

MESSAGE TRANSCRIPTS

Matsudah: God our Stronghold
Psalm 18:2; 1 Samuel 22:4; 24:22
Communion Service
Tim Armstrong, Senior Pastor

Weekend 07.23-24.11

Good morning, Crossroads. We are doing some things a little bit differently today in preparing ourselves for Communion. But I want you to do what Jamie just asked. I want you to take your Bibles out and, if you don't have a Bible, there is one in the chair back in front of you that you can use. Let's all turn to Psalm 18:2. And what I want is for you to have this open on your lap. We are going to read it here in a few moments.

I want to take you first though to a place in the Holy Lands. I want to try to paint a picture in your mind's eye of a place called, Masada. You say the word, Masada, in Israel and immediately you will create this image in the mind of your hearer. You will create an image of this imposing rock fortress that rises 1,500 hundred feet right beside the Dead Sea. You'll create this image of this natural ring citadel that stands out from the flat Judean desert. You'll create this image of a mountain-like rock with a strangely flat surface. The rock itself is more than 1,900 feet in length, 600 hundred in width, twenty-three acres in circumference. It would take you an entire day to walk around. In ancient times, the only way to the top was by a narrow trail called the Snake's path, a 900 hundred foot climb that twists back and forth through jagged rocks. In fact, as early as the first century, the Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote this about Masada. He said, "Masada is a rock of no slight circumference, lofty from end to end, and as roughly terminated on every side by deep ravens. The precipices are rising sheer from an invisible base being inaccessible to the foot of any living creature except where the rock permits no easy ascent. They call it the Snake Path seeing the resemblance to that reptile for the course is broken and skirting the jagging crags and returns on itself making it a painful headway." He writes, "One traversing this route faces destruction on either side." That's Masada.

Do you have it now in your mind? Masada was the perfect citadel for King Herod. That's where he was going to build his Armageddon fortresses—his doomsday palaces. Now when I say Herod, I need to give you some clarification because we actually have three Herod's in the New Testament. There is Herod, the Great. That's the first Herod and that is the one I am talking about. He is infamous for Matthew, Chapter 2 where he killed all of the baby boys two years and younger in Bethlehem trying to wipe out the Messiah. You remember that one?

I am not talking about Herod, the Tetrarch, who stood before Jesus and condemned him one step in the process towards crucifixion. And I am not talking about Herod Agrippa who is found in the book of Acts. Now when you think of this Herod, you have to think of Herod the Great. He was a master at building and expanding Jerusalem. He conquered Jerusalem and then he started these building campaigns and one of the things that he started building was outside Jerusalem which for us would be about a two-hour drive, for them, about a five-day trek, two huge fortresses, palaces on top of Masada...five days away. He built one on the northern rim, the very corner of the rock itself and then a western area also, for a palace that was opulent like the palaces that he would have lived in, in Jerusalem, and would have rivaled any palace even in Rome. He brought in marble and all types of precious stones and precious metals. He fitted it with the typical Roman baths and other aspects of his life there in Jerusalem. But one other thing that he

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did, he filled it with all types of resources as if he was planning someday possibly to be there for a lengthy period of time. He cut out cisterns in the rocks so that as the rain naturally fell on the mountain, it would collect in these hewn out cisterns, hundreds and hundreds of thousands of gallons of water. In these large corridorred rooms of the palaces, he filled with things like grain, wine, oil and dates of every kind and he hoarded a mass of weapons sufficient...most archeologists would agree for about ten thousand men. Masada was essentially Harrods's norad, his doomsday garrison. Why? That's the question. Why? What drove Harrods's obsession with Masada.

Well, Herod lived with a two-fold danger. On one side, there were the Jewish people—those people he conquered coming in to Jerusalem. He feared that one day they would rise up themselves and take him out of power and give power back to the Hasmonians. So he was always concerned about the very people that he was over. But mostly he was afraid of Cleopatra. Remember her? The Queen of Egypt. Cleopatra did not hide her intentions from anyone. She had a desire, in fact, she would often beg Marc Anthony to slay Herod so she could have the region of Judah. She wanted to have the throne of Judah. With that kind of opposition, Charlie Dyer, my old seminary professor says it right. He said, "Herod must have slept lightly." And surely, he must have.

