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ISAIAH 54:2 *HOLD NOT BACK*

Sermon preached at a Service in Serampore, India, on 11 November 1992, to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of the BMS and the 175th Anniversary of the founding of Serampore College.

This is the time to prepare for growth. That is the message of Isaiah 54. No doubt it was for this reason that William Carey chose this chapter as the basis for his plea for the forming of a missionary society. Carey had been obsessed with the idea of forming a missionary society for many years. As the newly appointed minister at Moulton he attended a meeting of ministers and raised the matter there. That was probably in September 1785. He received no encouragement. Undeterred, Carey began to put his thoughts into writing. His book, *An Enquiry into the obligation of Christians to use means for the conversion of the heathen* was written while he was minister at Moulton, although it was not published until 12 May 1792. When Carey was invited to preach at the Annual Meeting of the Northamptonshire Association, On 30 May 1792, it was obvious that he would take the opportunity to follow up the publication of his book, less than three weeks before. For his text he chose verses 2 & 3, of that 54th chapter:

Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitation be stretched out; hold not back, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities.

We do not have a copy of Carey's sermon. In fact we know very little of what he said. We do, however, have comments on the sermon. John Ryland found it so forcible that he would not have been surprised 'if all the people had lifted up their voice and wept.' J. W. Morris, the minister from nearby Clipston, said 'The effect of the discourse was considerable.'

Whatever the force or the effect of the sermon when it came to the business session of the Northamptonshire Association the next morning no one was willing to propose any action. In desperation Carey, fearing that nothing was going to be done, seized Fuller's arm and to quote the latest BMS historian, Dr Brian Stanley: 'Carey's appeal evidently moved Fuller who then took the initiative from which others *had held back*.' The initiative was to propose that a plan be prepared for the forming of a society. But I put emphasis on the words, '*had held back*'. These words also came in the verses from Isaiah that were Carey's text. I do not know if he said anything about them, but I wish to emphasize them this morning. '*Hold not back*'.

You may regard them as unsuitable for an occasion such as this. We are celebrating the Bicentenary of the Baptist Missionary Society. Two hundred years of Christian witness in many ways in many countries. We are also celebrating the 175th anniversary of Serampore College. Years during which thousands have been equipped to live and serve and witness to the power of God. This is a time for thanksgiving and rejoicing, so why be negative? Why have as a text the words, '*hold not back*'?

The purpose of this sermon is to try and explain their significance and to discover that any negative element in them is there to clear the way for growth. The words

'hold not back' belong to the first half of the verse, to the tents and the curtains, not the cords and the stakes. So, says the prophet, keep on enlarging your tents. You need to take possession of more and more space for more and more people. Don't hold back. Keep spreading, keep growing. Here we have an echo of the words that God had spoken to Jacob, in his dream, centuries before: 'The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south.'

God promises growth. But are we ready? Is it not true that we are, generally, much better at holding back than at pushing forward? We prefer to stay where we are. The prophet says you must not stay where you are; history can teach us the same lesson. That is why I reminded you of the response to Carey's sermon. It was recognized as being forcible. It did have considerable effect. Men and women were aware of the force of its argument or the persuaviveness of the preacher, but still they held back. It needed Andrew Fuller to take the initiative. What if he also had held back? Would there have been a Baptist Missionary Society? If not, could there have been a Serampore College?

The attitude, the inclination, to hold back has to be removed before there is advance. It was on 15 July 1818 that the Serampore missionaries, William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, issued the prospectus of a 'College for the instruction of Asiatic Christian and other youth in Eastern Literature and European Science'. So Serampore College was born.

