

Bedrock

Isaiah 41:9-10

You know a few weeks ago when we were invited to write down verses from the Bible that were especially meaningful to us and submit them for the summer preaching series? I wrote Is 41:9-10 on that 3x5 card and dropped it in the offering box without any inkling that a month or so later I'd be preaching on those verses! Ha! You've got to be careful around here... they know things... they have ways of making you talk!

Anyway, the reason I wrote down those particular verses was because they had become bedrock for me & Katie... you know bedrock, that deep down rock that cannot be shaken no matter what's happening on the surface. On more than one occasion in our life together it's come down to three basic things: me, Katie, and these bedrock words from God. I hope they encourage you as well.

*You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth and called from its remotest parts and said to you, "You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you."
Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with my righteous right hand!"*

Katie & I had been married for less than a year, and during that time we had traveled out to California to receive our initial training as staff members of a missionary organization focused on youth (CCC). When we returned to Mass, we were excited but a bit overwhelmed, for the first task we had to accomplish was to raise all of our missionary support. This, to us, looked like Mt Everest. It was huge... and this was in the late 70's in New England. I think there were only about 6 Christians in New England back then, and we knew them all! We had no idea where all this missionary support was going to come from. Sure we prayed and tried to drum up our faith about it, but like I said, it was Everest, and we hadn't even started climbing yet.

Soon after we got back from Cali, some good friends, a couple who were on staff with CCC at Boston College came over. They had helped us grow in our faith when we had just become Christians and were a couple we really looked up to spiritually. They came over to pray with us and encourage us with this whole support-raising thing. So we had dinner, we talked, and we prayed... and before they left John looked at us and said, "We have a gift for you!" I got all excited because I thought he meant cash... since that's what we were so focused on at that time... but he didn't! Instead he said, "You will need these verses while you are raising support and beyond, when you are in ministry." And honestly, I was a little let down. I mean, cash or Bible verses? I was so dumb. And so he & Karen gave us these verses as a gift –

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I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with my righteous right hand!"

At the time I remember thinking, "Hmm, those are nice verses, comforting, encouraging... like a glass of warm milk before bed." Little did I know much this gift was worth... for over time it became the bedrock of our lives and worked its way into the very marrow of our bones. I think I can say that these have become my survival verses... when nothing else helps, remembering these powerful words seems to calm my soul.

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Why have they proven to be such a powerful encouragement and support? Well I guess part of it is that it's God speaking and it has always felt like He is speaking directly to me right here right now. In space & time God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah about 600 years before Christ; He's speaking to His people... the ones He rescued out of slavery in Egypt and eventually guided to the Promised Land where they could settle, multiply and thrive. But unfortunately they were also the ones who seemed to chronically fall into spiritual apathy and run after almost every false god they met... So I guess I'm saying that they were a lot like me. Eventually they were attacked and overrun by this huge steamroller called the Assyrian Empire, and after they were defeated, huge numbers of them were hauled off into exile.

And it's into this scenario that God is speaking. These were not happy, carefree times for God's people. Quite the contrary. They had been roughed up and hauled away, their comfortable lives had been shattered. The things they had taken for granted in life had been stripped away and they were confused, they were lost, they were afraid. Worst of all, they hadn't heard from God recently... or maybe they hadn't been listening? And they wondered, where is God in all this? How could He let this happen to us? What's going on here?

Been there? Yeah you have... If you have any sort of mileage on your body, you've been in a place like that at some point (or points!) in your life. We're human. We're inconsistent. We're vulnerable. And stuff happens. Which is why I love how these verses start out:

Called

"You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth and called from its remotest parts..." Let's remember here, God says. Let's remember who you are – you are my called people! I have called you... not others... you. And that sets you apart.

We can stray awfully far from God, you and I. The ends of the earth... its remotest parts... spiritually it can seem like we're irretrievable; too far away to hear God or for Him to bother with us. I share with my physics students that our sun is just one of a 100 billion stars in our galaxy and our galaxy is one of a 100 billion galaxies in the universe. So the distances involved in the universe are staggering... but the amazing thing is that God is omnipresent in every place at every time. That means there is nowhere you can be where God can't call you. You can run but you can't hide... and God will still be calling you.

