

Look to the Rock

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity.

On the 28th of March 1999, the preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled, Look to the Rock, and is from Isaiah chapter 51, verses 1 to 11.

People are all too willing to denounce God's goodness. In a suffering world. People are all too willing to reject Jesus' uniqueness.

In a pluralistic world. People are all too willing to scorn God's power in a pagan world where Christians are a minority.

People are all too willing to decry Christian hope in a materialistic world. People are all too willing to belittle Christian fellowship in a macho world.

[1 : 33] And yet, against all these threats and appearances, Christians still cling to faith in God and his word. They cling to faith that God is sovereign and good and that he is and will fulfill his purposes for this world.

Even in exile in ancient Babylon, where the people of God had been taken from Palestine or Judah, Jerusalem destroyed, taken into exile in Babylon, even there, there was a righteous remnant, a faithful few who clung to faith and did not abandon trust in God and the God of the Old Testament.

Despite the appearances of God being defeated, it seemed. Despite living in a pagan world and the pressure of idolatry all around them. The pressure of being a small minority where many of their kinsfolk had abandoned the same faith in God and gone after idols.

These faithful few. It seems from Isaiah weary in living in a pagan world and weary of God's inactivity, it seems, to them.

Longing for their redemption and salvation and restoration to God. A faithful few clung to faith. To them, Isaiah now speaks in this chapter.

[3 : 01] Not to those who've gone after the idols. He's been addressing them week after week with stinging rebukes and pleading cries to return. But now to those faithful ones.

Isaiah, indeed God, speaks. And what we find in this section is a model of pastoral sensitivity. God doing what he said he would do through his servant in last week's chapter.

Sustaining the weary with a word. Notice how God addresses his faithful people in this chapter.

There are three sections when he says, listen to me.

And then he addresses them or describes them in tender words. The beginning of verse 1. Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness. You that seek the Lord.

Not those who pursue self-righteousness. But rather those who know that righteousness is found from the Lord. And then at the beginning of verse 4. Listen to me, my people.

[4 : 02] And give heed to me, my nation. Words of tender relationship that still stands despite all that's happened. These people are still God's own people.

And then in verse 7. Listen to me, you who know righteousness. You people who have my teaching in your hearts. Not the pious frauds.

Not those who put on a facade of faith or the religious hypocrites. But those who've got it in their hearts. Those who from their insides know God's righteousness.

And seek to live it out in their lives. Obviously God is holding these ones dear to his heart. These faithful few. Who are left in exile in Babylon.

These are the same sorts of people that Jesus blessed. When he said in the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

[5 : 05] For they shall be filled. These are those who've persevered in Christian faith in effect. But in exile. Far away from their land.

And far away from the realisation of God's promises. These are the ones who cling to those promises. The ones who are sustained by God's word. Faith in such circumstances is never easy. For them the majority of their fellow people of God had departed the faith. The few that are left are a small minority. And they are mocked and insulted.

As we shall see. Firstly to them. God calls them to look back. To their origins. The middle of verse 1.

Look to the rock from which you were hewed. And to the quarry from which you were dug. That is look back to your origins. From where you as a people began.

[6 : 08] He explains it in verse 2 what he means. Look to Abraham your father. And to Sarah who bore you. Why to Abraham?

Why to Sarah? Because in Genesis chapter 12. Hundreds of years before these words were spoken. God had made a promise to Abraham. That through him.

There would become a nation of God's people. They would be given land. They would receive God's blessing. Have a particular relationship with God. And through them.

God sought to bring blessing to the whole world. That's where God's promises began. And they are the promises that actually guide the story of the Bible. Right through to the very end.

The reason Jesus came we discover. Is because God is keeping the same promises he made to Abraham. 2,000 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Those promises to Abraham.

[7 : 06] Are foundational to the Bible. God promising to call out a people. In a particular land. In a relationship with him. To be blessed by him.

And therefore to be the model by which the world would come to receive blessing. From God through them. Now there was a problem though. Because when Abraham was made those promises.

He was 75-ish. His wife a little bit younger. And barren. No children. How on earth was God going to provide a great nation to come from them.

When they are already old and barren. Indeed when at one point God reiterated the promise. Sarah laughed. Because it seemed so silly. But that wasn't a problem for God.

Even though Abraham was just one man. Even though he and Sarah were just one couple. God kept his promise. And if you read through the book of Genesis.

[8 : 03] You see that promise working itself out. With eventually a son Isaac. And then two grandsons. And then quite a number of great grandsons. And then after a few hundred years in the book of Exodus. Under Moses leadership.

