

I Will Be with You

Lesson Text: Isaiah 43:1-7, 11,12

Background Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-28

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 31:3

Isaiah 43:1–7, 10–12

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. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. ³ For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. ⁴ Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵ Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. ⁶ I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’ Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

¹⁰ *“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. ¹¹ I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior. ¹² I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “that I am God.*

INTRODUCTION

Strange Gods

Has anyone not noticed the wide variety of religious beliefs these days? In cities large and small, there are synagogues, mosques, temples, tabernacles, chapels, churches, and other houses of worship. There is an ocean of Web sites to explain the belief systems of everything from atheism to voodoo. Religious TV shows feature outrageous “holy” men and women. The spirituality section in commercial bookstores is crammed with volumes on New Age religion, humanism, and witchcraft right alongside the Bibles.

This is not a new state of affairs, however. Ancient Israel was surrounded by nations with strange religions. They practiced such things as idol worship, temple prostitution, and human sacrifice. The Israelites allowed these practices to infiltrate their own religious life (2 Kings 17:17; Isaiah 44:17; Hosea 4:14). Yet the people of Israel had a heritage of worshiping and serving the one true God, the only God. Any other so-called “god” was false, and to worship a false god was futile (see Romans 1:21–23).

The Bible sometimes calls these “strange gods” (Deuteronomy 32:16; see Psalm 81:9). If we have placed our faith in the Lord, the one true God, this idea of strange gods has more than one connotation. Some of these fictitious gods are strange in the sense of being just plain weird, like the elephant or monkey gods of the Hindus. Some are strange in that they are unimaginable to us. What kind of god would demand the sacrifice of a son or daughter in order to be appeased? They are also strange or foreign in that they seem to be “distant” in more than one sense. They are alien and frightening in their imperfection and demands. These are not deities that we want to be like or whose image we would be pleased to bear.

Isaiah was deeply concerned that his people understand that there is only one God. All other claims of gods are false and dangerous. Things haven’t changed. Despite the appearance of competition among religions in our world, there is still only one God. There is no one besides Him (Isaiah 45:6). This is not because He is the greatest of the gods, but because He is the only God. Any other god proposed to us is strange!

LESSON BACKGROUND

An important theme in the second half of Isaiah is that the people of Israel are to be God’s witnesses to the other nations of the earth (Isaiah 45:20,21; 48:20; etc.). This was not witness in the sense of “evangelism,” but that of “testimony.” Such a witness proclaims eyewitness observation or experience (Isaiah 43:10, today’s text).

The concept of using a witness to verify legal claims is very ancient, and the integrity of witnesses is the foundation of all legal systems (compare Exodus 20:16). The wisdom tradition of Israel saw the honest witness as “faithful” in contrast with the false witness (see Proverbs 14:5). The people of the Bible were very aware of the great damage a false witness could bring (see Proverbs 25:18).

The nation of Israel had many occasions in its history to be a witness of and to the power of God. They had seen the plagues inflicted on Egypt to force Pharaoh to release them. They had walked through the miraculously parted Red Sea to escape the Egyptian army. They had seen the glorious mountain of the Lord where they received the law; that peak had the appearance of a mountain on fire (Exodus 19:18). They had seen the collapse of the walls of Jericho without a human hand having touched them.

These mighty acts of the Lord made the Israelites witnesses for their God to all other nations. The law required two or three witnesses to convict someone of a crime (see Deuteronomy 19:15; compare John 8:17). In Israel, God had a whole nation of witnesses.

TODAY’S AIM

- **Facts:** to show us that our God is ever present with us, especially in difficult situations.
- **Principle:** to show that God cares for His people and is present with them to strengthen them.
- **Application:** to know that when we go through difficult situations, our God is always there and ready to help us.

God’s Redeeming Love (Isaiah 43:1–4)

As in the other prophetic books of the Old Testament, the message was not Isaiah’s but God’s. Hence, the familiar “*This is what the Lord says*” (Isa. 43:1) prefaced this message to God’s people from the prophet. Of course, the names “Jacob” and “Israel” are referring to the same person and group.

