

**ADVENT 2020: What are You Waiting For?**

To Belong

Isaiah 43:1-11

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*But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." Bring out the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! All the nations gather together, and the peoples assemble. Who among them can declare this, and show us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right, and let them hear and say, It is true. "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior (Isa. 43:1–11).*

When our family made our annual trip to cut down a Christmas tree, I found a few that I thought typified the challenges of Advent in 2020. Granted there were many beautiful trees, and we've enjoyed decorating our house for Christmas. I'm excited for this time of year.

But as we were trying to find the right Christmas tree, we stumbled upon two that seemed to typify the challenges of this year. I tweeted the first one that is half dead. When you could only see the top, it looked pretty good; but, when I walked up to it, I realized it was awful. I tweeted, "Christmas 2020 be like..." The tree seemed to be a fitting metaphor for how hard this year has been.

And there was another one that our daughter, Savannah, found. It had a large bare spot between the lower and upper branches. She grabbed the tree as if frustrated. I snapped another picture as we laughed at how that tree fit with 2020 as well.

Do you resonate with this?

Advent is a special time of the year. It will feature some great times of celebration, reflection, and togetherness. But in 2020, it will also highlight that things aren't the same. Every Christmas season is like that at some level—an empty seat at the table, someone not able to visit, uncertainty with your job, or a

relationship that's still painfully awkward. However, 2020 has not only magnified all the usual tensions, but it's also made things more challenging.

During seasons where life feels out of sorts or when you feel like everything's falling apart, it's important to return to some basic, foundational questions. Hardship and loss cause us to ask:

- What's really important to me?
- Where do I place my hope and joy?
- What do I trust in?

There's more, for sure. But there's another question, and it's why we are in Isaiah 43: to whom do I belong?

Do you know what the word "belong" means? The word means to be "in" something like a family, a team, or a group. It means to be a member and embrace the identity that comes with belonging. It's an important word culturally because it relates to your place in the world.

Our mission as a church is to *ignite a passion to follow Jesus*, and our discipleship strategy is Belong-Grow-Multiply. Belonging means that you identify with the people of the church and that you are a member of this body of believers.

A sense of belonging has taken a hit during COVID. From a church standpoint, people's commitment to their local church has waned with the inability to gather as we have in the past. And the added pressure of life has shaken people's sense of where or to whom they belong.

That's why I'm really glad to be in Isaiah 43 today. This text is part of God's message to his people when they are exiled and as they wonder who they really are. The prophet Isaiah is attempting to help suffering people understand the bedrock of belonging that is underneath their lives.

This is what hurting, scared, burdened people need to know: to whom do I belong?

Here's the answer: You belong to God because of God. If we add the New Testament lens: **Through Jesus, you belong to God because of God.**

Let's unpack these twenty-one verses to see three truths that emerge from this text. Belonging to God means:

1. God personally intervenes in our lives
2. God's plans are never hindered
3. God's glory is going to be revealed

### **Truth #1 – God Personally Intervenes in Our Lives (vv. 1-7)**

The book of Isaiah is about God and his glory. In Isaiah 48:11 God says this:

*For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.*

Chapters 40-55 are prophetic words about how the people of God should think about the Babylonian exile. For seventy years the nation of Israel wondered if God had forgotten about them. They are in exile. The temple is destroyed. Their national identity is shattered.

Chapter 40 begins with, "Comfort, comfort my people...the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (vv. 1,5). Chapter 41 is an encouragement not to fear. Chapter 42 records the prophecies regarding the Suffering Servant. And chapter 43 is about God's ability to be their Savior.

Verses 1-7 highlight the hope and comfort in God's personal intervention. God cares personally for his people. Their struggle is not lost on him. He's going to help his people because they belong to him.

Notice that in verse one, Isaiah starts with creation. He appeals back to the foundation of life itself. God created and formed you! But this is not merely a fact. It's not an emotionally detached acknowledgment that life was God's idea. This is personal. It's relational.

It's like a parent saying, "We loved you while you were in your mommy's tummy."

This is designed to bring assurance and comfort: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." Take note that the comfort offered by God to his people is based upon what God has done. He's their creator. He's redeemed them. He's called them by name which means that they are known. And he owns them as his children: "you are mine."

Notice how God-centric these verses are.

In fact, this is a major theme that is evident throughout this section. Just look at all the personal references that God makes in these verses. I've highlighted them below:

"Fear not, for **I** have redeemed you;

**I** have called you by name, you are mine.

<sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters, **I** will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.

<sup>3</sup> For **I** am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
**I** give Egypt as your ransom,  
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.

<sup>4</sup> Because you are precious in **my** eyes,  
and honored, and **I** love you,  
**I** give men in return for you,  
peoples in exchange for your life.

<sup>5</sup> Fear not, for **I** am with you;  
**I** will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west **I** will gather you.

- <sup>6</sup> I will say to the north, Give up,  
and to the south, Do not withhold;  
bring **my** sons from afar  
and **my** daughters from the end of the earth,  
<sup>7</sup> everyone who is called by **my** name,  
whom I created for **my** glory,  
whom I formed and made" (Isa. 43:1-7).

This text is beautiful because of the personal connection to God. Take note that he doesn't promise the absence of water, rivers, fire, or flame. In fact, in verse 2, he says "when." He promises his personal intervention. God is personally intervening for his people. It's only a matter of time.