A whole nation descended from Abraham. God indeed has kept his promise. Now the point of the appeal here is firstly to say. See what God did.

They were just one couple. And out of them came a great nation. Now you in exile are just a faithful few. We don't know how many. But they were small and felt small.

If God can do that for Abraham because he made a promise. So can he and will he do for you.

Because the same promise still stands. That from Abraham and Sarah. God's people will continue and bring world blessing.

So that's the first part of this appeal back. Is to look to what God had done through Abraham. The second half of verse 2 says. For he was but one when I called him. But I blessed him and made him many.

[9 : 07] So he's going to do the same sort of thing for the people in exile. That's what verse 3 is saying. For the Lord will comfort Zion. A word for Jerusalem. Jerusalem meaning standing for God's people.

He'll comfort all her waste places. He will make her wilderness like Eden. Her desert like the garden of the Lord. Now that's not just promising that the people will go back to Jerusalem and live there.

Because to say he'll be restored to Eden. Is to say something bigger than Jerusalem. Because Eden was the place where Adam and Eve lived with God before they sinned.

You see to restore the people of God to Eden in effect. Is to say God will restore you to himself. No longer will a barrier of sin cut you off from God.

But God will promise to restore you in a united and reunited relationship with him. No wonder the response will be joy and gladness thanksgiving and singing.

[10 : 05] No more the lamentation and mourning of being in exile. But that will give way to great joy. These promises are real comfort to the people of faith far away in exile.

But God is not only appealing here to the promises he made to Abraham. He's also appealing to the model of Abraham in responding to the promises.

Because when God made those promises to Abraham. There was a time when Abraham doubted it. And God said to him in Genesis 15. Come out and look up to the sky.

To the night sky. Count the stars if you can. Such will be your descendants. To that point. Abraham still did not have an heir. And we're told that Abraham believed the Lord.

And it was credited to him as righteousness. Genesis 15 verse 6. That's a model for the people in exile. The faithful few.

[11:05] They too are to look. Not up to the night sky. But to look back to the rock. And they're there to see Abraham. And not only God keeping the promises. But also the model of Abraham.

Abraham who looked and believed. And it was credited to him as righteousness. Remember how these people were addressed in verse 1? You who pursue righteousness.

God is reassuring them here. That righteousness is found through faith in God. No other way. He's saying to them look. And believe.

And the implication is you will find righteousness. Just as Abraham did. So too will you. You see the real children of Abraham in the Bible.

Are not those who are racially descended from him. But rather those who like him. Trust in God's word. And therefore have righteousness credited to them as well.

[12:06] Abraham's real offspring you see. Are those who are sustained by God's word. For those in exile they were weary. God sustained the weary with his word.

And the same applies in every generation. The real children of Abraham are those of us. Not racially descended from him. But share the same faith and trust in the same God's word of promise. God is encouraging these people of exile to emulate the faith of Abraham. To trust God's word. To keep on trusting God's word. To be sustained by it.

And therefore to have to them credited God's righteousness. That is the path to righteousness. Trusting in God's word.

A trust that works itself out in action, in lifestyle and so on. Abraham found it. The people of Israel are being commended to that path. And so to us.

[13:08] We're commended to the same path throughout scripture. The path of righteousness through faith in God's word. Christians like Abraham and like the Israelites here are hewn from the same rock.

Abraham is our father. If we are people who trust in the same God. If you are weary in this world. If your faith is flagging.

If you're weary of the world's evils and your own sin. Then look to the rock from which you are hewn. To Abraham your father.

Trust in the same God who made promises to him and keeps them. And emulate the faith of your father Abraham. Trusting God's word. Don't be enticed to abandon faith.

Like so many of the Israelites in exile did. But rather know that God's word is a sufficient promise for you for eternity. Cling to it.

[14:13] Trust it. And it will be credited to you as righteousness. Faith you see is not a blind leap in the dark as the mockers try to describe it.

Faith is a considered response. To a God who has spoken and made promises. And has backed up those promises throughout history. And the Bible is sufficient evidence for us to trust in that God. It is not a blind leap in the dark. But rather a responsible response to God's word. God lifts the sights a bit higher in the next little bracket verses 4 to 6.

Because the future redemption is not just for those descended from Abraham. But rather of course from the world. Because as I've said. The children of Abraham are those who are children of faith.

