



Benjamin Franklin once said most people return small favors, acknowledge medium ones, and repay the greater ones with ingratitude. I think there's a lot of truth to that statement. If someone does a small favor it is easy enough to do one in return for them. Someone pours a cup of coffee, gives you the best seat, or lets you go first, and you can easily enough return the favor. The medium favors are harder to pay back, so we express thanks and acknowledge the generosity given to us. We might write a letter of thanks or tell the person thank you. We may not pay them back, but we at least acknowledge the gift. But the greatest things done for us are often, most surprisingly, repaid with ingratitude. Consider for example the great sacrifice that someone gives when they serve in the military. They leave their family for months, risk injury and death and sometimes sustain injury or die. Yet many of the millions of people they served will never even remember their names. Or take for example the great price paid by parents for the benefit of their children. Many sleepless nights are endured, countless diapers are changed, meal after meal is served without a single word of thanks. In fact, these efforts are sometimes met with a complaint or rejection. And how many teenagers as they become independent don't respond with ingratitude toward their parents? Most people return small favors, acknowledge medium ones, and repay the greater ones with ingratitude. And I think this statement holds true between us and our God. We like to think we are somehow repaying him with something small when we give back to him. We might like to think we properly acknowledge his medium gifts like a sunny day or a plate of food with a short prayer acknowledging him. Even these gestures fall far short. And how do we respond to his greatest gifts? Today we look at God's Word in Isaiah 43 and see how the people of Israel had repaid God's goodness to them with ingratitude. They had even responded by giving him more of a burden. Instead of their thanksgiving piling up their sin piled up. Isaiah records God's response to all this. We continue our series on "fighting temptation" and see an important truth for us when our guilt piles up.

God reminds the people first how much they already owed him. Earlier in this chapter he speaks of himself as their creator. They owed him everything by this very fact: he was their source of life. But more than that he had also rescued them from slavery in Egypt. God briefly recounts that great event. How could the people ever forget it? Even though over seven hundred years had passed they had to remember. God had rescued them by parting the sea so that a road of dry land appeared. A wall of water rose up on their right and on their left as they crossed the Red Sea in complete safety. The entire army of Egypt, an army with no rival at that time had been pursuing them. But God closed the waters in on their enemy. The best military was no match for God's plan to deliver his people. When the Israelites looked back at the sea, they saw no one left to pursue them. All the Egyptian army was drowned, their chariots lost, and the Egyptians had been completely ruined. The picture God gives of the Egyptian army is like one snuffing out a candle. With a single motion he forever did away with them.

This **rescue was worth remembering over 700 years later** because it is what allowed the nation of Israel to even exist. Without God's rescue from Egypt they would still be slaves or destroyed. But 700 years later they were now a nation that had independence and could enjoy their freedom. Just imagine if the United States is still around in 450 years as an independent nation. Don't you think they'd be celebrating Independence Day with the same if not greater appreciation for what took place? That's how long Israel had to thank God for their freedom and reflect back on his rescue. How could they ever forget?

And yet here God tells them "forget the past, don't ponder the former things..." Why? Not because they are unimportant, but because he is going to do something so much greater. In effect God is saying "You think something like that was great and a wonderful miracle of rescue?! You haven't seen it all yet!" "I'm going to do something new" the Lord says to the people. What is he planning now? (verses 19-20a) *"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. ¹⁹See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. ²⁰The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland..."*

At first reading this you might think: "Water for the jackals and owls? **What's so great about that?**" After all, God moved an entire sea to destroy an entire army and free an entire nation of people 2 million strong. Now he says that a river of water for some animals in a dry wilderness is better? Doesn't God have to do more than build a canal in the middle of nowhere to top the exodus event? But here we see an important truth regarding prophecy: you need to look at the main point of the prophecy and the context to understand what is meant by the imagery. Isaiah paints a lot of pictures and uses places, people, animals, and events to make important points. Obviously, water flowing to some jackals and owls would be a praiseworthy deed. But it doesn't seem to be all that important. You can imagine the people would say "what does that have to do with me?" if this were all they knew about such a prophecy. But in the following section God makes it a very meaningful prophecy for Israel and us.

He **isn't talking about just giving water to the wild animals.** Whenever Isaiah talks about places where there are owls and jackals, he is talking about places which are desolate, ruined, and abandoned. In other words God is going to provide water where it would least be expected or looked for. He is talking about making something completely impossible an unexpected happen. Just as you would never expect there to be dry ground in the middle of the sea you would never expect there to be fresh water in the middle of the dry wilderness. For the sake of his people he once miraculously made the water depart to bring them rescue. Now he would miraculously make the water come. And God works the impossible for his people. Because of course it is not owls and jackals, but his own people who he is promising to bless. The last part of this prophecy explains his

purpose for bringing water to the dry wilderness, the owls and jackals. He says he is going to make a new thing, cause water to flow to “give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself.”

