

Fear Not!

Lesson for January 8, 2023

Unit II: God's Promises

Scriptural Background: Isaiah 43:1-21

Printed Text: Isaiah 43:1-4, 10-12

Key verse: *But now, this is what the Lord says—he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”* (Isaiah 43:1, NIV)

Word Study

Black Bart was a professional thief whose very name struck fear as he terrorized the Wells Fargo stage line. From San Francisco to New York, his name became synonymous with the danger of the frontier. Between 1875 and 1883 he robbed 29 different stagecoach crews. Amazingly, Bart did it all without firing a shot. Because a hood hid his face, no victim ever saw his face. He never took a hostage and was never trailed by a sheriff. Instead, Black Bart used fear to paralyze his victims. His sinister presence was enough to overwhelm the toughest stagecoach guard.

Fear is petrifying, however, in today's lesson, the prophet Isaiah lets God's people know He has everything in control.

Key terms

1. **Chosen** (verse 10) – Divinely elected or selected; marked for favor or special privilege.
2. **Honored** (verse 4) – Distinguished; glorified; respected; to regard or treat (someone) with admiration and respect.
3. **Redeemed** (verse 1) – To buy back; to free from captivity by payment of ransom; to atone for.

Lesson Background

Isaiah is one of the most well-known prophets in the Bible for his prediction of the coming of the Messiah, who would redeem His people from their sins. A book of stark contrasts, Isaiah contrasts terrifying warnings of judgement and destruction with uplifting promises of hope and prosperity.

The book of Isaiah contains one of the clearest expressions of the gospel in all the Old Testament. Even from the first chapter, it is clear that the people have turned away from God and failed in their responsibilities as His children (Isaiah 1:2–17). Yet God miraculously holds out hope to this unrepentant people, offering cleansing of sins and the blessing that comes with faith and obedience in Him (1:18–20).

Notes collected and developed by Ethel Williams

Up until the time of Isaiah, the kingdom of Israel – the northern ten tribes – had some 18 kings, all of them bad and rebellious against the LORD. The kingdom of Judah – the two southern tribes – had some 11 kings before Isaiah’s ministry, some good and some bad.

In the time of Isaiah, Israel was a little nation often caught in the middle of the wars between three superpowers: Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon.

As Isaiah’s ministry began, there was a national crisis in the northern kingdom of Israel. The superpower of Assyria was about to overwhelm the kingdom of Israel. During the span of Isaiah’s ministry as a prophet, the southern kingdom of Judah was faced with repeated threats from the larger surrounding nations.

In Chapter 43 the focus is on redemption from captivity. It is here that the message focuses on the idea of the Servant as the nation. In the first seven verses (43:1-7) the LORD promises to regather His undeserving nation (servant) and renew them. Israel is first exhorted not to fear because God formed them and called them in the past; and because they are precious to Him they will be regathered from the whole earth. The LORD then brings the people forth as a witness that He is God alone (43:8-13). Both this witness and the nations in general will recognize that the LORD is sovereign, that He acts without any assistance, and that none can oppose Him.

Lesson In Depth

I. God’s Love Extended (Isaiah 43:1-3)

In spite of Israel’s deliberate rejection of the Lord as her rightful king, God reassures them, “Fear not: for I have redeemed thee.” It indicates a redemption from physical and spiritual bondage as well as the eschatological redemption yet to come (43:5-7; 44:22; 49:16-17). In addition to redeeming Israel, God also announces that “all the nations” (Gentiles), will be gathered to Him for salvation.

Says the LORD, who created you: God speaks to His people as their *Creator*. God has a special and unique claim upon us because He is our Creator. When men forget or reject God as Creator, they fail in the most basic obligation they have to God.

O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel: This double designation for God’s chosen nation is used by Isaiah 21 times (16 of them in chapters 40-49). This speaks of the Lord’s special attachment to Abraham’s physical seed. Israel” means prince of God, so you can easily see, they are called of His name. The creation always belongs to its Creator. Creator God (“Elohim”), is the Word of God.

...and He who formed you: The only explanation for the ongoing existence of the nation of Israel is God’s sovereign grace, which brought her into existence from nothing (Deuteronomy 7:6-11) and sustains her. Since she was God’s creation, she could find comfort in knowing that no one or nothing can destroy her, not even her own wickedness (43:18-25).

Fear not: This is a *command*, accompanied by *promises*. By outward circumstances, the people of Judah had reason to be afraid of Babylon's army and exile. God points them past the present circumstances to both this command and promise. The Lord repeated His word, relieving Israel's fear (35:4; 41:10, 13-14).

I have redeemed thee: Not only did Israel have an obligation to God as their Creator but also as their Redeemer. He is the One who bought them out of literal exile and spiritual slavery. God's redemption of His people from exile is not to be complete until His Servant returns to reign over the faithful remnant in the land of Israel who have believed on Jesus Christ. The limited return from Babylon only typified the final return.

I have called you by your name; you are mine: God *twice owns* His people. He has the right of ownership both as Creator and Redeemer. His ownership is *personal* because He says **I have called you by your name**. His ownership is *certain* because He seals it by saying **You are mine**. Knowing that we belong to the LORD is a wonderful answer to fear. We can know that He holds us, protects us, guards us, and cares for us. We can know that He would not have created, redeemed, and called us unless He intended to finish His work in us. How can we be afraid when we know this God is for us, is looking out for our interests?

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you: Through any potential obstacle, God will be with us. Deep waters? **I will be with you**. Must you **walk through the fire**? Then **you shall not be burned**. When God is with us, He is for us, and who can be against us? Israel had and would have their trials, but we have ours also. Trials are inevitable; it doesn't say *if you pass through the waters*, it says **when you pass through the waters**. The text doesn't say, "When you walk on a luxurious padded carpet, I will be with you." It says God will be with us in the toughest of circumstances. Trials are varied; sometimes we face **waters**, sometimes **rivers**, and sometimes **fire**. Floods overwhelm, fires consume.

