

God's Faithfulness And Hope

God Never Gives Up On Us

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 17-Oct-03; Sermon #FT03-07

Have you ever given up on someone? I mean, just dumped them?

For most of us, it is not something that we are proud of, or that we necessarily cared to admit to if we were asked, but I would bet that most of us have at one time or another given up on somebody. They treated us wrongly, they offended us, they did something to make us just totally turn off, and we wrote them out of the book of life, or our own little book of friends and acquaintances, and those that we consider to be close to us.

It is kind of unfortunate, though, that it is a normal part of life, because if we are realistic, some people are just not trustworthy. You cannot trust them to do anything without messing up. There are thousands of things and ways that people can offend. Finally you just get down to personalities. They clash. You really do not want to have much to do with them. Or, they just do not inspire a great deal of hope that they are ever going to change. And so, you just have to break things off.

I know some people have given up hope of ever getting books, tools, or money back from certain people. And, as Paul said, those things are counted as loss. Oh well.

Well, I have a little story. In it, my wife and I are the bad guys.

About eighteen months ago, as I was getting ready for work, I heard on the radio an advertisement for free purebred Siberian huskies. And I jumped at it. I had read Jack London stories as a boy, and sled dogs to me were pretty high on the list of canine acquaintances I wanted to meet and own.

Malamutes, huskies, I liked them, because of the adventure of pulling a sled across the Yukon. They are pretty dogs. They are about one step away from a wolf. They are just beautiful creatures. So, I thought that my kids would like to have a dog, and here is a Siberian Husky free, purebred!

So, I jumped at it. I called up the station. The producer of the show was the one who was breeding these Siberian Huskies and he had a couple left from the litter, and, could not seem to get rid of them. (That should have been the first clue.) They were about six months old. They wanted to get these puppies out, so they offered them to families since they were giving them away—free.

And so, we packed up the van, and went out to see these puppies. There were two of them left. It did not take us long to decide to take six month old Chocolate home. Why they called her Chocolate, I have no idea. We did not want to confuse her by giving her a different name. There was no chocolate coloring on the dog at all. Maybe it was her eyes. That is what Beth thinks it was. She had brown eyes. Maybe that was it.

We stuck with the name Chocolate and brought her home. Thus began the saga.

Money for vet fees, shots, food (lots of food), accessories, you name it, we bought it as long as we had this dog. Maybe five or six hundred dollars worth. And we did not even pay for her. Just think what it would have been had we had to shell out money for the dog.

But, she chewed up everything. What did not get chewed up she scratched up. We had just put a new addition on the house the previous fall, and she scratched that door, and the frame up pretty badly. Anything that had some give to it, she chewed. She liked wood for some reason. A lot of things were ruined in our backyard.

Again, she is one step away from a wolf. For the first week or so, she howled like you would not believe. I do not know what our neighbors thought. We live in the city limits. I do not know if they thought that they were being invaded or what. We do have coyotes there. Chocolate could put up a pretty good howl when she wanted to.

She ripped up grass. (I really wish I could have found a way for her to actually mow it! That would have been nice.) She liked to rip it up, and make trails. She got into the flower beds and made places to sit right in the middle of them. They were nice and cushy. Great for a dog bed.

Of course, she made her requisite messes on the lawn. We knew that going in.

But, the thing that really bugged us was part of her very nature. She ran. She ran and she ran, and she ran some more. Running is bred into them. They are running dogs. They pull sleds. They run, run, run. And now I know why they put lines on them—to make them go where *you* want them to go. Every chance she got, Chocolate would dig under the fence, or shoot through a hole, or otherwise miraculously escape the backyard. We cannot figure out some of the ways she was actually able to get out.

She would take off just for the joy of running. No particular direction, she would just run and run and run. She loved it.

We tried to tie her up. You do not tie up dogs that like to run. She was miserable tied up.

We tried training her to the (PETA-hated) leash—the one that grips them, and digs into their skin to train them to the leash. She had such thick fur it did not make an impression on her. You are supposed to get it up under the fur, but it did not work. She would calm down for half a second, and then she would be off again.

We thought about invisible fencing. We had already spent all this money on her. We said, no, that would be too much. We contemplated pouring concrete along the line of the fence so she could not dig out. We did not do that.

