

‘God can and God will!’

Now before we get into our text today, let me share with you a basic outline of the **Book of Isaiah** to help us put our text into context.

Isaiah 1-39 deal mainly with Judah and Jerusalem at a time when the city was still standing and when the southern kingdom was threatened with invasion by the Assyrians. **Isaiah 40-55**, speak about the return and restoration of Israel, after the exile from Babylon and the promised Messiah. In **Isaiah 56-66**, Isaiah speaks about the great reward for all those who trust and obey God. He proclaims the hope for the afflicted and judgment for the evil.

And today, we’re going to be looking at **Isaiah 51** where the Israelites are going to be reminded that God can, and God will, establish His people as a nation again, after He will deliver them from their Babylonian captivity.

A young woman lived on the top floor of a two-story house, whilst an elderly widow lived below on the first floor. After not hearing from the widow for a few days, the young woman got a bit nervous, and so, she called her son John and said to him, ‘do me a favour and go find out how old Mrs Robinson is.’ So, six-year-old John went down the stairs and knocked on the elderly widow’s door. When he came back upstairs his mum asked, ‘So how is she?’ Little John said, ‘How is she! I’ve never seen her so mad in my life, she said it’s none of your business how old she is’.

And I guess the point of that story is that it’s all too easy to miss the point, isn’t it? You see, when we come to **Isaiah 51**, there are many people, especially the Jews of today have missed the point of this chapter, which means they’ve ultimately missed the point concerning the Messiah. Now remember that the Jews of today don’t recognise Jesus as the Messiah, and so for them, they’re still waiting for the arrival of the messiah. But if you read carefully through the **Book of Isaiah**, there’s no missing the point that this chapter and the chapters to follow are speaking clearly about Jesus as the Messiah.

Isaiah 51:1+2 “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; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him, he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many”.

Now when God says, ‘listen to me’, He’s not addressing all the Israelites. And we know He’s not addressing them all because He says, ‘you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD.’ He’s addressing the faithful remnant who are seeking righteousness and seeking to learn God’s will and obey it.

And loved ones, like I said before when God asks us to listen to Him, we must listen closely to what He’s got to say. In fact, later in **Isaiah 51:4** He says, ‘Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation.’ **Isaiah 51:7** “Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have taken my instruction to heart.” In other words, what God is about to say is important and they don’t want to miss what’s He’s about to say to them.

Now remember earlier in Isaiah, they were wondering when their captivity is going to come to an end, they were worried about what was going to happen to them when Cyrus came. And so, God says, ‘listen, I’ve actually got some words of comfort for the faithful’.

Have you ever walked into a room to get something and you forget what you went in that room for? Have you ever met someone who knows you really well, but you can’t remember them? You know what it’s like, don’t you? You’ll start chatting away asking how they’re getting on and what they’re doing with their lives but all the time you can’t remember who they are or where you met them before.

It’s embarrassing isn’t it? Especially when they’re asking you how your wife and kids are doing. I mean they know who you are and so much about you, but for the life of you, you can’t remember who they are, where you met them or anything about them. When we had our youth weekend here earlier this year, I was in that very situation. I was speaking with one guy who knew everything about me but for the life of me I couldn’t remember who he was, until he mentioned the words, ‘Maplewell Camp’. And then I remembered that he was one of the kids I taught at camp one year.

You see, in a sense this is what God says to the faithful remnant, to help them remember who God is and what’s He’s done in the past. God says, ‘Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth.’ God says, look back, look back at your ancestry, look back at your history.

Now tracing our ancestors is very popular today, but whenever you mention the names Abraham and Sarah to a Jew, they would know exactly who they were, and they knew exactly who their God was. God tells them to remember what He did for Abraham and Sarah. He says, ‘When I called him, he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many’.

You remember when God first called Abram, don't you? Genesis 12:1-3 “The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

You see, Abraham was alone, he was just one man when God called him. But God went on to bless him and made from him a mighty nation. And we know that God was faithful to keep His promises, and Abraham was faithful and obedient, completely trusting in God.