God’s words at the beginning of this chapter remind Israel of the Genesis creation story. There God “created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1) and “formed man” from “the dust of the ground” (2:7). But then sin entered the picture, and God needed to redeem His creation. A key part of His plan is to regain possession of Israel. This is a reference to God’s deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage (see Exodus 6:6). In this act, God created a new nation for His purposes (see Deuteronomy 4:34).

Isaiah portrays an intimate, personal relationship between Israel and the Lord, for the nation is called by name. This personal aspect is made even more resolute by God’s declaration thou art mine. Such a relationship is exceedingly rare in the ancient world, where the gods of the nations are portrayed as fickle, terrifying deities. In Israel’s case, the nation is not commanded to cower in fear, but to fear not.

1. *What message did God have for Jacob and Israel (Isaiah 43:1–4)?*

Not only was Israel created and formed by God; she was also promised divine protection. Using typical Hebrew parallelism, “*waters*” and “*rivers*” are equivalent, as are “*fire*” and “*flame*.”

While the above are likely figurative expressions, the history of Israel did include passing through the Red Sea on dry land (Exod. 14) and a miraculous crossing of the Jordan River when they finally reached Canaan (Josh. 3).

Once they were captives in Babylon, the faith of some Jews would literally be tested by fire. Daniel’s three friends were thrown into the fiery furnace because they refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar’s image (Dan. 3). As God delivered these faithful men from the flames, so He would deliver His people from captivity.

“Because of God’s past work in creating, redeeming, and caring for Israel, He would continue to protect her. Therefore in difficult times, pictured as floodwaters and fire, Israel should not give up and fear, for God would be with her and protect her” (Walvoord and Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Cook).

We are reminded of the promise of Paul that nothing is able to separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38, 39). We too may be determined to “*not fear*” (Hebrews 13:6), for we are assured of God’s protecting hand in our lives.

2. *What was the significance of God bringing Israel through waters, rivers, fire, and flame (v. 2)?*

What Do You Think?

What are some specific ways that you have experienced God's protecting hand? How is your faith affected in times when God seems to be absent?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In natural disasters (Isaiah 4:6; Psalm 46:2)
- In times of uncertainty (Isaiah 41:10)
- In times of martyrdom (Jeremiah 26:20–23; Acts 7:54–60; 12:1,2)

God does not need to justify His claim on Israel, but four aspects of God's relationship with the nation are presented. First, the people are reminded that this is the Lord speaking, a use of God's divine name that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14, 15).

In addition, God is the Holy One of Israel, a favorite designation of Isaiah for God, used about 25 times in the book. This designation emphasizes both the solidarity of God with the nation as well as the separation that God's holiness entails (see Isaiah 12:6). Israel is a people of imperfect holiness, and no one knows this better than the prophet himself (see 6:5). It is a wonderful paradox that the perfectly holy God dwells in the midst of sinful humanity, a paradox that finds ultimate expression in the incarnation of God's Son.

God is also presented as Israel's savior. This title has an active sense here, for God is the one who is saving Israel in the present as He has in the past. This is expanded by the fourth aspect: God as the one who has given a ransom for Israel. This is closely related to the concept of atonement, a price paid for redemption.

In this setting, the sacrificial ransom was the three nations of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba. Egypt is the nation of the lower (northern) Nile River valley, while Ethiopia (Cush) is of the upper (southern) region. We do not know where Seba is. But the Bible records a son of the original Cush named Seba (Genesis 10:7; compare Psalm 72:10), so this is likely a reference to the same people-group.

The imagery of ransom ... for thee reminds us of the devastation God brought on Egypt in the process of freeing the Israelites during the days of Moses. The people of Israel are to remember that God's act of choosing them was not without cost to other nations, nations also loved by God.

3. Where were Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba located? How were these nations a ransom for Israel (v. 3)?

Because of her creation and call, Israel was precious in God's sight. "From the time the promise was given to Jacob (Gen. 28:14), Israel became precious to Jehovah. From that time on God placed the interests of Israel above those of other peoples.... Israel's preciousness consists solely in God's sovereign choice of her to be His servant" (Butler).

