



RIVERS IN THE DESERT

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The Texts

Isaiah 43:5-7; 18-19; John 4:1-42; John 7:38; Zechariah 9:12

Message

When our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.

Introduction

The prophet Isaiah was closing in on almost 50 years of ministry. He had already served under kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Isa 1:1). His words were listened to because the Lord God of heaven spoke through His servant. And now, he would speak for God one last time, but this time things seemed hopeless.

King Manasseh, perhaps the worst king Judah had ever had, had risen to the throne. The Bible says Manasseh rebuilt the high places of pagan worship his father had torn down. He erected altars to Baal and Astarte, “and worshiped all the hosts of heaven.” He even built pagan altars dedicated to demons inside God’s temple in Jerusalem! Manasseh practiced witchcraft and sorcery, engaged with mediums and spiritualists, and even sacrificed his sons in the fire for the sake of strange deities (2 Chron 33:1-9). In 2 Chronicles, chapter 33, we reach in verse 2, that Manasseh did “evil in the sight of the Lord.” In verse 6 we read that he did “much evil,” and in verse 9 we’re told he did “more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel.” That’s not a good trend-evil – evil, much evil, more evil.

In his old age, the prophet Isaiah had plenty of reasons to feel discouraged. The worst possible king was currently leading God’s people. Days were dark. The Assyrians had already taken the northern tribes – Israel – captive because of



their unfaithfulness to God. Judah was getting very close to the same destiny. It wouldn't be the Assyrians this time, but the Babylonians who would plunder Judah and take their sons and daughters to exile. Since God's people did not respond to Him in times of prosperity, God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, would try yet again by allowing them times of adversity.

Was all hope lost that Israel could be redeemed?

The Promise of Isaiah

At this point in Judah's history is when Isaiah wrote some of his most wonderful prophecies. Isaiah 40 to 66 is so full of hope that scholars have for years doubted this could come from the same author. They call this section of Isaiah "Second Isaiah," as if this was a different prophet. But it wasn't. This was the same man that responded to God's call in his youth (Isa 6:1-8). And in the worst of times, he wrote the best of words.

"Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your descendants from the east, [from Babylon and Medo-Persia] And gather you from the west [from Greece]; I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' [the north: the Seleucid kings] And to the south, 'Do not keep them back!' [the south: the Ptolemaic kings] Bring My sons from afar, And My daughters from the ends of the earth – Everyone who is called by My name, Whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him." Isaiah 43:5-7

One hundred years before Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, took the Jews captive, God prophesied through Isaiah that He would bring them back. Not only them, but also other captives from future enemies.

Do you know people who are captives of the enemy? Do you have loved ones right now who are not walking with the Lord, who seem distracted with the world or consumed with worry or overwhelmed by the cares of life? Have you been praying for those close to your heart, day after day, week after week, month after month, even year after year without apparent results? Do not despair: *when our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.* God knows what He is capable of. He loves those whom we love with an undying love. Though even we may forget, from time to time, He will



never forget them. As Isaiah said, they are all “inscribed...on the palms of [His] hands” (Isa 49:16).

How can we know God is at work when we fail to see our loved ones return home?

We know it because of what Isaiah says later in that same chapter. Isaiah 43:18-19:

“Do not remember the former things, No consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing, Now it shall spring forth; Shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

Rivers in the desert? A road in the wilderness? What is that about?

The Promise Realized

God is alluding to His mighty acts in the past. When the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, God in His mercy made a pathway for them through the Red Sea. But that was “the former things...the things of old.” He is now planning “a new thing.” Instead of causing dry land in the midst of the sea for Israel to cross to freedom, He will make rivers in the desert for Judah to return home from Babylon. You see, Babylon was East of Palestine, in modern-day Iraq. But in between those lands was forbidding territory: such dry desert and mountains that anyone attempting to cross it would certainly perish. Instead, anyone coming from the east or going there had to go north. They had to circumvent the desert. But God, who is not limited by anything, promises a “river” road through the midst of the desert, in order to get home more quickly.

A beloved servant of the Lord, Ellen White, once wrote: “Our heavenly Father has a thousand ways to provide for us of which we know nothing. Those who accept the one principle of making the service of God supreme, will find perplexities vanish, and a plain path before their feet” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 481). In other words, when we run out of options, God still has many at His disposal. And when it comes to bringing people back to Him, He still has plenty left in His arsenal. Here is another “thousand ways” promise: “What is it that brings man to repentance? It is Jesus Christ. How does He bring man to



repentance? There are a thousand ways that He may do this” (*Faith and Works*, p. 64).

I often think and pray with this in mind: “Lord,” I pray, “use one of Your thousand ways to help my beloved ones open their eyes to see their need of you. You have many ways to accomplish this. Use one of them for their sake!”

Our vision is very limited. We see just what is in front of us; and even then, we often misinterpret what we actually see. But God sees in front, in back, on each conceivable side, and beyond for miles and millennia. He sees all there is to see to assess the situation. And even though He will not bend the will of human beings to follow Him, He can work effectively all around them to help them see what He sees so well.

