



Ron Woodward

As I write these *Fruit of the Vine* devotionals, I am in my sixth and final year in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, accompanying my wife, Nancy, as she serves as high school librarian at the International School of Kuala Lumpur. So at this point, I'm greatly anticipating "real retirement" in our condo in Keizer (Salem), Oregon, at the ripe old age of 78!

We have been active in the Saint Andrews Presbyterian (International) Church in Kuala Lumpur, where I have done some preaching, service leading, and adult Sunday school teaching. I continue to do some writing, editing, and proofreading for Barclay Press, a ministry that I greatly enjoy. This week's devotionals are taken from the later chapters in the book of Isaiah (40–55) which contain prophecies directed to Jewish exiles in Babylon who were struggling with their faith.

The picture above was taken at a viewpoint in Toledo, Spain, when Nancy and I visited that city shortly after Christmas last year.

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 40:27-31

Jewish exiles living in Babylon could easily succumb to the temptation to believe that God had forgotten about them altogether or else had simply abandoned them as his chosen people because of their sin and idolatry. After all, they were far from the Promised Land with precious little hope of ever returning. Do you ever have this thought that God might have simply abandoned you? That God presently cares about others, but not about you?

Isaiah confronts the issue head-on: “Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God?’” Then the prophet declares who the Lord really is (vv. 28-30) and concludes with that powerful and precious promise found in verse 31.

The promise in verse 31 is universal. The word *whosoever* is not in the text, but the meaning is there: all those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. God will be there for them, and not just for some of them—not just for those who are viewed as special in his sight.

God does really care about you! Phillip Yancey penned some lines that are worth repeating, even though the truth of them should be obvious: “A God unbound by our rules of time has the ability to invest in every person on earth. God has, quite literally, all the time in the world for each one of us” (*Prayer* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006], p. 49).

SONG: Does Jesus Care?

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, thank you for your unique love and care for me. May I grow daily in my awareness of this!

—Ron Woodward

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 41:8-10; Matthew 28:19-20

In his commentary on Isaiah 41 in *The Renovare Bible*, Walter Brueggemann states that the assurance of God's presence is the most fundamental assurance we find in all of Scripture (my paraphrase).

While exploring Africa, David Livingstone penned the following journal entry: "January 14, 1856. Evening. Felt much turmoil of spirit in prospect of having all my plans for the welfare of this great region and this teeming population knocked on the head by savages tomorrow. But I read that Jesus said: 'All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, and *lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.*' It is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honour, so there's an end of it!" Livingstone seriously considered packing up that night to escape the danger, but then he wrote, "Should such a man as I flee? Nay, verily, I shall take observations for latitude and longitude tonight, though they may be the last. I feel quite calm now, thank God!" (quoted in F. W. Boreham, *A Bunch of Everlastings* [The Abingdon Press, 1920]). F. W. Boreham tells us that Matthew 28:20 was David Livingstone's life verse.

God encourages his servants to overcome fear in the knowledge of his abiding presence. That word came to Joshua (Joshua 1:5, 9), and then much later Jesus promised that his abiding presence would accompany the disciples, even in times of great danger (John 16:33; Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 28:20). Paul assures us that absolutely nothing has the power to separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:38-39)!

SONG: Like a River Glorious

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Pray today that you'll be able to claim David Livingstone's verse and live in the confidence of its truth all throughout the day.

—Ron Woodward

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 43:1-4

I feel blessed to have grown up in a Christian home. As David wrote in Psalm 16:6, “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.” Even as a child I was impressed that today’s Scripture passage was one deeply cherished by my mother. I remember her quoting verse 3 from memory more than once. Growing up in a Friends parsonage, I’m sure she and her sisters were taught to memorize this verse and count on it being absolutely true.

Someone has suggested that if we read these four verses every day for a week, it would do wonders for our sense of security in God’s love. It’s easy to forget, as the Jewish exiles did, that we are uniquely precious in God’s sight and deeply loved. (To the exiles in faraway Babylon, God wanted to make it clear that they were created, formed, redeemed, and called by him, that they were still his precious possession.)

Again in this passage, just as in Isaiah 41:10, we are given the promise “I will be with you.” A keen awareness of God’s presence has fortified countless believers through the centuries as they’ve faced a crisis or even a violent death. In 1415 John Hus was tried for heresy at the Council of Constance and burned at the stake. He died in peace, confident in the presence of Christ and in his eternal reward.

According to tradition, the apostle Paul was put on trial in Rome during the reign of the Emperor Nero and later executed. Describing his situation in a letter to Timothy, he wrote, “...Everyone deserted me.... But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength...” (2 Timothy 4:16-17).

SONG: In Shady Green Pastures (God Leads Us Along)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I believe your promise! Even if I pass through deep water, I will count on your strengthening presence.

—Ron Woodward

*BIBLE READING: Lamentations 5:20;
Isaiah 49:8-9, 14-16*

Every now and then we read about some celebrity who tries to remove the tattoo of an image from a previous (and currently discarded) relationship. In this passage from Isaiah, exiles who assumed they were forsaken and forgotten by God (v. 14) are actually told by the Lord that "I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (v. 16). Wow! Having a tattoo describing a loving relationship is apparently nothing new!

