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Sermon Notes

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God Says: Look to the Past to Learn How Bright Is the Future!

Isaiah 51:1-23

God has called us as Christians to an astonishing work of world-wide salvation, but Satan is very skilled at wrapping our hearts up in invisible CHAINS of fear so that we don't boldly proclaim the gospel to the nations

The Word of God is a sharp, double-edged sword that has POWER TO CUT THROUGH the chains of fear around our hearts and make us BOLD WITNESSES for Christ

Thursday, October 31, 1991... a night I will never forget, the night of the Halloween Hurricane in Massachusetts

There was a movie made later about it with George Clooney: "The Perfect Storm" ... a triple storm system that collided and whipped itself into a massive frenzy... The storm lashed the East Coast of the United States with high waves and coastal flooding... waves over 30 feet high crashed into the eastern seaboard, including Massachusetts where Christi and I were living at that time

The previous year, 1990, I had led a Halloween outreach to Salem, a center of witchcraft, and had had an amazing night of witnessing (it's a night of partying for local college students, and a night of recruiting for the witches); I even had a run-in with Laurie Cabot's daughter (Laurie Cabot was the official witch of MA) and with the Salem Police who she'd called to arrest me (though the police said I'd done nothing wrong); a year later, I recruited a bunch of people from our small church to go to Salem and witness; I wrote a tract on the Bible and the occult and printed a bunch of them. READY FOR THE OUTREACH!!

But as the day drew near, I had more and more FEAR of the outreach; Satan was working on my heart. Then this massive storm came, and I thought of calling it off. I rationalized that the college students wouldn't be out on such a horribly stormy night. Christi urged me to go through with it and I barely made it through that work day... a Thursday. About lunch time, I was reviewing Isaiah 51 (I was memorizing the Book of Isaiah at the time); God used these words to convict me of my fear of man:

Isaiah 51:12-16 "I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you fear mortal men, the sons of men, who are but grass, ¹³ that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor? ¹⁴ The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in their dungeon, nor will they lack bread. ¹⁵ For I am the LORD your God, who churns up the sea so that its waves roar-- the LORD Almighty is his name. ¹⁶ I have put my words in your mouth and covered you with the shadow of my hand-- I who set the heavens in place, who laid the foundations of the earth, and who say to Zion, 'You are my people.'"

WOW! So many points of contact for me!! I was living in terror of what people would do to me. I was forgetting God's amazing power!! I was more fearful of man than of God, so I didn't want to witness!! And God was CHURNING UP THE SEA SO THAT ITS WAVES WERE ROARING!! Like I'd never seen in all my life!!! And God was going to rescue spiritual prisoners through us!! And God had put His words in my mouth! And God was going to cover me with the shadow of His hand!! And I MUST go and lead that outreach!!

Well... that night was one of the most incredible of my life. We witnessed to TONS of college students who were out in force (Christi was right about that!) I witnessed to a native American man who was blind... he had a leather vest and all these talismans on him and had two beautiful women hanging on him; and he debated me for a long time about witchcraft and the Bible... dozens of college students were there listening to us. Several came to faith in Christ as other members of our team talked with them.

The next night we went on a church retreat on Cape Cod; the ocean was still heaving and churning. We got to the retreat center and a young woman named Heather came in, anxiously asking "Where's Andy?" Heather had been involved in the occult before she came to Christ. She wanted to know if I was okay. I said "Sure... what's up?" She asked if I had gone to Salem the night before and if I was okay. I said it went great. She had heard NOTHING. She said "I had a dream two nights ago about you and was afraid for you. In the dream I was in the town hall (where our church plant met for worship) and it was night. It was dark and scary. Satan was there and was threatening me. You came and told Satan to be gone. And he crashed through a window and left me. The weirdest thing was that Satan was disguised as a blind Indian man with a leather vest!" I asked her if she'd heard anything about the outreach. She said "No!" I was stunned at her dream and then what happened to me.

NONE OF THAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF I YIELDED TO THE
INVISIBLE CHAINS OF FEAR SATAN WAS WRAPPING AROUND MY
HEART

God used Isaiah 51 to help free me from fear of man in witnessing. Isaiah 51 as a whole teaches us to LOOK BACK at what God has done so we can LOOK AHEAD to the future unafraid!!