In Hebrews 11, that great chapter, where we find examples of the faithful. Hebrews 11:8-12 “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so, from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.”

God calls Abraham and Sarah to venture from the known to the unknown. And because of Abraham’s willingness to do so, we now know him as the father of faith. Sarah and Abraham head out, having no idea where they are headed, but following God every step of the way. Sarah is old and barren, yet God’s plan is dependent on her having a baby.

In time, in a new land, Sarah gives birth to Isaac, the seed of Israel. From Isaac and Rebecca comes Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. This story of faith begins with Abraham and Sarah, the rock from whom Israel was hewn. Abraham and Sarah are the quarry from which Israel was dug. From one man, whom God called, and one woman, who was also faithful to God’s call, came the many that grew into the nation of Israel.

So, what is God trying to tell them? He’s trying to comfort them by asking the question. Why should thousands of the righteous remnant have any doubt, that He indeed has the power to bless and multiply them, overthrow their enemies and pour out the blessings of heaven upon them that trusted Him?

Now I’ve mentioned a few times that God is speaking to the faithful remnant and that’s important to understand. Because when the time came for their deliverance from captivity, there would be other Israelites who didn’t want to return to their homeland. These unfaithful Jews were quite happy to stay in Babylon because they had become wealthy through dishonest means.

God says, look back to the father of your faith, Abraham, he was the physical origin of Israel. He is the spiritual origin of all those who trust in God for direction. Those who live by faith today, are the spiritual descendants of Abraham. National Israel was born from the womb of Sarah, but the church was born from the faith of Abraham.

A Sunday School teacher was describing how Lot’s wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt, when little Johnny interrupted her with this announcement, ‘My Mommy looked back once while she was driving, and she turned into a telephone pole!’

I know the Bible speaks about the dangers of looking back, but there are times I think we need too. Because I believe that God has always asked people to look back to remember who He is and what He’s done for His people. When Jacob was dreaming about a ladder reaching heaven, God said to him in Genesis 28:13 “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.” When Moses had his burning bush experience, God said to him in Exodus 3:6 “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”

After the Exodus, God continued to remind His people of who He was and what He did for them. Deuteronomy 5:6 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” The Psalms are filled with these reminders. Psalm 81:10 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

So, all the way through the Old Testament God asked the Israelites to look back and remember who He was and what He did for them.

And when we come to the New Testament we're continually reminded to look back, **aren't we? 1 Corinthians 11:23-26** "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." That's what we did earlier, we partook of the Lord's Supper to remember who He is and what He's done for us.

And I personally believe that looking back can be a healthy thing for us to do. **How many times, have you been going through a tough time in your life and God has helped you through it?** Now I can remember some of those times when God has helped me but not all of them. And that's because we are a forgetful people, we forget all the times God has delivered us from certain situations. God told the Israelites, time and time again, I am the God who delivered you from Egyptian slavery, so that they would never forget who He was and what He's done.

And if we were to look back in our lives, we would hear God say, 'I am the God who delivered you from the power of sin'. 'I am the God who delivered you from that addiction.' 'I am the God who delivered you from that terminal illness.' 'I am the God who got you that job, so you could feed your family'. 'I am the God who comforted you and strengthened you when you were going through the loss of your loved one.'

And the reason we need to look back and remind ourselves of who God is and what He's done in the past. Is simply because those memories and those events, actually remind us that God will deliver us again when tough times come our way in the future. If He did it in the past, **what makes you think He won't do it again in the future?**

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were about to get thrown into the fiery furnace, they said to Nebuchadnezzar in **Daniel 3:17** "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand."