Years ago, one of use was walking early in the morning, thinking about what the psalmist had said in the longest of the psalms: “You established the earth, and it abides. They continue this day according to Your ordinances, for all are Your servants” (Ps 119:90-91). The verse is talking about Creation and the fact that the laws of creation continue to obey Him to this day. Why? Such laws are His servants. In another version it simply reads: “All things are Your servants.”

God will not infringe on the will of our loved ones. He will not force His love and grace upon any who refuse to accept it. But everything else that surrounds them is subject to His command. “All things” are His servants. That’s why He knows of a thousand ways available to solve problems. *When our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.*

The Woman of Samaria

In John 4, we are told about a time when Jesus needed to travel from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north. Between Judea and Galilee was Samaria. Hundreds of years before, Samaria was the central area of the northern tribes of Israel who walked away from God and adopted the customs of pagan nations following other gods. When the Jews came back from Babylon, they were cured from idolatry, and they determined that what happened to the Samaritans would



never happen to them. They grew to despise the Samaritans. They considered them worse than the Gentiles – and they called the Gentiles dogs!

So, in Christ’s time, no self-respecting Jew would willingly walk through Samaria. The quickest route from Judea to Galilee was through Samaria. Instead, however, they would walk east, cross the Jordan, and walk north through Perea – a foreign land – until they crossed the river again to enter Galilee.

Jesus often did what no one expected, or even understood, at the time. But He was guided through His ministry by the Holy Spirit (Matt 4:1, 17). He walked through Samaria and His disciples obediently followed: When He reached the outskirts of a town called Sychar at noon, it was hot, and He was thirsty. While His disciples went to town to get some food, He rested by the city’s well. You probably know the story. A Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well. This caught the attention of Jesus because the time to draw water was either early in the morning or evening, never at noon. And it was a social practice: women did this together. But this woman was alone, and clearly, she was avoiding other women.

As the story unfolds (John 4:1-42), we learn that the woman had had relationship with five different men and the relationship she was involved in at the time was with someone who was not her husband. That may be one reason why she avoided other women. It became obvious to Jesus that she was very alone, ostracized, and very lost even in her own city. So, the Master offered *her* water: “Whoever drinks of this water [from the well] will thirst again,” He said, “but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life” (vv.13-14).

The story ends on a glorious note. The woman accepts Jesus as the Messiah, thus drinking from the true Well of Life, and in turn she *becomes* “a fountain of water” as she eagerly shares with others what she learned from the Savior! John recalls that “many” people from the city believed in Jesus “because of the word of the woman” (v.39). Her life was dry, ready to expire. But in a single



conversation, God awakened the woman to a new beginning. She saw what she'd never seen before. And she grabbed on to the hope that Jesus offered to her.

This can happen with our children who are far from home. This can happen with our siblings wandering “in the desert.” This can happen with our loved ones seemingly lost in the world. In one sensible conversation with Jesus, they can become “rivers of living water.” Isn't that what Jesus said? “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). *When our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.*

Coming Home

In one of his books, Roger Morneau tells of a couple who had separated four years before. The man was talented and worked for a multinational corporation. As he was given more and more responsibilities at work, he stayed away from home more and more. He began to adopt the lifestyle of the corporate world, including partying, drinking, and buying expensive jewelry. He stopped going to church, criticized those who did, and argued with his wife all the time. Eventually, he began having an affair with his secretary, and moved out of the home.

His drinking turned to gambling and then to drug use. He made some poor decision at work which cost the company a lot of money, and they fired him. His life now a mess, he seriously thought about committing suicide, but decided he was too much of a coward to carry it through.

What would you do if you were the wife? What *could* she do but pray? And that's just what she did. She realized that only the mighty power of the Holy Spirit could overturn her estranged husband's life. One evening, while cooking, she heard a familiar voice on the TV. A reporter was interviewing a homeless man living under a highway overpass. It was her husband. She could hardly recognize him! The former corporate executive was reduced to eating food from garbage cans behind restaurants.



The woman learned where the interview had taken place and went looking for her husband. She found him inside an 8- by 10-foot shack, lying on a pile of broken-down cardboard boxes. She begged him to come home, but all he could think of was how far he had fallen. His mind was deeply affected. He was seriously depressed. After numerous visits, he agreed to come home, but he still lived like a tramp.

She began to pray for Jesus to heal his mind. It took some time to see results, but they came. The man eventually decided to clean himself up, to cut his hair, and to look again for a job. Today, they are together again and have moved to another city to begin a new life, after four years in “the wilderness.”

Jesus never forgot the man. He knew where he was, He knew what he endured, He knew the depth of his own despair. At the right time, and since all things are His servants, He left his wife to recognize her husband’s voice on TV. *When our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.*

Do not despair. Do not give up. Jesus will do “a new thing” in your midst! He will make a river in the desert to speed up the return of your exiled son, your daughter, your brother, your sister, or your friend. *He will bring them back! He will do so for the honor of His name and the benefit of His people. He will never leave them nor forsake them! (Heb 13:5). When our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.*

“Return to the stronghold, You prisoners of hope. Even today I declare that I will restore double to you.” Zechariah 9:12