"Waters ... rivers ... fire ... flame": Many perils symbolized by these words have confronted the Israelites through the centuries and will continue to do so until the nation's final redemption, but the Lord promises the nation's survival through them all.

The passage of Moses' and Joshua's generations through the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21-22), and the Jordan River (Joshua 3:14-17), and the preservation of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, illustrate His care for Israel.

We know that God had brought them through the water at the Red Sea, on their flight from Egypt. We also know that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were saved in the fire of the furnace, when they refused to turn against God.

God was their very present help in trouble. He is our help, as well. Tribulation comes to all of God's people to make them strong. He is there to strengthen us in our trouble.

For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Savior: God delivered Israel from Egypt and will deliver her from Babylon and all future exiles, as well as bring her to spiritual salvation (Zechariah 12:10 – 13:1; Romans 11:25-27).

I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee: A country either in southern Arabia or across the Red Sea in northeast Africa, near Cush, or Ethiopia. Egypt, Cush and Seba became a vicarious compensation so that God could spare Israel. “Sabeans” is another name for the inhabitants of Seba (45:14).

God had spoken to Moses in the wilderness and called Himself “I AM”. This tells us that God is the God of the present, whenever that present is. He is everlasting, and unchangeable. He was God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and yet, He is the LORD our God today.

He is the Self-existent, or Eternal One. The Holy One of Israel, or Savior, is speaking of the One we know as Jesus. We have mentioned before that “Jesus” means Savior. God would have completely destroyed Egypt if they had not let His people go. Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba were not too high a price to pay for God’s people.

II. God’s Love Explained (Isaiah 43:4, 10-12)

Since you were precious in My sight: The study of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land showed that God truly allowed their enemies to be destroyed before them. God had a plan for His people, and He left nothing undone to accomplish His plans.

Many lands, they went through on the way to the Promised Land, were inhabited by ungodly people. God allowed them to be overthrown to help His people. As long as Israel was faithful to God, He destroyed their enemies before them.

In verse 4 God describes the *motivation* for His work of redemption. He loves us! We are **precious in His sight!** This is an Old Testament example of the truth in John 3:16: *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son.*

You are My witnesses: God’s people had witnessed the greatness of God. Israel’s God repeatedly predicted the future accurately, enabling Israel to witness to His truthful accuracy (verse 13), and thus the reality that He was the only eternal, living God. If only Israel would remember the great things God had done among them, they would see each wonderful work of His as a *witness* to the truth that He is the only true God.

And My servant whom I have chosen that you may know and believe Me: A witness is a passive observer of what someone has done, and Israel had seen the great works of God. But they were more than passive observers; God called Israel to be His **servant**. That was why they were **chosen** – not to sit around and glory in their being chosen, but to *serve* the LORD, and to **know** the LORD and **believe** Him in every way.

Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me: In clear, certain words, God says that not only is He the most high God, but that there are *no other gods* beside Him. There are no “junior gods.” There are no “second class gods.” **There was no God formed** before the LORD, and there will be no God formed after Him.

I, even I am the LORD and besides Me there is no savior: The LORD God is the only savior. Only He has **declared and saved** – there was no **foreign god among you** who did any good. He is our help and support. Sadly, we often turn to our only savior as a last resort, instead of as a first resource.

... when there was no strange god among you: The one thing the LORD will not tolerate is other gods. An idol is nothing. It cannot save anyone. God had proved over and over to these Israelites that He alone was God.

Therefore, you are My witnesses: If Israel would remember that only the LORD has ever rescued them, they would not be so quick to turn to other gods and to turn away from the LORD. We should all be **witnesses** to the saving, rescuing, and healing work of the LORD.

Lesson Summary

Verses 1-7 promise the regathering from the captivity so that the people have no reason to fear. There are two cycles to this message, the command “do not fear” serving as the structural marker. The rest of the passage is a trial; first, witnesses are called for the LORD and then witnesses are called for the nations, and second, the LORD makes His claim that the witnesses will attest to the fact that He alone is the sovereign Lord. The proof of His divine sovereignty is that He conducts His people through history in a way that they can follow with confidence; and His ability to orchestrate the future, to chart it out, to show the direction He was going, is great evidence of His sovereignty.

Acts without words are open to all kinds of interpretation, and words without acts are hollow promises; but words that predict the acts, and acts that confirm the predictions, attest to the truth of the claims of the LORD and build confidence in the yet unfulfilled promises that He has made. In this passage that promise concerns the regathering of the nation – God is able to create a future out of the ruins of the past. He alone can do this. And even if Israel had been blind and deaf (i.e., disobedient to and ignorant of God’s Word), they would make superb witnesses to what He was able to do when they saw the promises begin to unfold in spite of their sin. This passage, then, may be used to build confidence in the promises of God—Do not fear, God says, I will ransom you from the world; you are my witnesses that I alone am the sovereign God and am able to do this.

The immediate fulfillment for Israel would be their return from the captivity—which had been predicted as well as their captivity. But that fulfillment was merely a foretaste of the greater ingathering that would take place at the end of the age.

For the Christian, it will be necessary to assess the promises of the New Covenant that await fulfillment. These overlap with the promises in the prophets of Israel, for we have been grafted into the New Covenant. Paul says that the whole world is groaning, waiting for the day of redemption (Romans 8). We are to be filled with confidence that God will keep His Word and deliver us from the bondage of the world. This hope casts out fear.

Our confidence in the promises is only as strong as our knowledge of the LORD. Therefore, we must be sure to teach that as the necessary basis of our faith.

Notes collected and developed by Ethel Williams