Further context of this prophecy opens up further meaning. We can read on and the verse which is immediately after this section says that God is going to –against all expectation- forgive the sins of his people. He talks in the start of the next chapter of causing a spring to pour out on his people as he pours out the Holy Spirit on them and makes them his own. God is going to grant forgiveness of sins and pour out his Spirit! This is far greater than parting the sea and destroying Egypt! He would pour out life-giving water, forgiveness, and his Spirit on his people. It would be such a great blessing that the former blessings wouldn't even be worth mentioning in comparison.

Naturally, the least the people could do was to acknowledge such a gift. God doesn't say he's looking for any payment, only that they “proclaim his praise” for all he has done for them. Sadly, this was not the case with Israel. (read verse 22-24) ²² “Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel. ²³ You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. ²⁴ You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.” Instead of calling out the praises of God, they didn't even call out to God! Instead of offering thanks and praise, they offered sin to God! Talk about ingratitude!

What about us? This promise is far greater than the rescue from Egypt because it is the very reason why Israel was brought out of Egypt. It is to fulfill the promise made to Abraham: that all peoples would be blessed. God sent his son Jesus to be the fulfillment of that promise. Jesus speaks of himself as that living water. Jesus sends out his disciples to baptize with water and grant the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the holy Spirit. God makes you and me and all who believe his own as he sends his Spirit and removes our sins. This is the thing which is so great God says, “Forget about that old deliverance! This one is the rescue worth remembering forever!”

Do we give God the praise and honor that is due him? After all, the greater thing which he did for Israel, he did for all the earth, including us! Far greater than the rescue from Egypt we were rescued from sin, made to be his people. What sort of thanks is now due him? The people grumbled shortly after Egypt. Still seven hundred years later they hadn't paid off the debt of gratitude but added to the grumbling and sin. And who of us can say that we have paid off the debt or ever could imagine paying back our God for the great rescue that he won for us? Who of us can say we proclaim his praise as he intends? The words here are that Israel should, “recount, retell his praise.” How much of your life do you spend telling others what God has done for you? How much of your life do you spend grumbling against God? How much of your life do you and I spend piling on sin instead of thanks? Most return a small favor, acknowledge a medium one, and repay the greatest with ingratitude. Is our rescue from sin merely a small favor for which we can pretend to repay our God? Is it a medium favor that only merits a word of thanks once a week in worship? Or is it an act which deserves that we give our very selves and love, serve, and praise our God with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our mind? And what do we end up bringing instead of praise? The guilt piles up.

Why should God ever do something great for anyone who responds with anything less than praise? How much less shouldn't he cease to serve those who return good with sin! The expression translated here “wearied me and burdened me” literally says “You have caused me to slave for you.” How much should God put up with? He puts up with more than we can imagine! Remember parable that Jesus told us this morning from our gospel reading about the vineyard? Over and over and over the response is rejection and ingratitude. Finally the owner of the vineyard sends his Son. “They will respect and honor him!”

This is exactly why our God is so worthy of praise and worthy of recounting his deeds! We did burden his Son, but he came in grace! Jesus came to do something far greater than giving us bread or destroying our earthly enemies. He came to carry out the greatest rescue. He did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a payment, a ransom. To set us free from our enemies he became the servant of all and gave his life in order to open the way to heaven. From him, comes living water and eternal life. More than freedom from slavery comes freedom from the curse of sin and control of the devil. More than we could ever perceive, just as he foretold, he gives us water and his Spirit. We are made to be his own. We belong to him. He calls us “my people” because we are washed with water and the Word by his Spirit. We might grumble and complain about these bodies failing us, but he has promised something so great, we won't only forget the former good things he has done, we won't even remember the worst things that happened. The apostle Paul says, “I don't consider our present suffering even worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” He's done great things for us! Unimaginably greater are yet to come!

When our guilt piles up, God's grace piles up all the more. God did not rescue the people from Egypt because they had done anything for him or because they would do anything in the following centuries. He operates on the basis of grace. He has not rescued us because we call on him, or because we bring him praise and thanks. He did not promise more rescue because we will repay him in anyway. He operates on the basis of his grace. When our guilt seems like too much and we feel our God could never give us any more goodness, we lose sight of what our God is really like. He is amazingly gracious to us!

When you are **tempted to despair or when you struggle with ingratitude, look not to pay him back.** Look to his immense and incomprehensible grace for you. With this good news he sends his Spirit with all his gifts. When our guilt piles up his grace continues to pile up for us! *The Lord has done so much more for us. More than we could ever perceive. More than we could ever deserve.*