Another thing was to buy chicken wire, or some sort of wire mesh, and dig down a certain 12 or 18 inches and put the wire mesh down in there, so she could not dig out. We decided not to do that.

Harsh words and discipline made no impression on her at all. Nothing worked on this dog that loved to run.

So finally, we had had enough. We had to give up on a very beautiful, playful dog. She was show quality. As she grew older, we checked her against the purebred book standards that had all the points in them. And she had them all. She was just a beautiful dog. I do not know if there was anything about her, physically, that would have scored against her. She was just a beautiful dog.

But, she had this desire to get out all the time. It was taking a great deal of our time.

So, Beth put an advertisement in the newspaper. In the first day, several families came, and took her home—and brought her back. Finally, there was a family who had another dog, and several acres of land. We are only on about a third of an acre. We did not have much of a track for her to run on. But, this family had something like five acres.

So, we gave her away with a little bit of sadness because she was a nice dog, otherwise.

And you know that a few months later, we received a phone call from somebody saying, "Hey! We've got your dog." And we said, "We don't have a dog. We used to have a dog." "Well, this is your number isn't it?"

What we found out was that the new owners had never taken our tag off the collar, and she had gotten out again. She got away again from that person, and it was not a couple of hours later that we got another call from someone else saying, "We've got your dog! Want to come and get her?"

Evidently, she had escaped from the people whom we had given her away to. She continued to escape from all subsequent owners and caretakers down the line.

She was a beautiful dog. We wish we could have kept her. But, we think that what the problem was that we got her when she was six months old. Her personality was already ingrained in her, and there was nothing we could do, short of chopping her legs off, to keep her in the yard.

We had given Chocolate six months to change her ways, but she never repented, not once. Her personality was there. It was almost innate within her to run. And so, since there was nothing we could do to make her stop bolting to freedom, we gave up on her.

Are you not glad that I am not God in charge of you? Are you not glad that God does not give up so quickly on us?

He gives us plenty of leash. He lets us have our heads at times. He brings us back to the backyard when we bolt and He suffers long with our stubbornness. But His faithfulness to us has within it a great deal of hope. He is not like me, who is willing to give up after six months. He is willing to stick with us for years and years, through all the times when we do these things that He is trying to work out of us.

In the end it will result in our entrance into His Kingdom. That should give us a great deal of hope.

Please begin with me in Romans 15. I want to use this as a springboard.

Romans 15:4 For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

The Old Testament scriptures mentioned here was written to teach us certain lessons. Maybe the primary reason of those lessons being there was so that we would not have to go through "the school of hard knocks" ourselves. We have the example of the Israelites, and all the other people whom God decided to focus on, so that we can actually sit in the comfort of our homes, and services, and read these things. We can take out important lessons from them and not have to actually experience them but use the experience of others in order to have the learning, instruction, and admonition.

As it says, here, in this scripture, it produces in us three things especially. Patience, or perseverance, a kind of endurance through thick and thin. He mentions comfort here. It is a feeling of being taken care of, a feeling of not having to go through these things ourselves, and this should lead to hope.

Thus, we should be able to derive from Scripture a sense of God's view of time. Because, if we look at how God worked with people, we would see that He worked with them over *many* years. That should help us have this idea of patience, and perseverance, and comfort, too, because we can see the end of these individual stories as they occur in the Bible, and know that with God in control, things work out just fine. So, that gives us a great deal of comfort. These things fill us with hope because we know that God does not change. These same results can happen with us.

We are going to go through some of the story of the children of Israel to see if we can derive a sense of this patience and comfort, and ultimately hope. We are going to be keying in on God's faithfulness to them.

Oftentimes we read the first part of Deuteronomy 7. I would like to read the last part of it. We need to think of this in terms of the Exodus. As a matter of fact, down in verses 18 and 19, He brings this out.

He had just been talking to them about the need to keep the commandments and the covenant.

Deuteronomy 7:12 Then it shall come to pass, because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the mercy which He swore to your fathers.

So, He is saying that He is going to be faithful to His end of the bargain.