That's exactly what God is calling on Israel and on us to do in Isaiah 51! Look back at what God has already done... so you can look ahead with confidence to the future

The basic idea is this: despite all appearances, God will most certainly finish his plan of salvation in this sin-cursed world, and he will bring about perfect righteousness, salvation for his sinful people, resulting in eternal joy and celebration. Any doubts we may have about that should be instantly swept away when we consider God's astonishing track record. The same God who created a nation from an elderly man and his barren wife can create a righteous nation out of nothing. The same God who made a way through the sea can make a way through vicious enemies to establish Zion for all eternity. **Look to the past to learn that the future is staggeringly bright!**

The immediate context is powerful. God is speaking a word of comfort to the Jews for all the suffering they are going to endure at the hands of the Babylonians. Again, keep in mind that Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, has not yet even been born. But through the prophet, God looks beyond the time of his wrath and judgment on his people. He addresses his remnant as if he were looking backward at the events of the Babylonian conquest and exile. He speaks in verse 3 of the Lord comforting Zion (Jerusalem), restoring her waste places and making them like the Garden of Eden. These words would mean nothing if God were not going to make Zion into a waste place. He speaks in verses 17-20 very directly of the destruction God is going to bring on Jerusalem as a display of his righteous wrath against the Jews for their sins. Jerusalem will be drinking to the bottom a bitter cup of God's wrath, tasting the dregs in her mouth. A remnant will be all that survives.

But in this chapter, God addresses that remnant. They are tormented by the memories of that slaughter, of the destruction of their beloved Zion. After that, they are tormented by the taunts and threats of their captors (vs. 7, 12-13, 23 all mention mocking terrifying tormenters). God is promising that these mere mortals (vs. 12) will soon be drinking the same cup, God's righteous wrath and judgment for their sins (vs. 23).

By contrast, God is making some amazing promises to his chosen people. He will repopulate the godly nation, he will establish again his people in their beautiful land.

But his promises soar above even that: God will populate the heavenly Zion with people from all over the earth; He will destroy the entire universe, heaven and earth (vs. 6) and will create a New Heaven and New Earth (not named here but implied in verse 16; he will openly name them in Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22) in which his chosen people will dwell with great joy (vs. 16).

Until that happens, God wants his people filled with faith, hope, and power despite the taunts of their oppressors and the apparent impossibility of these grand promises being fulfilled, **so they can do the work of missions that will fulfill this chapter!!!** So he calls on them again and again to awake and listen to him, shaking off weariness, sadness, fear and depression. In order to be confident of the future, God's people must look to the past as recorded in Scripture.

- The same God who created the first heavens and the earth will create the final New Heavens and New Earth.
- The same God who first called a people out of nothing from Abraham and Sarah will again create a people for his pleasure, to dwell in righteousness for eternity.
- The same God who led Israel through the Red Sea and slaughtered Rahab the sea monster (symbol of death—in the waves of the Sea and also Pharaoh's army) will lead us through death to resurrection glory
- The same God who built the earthly Zion through David will also build the heavenly Zion through Jesus Christ

Look to God's actions in the past so you can look ahead with hope to the future. Then you can look at your tormenters unafraid and know their final end.

I. Listen to Me! The God of Abraham Will Again Create Righteousness from Nothing (vs. 1-6)

A. Seeking Righteousness? Look to Abraham and Sarah (vs. 1-2)

Isaiah 51:1-2 "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.

1. God calls to the godly in every generation... first the exiles in Babylon, then all the elect in every generation
 - a. To those who “**pursue** righteousness and who **seek** the Lord”
2. He calls on them to LISTEN and to LOOK
 - a. “Listen to me” (by hearing the words of the prophets)
 - b. “Look” by faith to the rock from which you were cut: GOD’S FAITHFULNESS TO HIS PROMISE TO ABRAHAM
3. Don’t listen to your heart... and don’t look at the circumstances
4. Look back to Abraham (the rock from which you were cut)... and to Sarah, our spiritual mother

Galatians 3:7 ... those who believe are children of Abraham.