The apostle Paul understood that God had rescued him time and time again throughout his life. And near the end of the of his life, he wrote in **2 Timothy 4:17+18** "And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

And remember this, God doesn't promise we will never face fearful circumstances, but He does promise to deliver us through them. Loved ones, God can, and God will deliver us again, when difficult times come our way. God says to the faithful remnant, look back at your ancestry, look at what I did for Abraham and Sarah. In other words, if God did all this for Abraham, God will do great things for all who have a similar obedient faith. God will deliver the faithful few from captivity and that's a promise you can stake your life on.

And so, Isaiah continues and says, **Isaiah 51:3** "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."

God promises He will comfort Zion with the same great change that He did for Abraham. Now remember that Jerusalem has been reduced to ruins because of the Babylonians. Judah, the southern kingdom of divided Israel where Jerusalem sits is now a wasteland. And so, God comforts His people while they are still in exile, and He promises restoration.

Isaiah says that the faithful will '**blossom like the Garden of Eden**'. The Jewish homeland will flourish with fruit trees and green plants for food. **And what will be the result?** Joy and gladness will return. Joy and gladness will return as God's people return to the Promised land. The promised land which at this point of time was an empty, desert wilderness, will turn back into a lush garden like Eden. We can only imagine the joy and gladness in their hearts, we can only imagine the thankfulness and singing from their hearts, after spending 70 years in captivity.

And I'm wondering this morning, **how long your planning to stay in captivity?** Now you might be thinking, but Mike I'm not in captivity. The truth is loved ones most of us are, it's just that some are more obvious than others. Oh, we see the captivity that the alcoholics and drug addicts find themselves in.

But what about those who are captives to work? What about those who are captives to pornography? What about those who are captives to their religious beliefs, and refuse to admit what the Bible says, because of their own 'personal experiences'?

In the film 'The Shawshank Redemption', there's a scene when Andy is speaking to Red after their friend was released from prison, but he hung himself because he couldn't handle life on the 'outside'. And Red said something really interesting to Andy, he said, 'these walls are kind of funny. First you hate them, then you get used to them. Enough time passes, gets so you depend on them.'

And I'm wondering if that's you this morning. Have you become so used to your prison walls, you've become depended upon them? Oh, at first you hated being captive by them, then you kind of got used to them. But now you've gotten to the stage where you've come to entirely depend upon them. You see, the only way to break free from your captivity, whatever shape or form that comes in, is by submitting yourself wholeheartedly to God.

And to do that, the first thing you need to do is, pursue righteousness, are you pursuing righteousness? Now righteousness basically means being right with God and the way to be right with God and keep right with God is to turn away from evil and follow God's ways. Proverbs 15:9 "The LORD detests the way of the wicked, but he loves those who pursue righteousness."

To pursue righteousness means we've got to continually run away from evil, and continually chase after God's ways. 2 Timothy 2:22 "Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

The second thing you need to do, is seek the Lord, are you seeking the Lord? Jeremiah 29:13 "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." Are we too complacent, have we been seeking Him with all our heart?

You see loved ones, God can't do anything for you, if you're not willing to pursue righteousness and seek Him. God can't lead you out of the captivity that's got a strong hold of your life, if you're not willing to allow Him to lead you out and set you free. But if you're willing to trust God wholeheartedly, when you're willing to pursue His ways and seek Him. Then God can, and God will, set you free.

We sometimes sing that song called 'God has smiled on me.' The song starts by saying, 'God has smiled on me, He has set me free. God has smiled on me, He's been good to me.' Loved ones, the prison doors are open, God has set us free.

And if you're not a Christian this morning, then please know this, God can, and God will set you free too, from whatever is holding you captive. And when you turn to Him, you will not only be set free, but you'll receive what you need most of all, mercy and forgiveness. Isaiah 55:6+7 "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."

If you're a Christian this morning whose struggling with something which is holding you captive, then please speak to one of the elders about it today before you leave. They will listen to you and pray for you and the joy and gladness of your salvation will return.

If you're not a Christian this morning, who wants to be free from the power of sin. Then you too please speak to our elders today before you leave, and they will gladly show you how, 'God can smile on you, and set you free because He's longing to be good to you.'