Therefore the promises of God apply to the whole world. Not just to the few Israelites or Jews who find themselves in exile in Babylon. So that's why he says in verse 4, second half.

[15:23] For a teaching will go out from me and my justice for a light to the peoples. The nations of the world. I will bring near my deliverance swiftly. My salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples.

The coastlands wait for me. And for my arm they hope. They are things that the servant of God was going to do in chapter 49 and chapter 42.

As we saw in recent weeks. Now they're things that God himself will do. A reminder to us that the work of that servant that's promised. And the work of God are so intertwined.

That we try to separate them at our peril. These verses also remind us that it is only God who brings real hope to this world.

And that hope is his salvation. You see our world's hope is just based here and now. In the physical things of this earth. Peace, prosperity, physical security, health.

[16:25] And the mockers of Christianity often try to mock Christian hope. And say it's just pie in the sky when you die. It's just a little crutch that you rely on. It's just sort of wishful thinking about the future.

But this is the real world. This is where you've got to focus your life on. The age keeps telling us every day. Seize the day. Because this is what matters. Here and now. But in the end they're wrong.

Because this world is just a temporary stage. The real substance. The real reality. Is God's future kingdom. It's that that will last forever.

This world is temporary. Fleeting and passing away. Yes it looks solid. It looks permanent. But there will be a day when it comes and it's just rolled up.

It will vanish like smoke. It will wear out like cloth that is eaten by moths. And those who cling to this world's hope. Will be consumed at the same time as this world passes away.

[17:27] That's what verse 6 is saying. Lift up your eyes to the heavens and look at the earth beneath. For the heavens will vanish like smoke. The earth will wear out like a garment.

And those who live on it will die like gnats. But in contrast to the fleeting and the earth will be. The earth will be the earth. And those who live on it will be. The earth will be the earth. And those who live on it will be. And those who live on it will be. My salvation will be forever. And my deliverance will never be ended.

The things of this world promise lots. But deliver little. The allure of this world undermines faith.

This world's illusions of permanence beckon the weary. But they fail to satisfy and deliver in the end. No doubt in exile Israel faced those sorts of temptations.

No doubt they faced the temptations to place their hope and faith in the Babylonian government. In the Babylonian gods and idols. In the things around them. In their possessions.

[18:33] We face the same sort of temptations every day. But this world's treasures are fleeting and fading. Instead solid joys and lasting treasures are found only in God's heavenly eternal kingdom.

There's only one thing that will sustain for eternity. And it is not the things that this world promises or gives. Not that it gives much anyway. God's eternal word.

If you cling to that you'll be sustained for eternity. But cling to anything else in this world. It is fleeting, fading and will pass away. And you along with it. If that's where your faith and hope is placed.

Jesus said as much. Heaven and earth will pass away. He said. But my words will last forever. St. Paul said as much in 2 Corinthians 4. Speaking about this world and the world to come.

We look not at what can be seen. But at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen. This world is temporary. But what cannot yet be seen.

[19:46] Is eternal. The Bible of course ends with the great picture. Of this earth and heaven passed away. But the new heaven and the new earth come from God.

A perfect place. An eternally perfect place. That's the substance. That's the reality. And that is what we're called to look forward to.

God is urging his faithful people in exile. To keep on trusting. And clinging in faith to him. In the face of their fewness. Their littleness.

He said keep on trusting in God. In verses 1 to 3. In the face of the promises of this world. Keep on trusting in God's promises. Jesus. He says in verses 4 to 6.

And now in verses 7 to 8. Another problem he addresses. Their opposition. Those who mock them or insult them. Those who ridicule their faith. He says to them.

[20:45] Do not capitulate. In the face of your opposition. Do not fear the reproach of others. And do not be dismayed when they revile you. For the moth will eat them up like a garment.

And the worm will eat them up like wool. You see those who oppose you are just part of this world. And if this world is transient. So too is the opposition that comes from this world.

And if this world in heaven is going to pass away one day. So too will the opposition that belongs in this world. So don't fear them. Don't be dismayed by them. They will go along with this world. In contrast again verse 8 finishes. But my deliverance will be forever. And my salvation to all generations. Martin Luther.

The great German reformer of the 16th century. Put it like this. And were this world all devils o'er. And watching to devour us.

[21 : 44] We lay it not to heart so sore. Not they can overpower us. And let the prince of ill. Look grim as e'er he will.

He harms us not a whit. For why? His doom is writ. A word shall quickly slay him. God's word. For all their craft and force. One moment will not linger. But spite of hell shall have its course. Tis written by his finger.

