come up in the morning and the moon will appear at night.

The Lord says, “Look at the earth beneath your feet.” It’s always been here. You can count on good old *terra firma*, right? It’s a constant. It’s certain. But then God says, **“The heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies.”** The things you thought you could count on will vanish, will just wear out and be gone. What we thought was so permanent turns out to be transient, temporary. This is all we’ve ever known, life here on this earth. If we can’t count on this, what can we count on? God tells us. **“But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.”** His salvation will last forever. His redeeming love and mercy, his character will never wither or die or wear out or vanish like all the seemingly permanent things in our experience. Everything else will wear out, vanish, fall apart, die, but not his salvation, not his righteousness. He is eternally faithful!

Isaiah is inspired by what the Lord is saying. God hasn’t forgotten them. Salvation and deliverance are coming. Isaiah suddenly cries out **v9 “Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old.”** Isaiah says, “wasn’t it you that made a way through the sea so Israel could cross over into the promised land? You did it before and you’ll do it again!” You can hear the faith, the rising certainty in his heart as Isaiah proclaims, **v11 “The ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”**

We will return! We will enter Zion with singing and not mourning and crying! We will rejoice. We are going to do this! He is going to save and deliver us, comfort and restore us. It’s going to happen! But you know how we are...

“Yes, but what about....?” Listen and look back and remember. **V12 “I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you fear mortal men, the sons of men who are but grass, that you forget the Lord your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor?”**

The Lord is saying, “What do you mean, ‘what about....?’ Have you forgotten the rock from which you were cut? Who are you to fear mortal men? You are part of the church, you are a child of God. You have nothing to fear because I am your Lord, your Maker. Don’t live in terror and fear of the oppressor. I am here. I am the one who comforts you. I’ll take care of you.”

The Lord says, “Listen, look back and remember who I am and whose you are. Then trust me.” **V14 “The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in their dungeon, nor will they lack bread. For I am the Lord your God, who churns up the sea so that its waves roar – the Lord Almighty is his name. I have put my words in your mouth and covered you with the shadow of my hand – I who set the heavens in place, who laid the foundations of the earth, and who say to Zion, ‘You are my people.’”**

Look back and remember who you are. The one who set the heavens in place and who laid out the foundations of the earth says to us “You are my people. I’ve covered you with the shadow of my hand. You aren’t just boasting in some false hope, it’s not your imagination because I put these words in your mouth and this hope in your heart. I’m going to fulfill every promise. Rejoice because deliverance and salvation are coming and you have no cause for fear.”

On this memorial day as you look back and remember, look back to the rock from which you were cut, remember God’s faithfulness in the past, rely upon his provision for today and then rest in the certainty of his promises for tomorrow. **V5 “My salvation is on the way...”**