

ISAIAH 51

THE DESERT SHALL BLOSSOM LIKE EDEN!

It is good for us all to look back upon the lowliness and obscurity of our origins. Such considerations deepen our humility, and augment our thankfulness for the grace of God which has made us what we are. Let us remember our first parents; and let us see the pit of selfishness, passion, and murder from which we have been taken. She who plucked the tempting fruit, in violation of her Maker's express word, was our mother; and he who cast the blame upon her, and indulged his fleshly desires, was our father. For our brother, we must take Cain; and for our sister, Rahab. But what has brought us out from such an awful origin, and made us a pillar in the temple of the Lord? What *could* work such a change, except the grace of Christ, which has no measure except for infinity? There is nothing in ourselves that can account for such transformation. Even when we were still His enemies, we were reconciled to the Father by the death of Jesus.

During the Babylonian captivity, the Jewish nation was greatly reduced in numbers; and those who were Godly were only a handful out of that small remnant. It seemed preposterous to suppose that they would ever again attain to such prolific numbers as to rival the sands on the shore or the stars of space. But in answer to such forebodings, the voice of inspiration cries, "Look back! Consider Abraham and Sarah. There was a time when they were the sole representatives of the Hebrew nation; yet from the one son of their old age, countless myriads have sprung. What little reason do you have, then, for fear! You may take hope; for even in captivity, you are now counted by thousands!"

Abraham's history is a picture of God's dealings with mankind. Not merely once nor twice, in the record of the Church, has the cause of truth been entrusted to a tiny handful of defenders – who themselves have deemed it forlorn or lost! The dens and caves have sheltered the loyal but diminished few. Ragged, tattered, hunted, and exiled – these men, women, and children have gathered around the banner of Christ's love and followed it! Not many of the mighty, noble, or educated of this world have been called. But suddenly, from some unlikely quarter, God has called one person; and it has seemed as though the dust of the earth itself has been suddenly transformed into warriors, and truth sprang up from the soil as luxuriantly as grass after the spring rains! Such was the case in the days of the Arian heresy, when Athanasius stood alone against the world for the truth of the Deity of Christ. Such was the case in the time of the Reformation, when Europe lay asleep under superstition and false teaching. Such was the case when the abolition of slavery first began to be called for. The Lord has repeatedly shown that He has no taste for strong battalions.

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ The Lord's three "Hearkens" that He addresses to His people – verses 1-8
- ❖ His people reply to Him in the language of faith – verses 9-11
- ❖ He speaks words of comfort and redemption to them – verses 12-23

He chooses a Gideon, a Judas Maccabaeus, a Luther, or a Wilberforce. The history of the Church is largely a collective story of the lives of individuals. It is through a Paul, a Judson, or a Carey that whole nations have been brought to the feet of Jesus. Therefore, if some lone and single-handed Christian reads these words, there is no reason for despair! You may be small and helpless, but you have the infinite and Almighty God in front of you! The question is not what you can or cannot do, but what you are willing for *the Lord* to do! When He makes use of one man, he becomes the father of a vast multitude – just as in the case of Abraham and Israel. The only condition is the presence of God in us, with us, and through us. Open your whole being to Him, for He is about to comfort the waste places of Zion! (verse 3) He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of Paradise! Joy and gladness shall be found therein, as well as thanksgiving and the voice of melody!



The Lord had been giving exceedingly great and precious promises to His people; and in verses 9-11, His people unite their voices to make a thankful answer to Him, in prayer and praise. These words are the language of strong faith, offered up in Jesus; for the arm of the Lord is Christ (Deut. 7:19). It is He Who “wounded the dragon,” and dried up the sea, and led His people through; for who is meant by the dragon, or by leviathan (Ps. 74:13-14), but Pharaoh? And what sea was this, but the Red Sea? What a blessing it is to see Christ in the redemption of His people!

Verses 12-16 contain the Lord’s answer to these words from His people. Observe how He proposes comfort to them – even comfort that is to be found in Himself! It is as if He had said, “Indeed, the deliverance at the Red Sea was great; but let your joy for that deliverance be in Me, the Giver!” Redemption is a blessing, but the Author of it is even more so. The Lord Himself is both the Comfort and the Comforter of His people; therefore, how childish it is to fear man, while the Lord is our refuge! The childlike fear of the Lord will drive out all fear of men or devils, just as the fire of the sun will extinguish the light from the fire of a hearth.

How very beautiful and gracious is the conclusion of this chapter! (verses 17-23) The Church had called upon the Lord to awake; and now He bids Jerusalem to rouse herself, in His strength. The Lord puts her in remembrance of how she had been afflicted, and how she had tasted the gall and the wormwood; but now, in her redemption by Christ, she shall drink of it no longer! A poor fretful sinner – until he or she is relieved by the redemption of Jesus – is entangled and unable to get free, like a bull in a net (verse 20). But when the Son has made the sinner free, he is then free indeed! (John 8:36)

We praise You, Lord, for being both the Comfort and the Comforter of Your people; for You alone are our refuge, and the Author of our redemption! Amen.