It is no wonder he made Masada the most secure place in all of the Middle East. But long before Herod first noticed Masada, before he built his palaces in this strategic advantage, there was another leader that you probably know much better. David walked across Masada a thousand years before Herod. You do not need to turn there but the account is actually found in I Samuel 22. This is where we first pick up the story of David, but David as a fugitive. If you remember, David rose to popularity. Why? Because he killed the giant, Goliath. And he rose in popularity as a warrior, not just for Israel but for Saul, the king. But Saul had a jealous streak and he watched carefully this young protégé. And before long, he started to sense that his own popularity started to wane as David's popularity started to skyrocket. In fact, there were chants around the area that illustrated this. The chant went something like: Saul killed his thousands but David, his tens of thousands, speaking of David's victories over the Philistines. When Saul continued to hear this as it echoed in his ears, he became more and more jealous until the point where he wanted to kill David. And in I Samuel 22 what we find is that David is now a man on the run. We find him actually travelling to Bethlehem. There he is going to take his parents and secretly cross the desert and the Dead Sea. He is going to cross over into Moab so that he can hide his parents there. Why Moab? Well, if you remember anything about your Old Testament history, Moab was the country of David's great grandmother, Ruth, the Moabites. So he was taking his parents probably to hide them with distant relatives but he himself was not going to stay there. He was going to cross back over so that he could be with his men, this band of men, misfits that basically had gathered together to follow after David. But as he is crossing back over the Dead Sea, I would imagine he was thinking what you and I would be thinking. I need to find a safe place to hide. I need a place that I can see great views—a place that is nearly impregnable. Where did David go?

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Well, we read in I Samuel 22:4, “David went to the stronghold.” The word in Hebrew is *Metzuda*, Masada. Evidently it was the name for this mountain even in David’s time. We can understand when you look at it what a fortress this could have been even before Herod would build his palace. We could understand why military men would single out a place like Masada as a stronghold. It looks absolutely undefeatable as if you could take a very small force of men, ring that area up on top of the mountain and you could fight off literally thousands of warriors from ever attacking you. But listen. No fortress, no human fortress is ultimately secure.

From a human perspective, Masada might have looked that way but even this fortress faced defeat in 73 A.D., long after David was gone, long after Herod himself was gone. It actually started in 70 A.D. when the Romans sacked Jerusalem. They were tired of the uprising of the Jewish people and so they went in and they completely decimated Jerusalem, knocking down the capitol walls, knocking down the temple, upending the entire city, killing hundreds of thousands of Jewish people, all except 960 men, women and children. These Jewish survivors took flight out of Jerusalem across the desert and, where were they heading? *Metzuda*, Masada. They were heading to the stronghold. And they themselves took up residence in the now abandoned palaces of Herod and there they stayed for two years. And they were really a thorn in the flesh for those who were a part of Rome, especially the Roman governor, Flavius Silva. He felt as if it was a defeat. If he could not totally annihilate, totally capture, then it was a defeat. If even 960 could sneak away, he felt something had to be done about it. And so in 72 A.D., he took 15,000 men from the tenth legion and he marched towards Masada. And he did the amazing. He actually built a siege ramp from the base of the canyon floor up to the rim of the mountain. It is an amazing feat. It looks like this huge wedge comes out. Ironically, he used Jewish prisoners of war for slave labor to build this monstrosity.

And if you would travel there with me in the winter, I will show it to you. You can see it is the remains of this huge ramp that goes from the bottom of the canyon right up the top and their goal was to push a siege-type of instrument, a battering ramp up this huge incline to the top and begin to press hard against the western walls of the palace and that is exactly what Rome did. They did it until they were successful in breaking down the first layer of the walls. When they got through the first layer, they realized that the second layer was actually made of wood and, so what did the Romans do? They set it ablaze. Historians tell us that it burned for an entire day, from morning until evening. The smoke could be seen all throughout the Judean wilderness. And by evening, the Romans knew that they were able to break in to finally conquer those who had holed up in Masada. But they thought they would wait. They decided they would wait until the next morning so they brought the battering rams down. They carefully and strategically placed forces in just the right places so there was no escape—no escaping the Snake Path on the eastern side, no escaping through the siege ramp. And they waited until morning.

The 960 inside knew their fate. But they did something unthinkable. Rather than giving up, rather than facing capture, that night they gathered and they took their own lives. And when you read about it, the

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hair on the back of your neck literally stands up. It is the strange sense of devotion. Men would take a knife and lay it against their children's throats and then their wives. And then the men gathered together and they drew lots and ten men then put down their comrades. And then those ten drew lots and one was left. And he then, the same that he had done to his sons, his daughters, his wife, had witnessed around him, that one was left, finished the nine and then turned the dagger on himself. You say, how do we know this? Well, only five actually survived. Two elderly women and three children were hiding out in a cistern or we would not know the story of Masada. All we would know is what happened the next morning. And imagine that? When Rome broke through and here they entered into the top of Masada and experienced this eerie silence followed by this horrific discovery. You and I might think that's horrific. We can't even imagine that. In fact, when we hear things like that, it conjures up images like Jonestown and strange maniacal massacres and things like that. But not to the Jewish people. To this day, the Jewish people see this as a symbol of determination. And when you go there and you are standing on Masada, you see groups of school-age children making their annual pilgrimage there. Or you see Israeli soldiers going there in groups to take an oath to defend their country even to the death. And they will say, we go there to remember as a people that we should be free in our own land. That is the lesson that they take away from Masada.

