

With Wings As Eagles

(God's Promise To Those Who Believe In Him)



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Isaiah 40:28-31

In brief the theme of my talk today is, it is inherent in our lives that we will always face challenges. If we try to undertake them alone we will often feel: despair, bitterness, loneliness, unloved and often fear. If however, we ask for God's help in attempting them, we will be astounded at our capacity to meet and overcome them and be just as amazed that having succeeded in meeting the challenge we have encountered, we are a better person for it.

To illustrate my point, I want to concentrate today on the reading that we have just heard from Isaiah and how its meaning (at least as I interpret it) outlines God's promise that those who believe and trust in him will always find the strength to live through even the greatest challenges that life "throws at them."

Today the reading started at verse 28 but to set the scene we really need to go back to verse 27, which reads:

"Jacob, why do you complain, and you Israel, why do you say,
'My lot is hidden from the LORD, my cause goes unheeded by my God'?"¹

To me these words suggest a person (Jacob) and a nation (Israel) who feels an uncaring God ignores their calls for assistance in resolving the problems and challenges that they faced.

¹ The Revised English Bible Oxford & Cambridge University Press 1996, Isaiah Chapter 40 verse 27

But then the answer is given in the subsequent verses:

“Do you not know, have you not heard?
The LORD, the eternal God, creator of earth’s farthest bounds,
Does not weary or grow faint;
His understanding cannot be fathomed.”²

So God never tires of us or our continual requests for support. He never says:

“its not a good time” or “come back later when I’m not so busy.”

We cannot begin to understand his: patience, willingness to help and forgiveness of us for doubting that he would help us.

Recently, someone close to me who is suffering from cancer said to her sibling (who is at least as good a Christian as anybody I know):

“You’re not still doing that Church thing are you? A fat lot of good it has done me!”

I was very sad to hear this comment. This person was brought up a Christian and for many years attended St Paul’s Cathedral in Wellington and brought her children up as Christians. In my view this is the very time when I believe the sufferer could by simply seeking God’s help, gain comfort and solace and perhaps the courage to embrace this challenge. My prayer for this person is that she gains the wisdom to lean on God by simply believing in and making a request of him.

Turning back to the passage we are told that our God:

“.....gives vigour to the weary, new strength to the exhausted.
Young men may grow weary and faint, even the fittest may stumble and fall;
But those who look to the LORD will win new strength,
They will soar as on eagles’ wings; they will run and not feel faint, march on
and not grow weary.”³

I first encountered this text in the Oscar winning movie ‘Chariots of Fire’. Most of you will know that it is story of athletes who competed for Britain at the 1924 Olympic Games held in Paris. The 2 main characters are Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell who won gold for Britain in the 100 and 400 metres respectively. Liddell came from a missionary family and was himself a

² supra verse 28

³ supra Isaiah chapter 40 verses 29-31

missionary in China. Although picked to run the 100 metres in which he had previously defeated Abrahams (the gold medalist at the Olympics) as a devout Christian, he refused to compete in the heats on a Sunday and therefore could not take part in the final. However he did compete in the 400 and against all expectations won it in Olympic record time! Just prior to the event, he was handed a piece of paper with the following words written on it:

"In the old book it says: 'He that honours me I will honour.'"

Most important in the film, Liddell quotes the reading from Isaiah that we heard today, in Church on the Sunday of the 100 metres heats. Here then is an example of a person who was strong in his principles i.e. he refused to run on the Sabbath and asked for God's help to give him strength to undertake a challenge which was probably the most difficult he would face in his running career and he received it.

My second encounter was much closer to home. My oldest son Daniel is a Chartered Accountant. This is a 2 year postgraduate qualification that one does part-time while working for a qualified Chartered Accountant. At the conclusion of the second year, one sits a final exam for 6 continuous hours! A candidate is allowed to take in food and use the bathroom. Everybody I have spoken to who has sat it, agrees it is the most challenging exam they have ever sat. If you fail you repeat the whole year again including the exam. When Daniel was preparing for it, I sent him the excerpt from Isaiah and mentioned the Liddell story. He passed the exam and he told me later that it was tremendous inspiration to him.

The challenges we face might seem insurmountable. They might be:

- overcoming a health issue like suffering from and being treated for cancer, a heart attack or stroke;
- a relationship break-up with someone particularly close to us whether by death or otherwise;
- criticism from others especially where it is unjustified;
- the loss of employment or position whether through retirement redundancy or otherwise;
- the loss of wealth or physical possessions;
- a crisis for someone else who we know and care about;
- the in trepidation we might feel on being asked to accept higher office or undertake a new career;
- concerns or worries for family members;
- and perhaps the biggest of all, being betrayed by those who we thought we could trust and who loved us.

There are of course many more.

But no matter what the challenge, my message is clear. If you ask for God's help this passage from the bible gives us the comfort of receiving God's promise that we will be supported in undertaking any challenge that we face.

Might I quote the words of the character Eric Liddell in Chariots of Fire:

"I have no formula for winning the race. Everyone runs in her own way, or his own way. And where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within. Jesus said,

"Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you."⁴

If with all your hearts, you truly seek me, you shall ever surely find me."⁵

If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run a straight race."

And for me? I believe if we encounter the challenge and see it through to the end (whatever that may be), we are spiritually stronger for having experienced it.

As Christians then we have a benefit that others don't –in that we can share the burden of our undertaking with a God who is there for us 24/7. After all have we not also been promised:

"Ask, and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, those who seek find, and to those who knock, the door will be opened."⁶

I will end this sermon with some words from the singer Robbie Williams that in my view, perfectly captures the message I am delivering today:

"As my soul heals the shame,

I will grow through this pain.

Lord I am doin' all I can to be a better man."⁷

⁴ supra Luke chapter 17 verse 21

⁵ adaption of Jeremiah chapter 29 verse 13

⁶ supra Mathew Chapter 7 verse 7

⁷ 'Better Man' written by Robbie Williams and Guy Chambers