

Mission Impossible

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The title of this message, *Mission Impossible*, is a nod to the old TV series that originally aired in the late 60s and early 70s. It starred actor Peter Graves who played the role of Jim Phelps, the leader of the small Impossible Mission Force (or IMF as it was known). Each episode opened with him receiving a recorded message from his supervisor in which his team was assigned a super secret impossible mission to accomplish on behalf of the US Government. It was usually something related to espionage and the Cold War or maybe to fighting organized crime. Five seconds after Jim heard the mission, the device he was listening to would self destruct in a cloud of smoke. Then he'd put his team into action and off they'd go to work on the mission. The series spawned a short-lived reboot in the late 80s and more recently six full length motion pictures with Tom Cruise in the role of Jim Phelps. Personally I haven't much cared for these films; too many explosions and high speed chases and what not, more like James Bond movies than the flavor of the original series in which the IMF team using a combination of cleverness and deceit and high tech gadgetry outwitted their foes often without them even becoming aware that they'd been had. One thing was for sure though: week after week the IMF team proved that what seemed to be an impossible mission was not.

Of course, *Mission Impossible* is fiction; God's Holy Word is not. And within God's Word we find any number of what seem to be impossible missions described. It happens that one of these impossible missions is the backdrop for today's Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah. How that's the case is going to require some explanation, so bear with me. Your patience will be rewarded.

If we were to back up and look at the whole book of Isaiah, we could divide it into three main sections. The first 39 chapters are generally about how God's people in Judah are being very naughty and unfaithful to the Lord, and how, as a result of their continued refusal to repent and return to him, they are going to be punished by being sent into exile. Think of it as an elaborate "time out". Chapters 40 to 55 describe the Lord's promise to, after an extended period of "time out", bring his people out of exile and restore them to their place in the Promised Land. The final chapters, 56 to 66, describe how life will be in the renewed Promised Land, themes of the restoration of paradise on earth, that sort of thing.

With that in mind, you'll note that today's reading comes from the very end of the center section, the one dealing with the Lord's promise to rescue his people from exile. And you need to know that Isaiah wrote these words somewhere on the order of 150 years before the exile of Judah even began. So Isaiah didn't write the words of this section for the people of his time: they weren't in exile. And the truth is that despite the warnings of Isaiah and several other prophets, very few people in Judah believed that the Lord would actually do what he threatened and send his people into exile at all – until he did, until he was forced to because there was no other way to shake his people out of their spiritual lethargy and get them to see the magnitude and severity of their sin.

But now mentally place yourself in the sandals of one of these exiles. The Lord has just dealt with you quite harshly. You've been made a prisoner of the Babylonian Empire, the fiercest and mightiest nation the world has known to date; you've been rooted up from your home and most of your family and friends; you've lost everything you own – your only possessions are the clothes on your back; you along with some 15 thousand of your countrymen have been driven like cattle over 500 miles by soldiers whose language you don't

understand, all the while them barking orders at you, and prodding you with spears, and making fun of you. And when at length you arrive at your destination, you're placed in what amounts to a penal colony: a ramshackle collection of tents and lean-tos and other temporary shelters located in the middle of some of the least desirable farm land you've ever seen. *This* is your new home. Get used to it. You've lost pretty much everything that mattered to you. So, you've suffered much and it's not over, not by a long shot. You're humiliated. And the worst of it is that you know deep in your heart that you had it coming because you, like most of the people living in Judah, had been living a corrupt life far from what the Lord expects of the people who bear his name and you've been ignoring the warnings of the true prophets and ridiculing them for saying that the Lord would cast his chosen people out of the Promised Land unless they repented and returned to him.

Your sense of guilt and shame are more than you can bear. Your one hope, your only hope, is that one day you'll be able to return to the Lord's temple in Jerusalem and there offer a sacrifice to atone for your sins. If you could do that, you could come clean, rid yourself of this terrible burden of guilt you're bearing, and resolve to live in the future as one who learned the lesson, a life worthy of one redeemed by the Lord. That's your one hope. But then a whole year passes; followed by two and then three. Things don't look good; but you cling to the one hope. Eight years go by and word comes that the people who remained behind in Judah still didn't get the message. They rebelled yet again against their Babylonian masters. And this time around the Babylonians have had enough. They won't be taking more people into exile. They'll be killing them all – except for the few survivors they can sell off as slaves.

