



Count your Blessings

It is gratitude and remembrance that prompted an old man to visit an old broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973. He would come walking slowly carrying a large bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to this old man, and he would feed them from his bucket. Many years before, in October, 1942 this man Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission in a B-17 to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea.

Somewhere over the South Pacific the Flying Fortress became lost beyond the reach of radio. Fuel ran dangerously low, so the men ditched their plane in the ocean... For nearly a month Captain Eddie and his companions had to stay alive in their dingy.

But of all their enemies at sea, one proved most formidable: starvation. Eight days out, their rations were long gone or destroyed by the salt water. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And a miracle occurred. In Captain Eddie's own words, "Cherry," that was the B- 17 pilot, Captain William Cherry, "read the service that afternoon, and we finished with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of praise. There was some talk, but it tapered off in the oppressive heat. With my hat pulled down over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I dozed off."

Captain Rickenbacker then said "Something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. Everyone else knew too. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that gull. The gull meant food...if I could catch it." And the rest, as they say, is history. Captain Eddie caught the gull. Its flesh was eaten. Its intestines were used for bait to catch fish. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed because a lone sea gull, uncharacteristically hundreds of miles from land, offered itself as a sacrifice. You know that Captain Eddie made it.

And now you also know...that he never forgot and remembered with gratitude that deliverance. Because every Friday evening, about sunset...on a lonely stretch along the eastern Florida seacoast...you could see an old man walking...white-haired, bushy-eyebrowed, slightly bent. His bucket filled with shrimp was to feed the gulls...to remember that one which, on a day long past, gave itself without a struggle...like manna in the wilderness.¹

¹ "The Old Man and the Gulls" from Paul Harvey's The Rest of the Story by Paul Aurandt, 1977, quoted in Heaven Bound Living, Knofel Stanton, Standard, 1989, p. 79-80.



This story is all about remembering with gratitude. And our reading tonight from Isaiah has at it's heart the importance of remembering and gratitude or praise.

The passage divides into 3 sections, and I have put these under the following headings:

Recalling all that God has done for us, (verses 7-9)

Rebellion may turn God against us, (verse 10)

Remembering us, God blesses us, (verses 11-14)

The message translates the verse 7 as follows:

I'll make a list of God's gracious dealings, all the things God has done that need praising, All the generous bounties of God, his great goodness to the family of Israel.²

When I was in my twenties I tried to study for a higher research degree and was using some of the facilities of Aldermaston. Whilst there I used to attend Sarum Hill Baptist church in Basingstoke. They used the Redemption Hymnal as their hymn book at the time. One of the favourite hymns at that time was 'Count your blessing'. I won't attempt to sing it but the chorus went as follows:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God has done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your many blessings, see what God has done.³*

So this first section is about *Recalling all that God has done for us*, or if you like 'Count your blessings'.

The prophet here is recalling what God has done for the Children of Israel. His recall or remembering what God has done for them is an act of praise to Jehovah their God.

First in verse 8 we read: *'he became their Saviour'*. In the next verse we read that *'in their distress the angel of his presence saved them'*. And in the same verse we read, *'he redeemed them'*, *'he lifted them up'* and *'carried them all the days of old'*.

One of the commentators says:

"The Angel of His Presence" occurs here in parallel to pronouns referring to God Himself. This is the Angel of the Lord who acted on Israel's behalf at the Exodus and other times and is considered to have been the pre-incarnate Christ⁴

² Isaiah 63:7 The Message

³ Text: Rev. Johnson Oatman, Jr. 1897; Music: Edwin O. Excell 1897; Tune: Blessings

⁴ The Believer's Study Bible



So may be we have a glimpse of Jesus in the Old Testament acting as saviour to Israel.

Even it was an angel they are messenger who represent God himself to us and bring us his message often of release. Indeed it may be an angel that does the deed as one did for Peter when he was in prison. For it was an angel that unlocked the prison doors, as we read in Acts.⁵

One of the greatest things that Israel needed to remember and praise God for was the Exodus.

Before the Exodus the Children of Israel were effectively in slavery. They were under the command of a harsh and cruel task master the Egyptians. Making bricks under great difficulty and effectively for no reward.