But you and I, we can take a different lesson away from Masada. It is really where I want to focus your attention before you take part in communion this morning. You see, what you and I can learn from Masada is that all human fortresses, no matter how strong they might appear will eventually fail. All human fortresses eventually fail. Now come back with me to the story of David and let's finish that. David is in the stronghold but he can't stay there forever. Sooner or later, he has to come down. And in I Samuel 24, where do we find David? Not in the stronghold. But we find him at Ein Gedi, ten miles away from Masada. Ein Gedi is called the Spring of the Wild Goats. It is a place where you could pick fresh fruit and you could get fresh spring water. And I am sure he was there with his men. But while he was there, he had an amazing encounter with of all people, Saul. He encountered Saul in a cave at Ein Gedi. It is somewhat embarrassing and awkward why Saul was in that cave so I am going to let you discover that for yourself. You can read it from the book of Samuel starting about chapter 20 through to about chapter 25 and you will find out what Saul was doing in that cave when David happened upon him. I am not concerned about that as much as concerned about what happened next. Because what happened outside that cave was the confrontation with Saul and David where Saul told him that he would no longer be chasing after him, no longer would there be a threat of his personal annihilation. He was going to let David go.

And we read in I Samuel 24:22, "Then Saul went home"...but if you were David, how much would you trust Saul? Well, obviously David did not trust Saul that much because we continue reading..."but David and his men went up to the stronghold." He returned to *Metzuda*, Masada. It was a safe place, a perfect place to wait and see if Saul might change his mind. It is not surprising that someone like David or

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someone like Herod with their military background would discover Masada to be a strategic location. Both had military backgrounds. Both understood the need of a strong defense. Both faced strong oppositions. But that is about where the similarities end. For Herod, he would build Masada into this massive fortress because of fear and he saw it as a human stronghold, a place that could possibly protect him for the rest of his life.

David walked across that same mesa and came to a completely different conclusion. He saw it too as a structurally strong place, geographically one that could hold off his foe for years to come but that is not ultimately where David would put his trust. How do I know that? You have Psalm 18:2 open on your lap, don't you? Well, look at the very beginning of the Psalm. To the choirmaster, a psalm of David, the servant of the Lord who would address the words of this psalm to the Lord on the day when the Lord rescued him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. And what did David say? He wrote, "I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

And what was the word that David used for the word, fortress. You guessed it? *Metzuda*, Masada. You see, he saw that rock fortress. He saw and stepped over looking at the precipice. He saw the strategic advantage but he said this is not where I am going to place my hope. I am going to place it in the living Metzuda. Now how do we translate into our own lives this story of scripture?

Well, before you head to the table, I want to encourage you to think where you are placing your stronghold. In what or in whom? For some of you before you place this table, you might have to take a good look at yourself and say, do I put my strongholds in something other than the living Metzuda. Or do I place it in something that ultimately could fail. For many of us, we put our strongholds of life in things we can see, tangible things, like other people or relationships. But we know that eventually those would fail. Or we put them in the things that we can see around us like a home or some type of structure that would protect us but we know even that could fail. Or we look at ourselves and we say, well, we have our own resourcefulness or our own strength but over time, what is the first thing you notice that starts to fade from your own life? Your strength, your resourcefulness. Or maybe it is a stronghold of finances, of wealth. You say, I feel strong because of this. David would tell us that is the wrong place to put our hope. But rather we put our hope in that which can never fail us—the living Metzuda. Ask yourself that before you go to this table this morning. Ask yourself. Re-evaluate. Do I put all my hope into the stronghold of my living God?

Let's pray together. Father, I thank you for these passages in scripture that teach us things that we can physically see even to this day like Masada and then translate that into a man who saw that rock thousands of years ago but decided that the greatest fortress, the greater stronghold would be You as his personal Metzuda. And I pray that for our people here today that as we go before the tables, we take communion as we remember the sacrifices of the Lord. That we will evaluate where we put our hope

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and, if need be, to change that and to reaffirm once again that you are our fortress, you are our stronghold, our Metzuda. We pray these things in the great name of Jesus Christ. Amen.