And though they take our life, goods, honour, children, wife. Yet is their profit small. For these things shall vanish all.

The city of God remaineth. That's saying the same thing. There's lots of opposition to Christian faith in our world, in Luther's world, in Isaiah's world.

[22 : 42] It may look ferocious. It may look powerful. It may take much. But in the end it will pass away. God's word stands. It stands forever.

And those who cling to it belong to his eternal city. I wonder whether you can remember when you were a child looking forward to Christmas.

Counting the sleeps. Wishing that the days would go twice as quickly. Unlike today when we wish they'd go twice as slowly. Day by day urging the days to fly away.

Knowing what a wonderful day Christmas day ahead would be. Why couldn't it come quicker? And then when you're a child early in the Christmas morning, before it's light, the only day of the year you ever have to get up first without your parents dragging you out of bed.

Racing into your parents who are still of course asleep. And shouting out to them, awake, awake, wake up. That's the eagerness that Isaiah expresses in verse 9 for God's salvation.

[23 : 53] He says to God, because he's been thinking about the great salvation that's promised. The great restoration to God and of God's people from all the world. The great perfection of God's heaven.

He can't wait for it. So he shouts out to God in verse 9. Awake, awake God. As though God is slumbering and asleep. He's urging God to hurry up and fulfil all his purposes and promises now. I can't wait. I want it to happen now, he says. Put on strength, O arm of the Lord. We'll see next Friday that the arm of the Lord is his servant who dies.

Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. This is not a cry of desperation. It's a cry of sure faith. This servant, this prophet, knows God's promises.

And he knows that they're so good and he has faith in their goodness that he can't wait for them to be realised. There are many such cries in the Bible. The psalmist sometimes says, how long, O Lord, until your promise of vindication and salvation?

[25 : 01] They're cries of faith and eagerness. This is a cry that knows God's action in the past. Second half of verse 9. Was it not you, God?

Yes, of course it was you, God, who cut Rahab in pieces. That's a label that's often applied in the Old Testament to Egypt. Who pierced the dragon. I think a reference to Pharaoh.

This is one who knows his Bible and knows that God has acted to free God's people in the past, in the book of Exodus, from the Egyptians. He's saying to God, do it again, God, and hurry up.

I can't wait. Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over? Of course it was you, God, when you parted the Red Sea and let your people come into freedom from Egypt, into the promised land.

This cry is one who knows God has acted in the past and knows he still has the same power to do so. It is a cry of faith in God. It is a cry that anticipates future joy.

[26 : 07] In verse 11. He longs for that time when the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

This is the excitement and anticipation of a child looking forward to Christmas, knowing the joy that that day will bring and cannot wait for it.

Before we think that this is being too impatient, before we think that this is a person trying to force wrongly God's hand, the Bible commends us to such a cry.

For the closing words of the Bible are just such an urgent plea to God as this. Come, Lord Jesus. The book of Revelation has built up a picture of God's perfect future kingdom. No more sorrow, no sighing, no pain, no sickness, no death.

[27 : 07] God's triumphant victory is once for all manifest in all of the universe. Long for it, the writer of Revelation saying. Cry out, come Lord Jesus.

We want it to be done now. And Christians are invited and urged to join in that cry at the end of the Bible. One of the saddest things I think this century about Christian songs and hymns is the growing absence of a longing for heaven.

The hymns of yesteryear are often much fuller of expectation of heaven than modern songs are. There are exceptions, I know. But on the whole there is a dying longing for heaven in Christian songs these days.

Why is that? Is it because the glitter of our world has blinded us to God's promises and future? Is it because the prosperity of materialism has deadened us to the glory yet to come?

Is it because the clamour for earthly treasure has deafened us to God's sure promises of the future?

Is it that secularism has smothered our Christian hope?

[28 : 22] My friends, we are commended to long for God's heavenly treasure. If we long for things of this earth, it will pass away and we along with it.

Set your treasure in heaven and long for it with the eagerness and anticipation expressed by Isaiah here and St. John at the end of the book of Revelation.

This is the reality. This is the substance. This is what will last forever. But the fleeting, fading joys of this world deliver nothing and will pass away.

Lift up your eyes to God's new heaven and long for it and cry out for it and pray for it. For that's our goal. That's our hope.

And that will be our eternal joy. The ransomed of the Lord shall return and come not to an earthly Zion or Jerusalem but to God's heavenly Jerusalem with joy and singing.

[29 : 28] Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

That's our hope. Long for us.