Nine years into your exile the report finally comes: Jerusalem has fallen. The Lord's temple has been leveled to the ground along with the rest of the city. All of Judah is sacked and destroyed. The country lies in ruins. Everyone you knew back there is gone, never to be heard from again. And your one hope is gone. You can't offer a sacrifice for your sin because there's no temple at which to offer it. The Lord made it clear: to offer a sacrifice anywhere else would itself be a sin. You'd only be making things worse for yourself. So that's it then. You're lost, cut off from the Lord forever, no chance for redemption.

But along comes someone who managed to get his hands on a copy of the Isaiah scroll. He says, "Look here, this was all foretold more than a hundred years ago: the exile, the destruction of the city, all of it. And look at this! It says the people in exile will be redeemed by the Lord himself. He's going to bring us out of exile and resettle us in the Promised Land! Isn't that the best news you've ever heard?"

And your respond would be, "Uh huh. That sounds great. But get a grip. It's impossible. It can't be done. Am I to believe that the Emperor of Babylon is suddenly going to become Mr. Nice-Guy. "Oh, sorry about that exile thing. I didn't mean it." Or what? Is the Empire going to collapse and fall and some other leader from who-knows-where is going to free us and send us home? You're out of your mind. How can you even begin to think that it might be possible?"

Today's reading from Isaiah is the Lord's response to this line of thinking. And what it says in a nutshell is "Because I said so". "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

I've said this many times before, but it bears stressing yet again because we all tend to forget: God's Word is not merely information. It – or rather He – is a creative, living Being. He,

the Word of God, is none other than the second person of the Trinity: God the Son. He does what the Father sends him to do.

Here he is compared to the rain and snow that come down from heaven – just like he does. No rain, nothing happens. The ground dries up. Nothing grows. Everything living dies. The same is true when there is a drought of God's Word. Nothing happens. Spiritual life dries up. Nothing grows. Living faith dies. But with the rain comes life. Plants spring forth and grow. They bear fruit. And so it is with God's Word. He gives life to souls dead in sin and unbelief. They grow and bear fruit for the Lord, the fruit of living faith and love and good works.

The Word of God accomplishes impossible missions. To the exiles the Lord said, "For you *shall* go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off." And so they did. In the 58th year of their exile, the Empire of Babylon fell to Persia. And Cyrus, the new emperor, released the exiles. He sent them home to Judah where they rebuilt the Lord's temple and their nation.

The whole episode is a prophetic foreshadow of a much greater impossible mission the Lord sent his Word to do. Once again God's people found themselves under the thumb of a powerful and oppressive empire: this time Rome. They yearned to be delivered by the long promised king in the line of David; but that hardly seemed possible. There hadn't been a king in David's line for over 500 years. Their hope was pretty much dried up and dead. But the king came by seemingly impossible means: conceived in the womb of a virgin who asked, "How is this possible?" She was told "With God *all* things are possible".

This King, God's Word made man, came not as some thought to free his people from Roman control, but from an oppression much worse: that of Satan, sin, death, and hell. And he accomplished this mission by even more seemingly impossible means: by his death for all sin on the cross and his subsequent resurrection. And now by the Word of his accomplished mission, which is like rain watering the earth, he gives life to those who are dead in sin. They grow up in faith and bear fruit for the Lord. They go forth in joy, free from sin and Satan's bondage. They are no longer like thorns and briars, prickly desert plants that dry up and die each year, but more like the cypress and myrtle, evergreens – which just happen to be symbols of eternal life. Their roots run deep and drink in the water of God's Word continuously. They know what their source of life is.

And that brings us to the present – the present that grows more unstable and frightful each day. Things we relied on, the health care system, the economy, our government, our justice system, our system of higher education, even the clear thinking and loyalty of our fellow citizens – all of them are revealing their weaknesses and failures in ways we've never seen before. They are proving before our very eyes that it's futile to put any lasting hope in them.

Our hope, however, is grounded in something deeper. It's grounded in God's unchanging Word – the powerful and life-giving Word who has promised us something infinitely better: a new heaven and a new earth, and life eternal with him in blessed and innocent glory. At times it can seem impossible even to imagine. We wonder how it could be. But to him no mission is impossible. Therefore may our hope and trust ever be in him. In Jesus' name.

Soli Deo Gloria!