Deuteronomy 7:13-15 And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flock, in the land of which He swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed

above all peoples; there shall not be a male or female barren among you or among your livestock. And the LORD will take away from you all sickness, and will afflict you with none of the terrible diseases of Egypt which you have known, but will lay them on all those who hate you.

What a wonderful promise of health and healing, and of keeping us from disease!

Deuteronomy 7:16, 18-19 And you shall destroy all the peoples whom the LORD your God delivers over to you; your eye shall have no pity on them; nor shall you serve their gods, for that will be a snare to you, . . . you shall not be afraid of them, but you shall remember well what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt: the great trials which your eyes saw, the signs and the wonders, the mighty hand and the outstretched arm, by which the LORD your God brought you out. So shall the LORD your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid.

As I said, think of this in terms of the Exodus. We want to put our minds back to the time of them coming out of Egypt. They had just been through ten horrible plagues, and had actually experienced three of them. The first three descended upon Israelites as well as the Egyptians. They saw what God is able to do from a firsthand experience.

They felt it. They had seen it. They had walked through it. They had lived through it.

Beyond that, they had seen Egypt plundered by God opening up the Egyptians' minds to giving Israel their valuables as payment for their years of servitude in Egypt.

And then, on top of all that, they marched out of Egypt, out of the land of Goshen—all of them, and many others who had decided to mix with them—behind a pillar of cloud, and of fire in the night. One would think that if he had just experienced all of these things himself—10 plagues—and seen all these things happen in Egypt, been given millions of dollars, and then marched out without any opposition, that there would be an impression on

the mind that God was very willing to help. God had done all these things for the Israelites. They should have had some idea of what God was willing to do for them.

He had just defeated the greatest nation on earth at that time, and He was willing to do it again if He had to. And with the power that He displayed in all the miracles, in all the plagues, everything that He had done, He could do it without even lifting a finger.

All He had to do was speak a word, and all of Egypt was laid waste.

Exodus 14 is the account of the Red Sea crossing one week after they had left Egypt, the land of Goshen, and Rameses in particular. Pharaoh had a change of heart again, and so he got all his chariots together, and they marched out after the Israelites before they had actually left the territory of Egypt.

Exodus 14:10 And when Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians marched after them. So they were very afraid, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD

.

Listen to what they said:

Exodus 14:11-12 Then they said to Moses, "Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you so dealt with us, to bring us up out of Egypt? Is this not the word that we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians?' For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness."

One week is all it took them to forget the great power of God to save them. One week! That was it! Here they were crying, "Oh no, we're going to die out here! waaahhhhhh!"

Here is their first big test out in the wilderness and they just failed miserably. Even Moses, if you would go on and look at the rest of the story—Moses must have expressed something to God because God answers him rather

sharply. He said, "Don't just stand there talking with Me about it, do something!" So he says, "Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord." God says, "Why do you cry to Me?"

Exodus 14:15 "Tell the children of Israel to go forward."

"Look! I've already shown you that I was going to do these things. I told you I would bring you out! I'll take you out on eagles' wings if I have to. Move!"

And they did.

Exodus 14:30-31 So the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Thus Israel saw the great work which the LORD had done in Egypt; so the people feared the LORD, and believed the LORD and His servant Moses.

God saved them despite their faithlessness, despite their ingratitude, despite their awful attitude, thinking that God would have done all these things just to let them die in the wilderness a week later. He saved them despite their not having the foresight to see that He had already promised to bring them into the land that He was going to give them, which He had sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They just forgot it all, because of the circumstances in which they were in at the time. It was like God had never done anything for them.

But, He saved them anyway despite all those terrible things that they were expressing to Him and to Moses.

And then they believed God, it says; and Moses; and they feared, but for how long?

Exodus 15:22-25 follows the Song of Miriam. They are dancing on the seashore. They see the Egyptians dead. They are making up songs. They are shouting, "Hallelujahs!"

Exodus 15:22 So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water.

It is getting worse! That had had been a week before. God does this astounding miracle at the Red Sea and that only impresses them for about 3 days.

Exodus 15:23-25 Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet. There He made a statute and an ordinance for them, and there He tested them.