Then God under the leadership of Moses leads them out of Egypt and out of slavery. God had redeemed them from their bondage to the Egyptians. He had effectively purchased their freedom. He is indeed their saviour.

The prophet is reminding the people to remember all that God has done for them in delivering them from slavery in to the freedom and the blessing of the promised land, in and through the Exodus.

We can as Christians parallel the Exodus in what Christ has done for. For Paul writes in Galatians:

*So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.*⁶

In Romans Paul makes clear that one of the things we were slaves to was sin for he writes:

*But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.*⁷

And Paul time after time makes clear that in Christ we have been set free from Sin for in the next verse in Romans he writes:

*You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*⁸

So we need like the Israelites to Remember all that God has done for us. For he has set us free in Christ. Our response should be to remember that he has set us free in Christ and to offer this as praise to God who is our saviour.

⁵ Acts 12:6-10

⁶ Galatians 4:3

⁷ Romans 6:17

⁸ Romans 6:18



But if you remember after the Children of Israel had been set free from the slavery of Egypt. And after they had come through the water of deliverance of the Red Sea, they found themselves in a wilderness with the prospect in their view of no food.

Their response was to complain and moan to their pastor Moses. They should have been remembering their great deliverance from slavery. They should have remembered how God parted the Red Sea and defeated their enemy by drowning them when the waters came back. But instead they moan about their lack of food and even say they want to go back to Egypt, even though that would mean slavery for them.

How many pastors, vicars, and elders in churches find that some Christians are always moaning and complaining. Here we are people who have been set free by the death of God's only son, and we so often complain about things. Often the things are not that important in the scheme of God's kingdom. Often we complain about practical things in or around the church building or the structure of the church. I am not just pointing the finger at others, as I know I could slip into this attitude so easily.

But this passage reminds us to count our blessing to name them one by one. To use this remembrance as an act of praise and worship to our most amazing God who has set us free.

One of the other practical benefits of this act of remembrance of our salvation and deliverance is to make our freedom a reality in our lives.

It has been pointed out by some preachers that although God has set us free, quite often as Christians we don't walk out in this freedom. It as if God has, through Jesus, opened the door of our cage of slavery. Yet we still sit in the cage, despite the open door. We fail to walk free in the power of the Spirit. If we remind ourselves of our freedom and deliverance in Christ as an act of praise and worship this will help us to make this a reality .

But in the middle of this passage in verse 10 is a stark warning. For the prophet says:

Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them.

So we see that **Rebellion may turn God against us.** This is that clear warning in the middle of this passage from Isaiah.

God had initiated a covenant with the Children of Israel. He basically said if you will love me and follow me whole heartedly then I will be your God. Recently we studied the 10 commandments in sermons. Here was God's basic guidance for following him. One of the main points was to have or follow no other God's. If they kept this covenant God promised to protect them and bless them.



Yet as we know they started to worship and follow other gods. They set up the high place and the Asherah poles. These are all worship of other gods. Not that there are any other real gods but Yahweh the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of Jesus.

But to the people around the Jews and unfortunately at times to the Jews they were accepted as if they were gods that had to be worshiped and acknowledged, usually alongside their half hearted following of Yahweh.

It is interesting that the prophet says that this grieved the Holy Spirit. We don't read much directly about the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. But here in Isaiah we see a clear glimpse of God's Spirit. And we see that their disobedience clearly grieved the Holy Spirit.

We know that Paul says we can grieve the Holy Spirit for in Ephesians he writes:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.⁹

Let us for a moment think about what it is that upsets God and may be one of the areas where we can grieve the Holy Spirit.

When Samuel is confronting Saul he says:

For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king.¹⁰

God we know hates divination, witchcraft and all other forms of occult practice. And yet he says that rebellion is just like such sin. Idolatry again as we know from our study of the 10 commandments is not keeping one of God's rules for life. In effect it is very much disobedience in that it is not doing what God said we should do.

