

Things Are Different Now 2024
Isaiah 51:1-4, 7-8, 12 Ephesians 5:8-11, 15-20

Isaiah 51:1-4, 7-8, 12 (New Revised Standard Version)

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song. Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. Listen to me, you who know righteousness, you people who have my teaching in your hearts; do not fear the reproach of others, and do not be dismayed when they revile you. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool; but my deliverance will be forever, and my salvation to all generations. I, I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die, a human being who fades like grass?

Ephesians 5:8-11, 15-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I have always found that writing things out
helps me to focus and organize my thinking.

So when I traveled and studied in the Middle East during seminary,
and for one of my courses spent several weeks traveling in Ghana,
both trips, no matter how weary & tired I was at the end of the day,
I tried to write in my travel journal, and reflect on my
observations, the places, events & people of that day.

It has been wonderful to revisit those trips through my journals,
& it's remarkable that many of those experiences & observations
have a very different feel, reading them these many years later.
Those journals are wonderful snapshots of another place and time,
**which I read and understand differently and more deeply now
from the larger perspective of insights gained along the way.**

I find that looking back at my life, it's easier to see and appreciate
how I have been blessed by challenges and difficulties all along,

and that God was actually preparing me for situations ahead,
which today, fills me with wonder, gratitude & cause for hope.
It amazes me how well God was equipping me for what was to come my way,
always inviting, directing, blessing and drawing me ever closer.

All that points toward our spiritual journey & growing life of faith,
of how far God has brought us, been with us each step along the way,
changing us and forming us toward **a deepening Christian faith**
toward the faithful & useful disciples **we are still becoming.**

What an incredible and awesome thought to consider,
that real change and transformation are actual possibilities,
and that we don't have to remain just as we have always been.
We don't have to keep repeating the same old mistakes,
and we don't have to let the past determine our future.

When the passage we read from Isaiah was first written,
it was during the Babylonian Exile, a harsh & terrible experience
of tragic loss, disappointment & suffering while in captivity.

The God's message through Isaiah was a promise of hope and comfort,
a word of assurance that God's promises are sure and certain, vs. 1,
**Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which
you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.**

the rock from which you were hewn,
The message is to consider who you are, your own history with God.
Remember the Lord's promises fulfilled, and the mighty acts of God.
That is your heritage, by experience to trust the Lord your God,
and assurance that the Lord's is still at work & far from done.

Also, do not fear or be upset by those who are threatening, vs. 7-8, 12
**Listen to me, you who know righteousness, you people who have my teaching in your hearts; do not
fear ... and do not be dismayed ... For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat
them like wool; but my deliverance will be forever, and my salvation to all generations. I, I am he who
comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die, a human being who fades like
grass?**

As Isaiah explains it, those who threaten, disturb and oppose
are temporary like a woolen garment being eaten by moths,
in contrast to God's saving purpose which is sure and forever.

I am encouraged by that message and word of truth,
that despite whatever difficulty I am going through now,
the Lord will bring me through to a full victory and finish,
for there is far less anxiety when you already know how it will end.

Suppose you record a football game so you can enjoy it later,
but before you can watch it, someone tells you the final score.

So then later on, when you're watching it you already know who won.
How anxious will be, even over a 4th quarter fumble,
when you already know the final score at the end?

As Christians, we already know how it will all end, Revelation 21:3-4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away... **see I am making all things new...**"

That means, whatever is happening to us or around us right now,
it is not cause for us to fear, feel anxiety, distress or panic,
because we are already assured that God's purpose will prevail,
and that the darkness will not defeat the light of God's grace.

In Ephesians, the author explains that

becoming a Christian moves us from darkness into the light, vs. 8,
For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.

Once upon a time there was a "before"
but then something very significant happened,
that marked a powerful and life-altering change,
which caused a shift in how we perceive the world —

-- which equips us with wonderful possibilities and resources,
to live and deal with our life in new and different ways
that reflect the light & glory of God's gracious love,
the Light that heals & transforms all our darkness.

Following Jesus means that I look at life and its situations
differently than I did before ... trusting that God is at work,
even in the ordinary, the challenging and unexpected.

Several times, situations that I perceived as hopeless disasters,
as it turned out, moved me in a new and better direction,
that began a sequence toward progress and my growth.
I needed to experience and endure, and only on the other side
could I see & appreciate that it was all God's gracious purpose.

The Christian life is a growing relationship of truth and trust
that starts with choosing to listen to the Lord, vs. 10~11, 17~18, 20

Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ...Take no part in the unfruitful works of
darkness ... So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is... be filled with the Spirit,
giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our call is to live as those who have been promised eternity,
which is the point of the Ephesians passage we read today.

Here, 'try to find out' means to test, evaluate and examine,
to give life some careful thought and timely reflection...