He tested their attitude. He tested their response. And despite their grumbling again, saying, "Oh no! We're going to die!" He gave them what they wanted. And He called this a test. They complained to high heaven. But, He was faithful to that covenant; faithful to His promise that He would bring them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land despite them. He performed another astounding miracle by throwing a tree into the water.

But, it had only taken three days this time for them to totally lose sight of God and all that He had done for them, and all that He had promised that He would do for them.

Exodus 16:1 And they journeyed from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the Wilderness of Sin
...

I have always felt that that phrase, "Wilderness of Sin," was one of the greatest ironies of all time! I wonder if it was called the "Wilderness of Sin" before or after the children of Israel walked through it?

Exodus 16:1-3 . . . which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they departed from the land of Egypt. Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the children of Israel said to them, "Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt . . .

This time they are not just dying by the hand of the Egyptians, now they want God to kill them for some reason.

Exodus 16:3 . . . when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

So, last time it was water, this time it is food.

Exodus 16:4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not."

Do you know what God set up here? A forty-year test all around this idea of food. And they failed it. They failed it within the first week again! But, He continued it for forty long years to give them a daily reminder of His providence for them; His faithfulness to the covenant that He had made with them.

So, seven days later, He received the answer to His test. Notice verses 27 through 30. Let me explain that God had told them that the manna would be happening on the first six days of the week, and then on the seventh day, there was going to be none. So, on the preparation day, they should gather twice what they would normally gather, so that they would have some left over for the Sabbath.

He would provide for them all seven days of the week. In whatever circumstance, He would give them manna every day. But, on this one day, the Sabbath, they were going to have to provide for themselves by picking up double the day before.

Exodus 16:27-30 Now it happened that some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found none. And the LORD said to Moses, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? See! For the LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day." So the people rested on the seventh day.

They failed—at least some of them did. They thought that they could just disregard what God said and it would be there for them to pick up, but it was not there.

They did not believe God. So, here, less than two months since escaping Egypt, God has already tested them at least three times. Now, this should give us a clue to show us how God works with us. He works with us the same exact way that He worked with the children of Israel.

He takes a length of time—it does not matter what length the period is, generally our lifetime—and then He fills it with tests. He sprinkles it liberally with tests to see what kind of decisions we are going to make.

Now, the tests are not just given without any background. The tests are interspersed with instruction about the proper way to live.

Notice in this one that He told them specifically, "Go out every morning, there will be manna on the ground like the dew from heaven, and collect an omer for each person in the family." That is pretty easy. Simple instructions. "And on the sixth day, go out and gather double what you gather on the first five days of the week." Simple!

It is hard to get that wrong. But they did. They got it wrong.

He does the same with us. He gives us instructions in various levels of understanding, and then He gives us tests every once in a while to see how well we have taken in what He has given us.

He wants to see whether we have absorbed these things into practice in our lives. Whether in practicing them we have actually ingrained them into our character. No good teacher would simply fill all of the time with instruction. He needs to know whether the students are getting it. Whether he can speed up, or else needs to go back and reiterate some instruction, principle, or what have you.

God is the best teacher of all. He knows when to give a test, and He knows when to give instruction. He knows when to punish, and send the dunce into the corner.

And, if the student passes, He can go onto the next bit. Every once in a while, He will throw the test in again, one that He had given before, just to see if it had been a fluke, or whether you actually had taken it in, absorbed it, and put it into practice.

But, normally, after that point, you go onto another area of testing. And if we fail, then He gives us another test in kind. It may be in the greater realm of money-related tests. If you pass the first test, He may give you something bigger to worry about. If you fail that one, well, maybe it was too much for us at the time, so He might give us a little test in the same general area, but maybe slightly off to the side to see if we can come up to that level in stages.

Now, we do not normally see these things in their big picture and how they happen, but He has got these things mapped out for us. He has got a lesson plan for each one of us and He is slowly guiding us through that lesson plan to bring us to the stage where He wants us. And then, at that point, we pass.

So, let us think back to the Israelites, here. Not just to these things that we have already gone over, but the whole wilderness wandering; the whole conquest of the land; the whole period of the judges; the whole period of the kings; the whole history of Israel. How many times was Israel tested regarding food and drink? How often was Israel tested regarding leadership, or idolatry, or sex, or whether God would protect them or not?