Romans 4:16-17 all Abraham's offspring-- not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed-- the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

- a. Look to the supernatural circumstances of the origin of the Jewish nation
- b. A barren couple, no hope of children... God made a promise to him and he believed it
- c. There wouldn’t even have been a Jewish nation if it weren’t for the miracle God did with Abraham and Sarah!!

Vs. 2 “When I called him, he was but one; and I blessed him and made him many!”

- d. So you exiles to Babylon, you think the Jewish nation is over and all is lost? Think again!! The same God who raised up Isaac from a 100 year old man’s body and from the dead womb of an old, barren woman can raise up a multitude of children from the remnant that were dragged to Babylon
- e. You aliens and strangers in this world... you think God cannot redeem the elect from closed Muslim countries??!! The same God who raised up Isaac and a nation from Abraham will save all the elect

B. Zion Will Be Transformed: From Desert of Sin to Paradise of Joy (vs. 3)

Isaiah 51:3 The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of

the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.

1. Zion = Jerusalem, the city where God dwells with His people
2. God is not finished with earthly Jerusalem; He will comfort Jerusalem and look with compassion on all her ruins... Jerusalem will be DESTROYED, turned to rubble by the wrath of God... but that is not the end of the story
3. The image (AGAIN) is of a desert made to bloom like the Garden of Eden!... The sounds of celebration, of worship and joy, will fill her streets once again!
 - a. Exactly what Zechariah the prophet described in his vision in Zechariah 8:4-8
 - i) The streets of Jerusalem will ONCE AGAIN be filled with old men and women watching streets FILLED with boys and girls playing there
 - ii) You may think it's impossible, but God can do it
 - iii) God will save his people from the EAST and the WEST and gather them to live in Jerusalem... they will be His people, and He will be faithful and righteous to them as their God
4. BETTER THAN just the physical Jews coming back: God will call children of Abraham from every tribe, tongue, language, and nation to the heavenly Jerusalem to live forever!! The New Jerusalem will be BETTER THAN the Garden of Eden!!!

C. God's Salvation Goes Forth and Will Outlast this Universe (vs. 4-6)

Isaiah 51:4-6 "Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.

1. This is MISSIONS language... GOSPEL language... the "light to the nations" is the gospel of Jesus Christ; the "righteousness of God" is the gospel of Jesus Christ

Romans 1:16-17 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

2. God's righteousness draws near SPEEDILY... God's salvation is COMING... it is on the way

- a. Even the DISTANT ISLANDS will look to God and wait in hope for His powerful ARM to set them free from sin and death

John Paton, a Scottish missionary in the 19th century, courageously brought the gospel to the New Hebrides Islands of the South Pacific, to a tribe of cannibals who had murdered and eaten the last missionary that had landed on that island in full view of the ship that brought him! Paton courageously lived among those people, facing the wicked darkness of their hearts; and God allowed him to lead many of them to Christ! The “distant islands” heard of Christ through John Paton

Don Richardson went as a missionary to Dutch New Guinea, to the Sawi people, who were also cannibalistic headhunters, and who revered treachery; when they first heard the gospel account, Judas was the hero for betraying Jesus! But Richardson found a way to explain the gospel using an aspect of their culture – the “peace child” – a son a rival tribe’s kind that was given to ensure peace between the warring tribes; as long as the Peace Child was alive, there would be peace; God used that idea to lead many of the Sawi people to Christ

All of this missionary success is predicted in Isaiah:

Isaiah 42:3-4 . In his law the islands will put their hope.

Isaiah 42:10 Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it, you islands, and all who live in them.

Isaiah 49:1, 6 Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

And now... here in Isaiah 51:

Isaiah 51:5 My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.

3. God is working an AMAZING SALVATION even for the distant islands to trust in and find salvation
4. The end of this story is nothing less than a NEW CREATION... a NEW HEAVENS and NEW EARTH!

Isaiah 51:6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.

2 Peter 3:12-13 the day of God ... will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

Revelation 21:1-2 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

II. Listen to Me! The God of the Exodus Will Again Make a Way for His People (vs. 7-11)

A. Do Not Fear the Taunts of Men... God's Salvation Will Outlast Them (vs. 7-8)

Isaiah 51:7-8 "Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults. For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations."