The Children of Israel were thought they could disobey God in going after these false gods. There was arrogance involved in this as they thought they knew better than God. In fact there is an arrogance about sin. So to rebel against God in disobedience is in his sight just like the sin of divination and all other occult practices. And I believe this sin particularly grieves the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who reveals God to us. He is the one who brings truth, particularly the truth of Jesus to us. So to disobey by not listening to God and obeying God word's brought to us by the Spirit, grieves God, particularly the person of the Holy Spirit.

⁹ Ephesians 4:30

¹⁰ I Samuel 15:23



It says in this passage that when we rebel that God may become our enemy and fight against us. This is a difficult thing to understand in the Bible as does the God who loves as actually work against us. We haven't the time to explore Hebrew thought that sometimes speaks in this way. But what is clear is that if we disobey or rebel against God, we grieve his Spirit. And it is also clear from the example of what happened to the Children of Israel that we will lose his blessing. They certainly lost the blessing of protection of the covenant. They lost battles, they were invaded and taken into captivity. All because they disobeyed and rebelled against God.

However God used these events for good. Whether God actually caused them or maybe he allowed them to happen is a question for theologians or Bible students. What is clear is that God loved his children with an everlasting love and had bound them to him with cords of loving kindness¹¹. And he used these difficulties, particularly the exile of Israel and Judah to call the people to repentance and a return to the covenant he had established.

But finally the last section begins in verse 11 begins in one literal translation:

*And he remembered the days of old, Moses – his people.*¹²

There appears to be some confusion in translation at this point, quite a few translations make it sound like the people remembered former things. In fact there is a footnote against this verse in the TNIV translation we use here at Meadgate.

So having seen that we need to

Recall all that God has done for us, & that Rebellion may turn God against us,
We finally see that Remembering us, God blesses us,

Again I find it hard to think of God having to remember. Now that I am in my sixties I get what I call senior moments. Those moments when I forget things that should know clearly and certainly. But I don't really feel God has such moments at all. His recall and memory is perfect.

I think again this a Jewish way of putting things. But what it does I think set out is that God clearly remembers all the time his purpose and plans. His love is constant and unchanging. His redemptive purpose to save the whole world is always in his mind.

So in a sense he recalls the time that he rescued them from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Who as it says in verse 12, *sent his glorious arm of power.*

So whilst God may in the face of rebellion appear to turn his face away from his people in the short term, he will never abandon his love for his people. Neither will he abandon his plans to save people and nations, that have started with the Children of Israel. And this included their Exodus from Egypt.

¹¹ Jeremiah 31:3

¹² Young's Literal Translation



God's heart is to bless us. If we are disobedient or rebellious we may not receive his blessing, in fact it may appear that God is almost our enemy. For we may experience difficulty and problems. But if we learn obedience and walk humbly and faithfully with our God then may be will receive his blessings more abundantly and constantly.

There is a beautiful promise contained in verse 14 where it says:

They were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord

One of the great blessings that God has promised us, as Christians, is that we can have the presence and power of the Holy Spirit continually. In the Old Testament before Jesus came, the Spirit moved at various times, places and upon some people. Since Pentecost, the Spirit has been poured out on all God's children who are in Jesus.

But as we have seen rebellion will block such blessing in the Spirit. And as we started one of the bests antidotes to this is to Remember all that God has done for us.

What better service to be encouraged to count our blessing and name them one by one. Jesus said when he instituted this service, *Do this in remembrance of me.*¹³

And remembering is often an act of praise in itself. So in the Communion service we hear the words:

In your love you made us for yourself. When we turned away you did not reject us but came to meet us in your son. You embraced us as your children and welcomed us to sit and eat with you. In Christ you shared our life that we might live in him and he in us.

Before we come to eat the bread we hear the words that say:

"Take, eat. This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

And before we drink the wine we hear the following words:

"Drink this all of you, this is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me."

So what a wonderful service to remind us to

*Recall or remember all that God has done for us in Jesus his wonderful son. And may we remember that, Rebellion may turn God against us and block his amazing blessing in the Holy Spirit. For he will continually be remembering us and pouring out his blessing of love and power in and through the Holy Spirit. Amen*¹⁴

¹³ Luke 22:19

¹⁴ 2980 words – say 25 minutes