

This is What the Lord Says

Isaiah 43:16-21

Philippians 3:4b-14

“This is what the LORD says”, these words are spoken 169 times throughout the Old Testament, from Exodus through Zechariah. These words bring commands:

Exodus 8:1

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘**This is what the LORD says:** Let my people go, so that they may worship me.

They bring confidence:

2 Chronicles 20:15

He said: “Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! **This is what the LORD says** to you: ‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s.

They foretell sorrow:

Jeremiah 31:15

This is what the LORD says: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

They foretell destruction:

Jeremiah 38:3

And **this is what the LORD says:** ‘This city will certainly be given into the hands of the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.’”

They promise redemption:

Isaiah 43:1

But now, **this is what the LORD says**— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”

Throughout the Bible the Lord has much to say to His people. One of the main themes of what the Lord has said is to remember. Today’s Scripture verses begin with an act of remembrance:

he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

The people are called to remember how the Lord delivered them from Egypt. They were able to cross the seabed on dry ground, then upon reaching safety to watch as those same stilled waters swept over and consumed Pharaoh's army. So, I must admit to being a bit dumbfounded by the words that follow:

“Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.

What? Ever since the Exodus God's people have been told to remember. Remember they were slaves in Egypt. Remember how God rescued them with His strong right hand. Remember manna and rivers in the desert. And now He says to forget! Take a deep breath.

The Lord had done many amazing and miraculous things with and for his people from the time of Creation. Now these people were living in the middle of an exceptionally long exile in Babylon. They longed for home. Although they could remember the things God had done in the past, they struggled to see into their future. God's past miracles had addressed their situations in the past. Would He be able to come up with a solution to their current dilemma?

The very next line answers their burning questions: “See, I am doing a new thing.” God says, “Open your eyes and see what is happening. Where I parted the sea before, I will make abundant rivers in the desert. Even the animals of the desert will know Me because of this new thing I

am doing. They, along with my people, will give me praise for this new thing I am doing.” In other words, “I have something new up my sleeve. Something you have never seen, or heard, or even imagined before.”

And he did! Just as He had used Nebuchadnezzar to take the Israelites into exile as punishment for their falling away from God, He would use a new pagan king, Cyrus, to restore them to their homeland. The new thing God did was to restore hope to his people by returning them to their home.

I will admit that sometimes I find it difficult to relate to some Bible stories. I’ve never lived in nor visited the Middle East, and even if I did it’s not the same land it was 3,000 years ago. No one I know personally has ever had to live in exile or witnessed their homeland destroyed by an invader. Modern technology has given us the opportunity, however, to witness such destruction from the comfort of our living rooms, perhaps making it difficult for us to genuinely appreciate the devastation experienced by the people in the images on our television screens.

Yet even though we have not experienced exile or the invasion of an enemy army, each of us has experienced our own personal tragedies. Those memories of past losses, shame, and grief swirl in our minds and can cloud our vision making it difficult to see past our own darkness and despair. A failed business, the sudden death of a loved one (especially when important words have been left unsaid), poor decisions, the cruelty

of others, and even our own cruelties, hinder our ability to see beyond the pain.

Amid trials and tribulations, it can be extremely difficult to see the possibility of a brighter future. We can doubt the promises made to us by a Holy God. We read the Bible stories and think, “that was really nice of God to bring the Israelites out of slavery. It was good that he delivered them out of exile in Babylon. But that was then, and this is now. What can he do for us here in the 21st century?”

He has already done a new thing for us. A truly marvelous and amazing thing. He has already redeemed us. We have been redeemed by the life, death, and resurrection of God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus who brings divine forgiveness, a new life in Him, and the overwhelming love of God the Father.

We no longer live in our pasts. Each day brings the opportunity for God to do a new thing in each of our lives. The Apostle Paul explains this in his letter to the Philippians Chapter 3:

⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard

to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in^[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

What God has done for us in the past and what God will do for us now and in the future is all based on His love for us. God created us and God

will always bring us home again, despite wherever our pasts have taken us. So let us forget the former things and not dwell on the past. May we have the eyes to see and ears to hear the new thing God is doing for us now.

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