

I don't know the boom and bust history of this city from experience. From what I understand there were times you just didn't go downtown in Oklahoma City out of fear and because there was little there anyway. I can only imagine people at that time looking at what was and thinking what could be. Their vision may not exactly be what's been achieved, but downtown today is a booming busy place at all hours of the day and night. I can only guess it's much better than it formerly was.

When the past isn't so great, like in downtown, it's easy to concentrate on what it is now. Who wants to think about going back to something so bad? But if history was really good it can be more challenging. Thoughts might drift back to the past. Israel had that kind of history. Some good things had happened to them in the past. Moments where God had really rescued them. We have some moments in the past that were good too. Maybe even good enough that it influences how we think about ourselves in the present.

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to get his people first remembering the past and then looking into the future. We join in as God says...

Something even better is coming
The former things were good
The new things will be great

Roughly two million people stood along the shores of the Red Sea. It was an imposing body of water, too far across and too deep to attempt any kind of passage. No way were some two million people all going to jump in and try to swim. To make matters worse approaching from behind was the army of Egypt. This army was pursuing all two million to bring them back to Egypt. They were escaping, people on the way out of Egypt. This was the Exodus. After 400 plus years of slavery Israel was getting out.

They didn't leave on their own. No, in fact God told them it was time to go with plagues in Egypt forcing the hand of Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. God led them out of Egypt right to the Red Sea. That's where they stood with the Red Sea on one side and the angry army of Egyptians on the other. So far things were not good.

God literally moved water to save his people. It was the greatest miracle the Israelites ever witnessed. The Red Sea split forming a **"way through the sea, a path through the might waters"**. Walls of water pushed back allowing all the people to walk safely across to the other side. God kept the army of Pharaoh comfortably away only allowing pursuit when it was time. The waters returned at just the right time, when the Egyptians were in the middle of the sea crossing. Every Egyptian chariot, horse, and soldier **"lay there never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick."** It was an epic rescue that was remembered yearly in the celebration known as the Passover Festival.

As much as the Israelites remembered this the best act of God's deliverance they ever received, so little might I remember the acts of deliverance God brings about for me. I may remember them, but I hardly celebrate them. Moments of rescue in the car where a close call could have gone far differently. For you it might be moments of rescue on the field of play where the bad injury didn't happen and you didn't even know it. Maybe it was at work or at school where conditions played out just so and you were spared. Even more it might be bigger things like hearing the Word of God or even getting baptized. Until someone gets baptized in front of me or you how much do we remember ours and what it means? Do we celebrate it? Do we have special festivals when we come to church to hear the Word? If it's such a big deal why isn't it remembered? Or isn't it that big of a deal anymore?

Remember your former things. Don't forget them. Realize they were good rescues and times of delivering from God. All the close calls, times where injuries didn't happen, conditions that didn't play out to harm you, these all are the trademark actions of a God who loves you. He forgives you for not seeing in the moment this reality or for overlooking thanking him. The bigger moments too come from him. Your baptism, hearing the Word of God in church, reading the Word during the week, these are gracious actions from a gracious God. Only he could rescue you in these ways. He forgives you if you have downplayed them or skipped them in the past. These are all part of God's former ways and they are good. Yet they are only backdrop for the greater things of God in your life.

Israel yearly went through the motions of celebration, often lacking passion in their remembrance. Still, being the biggest act of rescue the exodus was easy to remember. Then God came with a surprising request through Isaiah. **"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past."** Don't dwell on the past? God was the one making such a big deal about the past telling them to celebrate every year this Exodus moment. What was he getting at? God didn't want them to forget totally his delivering them from Egypt. But he was calling their attention to something better. Basically saying, "If you thought the former things were good, just wait." The former things were good, even spectacular. Splitting the Red Sea, total destruction of the Egyptian army, and total rescue of Israel from slavery wouldn't be easy to one up. But this would only be the backdrop for greater things to come from God.

As you take the train from Kenosha in southern Wisconsin south towards Chicago the view out the window changes drastically. Starts with the rolling hills and farm fields of southern Wisconsin. Next comes the outer suburbs of Chicago where the cities have very little rise to them. Tighter and tighter the cities get packed in. Further south towards the big city you realize the most impressive cityscape is still to come. On the horizon just barely is the glimpse of the towers rising out of downtown Chicago. That view is good, but there's something better coming that's going to be great. God would say the same thing to Israel and to you and me. The former things were good, but the new things will be great.

Fast forward in Israel's history and again they're in an impossible situation. This time in captivity in a place called Babylon far from their home territory held against their will. When they're released there's no great splitting of a sea, no pursuit by angry armies, not even a large group goes. Just a small remnant of believers leave Babylon but they quickly stare into a huge wasteland of a place called the Arabian Desert. There are no pathways and worst of all no water. Home is a long way and they aren't going to make it alone.

Isaiah shares what God will do. **"I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland."** God was with them. This was the promise of a miracle to come since Isaiah wrote when Israel wasn't yet in captivity in Babylon. But they would be. And the promise is that God will give them a return. He would give them a safe passage back home with water for the journey. As great a miracle as that would be, it still couldn't compare to the even greater rescue God would bring about. Mentioned earlier in the chapter of the first lesson, the servant would bring about a far greater promise. God would send his servant and his servant would save the world. It was like the entire world was living in a desert because of sin. No way the world could rescue itself, didn't even care to rescue itself. People were hopeless without assistance.

You and I exist in that same desert of our sins. We have no way out and no way of helping ourselves. We're in trouble. Sure good things have happened to us and those were from God. But those rescues can't compare to the great thing God has done for us. **"Because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise."** Suddenly in our wasteland of sin is a pathway. We don't walk it to God, he walks it to us. God enters our miserable situation. God graciously approaches us. Jesus came not only as God but as a human being. He walked in our world, through our desert wasteland. We are his people. People he made and formed for himself. We are God's by the work of Jesus our Savior who showed God's mercy as the new great thing. It is the gospel rescue, the best thing we could've hoped for. His forgiveness is like a cool refreshing drink of water in the desert.

Something even better is coming where the new things will be great. God promises us relief when we get to heaven. Safety in the eternal protection of heaven. Strength even now for our worst days because we are his people. God uses his power for our good, carrying us right through the middle of our lives with promises his grace through Christ has prepared a better place.

Because we are God's people we recount his glorious deeds. Call to mind the great things God has done and praise him. Share them with others. Look around because others are also in the same desert of sin, lost and condemned, and in trouble. God alone provides rescue. He provides the Savior. Believers have no purpose other than what God made us for. Our value comes from him. He made us and we exist for him. He redeemed you and me so our value is great. He redeemed us at great cost to himself. We are his.

Good things in our past. Even greater things to come. That's God's promise to us. He's got the rescue plan. The Savior came to us so we belong to him. Now we can wait, remembering the former things which were good and looking forward to the greater things that will come.