1. God calls on His people—His godly in every generation—again
 - a. **“you who know what is right”**
 - b. **“you people who have my law in your hearts”**
 - c. THIS IS THE LANGUAGE OF REGENERATION
2. He urges them NOT TO FEAR THEIR ENEMIES... do not be afraid of those who reproach you or taunt you or insult you
 - a. Nehemiah faced this while rebuilding the wall around the rubble-filled city of Jerusalem
 - b. Sanballat and Tobias opposed them and mocked them as they were working

Nehemiah 4:3 "What they are building-- if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!"

3. So also the evangelists and missionaries in every generation who take the gospel to hardened sinners, will have to face reproach and insults for the name of Christ; Jesus told us to rejoice!!

Illus. Jonathan MacDonald, Kazakh man looked him in the face and said "I HATE you! I hate what you stand for, what you are doing to the culture of my people!"

Matthew 5:11-12 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

4. If those enemies don't repent, a moth will devour them like wool... their worm will never die and the fire will never be quenched
5. BUT GOD'S SALVATION will shine like the sun for all eternity!!

B. Awake, O Lord! What You Did Before, Do It Again! (vs. 9-10)

Isaiah 51:9-10 Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over?

1. The redeemed in every generation CALL TO GOD to do what He did in the past!
This is PRAYER
2. The same God who cut the sea monster through with the sword of His word (Red Sea crossing)... RAHAB = death, the terror of the deep sea, like a monster
3. The same God who dried up the waters of the great deep (Red Sea crossing) so that the redeemed might cross over
4. MOVE OUT O ARM OF THE LORD! O Mighty God! Do in our day what you did in the past!

Application: PRAY FOR GOD'S MIGHTY ARMY to be unleashed in the spread of the gospel

C. The Ransomed Will Sing Eternally (vs. 11)

Isaiah 51:11 The ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Salvation songs for all eternity! "Everlasting joy" will crown their heads... they will never weep again! He will wipe every tear from their eyes forever!

This cannot be the mere rebuilding of Jerusalem under Nehemiah and Ezra... they still had the burden of enemies that surrounded them; the terror of being dominated by Gentile power, including the Greeks and the Romans

This is only fulfilled when at last the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven and God wipes every tear from our eyes

III. How Dare You Fear Man More Than Me? Through You I Will Establish Eternity! (vs. 12-16)

A. How Dare You Fear Man More than the Lord the Creator? (vs. 12-13)

Isaiah 51:12-13 "I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you fear mortal men, the sons of men, who are but grass, that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor?"

1. God challenges His weak, small, feeble, frail children in every generation NOT TO FEAR HUMAN OPPOSITION
2. He reminds them that He is the one who comforts them, especially by His redeeming work in Christ
3. He commands them to FEAR GOD more than they fear men
4. It greatly dishonors God to fear man more than we fear Him!
 - a. Now we do not minimize the great suffering of our brothers and sisters who are imprisoned, starved, tortured, beaten, interrogated, and murdered for Christ around the world
 - b. **We do not minimize the sufferings of those who were beheaded by Isis;** or detained for questioning by the religious police in Iran; or who are imprisoned for leading house churches in China
 - c. BUT ALL OF THEM AND US must learn to fear the Lord far more than we fear those who oppose us

Luke 12:4-5 "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. ⁵ But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.

- d. American Christians do not face anywhere near this level of suffering; we fail to evangelize because someone might frown at us, or stop befriending us; or be rude to us; or slam a door in our face

APPLICATION: how does fear of people act like an invisible chain to keep you from witnessing? How can you use the sharp sword of the Spirit to cut those chains, so you can grow in courage in 2015 and witness like you've never witnessed before?

B. The Oppressor Will Die, the Prisoners Will Be Freed (vs. 13-14)

Isaiah 51:13-14 ... you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor? The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in their dungeon, nor will they lack bread.

1. God will set all prisoners free, of all His chosen children
2. Satan is the real oppressor... and he cannot stop the advance of the gospel and the deliverance of the elect from his dark Kingdom

Luke 11:21-22 "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. ²² But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils.