The document was written by Joshua Marshman. As a boy Marshman read anything he could find. His son has recorded the list of books his father had read by the age of fifteen. This did not help him when he came to apply for church membership at the Baptist Church in Westbury Leigh. The deacons there said he had too much head knowledge and too little heart knowledge. So, although on probation for seven years, he never did become a member of the Westbury Leigh Baptist Church. Later it was Broadmead Baptist in Bristol that welcomed him into membership and encouraged him to offer for service with the BMS. Before that, Marshman had left Westbury Leigh, where he worked as a weaver, and went to London for a short time, to work in a booksellers' shop. His main job was to walk the streets of London delivering the books that customers had bought. On 2 October this year nearly two thousand gathered for a Service of thanksgiving in Westminster Abbey to mark the 200th Anniversary of the forming of the BMS. Even in Marshman's time Westminster Abbey was recognized as a national shrine in which all the good and the great of many generations were remembered. His son describes how one day Marshman was carrying a load of books:

He began to give way to melancholy and as he passed Westminster Abbey, laid down the load and sobbed at the thought that there was no higher prospect before him in life than that of a bookseller's porter. But looking up at the building and recalling to mind the noble associations connected with it, he brushed away his tears, replaced the load on his shoulders, and walked on with a lighter heart, determined to bide his time.

He did and in the years that followed nothing held him back. In *The Story of*

Serampore and its College, there is this description of him: 'A man of iron will and constitution he was always undaunted by difficulties. In fact obstacles only redoubled his determination to work toward the goal.

Obstacles can hold back when the need is to move forward. Krishna Pal faced these. During November and December 1800 Krishna and Gokol were visiting the missionaries and receiving Christian instruction. On 11 December William Ward wrote in his diary, 'Gokol, Krishna and family continue to seek after the word, and profess their entire willingness to join us.' The more Gokol and Krishna met with the missionaries, the more opposition they faced from their family and neighbours. On the day fixed for baptism, 28 December, only Krishna was willing to be baptized. The others held back. But Krishna's witness gave others the courage to come forward and more baptisms followed.

In the history of Serampore College there has been the need for those who did not hold back. Do you remember what Rev George Howells wrote when he visited Serampore, while working at the theological college in Cuttack? 'I felt glad that the authorities in London decided to send me to backward Orissa rather than to Serampore with its dead hopes. A young man sees more hope in an uncultivated wilderness than in a graveyard filled with monuments of the mighty dead.' Howells did not forget Serampore when he returned to Cuttack. He did not hold back, but recognized the significance of Serampore and its Charter and worked for its revival. Later, as its Principal from 1906-1929, his achievements were such that he is often referred to as the 'second founder of the College'.

Fuller in Nottingham, Marshman in London, Krishna Pal in Serampore and Howells in Cuttack did not hold back. Each could have remained where he was but was willing to move forward. They had to overcome the inclination, and perhaps the temptation, to hold back so that there could be a forward movement, so that there could be growth and so that God's purpose could be furthered. We are back with Isaiah 54, 'Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitation be stretched out, *hold not back*.'

Hold not back. This is the only place in the Old Testament where the form of the Hebrew word which is translated '*hold not back*' is used. But the word is used in a different form in Job. Job suffered the loss of property, family and health. He was so changed that his friends did not recognize him. Three of them spoke to him at some length, to comfort him, but without success. Eventually Job says: 'If I speak my pain is not relieved, and if I refrain, it does not go away.' 'If I refrain' - that is our word, '*hold not back*'. So we have this picture of a person whose life has been shattered. He is broken by grief and sorrow. What can he do? What he discovers is that he gets no relief at all by trying to hide what has happened, trying to act as though nothing has happened. He has to face the position, it will not go away. Grief must out. *Nothing is gained by holding back.* That is true of grief or joy, good news or bad news. It must out. There is no point in turning away from that which must be faced, and expressed or accomplished. A man came to Jesus and asked, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' You remember Jesus' answer: 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor. Then come and follow me.' And you recall the result, 'At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.' That man held back and he lost.

I have already referred to those who served with the BMS in India. There were many who served with the Society in Africa. One of these was Alfred Saker, who worked for over thirty years in the Cameroons, West Africa. Saker soon realized that people were suffering from diseases as a result of poor housing. This was not only missionaries who came and went very swiftly, or died. The local population also suffered. Wooden buildings soon rotted in the climate. Saker began to make bricks. He taught others. Gradually permanent buildings were erected, including a chapel. Over the years the area was transformed, but Saker faced criticism. Younger missionaries complained that Saker spent too much time on secular work and not enough on the spiritual. As the criticism grew, Saker needed to respond. This he did by issuing a statement affirming his faith. I can only quote part of it now:

As to secular work, what is it if rightly looked at? I point out to them a better way of labour, a word here, a five minutes handling of a tool there. Deaths among us have diminished in proportion to the better housing. This, it is said, is all very well, but it has been to the neglect of the work of a missionary. That means spiritual work as they would express it. To me it has ever been that the spiritual work is to get at the heart of the individual man. How it is done I don't care a pin.