When I was a kid, sometimes my friends and I would get so into what we were doing and would wander pretty far from my house. So when my Mom would call us for dinner we wouldn't hear; we were too far away. After a while we'd get hungry and head home, only to be greeted by a less than pleased mother wondering why we didn't come when she called! She was dubious when we said we didn't hear her, but she found the perfect solution: she got a bell. A big one. One you could hear for miles... definitely across the neighborhood, possibly across the ocean! From that time on there was no "I didn't hear you!" there was only the chuckling of my friends as that bell rang and I had to run!

So how do you know that God is calling you? Some people describe an inner voice, a spiritual nudge. Others look around at the beauty of creation or the vastness of the universe and hear in that infiniteness the call of God. Some have experienced God's call during moments of quiet contemplation, others during periods of searching, still others in the midst of the worst tragedy of their lives. Some have described the call of God in very mystical terms, others in logical ones. For me God's call was the dawning realization that Jesus had died for me – me! Not just everyone, but me in particular! Out of pure love, he had taken my place and died on the Cross for sins I had committed. That kind of love amazed me and called me and I could not resist.

I don't know how God is calling or has called you, I just know that He does. This is what God does... He calls people to be with Him. And you don't call for someone unless you want them to come. When my mother rang the dinner bell (so embarrassing) we all knew we were wanted for dinner pronto! When Katie & I were separated for a year while we were dating and she called, I knew she wanted me! Ah, young love!

So why would God call you or me or any of us fickle human beings? Love. He wants us to be with Him. Why? I don't know! There's a lot of days I don't want to be with me! I know myself, you see, and underneath this lovable exterior, there's quite a bit of me that is less than lovable! But not for God. He loves period... even though He knows things... Nothing can separate you or me from the love of God! And because He loves, He calls. He wants you! He wants you.

So here's a question for you to ponder: How might God be calling you? He loves you – of that the Scriptures leave no doubt – so He is calling you to be with Him. How is He calling you? And how are you hearing & responding?

Chosen

Secondly, God says, *“You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth and called from its remotest parts... and said to you, ‘You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you.’”* Chosen. This is taking love to the next level – the level of commitment. I have chosen you and not rejected you. Once again, this is a reminder from God of who you are... a person who is called and chosen by Him.

When someone special chooses you, it’s amazing. Our daughter, Meg, just got married last month, and I had the privilege of both walking her down the aisle and performing the ceremony. Pretty special stuff. And Bradford, the young man she married, is a pretty special guy too. During the ceremony they had a combination of their own personally-written vows and the traditional... and it was all so heartfelt and amazing to hear them commit themselves to one another, to choose one another in plenty and in want, in joy & in sorrow, in sickness and in health... to be one another’s life partner till death.

God has chosen you too. Do you have to say “yes”? Well, yes, I think you do... just like Meg & Bradford had to say “I do!” But what would stop you? The God who created the universe, loves you and has chosen you to be with Him forever. The God who knows you better than you know yourself... and yeah, he knows it all... even *that*... loves you anyway. He does. And has chosen you to be in His family forever. And because of His call and choice of you, He makes a powerful promise:

God

“Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.”

Got fear? Got anxiety? Yeah we all do... but no one has more problems than Bob... [show clip].

Bob Wiley has problems. And so do I. About two months ago I had a dream in which I died in three different ways! Seriously! First, Katie & I were on a bike ride and I was circling at the top of a hill waiting for her when I just fell over and got run over by a dump truck! In the second one I was working in a brewery and had to climb inside this huge stainless steel tank to clean it, when someone closed the hatch and started filling it with water! The third one was Katie & I were hiking up at the Grand Canyon and I was peeking over the edge when I slipped on some gravel and fell over! How’s that for weird? All in one night! One of my co-workers commented, “Gee, all three are things you love... biking, hiking, and brewing beer!” Still wondering what all this says about me!

Fears? yeah I got those. Anxiety? I was just sitting in a doctor’s office this week seeking solutions to my midnight anxiety attacks! And it is into the midst of those very uncomfortable places of our lives that God interjects... a smiley face? A chorus

of “Don’t worry, be happy?” No. No platitudes or clichés for God. Into those hard places in our lives, God interjects Himself. This is when those verses turn away from who we are and focus fully on who God is.

“Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.”