As Christians, we have also been called by God for the unique purpose of making the gospel known to our world (Mark 16:15,16). Like Israel of old, we are "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

While God was willing to ransom other nations for the benefit of Israel, He was willing to pay an even greater price to redeem the whole world. This price, of course, was the death of His Son. "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" (Mark 10:45).

Since God's motivation for selecting both Israel (Deut. 7:7; Isa. 43:4; 63:9) and the church (John 3:16; Eph. 1:4,5; 1 John 4:19) was love, neither they nor we can claim any special merit on our part.

Commenting on Isaiah 43:4, John Calvin wrote, "By these words he excludes all personal worth on the part of the people, that they may not boast of having obtained anything by their own merit; and, indeed, the cause of salvation, and all the blessings which we receive, is the undeserved love of God.... We must therefore set aside every idea of merit, or of personal worth, of which we have none, and must ascribe everything to the grace of God alone" (Calvin, Calvin's Commentaries: Isaiah, AP&A).

4. What was the primary motivation for God to choose Israel (v. 4)?

God's Glorious Gathering (Isaiah 43:5–7)

One of the great promises of the Bible is that we are not alone in our struggles. The obvious reason to set fear aside was that the Lord had promised, "*I am with you.*"

Whether addressed to Israel or the church (Matt. 28:20), this promise did not necessarily mean all perils would be avoided. Difficult days lay ahead for the Jews of Isaiah's day. The siege and fall of Jerusalem, their deportation to Babylon, and seventy years of captivity all lay ahead of them when Isaiah penned these words. Even so, they would not be abandoned by their God.

It is always easy to believe God is on our side when experiencing peace, prosperity, and physical well-being. It is when these things are taken from us that we may be tempted to doubt God's presence. God has nevertheless declared, "*Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.*" ⁶ *So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"* (Heb. 13:5,6).

After the time of the Captivity, the Jews would return to their homeland. Since the four points of the compass are mentioned (Isa. 4.3:5,6), some see this is a two-pronged prophecy. The larger picture, however, is of a gathering of God's people in a glorious unity. Hundreds of years after Isaiah, Jesus will speak of a time when the heirs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be joined at the table by people from all over the world (Matthew 8:11). Isaiah sees a new people of God determined not by their lineage and genealogy, but by the call of God to the table of faith.

5. *From what different directions would God call Israel home (vs. 5,6)?*

What Do You Think?

Since God will call people from the ends of the earth to Him, how should we react toward other peoples and nations? In what ways is this also true for Christians?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Our reaction to ethnic labels
- Our plan to take the gospel to other nations

This future gathering is not for the advancement and prestige of Israel, but for God's glory. Isaiah returns to the earlier language of creation, of a people formed and made (compare Isaiah 43:1, above). The existence of the gathered people of God is a manifestation of God's overall plan for humanity's redemption. We should always be mindful that we exist for God's glory, not the other way around.

6. *What important purpose was Israel given (v. 7)?*

God's Saving Presence (Isaiah 43:11,12)

God tells His people that this role of witnesses is given to them (v. 10, not in today's text). They must give testimony to the reality of the one true God, uncreated and eternal. God was not formed, in striking contrast with the forming of the first man (Genesis 2:7) and of the nation of Israel (Isaiah 43:1,7, above).

The modern phenomenon of shopping for a religion that one likes is debunked here in verse 11 ("*I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior.*") To see any given religion as a choice among many valid options is ridiculous. There is only one God, not a competing stable of gods. This God is the I am, the Lord. There are no other viable options. Therefore, any attempt to look elsewhere for salvation from the human condition is futile. The God of Israel is the only Savior.

When we integrate these exclusive claims of God as the sole Savior with Isaiah's promises of a coming Messiah, we begin to understand the great significance of the birth of Jesus. He is the God-intended and God-provided Savior of humanity. There are no other options that have a promise of salvation, for He alone is "*the way*" (John 14:6). There is no pathway to salvation other than God's chosen Messiah, Jesus our Lord (Acts 4:12).