There are probably others. I am sure that there were others that do not fit into those particular categories.

Sometimes the tests were combinations of these. In Exodus 32 we have the incident of the Golden Calf. That involved four of these things at least! It involved food and drink because they ate and drank, right? It involved sex because they rose up to play, which is a euphemism for deviant sexual practices in the cult of the golden calf. There was leadership, because they had given up on Moses and God, obviously. And, the big one was idolatry—they actually put up a golden calf.

One test, four areas! And, they failed miserably on all four counts.

God does this with us too.

So often, God uses one thing with multiple uses. He will do that with us. God kept testing them throughout their wilderness journey, and it continued after they entered the Promised Land. He never stopped testing Israel from day one until they went into captivity, and were "lost." He had tested them, and tested them, and tested them. Every situation was a new test—every situation. God does not lose these opportunities. He is a very efficient God. He has only a limited amount of time to work with! A human lifespan is so short compared with all eternity.

He used every situation to test them both individually, and as a group. They either obeyed God's instruction and received blessings, or they rejected His way and reaped the consequences. Read the Book! That is what it says. When they did well, He gave them all kinds of stuff. When they did evil, He punished them. Cause and effect!

Why do we have things like the "blessings and cursings chapter"? Because He is showing us that that is how He works. We have the "choose life" verses. Choose life, you live; choose death, you die! That is pretty easy!

He did this for over 800 years with the people of Israel until He had had it up to here, and sent both Judah and Israel into captivity, effectively divorcing Himself from them. You find that in Hosea 1:2 and 2:2-3. He had to put her away. It had just gotten to be too much.

But, think of the longsuffering of God! 800 years! That is a long time. That is only counting from the Exodus. You know He had worked with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph before then.

So, is not God faithful in longsuffering?

Israel did some terribly rebellious and perverse things in their history. And God does not spare them at all in His Word. He gives us every word on them.

But, even though they were very evil at times, God kept His end of the covenant perfectly. He never gave up on that covenant. There were times when He was tempted to do away with the whole lot of them, and start over again. "Moses, I think I will make of you a great nation, and wipe these out, and start over with you."

Well, Moses said, "That wouldn't be the God that I know." And, God said, "You're right, Moses. We will just go on from here."

But He never actually gave up on them. Never. He divorced them. But, in fact, He has still not given up on them at all! He has only put them aside for a time. His plan provides for eventually saving all of them through the New Covenant, if they so choose. That is what Paul says in Romans 11:26. "All Israel shall be saved."

God is not like me with my dog, giving up after only six months. Shows you my attention span and my patience. God's patience is so much infinitely better. 800 years just in that form, then He put them aside, and decided to wait for a better time.

Let us see that better time in Ezekiel 37. I am not interested in going through the entire prophecy here, I just want to pick out a few little principles.

Ezekiel 37:1-2 The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around.

I always get this picture of Ezekiel being suspended by the scruff of his neck, and being passed around all these bones in this valley. I do not know how he did it, but one guy was picked up by his hair and transported somewhere, so who know how this was.

Ezekiel 37:2 He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry.

These bones had been sitting there for a long time. They were *very* dry.

Ezekiel 37:11 Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!'

They thought that it was the end for them. They are dead. They do not have any hope. They believe that they have been totally and irrevocably cut off from God. So, God says to Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 37:12-14 Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it," says the LORD.'

As only dead people can know, they understood how they had treated God. They can look back over their lives, and see what a wretched job that they

did in keeping the covenant which they had promised to keep. They could also look with perfect hindsight at how God had treated them despite all the things that they had done to thumb their nose in His face.

As it says in one place, they stuck a stick up His nose.

Such a terrible way of treating God. But God replied not in kind, but in kindness and faithfulness. He always gave them a way and a time to repent. He treated them in a way that should have led to their repentance. And, they had always spurned it.

They know as only the dead can know just how they wasted their chance to fulfill God's purpose for them. That is what we see in verse 11. They see with perfect clarity now that everything is just down to bones. And they think, "We did this to ourselves. There's no hope. There's no chance that any good can come out of this. We are done. We are nothing."