Does that short phrase “I am” ring a bell? “I am” – in Hebrew, Yahweh, was the covenant name that God used to introduce Himself to Moses at the Burning Bush.

Exodus 6:2-8: *“**2** And God said to Moses, ‘I am Yahweh—‘the Lord.’ **3** I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El-Shaddai—‘God Almighty’—but I did not reveal my name, Yahweh, **(I AM)** to them. **4** And I reaffirmed my covenant with them. Under its terms, I promised to give them the land of Canaan, where they were living as foreigners. **5** You can be sure that I have heard the groans of the people of Israel, who are now slaves to the Egyptians. And I am well aware of my covenant with them. **6** “Therefore, say to the people of Israel: ‘I am the Lord. **(I AM)** I will free you from your oppression and will rescue you from your slavery in Egypt. I will redeem you with a powerful arm and great acts of judgment. **7** I will claim you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God who has freed you from your oppression in Egypt. **8** I will bring you into the land I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I will give it to you as your very own possession. I am the Lord **(I AM)!”***

You see, God isn’t just saying, “Hey, I’m here for you, bro.” It’s much more than that... much more than any human being could ever say. He is saying, Do not fear, for “I AM” is with you... I AM... the name by which He made an eternal covenant with His people to rescue them in trouble, to redeem them, to claim them as His own people and to pledge Himself as their God forever. That name “I AM” bears all the weight of that ancient covenant and applies it here and now to whatever it is we are going through. Do not fear, for the great “I AM” is with you! Do not anxiously look about you for the great I AM is your God!” He’s not just wise, He possesses all wisdom. He’s not just strong, He wields all power. And He’s here, He’s with you. He has rescued and redeemed you from hell and now He’s on your side, pledged to your good.

That’s the reason these verses are such bedrock for me. They don’t depend on me doing anything. They just depend on God being God, being that covenant-keeping Yahweh, who will never leave me nor give up on me. God being God. And so the final outcome is this:

Strength

*“You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth and called from its remotest parts and said to you, “You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you.”
Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.*

I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with my righteous right hand!"

Based on everything that comes before, the last line is almost superfluous. *"I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with my righteous right hand!"* And yet how good is it to hear those rock solid words, to hear the Great I AM, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe say to you in the midst of your hardship, I will strengthen you..., I will help you..., I will uphold you with my righteous right hand!

Strengthen, help & uphold... notice He doesn't say "I will never let you go through difficulties again... there will be no more tragedies in your life... and in everything you do, you will never fail." We'd like that to be the promise, but success, comfort, and happiness are not the promises God leaves us with.

What He leaves us with is Himself... our bedrock... and His promise to support and sustain us through whatever storms and black holes life brings. For we don't live in a utopia, a perfect world. Bad things happen... often to good people... and possibly the best witness we have to those who don't believe yet, is when others watch us go through life-shattering experiences and come out the other side, scarred but still standing, as if some supernatural strength had been imparted to us... because, oh wait... it has been.

So how can you apply something from these ramblings that you've heard today? I guess the first suggestion I'd have for you is to find some small piece of the Word of God that speaks to you like these verses speak to me. And when you find it, memorize it, meditate on it, and let it become part of your spiritual DNA.

Secondly, make sure you have said your 'I do!' to God! He has called & chosen you to be in His family because He loves you. Have you ever said back to Him, "Lord, yes, I do accept your offer of forgiveness and redemption in Christ! Thank you for making me your child." If you haven't, why not here, why not now? God longs to welcome you in!

Lastly, I think it's important to do what God says in these verses, especially if these are tough times for you: remind yourself, "I am personally called & chosen by God!" And then, "God is here! He is for me, He is with me, He will help me." Those sound simple, but you'd be amazed how much you will doubt them in times of trouble. They are the truth. Make them an anchor for your soul.

In a moment I'm going to ask you to close your eyes for a few seconds and just listen. I have no idea what most of you are going through right now, what challenges you are facing, or even if you have recently had a life-shattering experience. But just close your eyes now and listen to see if these words from God speak into your soul.

“You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth and called from its remotest parts and said to you, “You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you.” Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with my righteous right hand!”

And now we'll pray... but know this: if you need to pray with someone about something today, then don't hesitate to come up to the front after the service ends and there will be people here who will pray with you and for you. Let's pray.