7. *How was Israel supposed to be a witness to the world (v. 11)?*

Again, one of the primary purposes for which God called Israel was to be a witness to what He had done for them. Just as Rahab was convinced concerning the truth of Israel's God by what she heard about Him (Josh. 2:8-11), so Israel was to witness to the mighty deeds of the Lord in order to declare Him to the larger world.

"The absolute sovereignty of Jehovah is the message Israel is to proclaim. They are witnesses to it. They have seen and heard first-hand—for that is what a witness is. A witness does not tell what he thinks or feels—he tells what he has seen and heard. What Israel has seen is only Jehovah can save. . . . Jehovah did not reveal His saving power to Israel in a systematic philosophy—He revealed it in deeds, events, in the historical, human frame-of-reference. He also demonstrated experientially that none of the gods of man, none of the pagan idols, could save" (Butler).

As Christians we must also remember that we are to be the Lord's witnesses. As Christ told the apostles, "*and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" (Acts 1:8). To be sure, we cannot be witnesses in the exact same sense the apostles were, as they were eyewitnesses of the risen Lord (v. 22). Nevertheless, we are to communicate to others what the Lord has done for us.

This, of course, must be done within the framework of the objective truths of the gospel: "*that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:3,4).

We do not, in fact, go out to witness. We are witnesses—either good ones or poor ones. Which are you?

8. What is the role of a witness? How can we witness today (v. 12)?

PRACTICAL POINTS 1

1. Since God has created and redeemed His people, they need not be paralyzed by fear (Isaiah 43:1).
2. In any situation, God's omnipresence can bring comfort and courage to His own (v. 2).
3. God's people can rest and rely on His love, for it undergirds all that He does in their lives (vs. 3,4).
4. Nothing is too hard for God; when He commands, all creation must obey (vs. 5,6)!
5. The Creator's children should reflect His glory (v. 7).
6. The truth remains: God alone can change a heart and save a soul (vs. 11,12).

CONCLUSION

Continuing Theme: Witness

Isaiah's theme of witness is continued in the New Testament, where the risen Jesus charges His disciples to be His "witnesses" to all the people of the earth (Acts 1:8). In this, believers are following Jesus himself, for He is presented as the ultimate "faithful witness" to the power and holiness of God (see Revelation 1:5). But unlike ancient Israel, our witness should have the result of evangelism (Matthew 28:19,20). In this way, Christian believers are the new nation of witnesses of the power of God to unbelievers.

Our faith should lead us to testify to the mighty works of God, particularly to the power of the resurrection of Jesus (see Romans 1:4). God does not leave this task to us alone, for He gives us His Spirit as a witness to our status as His children (Romans 8:16). This is the "Spirit of truth" that adds His witness to our own (John 15:26; see 1 John 5:20).

Continuing Theme: Only One God

Our consumer society has given us many choices when it comes to products we purchase. I recently did a quick count of the different varieties of soda pop for sale in the supermarket next door, counting nearly 100. We are spoiled by this dizzying array, and sometimes we are paralyzed by too many choices. We are like the proverbial donkey that was placed between two feedboxes and starved to death while trying to decide which one he should eat from.

Some like to think that there are many choices in matters of faith as well. We want to worship, but we want a God who fits our lifestyle and preferences. So we choose a church as we would choose a new car.

Isaiah's insistence that this is mad still speaks today. There is only one God, whether we believe this or not. Our faith or lack of it does not change the reality. God's eternality, power, and singularity do not depend on our acceptance. Similarly, God's ongoing presence in the world is not contingent on our recognition of that fact. God declares that there is no other God. God promises that He is with us. He is our Savior, the only deliverer from the mess we have made of our lives.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we pray to You to save and protect us as You have promised. We pray to You, O God of all nations, never to withdraw Your comforting presence from us, even if we walk through the darkest valley of death. May You find us worthy and useful as Your witnesses to a world that denies Your loving concern. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Be a witness of the only God.