But God disagrees with them. That is why He tells Ezekiel to prophesy the way He does. He had never entirely cut them off. Certainly not for all eternity. He had cut them off physically. He had cut them off from being His bride.

He had another purpose to work out, and so He put them aside. And when He picks them back up again, God is going to make some changes so that it will work out right this time. He will give them His Spirit so that they can truly know Him.

Notice that He says that twice in these few verses. "Then they will know!"

Then they will know because they will have the minds to know. They will be given the understanding so they can see these differences, these contrasts as they happen, rather than after the result is already long in the past. They will be able to make these decisions by the power of God's Spirit for the good and not for the evil.

I want you to see how God looks at Israel, and how much He longs for their repentance, and what He is going to do when they finally respond to Him. He cannot wait! That is the feeling I get from this passage. He cannot wait to

be able to bestow these things upon them. He cannot wait for there to be a righteous relationship between them.

Hosea 2:14-20 Therefore, behold, I will allure her [Israel], will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her [Where have we heard that word before?]. I will give her vineyards from there, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope; she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. "And it shall be, in that day," says the LORD, "that you will call Me 'My Husband,' and no longer call Me 'My Master,' for I will take from her mouth the names of the Baals, and they shall be remembered by their name no more. In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, with the birds of the air, and with the creeping things of the ground. Bow and sword of battle I will shatter from the earth, to make them lie down safely. I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me In righteousness and justice, in loving kindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the LORD."

Hosea 2:23 Then I will sow her for Myself in the earth, and I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; then I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' And they shall say, 'You are my God!'"

God's faithful love for Israel really emerges in this passage. Though she had strayed so far as to even forget Him altogether (which you find in verse 13, which we did not read, the very last line there), she went after her lovers and she forgot Me, says the Lord. Almost as if He did not even exist.

But He still, despite all that, faithfully brings her back into her own and gives her even more than He had promised her before. Something far better than He had ever offered her. Of course, I am thinking of the New Covenant, and all the better promises that go with it.

Can you imagine the wonderful reconciliation that there is going to be between God and His people Israel? They will finally be on the same wavelength. Those people, who were once dry bones, will look back on

history and see how generation after generation of Israelites had all behaved in exactly the same way. They had all rejected God, except for various ones and twos, little bits and pieces here and there that formed the nucleus of what became the firstfruits.

They can see the disparity between the lives of those who obeyed God and kept the covenant, and those who disobeyed God and did not keep the covenant.

And they will say, "Wow! What fools we were thinking that we could make paradise on earth on our own. To think that we thought we were wiser than God, and live our lives in a way which we guided ourselves. Look at where that led us? It led us to death! But, look at these ones who decided to let God test them and tried to actually pass the test!"

The Davids, the Samuels, the various prophets, and of course, the true Christians, most of whom, from all we see in the Bible, are of Israel.

They will be able to look at these lives and see that the scales do not match, do not balance. But these few—144,000—are so much happier, have so much more, so much more blessed because they decided to engage God in the education that He was trying to give them.

Look at the hope that doing such a thing brings!

Finally, Israel seeing these things will begin to fulfill her purpose toward God. Once she begins to do that, she will then begin to fulfill her purpose to the rest of the world as God's witnesses that He is God.

They have to know Him before they can witness that He is who He is.

Isaiah 41:8 But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham My friend.

Let us take this in a spiritual sense, and start to turn the sermon a bit back toward us. We are the Israel of God. We are the chosen of Jacob. We are Abraham's seed and spiritual Jews. We can take this as something said directly to us, not just to physical Israel.

Isaiah 41:9-13 You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest regions, and said to you, 'You are My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away: Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.' Behold, all those who were incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; they shall be as nothing, and those who strive with you shall perish. You shall seek them and not find them—those who contended with you. Those who war against you shall be as nothing, as a nonexistent thing. For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.'"

God has not cast us away. He has chosen us. In spite of our frequent sins, our weaknesses, our ignorance, and our faithlessness, He is still holding our right hand in our walk with Him. He said that He would even uphold us, not just hold our hand as we are walking, but if need be, He will put us in the palm of His hand and carry us as we need to be carried.