... for to know what pleases the Lord, **first I must know the Lord**,
by having an authentic and current relationship with the Lord,
so that I can understand what the Lord wants from me, vs. 15~16
Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,
making the most of the time ...

In the quiet,
the introspective and truthful places of our hearts and minds,
how are we responding to God's grace and presence in our lives?
Ask, how well am I handling my life's challenges and adversity?,
or the many decisions and the hard times that we all pass through?

And is it our priority
to let God's love and purpose blossom and flourish in us,
to bless & guide by the way that we live out our lives?

Every choice and every decision that we make about how we live
will either deepen or will hinder our relationship with God,
and it's by our every choice and by our every decision,
that we're either walking toward God, or we are walking away.

It's not a matter of guilt or simply trying ever harder to be good,
but it's about being humble and quiet as we wait upon the Lord,
and then to **rightly respond to gracious love we've received.**

The Christian life is not about just passing the time until we die.

Spiritual growth and faithfulness do not happen automatically,
but require recognizing that there might be a gap
between what we know, what we do & say, **and isn't today**
a most excellent time to examine our response to God's grace.

Our understanding and relationship with God, our journey of faith,
these are precious gifts from God, **our own adventure-story**
is about a lifetime of spiritual turning-points and grace.

In seminary, my church history professor arranged for our class
to spend several days at a Roman Catholic Retreat Center
under the spiritual direction of a wonderful Jesuit priest,
who had us spend many hours in directed silent meditation
and then had us write out our **spiritual growth timeline.**

As a spiritual exercise we were to reflect on our faith development,
as an autobiography of our steps toward faith and spiritual growth -

- about the people, places, events, experiences and circumstances,
important points and specific insights along our journey of faith,
where the gracious love and truth of Christ became a reality,
and put words describing where, under what specific circumstances,

how our relationship with God grew, deepened and developed most,
when and how and with whom our Christian faith came of age.

This spiritual discipline of **remembering toward new understanding**
happens by writing our spiritual timeline or faith biography
as we retrace the steps and stages of our journey of faith,
and how each of the many individuals & events that touched our life,
influenced us and irreplaceably mattered in their own unique way,
and helped change and form us into the people we have become.

The point was to celebrate those amazing moments of God's grace,
to celebrate the mystery & wonder of how very far we have grown,
and to celebrate God's mercy and promises as a vision of hope,
**because Jesus didn't save us just to punch our ticket to heaven
and then leave us unchanged, to drift until we finally arrive.**

No, our faith a lifetime process of growing more Christ-like
because we believe & trust we are loved & precious in God's sight
and so learn to walk more & more faithfully in his Light, vs.8-9,
**For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit
of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.**

When I worked on writing my spiritual autobiography and timeline,
it helped me focus and concentrate on how my faith developed,
and see in new & fresh ways, the events & experiences of my life,
that often they made more sense as I begin to see more clearly
and specifically **how God had been working his plan all along.**

And with the advantage of remembering and gazing backward
from the larger perspective of my whole faith journey I gained
new insight & appreciation which deepened my understanding
of the power, purpose and blessings of God's grace and mercy.

For my faith to thrive, be vital and grow deeper,
I need to carefully and intentionally listen to God.

Whenever I've reread and added more detail to my spiritual timeline
I'm always freshly **overwhelmed by God's goodness and grace to me,**
and by the surprising and subtle ways that the Lord
has always been so present, faithful and wonderful
inviting, directing, guiding & always drawing me closer.

My spiritual story reveals how all of my life has worked together,
as each detail is part of the story of God always faithful to me.

However, a spiritual timeline exercise really isn't about us,
but it's intended to glorify our awesome and loving God,
**who was, who is and who always will be
present, active and mercifully reshaping us
as God's purpose and story continues to be written.**

Do you ever think about how it is that you became a Christian?

I'm not asking about, how does **a person** in general, come to faith,
but I mean you in particular – your specific story of faith.

What happened --- that Jesus our Lord did come into your life?

**What or who were the influences that led you
into a healing & saving faith in Jesus Christ?**

Today, consider again the story of God's graciousness toward us,
the Master's collage of our spiritual turning-points,
of when God was at work, and when **we were willing
to listen and to follow Jesus, our Lord's leading.**

To that end, I encourage you to reflect on your spiritual journey,
and pause to write out your own spiritual biography and timeline,
the significant points along your unique journey of faith,
where the gracious love and hope in Christ became a reality,
by focusing on those who helped influence your faith,
special events & experiences that shaped your faith.

It's important to remember, reflect & evaluate the road we're on,
so that we can be increasingly faithful, useful and effective,
in serving our mission as useful disciples of God's Kingdom,
and always dreaming bigger dreams & setting higher goals.

As it's written in Psalm 71 and Colossians 1,

O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come. You who have done great things, O God, who is like you? He who has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.