Saker had the practical ability that was needed and he did not hold back from using it, although he brought criticism on himself. It has been those missionaries with most to offer who have faced most criticism from their colleagues. The Serampore Trio were criticized by the younger brethren who settled in Calcutta. In China, Timothy Richard proved to be a man of great talent and vision, but others tried to limit his work and, to keep the peace, he moved to other work in China. William Knibb, the advocate of the abolition of slavery in Jamaica was not without his detractors, while Saker had to live with those who criticized his work in Cameroons. Yet all of these men, and other men and women like them, knew that nothing was to be gained by holding back. The need for growth required that they move forward even if that move brought them into conflict with colleagues. The man left Jesus with sadness, because he could not get what he wanted unless he was willing to pay the cost. He held back, and gained nothing.

Carey, Marshman and Ward, Timothy Richard, William Knibb and Alfred Saker, all experienced sadness, because others would not or could not share their vision, but they did not hold back and their gain was that they became the instruments of the growth promised and given by God. Again we are back with our text and the prophet's promise, and we see confirmation of that promise from God that if we do not hold back then God will honour what we offer. Tents will be enlarged and curtains stretched out to claim possession of more space for the people of God.

Hold not back. Often we are in the position of holding back. This desire to stay where we are has to be overcome. The attitude of mind that keeps us inactive has to be changed. Then we can move forward. What is it that can get us moving? Look again at chapter 54 and its relationship with the preceding chapters. There are questions about these chapters in Isaiah. When were they written and who, or what is it that is being described? The questions receive different answers, but let us accept that these chapters refer to the time when the people were expecting to return to their

own country after exile in Babylon. God is promising help. Isaiah 53 describes the servant who makes an offering for sin. This is the way by which the people will be saved. This is describing the process of conversion through suffering. Isaiah 54 describes the results. Thousands will turn to God; tents will need to be enlarged, curtains stretched out.

Whatever the contemporary interpretation, later generations came to accept that the description of the servant is the description of Jesus, and the thousands who turn to God are the church. John Calvin summed it up: 'After having spoken of the death of Christ, the prophet passes on with good reason to the church: that we may feel more deeply in ourselves what is the value and efficacy of His death.' When, therefore, we ask what it is that can get us moving, the answer is that we look again at Jesus, to see what he did and what he achieved. There were a number of occasions in the life of Jesus when he was tempted to hold back; to hold back from the way that would lead, inevitably, to death. Let me just remind you of two moments of decision and therefore moments of truth for Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke describe the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed, 'My Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.' Let this cup pass. Is this Jesus saying, 'let me stay where I am, let me hold back from the next step'? But this was not his final word. He was able to go on to say, 'thy will be done.' John does not have the Gethsemane prayer, but he has the equivalent when Jesus, challenged by the arrival of some Greeks, says: 'The hour is come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father glorify thy name.' That resolution of Jesus to go forward is followed by his claim that thousands will come to him; 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself.' The people are coming. Enlarge your tents and stretch your curtains. *Hold not back.*

But the people only come when a price has been paid; the price of suffering and sacrifice. This is what Isaiah said. This is what Jesus showed. This is the message that comes to us from the history of the BMS and of Serampore College. Those whom I have mentioned were men and women who did not hold back. They faced the cost and made possible the growth. And there were, and are, thousands of men and women like them of every generation and of every race.

The challenge of Isaiah comes to us, where we are today. We may feel tempted to remain where we are, but the prophet says again, *Hold not back.* Obstacles must not prevent action, nothing is to be obtained by holding back. Look again to Jesus and follow him. Many are waiting to hear and they will not hear unless we who know Christ share him with them, for the affirmation by Paul in his letter to the Romans still stands:

How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news.... Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.

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