He will use all of His strength—and that is no small thing, because He has all the strength in the universe to carry us, to help us in our times of need. He is with us, He says. We know from the New Testament that He is in us! That is how close that He is. He is there within a thought of us.

What hope and comfort because of this promise here of strength, help, and guidance.

You know that Jesus says something very similar in the New Testament, in Matthew 28. In the past, we have used these scriptures just to tell us what we should be doing—the commission of the church. But it is so much more than that.

Matthew 28:16-17 Then the eleven disciples [Judas had hanged himself by this time] went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them [He had told them to meet Him there]. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted.

Now this is important because it is what Jesus says in response—to alleviate the doubt.

Matthew 28:18 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth."

All the strength in the universe has been put into Jesus Christ's hands—our Elder Brother, the Head of the church, our High Priest, and Mediator of the Covenant before God.

He has got the reins of the universe in His Hands. He is the One upholding us. He is the One holding our right hand. He is the One dispensing the Spirit for our strengthening, for our education, for our comfort. And it is all there for Him to give as needed.

Then He says:

Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore. . .

Look! You have got the power of the universe behind you!

Matthew 28:19-20 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

So be it. This is true. What more do we need to encourage us?

He says, "Look. I know some of you do not fully believe. But God has given Me everything. I hold all power and authority, and you do not need to fear. You do not need to worry that I will not back you up. So, go! Go where I have sent you. Preach the gospel. Make disciples. Baptize them. Teach them. Do all the things that I have instructed you. And never forget, never forget, that I am there with you every step of the way, every minute of your day, even to the very bitter end. Whether that bitter end is your death, or whether that bitter end is My return and the destruction of the tribulation and the Day

of the Lord. I am with you. Why fear, then, what man can do to you? Fear God. Do His work. Repent! Grow! Just do it. I am there to help you."

We may not see Him. We may feel that He is far from us, but our feelings are sadly deceived many times. One of the best things that Joe Tkach, Sr. ever said was, "If you feel God has gone far away, ask yourself one question, "Who moved?"

God sure did not! He says right here, "I am with you."

If we feel that God has gone far away, actually the distance that we are feeling is because of our own unfaithfulness to the covenant, not to His. He works His end out perfectly every time.

He is there. It is one of His names. It is what He told Abraham when He had to sacrifice Isaac. "Do not worry, Abraham. I am here."

For whatever we have to do, whatever tests come up, whatever pit we get cast into, He is there with us. All we have to do is draw upon that strength, because nothing happens to His people that He has not had His hand in!

So, if He has cast us down, there is a good reason for it. That is when we need to say, "There's something wrong with me. Let me get back to the covenant, get back to the love of God, get back to all the things that I need to do to be at His side."

John Reid always attributes to me the comments about this section in Hebrews 13. I am just a conduit. They came from my dad, from his Hebrews Bible study years ago, and I just gave them in a sermonette back in 1992 that John Reid happened to hear, and so it stuck with him this whole time. It was a good thing one way or another.

Hebrews 13:5 Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

As we have said before, in the Greek that is five negatives.

"I will never, never, never, never, never leave you!"

I think more literally, it is, "I will never leave you, no, nor I will never forsake you." It is very emphatic. "Never will I leave you! Never will I forsake you! I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Hebrews 13:6 So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

We have no need to worry. Is that not part of the Sermon on the Mount?

"Why do you worry about what you are going to eat? And drink? Why do you worry about what you are going to wear? Why do you worry about your house? Why do you worry about money, and all these things that are just distracting you from the true life that I have given you the opportunity to live? Be satisfied with what I have given you. I will take care of those things. You just seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and I have plenty in heaven of these things to give you."

All these things, He says, will be added unto you. Do not worry. There is a great deal of encouragement in the fact that the God of all the universe is there. If we live our lives in subjection to Him—satisfied, or as it says here, content with the things that He has provided—we have no reason to doubt His faithfulness.

This book is a testament to His faithfulness. He never gives up. He is not a man that He should give up.

He will never leave us. That is a promise. He will never give up on us. With this confidence that we should have, we can boldly stride forward without fear toward the hope of the resurrection, and our certain entrance into the Kingdom of God, if we continue in this way.