The issue here seems to be the same one addressed in the latter part of Isaiah 40: that of a people who can't really believe that God cares for them anymore. As the Lord addresses the problem, he asks them, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast?" And then, "Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (v. 15).

Take a look once again at verses 8-9. This is an incredible promise to a band of discouraged and dispirited people. Yahweh makes it clear that there is a "day of salvation" coming soon when the captives in Babylon will actually return to the Promised Land and be able to reassigned land plots to exiles who have returned.

So, after reading this passage, what does it mean to you as a twenty-first century Christ follower to personalize it, to make it your own? What does it do for you to realize that your picture, your identity is tattooed on the hands of God?

God has not forgotten you! On the contrary, he's deeply committed to your very best future.

SONG: Trust and Obey

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, give me the confidence to trust your word and really believe that I am infinitely precious in your sight.

—Ron Woodward

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 51:1-3, 11-12a

This chapter begins with God's call for the dispirited exiles to realize who they are. Instead of a people in a distant land forgotten by their God, they are, in Saint Paul's words, "a chosen people...a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9). Hence, they needed to "look to the rock" from which they were cut, to "re-connect" with Abraham and Sarah and the Abrahamic covenant. They needed to become convinced that the promises given to Abraham were for all time and that even in Babylon, they were the inheritors of those promises.

Comfort in the Bible is much more than heartfelt sympathy. According to William Barclay (*Daily Study Bible, Corinthians*, p. 190), in the New Testament the word *comfort* comes from the Latin word *fortis*, which means "brave." In Barclay's words, "The Christian comfort is the comfort which brings courage." It's a comfort that enables the recipient to face with fortitude anything that life can bring.

If we look again at the first three verses of Isaiah 51, we notice that the comfort God promises will result in a complete turnaround of the fortunes of these exiles so that "the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing" (v. 11). Perhaps this all comes back to a common theme found in these chapters—the promise of God's presence. The "formula" might look like this: God's comfort + his presence = strength and courage, even in our passivity or discouragement, so we can do what's needed right now!

So, what is it that you haven't believed could happen? What is it you've been hesitant or afraid to do?

SONG: He Hideth My Soul

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, grant me the courage to "get out of the doldrums" and have hope for the days ahead.

—Ron Woodward

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 54:1-6

I suppose there were few things more discouraging in ancient Israel than a “barren woman” facing circumstances over which she has no control. Wives were simply expected to bear children, particularly male heirs to carry on the family lineage. The story of Hannah (1 Samuel 1), helps us imagine how discouraging it would have been for her not to be able to bear children for the husband who loved her so dearly.

Knowing the deep discouragement of an exiled people, God addresses them as “a barren woman” and exhorts them to sing and shout for joy because there are good times ahead. Beyond that, he calls them to take action.

Let’s face it—when we’re discouraged, it’s hard to get motivated to do most anything. During those times we can assume that the “barren woman label” is a good fit for us, and that God is also calling us to action. I love the imagery here:

- Enlarge the place of your tent,
- stretch your curtains wide,
- do not hold back;
- lengthen your cords,
- strengthen your stakes. (v. 7)

I believe that in times of our own discouragement, God wants to use this verse to call us to quit moping around and have the courage to do something productive, even something that might be a bit beyond our comfort zone. Could it be a bold step forward in the area of ministry? Maybe it’s simply a decision to invest time and money in something that will benefit and bless a family member.

SONG: Tempted and Tried (Farther Along)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear heavenly Father, I know there are times when I get discouraged. Next time it happens, please direct me to these verses!

—Ron Woodward

BIBLE READING: Isaiah 55:1-3a; Psalm 37:4

I suppose that, just like us, it was easy for Jewish exiles in Babylon to lose a spiritual perspective and focus on the power, splendor, and material prosperity in the society all around them. So, knowing the tendency on the part of the exiles to lose perspective, God takes on the role of a street hawker and calls on the people to come to him for “spiritual wine, milk, and bread” that require no money at all and are much more satisfying than any material acquisitions.

If you respond to the call of the “street hawker,” you receive the promise that “your soul will delight in the richest of fare” (v. 2). Add to this promise the admonition of the psalmist: “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4).

If we make a conscious effort to delight in the Lord, or even if we delight in him spontaneously, we are actually engaging in the spiritual discipline of celebration. In this regard, Dallas Willard writes, “Celebration heartily done makes our deprivation and sorrow seem small, and we find in it great strength to do the will of our God, because his goodness becomes so real to us” (*The Renovare Bible*, p. 1055). Obviously, the only way his goodness will become real to us is by making an effort to direct our focus to the Lord and to all of his gifts—to what Paul refers to as “every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3).

Consider the cost of your salvation, the blessings of the Christian life, and God’s innumerable acts of providence toward you. Then, delight in the Lord!

SONG: Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear Lord, you’ve done so much for me. Help me today to factor in all these blessings and allow them to lead me to a genuine delight in you!

—Ron Woodward