3. Satan cannot stop the prisoners from being released by the Holy Spirit and the power of the gospel!!

C. The Lord Who Rules the Sea Will Use You to Establish Eternity (vs. 15-16)

Isaiah 51:15-16 For I am the LORD your God, who churns up the sea so that its waves roar-- the LORD Almighty is his name. I have put my words in your mouth and covered you with the shadow of my hand-- I who set the heavens in place, who laid the foundations of the earth, and who say to Zion, 'You are my people.'

1. This is a direct reminder of God's splitting of the Red Sea by a powerful east wind
2. PERFECT STORM: God chose to use me that night! He put His words in my mouth and covered me in the shadow of His hand... the God who set the heavens in place and laid the foundations of the earth and who called me to be a part of His people
3. So God wills to use each of us to advance the gospel and establish His Kingdom on earth
4. WE NEED TO PLEASE GOD AND ADVANCE THE GOSPEL; Satan will use intimidation and try to cow us so we stop preaching the gospel

IV. Wake Up! The Time Has Come for Your Tormenters to Fall (vs. 17-23)

A. The Cup of God's Wrath Made You Fall (vs. 17-20)

Isaiah 51:17-20 Awake, awake! Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men stagger. Of all the sons she bore there was none to guide her; of all the sons she reared there was none to take her by the hand. These double calamities have come upon you-- who can comfort you? --ruin and destruction, famine and sword-- who can console you? Your sons have fainted; they lie at the head of every street, like antelope caught in a net. They are filled with the wrath of the LORD and the rebuke of your God.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile to Babylon were NO ACCIDENT... they were the cup of God's righteous judgment and wrath put into the hands of His sinful people for a time... they sinned, He punished them

B. BUT... Those Days Are Over! (vs. 21-22)

Isaiah 51:21-22 Therefore hear this, you afflicted one, made drunk, but not with wine. This is what your Sovereign LORD says, your God, who defends his people: "See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger; from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again.

1. This a word of encouragement to afflicted Jerusalem saying the time of judgment is over... for a little while, God punished Jerusalem for her sins
2. But now that cup has been removed... the time of suffering is over, and the cup has been removed from Jerusalem's hand

C. Now It's Time for Your Tormentors to Drink It (vs. 23)

Isaiah 51:23 I will put it into the hands of your tormentors, who said to you, 'Fall prostrate that we may walk over you.' And you made your back like the ground, like a street to be walked over."

V. Applications

A. Look to the Past to Gain Hope for the Future

1. That is the main message of this chapter... so DO IT!
2. So much of the Bible is history... even ancient history
3. It is written so that we can learn the character of an unchanging God; and know that His power is undiminished and active today
4. It is written to give us HOPE... we look back so we can look ahead
5. Be in the Word every day; as you read a story about something God did in the past, ask the Holy Spirit to press its lessons into your heart and give you a buoyant hope for the future

6. Also trace out God's mighty actions in your own lives
7. Raise your "Ebenezer" stone... this far, God has helped you; He will keep on helping you in the future

B. Look Especially to Christ Crucified and Resurrected

1. We will never be done looking back to the cross and the empty tomb
2. These are the central acts of all history; the might works of God for our salvation
3. Trust in Him; look to Him; believe in Him for FUTURE GRACE

C. Marvel at How Specifically God Predicted Missions in Isaiah... and Get Involved

1. Chapter after chapter lay out God's overarching plan for all history
2. The centerpiece is the salvation of elect people from every tribe and nation on earth
3. The spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth is God's great purpose

Luke 24:45-48 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

4. FBC is already involved in the spread of the gospel among unreached people groups... but I yearn to see it more and more
5. Pray... Give...Go... Support... Encourage...

D. Look Forward to the New Heavens and New Earth... the New Jerusalem!

1. Yearn for it; delight in it; read about it in Revelation 21-22
2. Look for the day when Isaiah's vision of Isaiah 51—a Jerusalem filled with joyful worship from the exiles who have streamed in from the islands of the earth will be fulfilled
3. Look forward to the day of God and speed its coming

E. Ask God to Deliver You from Fear of People

1. God rebukes fear of man in this chapter
2. He wants us to be BOLD WITNESSES for Him

3. He wants us to have those kinds of stories from courageous witnessing efforts
4. Let's look back at the works of God so we can venture forth unafraid!!