God is going to gather his people from the four corners of the earth (vv. 5-6). He's going to bring to fruition his plan for everyone who knows his name, who was created for his glory, and who he made (v. 7).

Now, this promise was made to the people of Israel, but I trust that you already know how it was fulfilled in the New Testament with the entrance of Jesus into the world. John said, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." (John 1:14). Matthew says "...you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins...they shall call his name Immanuel which means, God with us" (Matt. 1:21-23). The book of Hebrews tells us, "...because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb. 2:18).

But this is also how the Bible ends. "Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people and God himself will be with them..." (Rev. 21:3).

The story of the Bible is the way God intervenes at great cost to himself in order to redeem people. If you are a Christian, just think of all the ways that God intervened in your life. Even in the moments when you couldn't see it at the time, God was at work on your behalf for your good and his glory.

But why? God intervenes because we belong to him. Now some of you rightly wonder why God hasn't intervened in a particular situation in your life. I want to acknowledge that there are moments and situations that cause us to wonder, "God, where are you?" In the midst of those dark and confusing times, it's important to remember that, because of Christ, you belong to God. His purposes will become clear. He will intervene as he's done before. But we don't get to pick the when, the where, and the how.

In the meantime, however, we can trust that belonging to God is a personal issue for God.

### **Truth #2 – God's Plans are Never Hindered (vv. 8-13)**

It's not only important to know that you belong to God because of his personal intervention, but it's also critical to appreciate the power behind God's plans. To know that you are loved is one thing; but, to know that you are loved by a God who possesses all-power is another.

Verses 8-13 are a bit like a trial. God invites witnesses to make their case. There's a historical reference point here where God is looking backward in Israel's history. He probably has the Exodus in mind in particular. Here's the flow of the text:<sup>1</sup>

- The court assembles (vv. 8-9) – God calls on the spiritually blind and deaf to testify
- The charge (v. 9) – God invites evidence to show which is the One True God
- The witnesses (v. 10) – God calls his people to witness his historical works
- The claim (v. 10b-12) – God issues a stunning statement: “Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, a besides me there is no savior.”
- The verdict (v. 13) – What a statement that concludes this section!

*“Also henceforth I am he; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work, and who can turn it back?” (Isa. 43:13)*

This section of Isaiah is designed to bring comfort and confidence to God's people while they are in exile. It's designed to remind them that their deliverer is unstoppable. His power knows no end. He's proven himself trustworthy and powerful throughout the history.

I trust that you know this theme continues into the New Testament. Consider a few signature texts that are designed to both bring comfort and make the followers of Jesus courageous:

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:31–32)*

*For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:34–36).*

*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20).*

The promise of this text is that behind the seasons of waiting and wondering is a God who is all-powerful. He has plans that are good and kind and righteous. And nothing can stop his purposes. So even when it seems like evil is winning, we can have confidence that it's only a matter of time.

I believe it was Ray Ortlund who said, “The Devil always overplays his hand.” We can also say, “God never gets outplayed.” My guess is that you have a story you could recount as you look back on your life

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<sup>1</sup> J. Alec Motyer, [\*Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 303–304.

of how God worked something out for good. Over time you saw the wisdom and the kindness of God. We need to rehearse those moments.

That's what Advent is all about. It's an annual reminder that after years of silence, God intervened. Herod couldn't kill him. The Devil couldn't compromise him. The Pharisees couldn't discredit him. Pilate couldn't dismiss him. The Cross couldn't defeat him. The grave couldn't hold him. And, can I remind you, that history will not stop him.

One day the fulfillment of God's plan will be completed. The skies will open, and our King will return!

That's enormously important because during these dark days we can feel like everything just keeps getting worse and worse. We can have moments of despair and doubt. And it's important to remember the power of God and that his plans cannot be stopped: "I work and who can turn it back?" (Isa. 43:13).

### **Truth #3 – God's Glory is Going to be Revealed (vv. 14-21)**

Belonging to God means that in Christ you are loved and safe. But the goal is not to make much of you. The purpose of redemption is to make much of God. The endgame is the glory of God.

Isaiah 43 returns to the issue of the Babylonian exile. God promises a new kind of exodus – a deliverance from the Babylonian captivity.

After reminding the people who he is – "Your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel" – he tells them that Babylon is not going to go unpunished (v. 14). And this redemption is based upon who he is: "I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King" (v. 15). While they were living in Babylon and while they witnessed the might of this super-power, God reminds them who their true King is.

Verses 16-17 recount God's power: "...makes a way through the sea...brings forth chariot and horse...they are extinguished, quenched like a wick."

In verses 18-19, God promises that he going to do it again! He's going to make a way where there doesn't seem to be a way. He's going to create a river in the desert.

And the response will be that the entire created order will give God praise! Wild beasts, jackals, and ostriches will honor him.

He will satisfy the needs of his people. He will provide everything they need. But notice the end goal:

*...the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise (Isa. 43:21).*

This is the purpose for which we have been created, the reason Jesus came into the world, the plan behind his death and resurrection, and where all of history is headed – the praise and glory of God.

One day everyone who knows Jesus as their Savior and Lord will see him and be with him. At that moment, our belonging and God's beauty will converge. At that moment we'll fully understand that our belonging to God was meant to lead to beholding the glory of God.

So, what do we do now? We live in the gap between belonging and beholding. Let me suggest that we remind and comfort ourselves in the practical hope of what it means to belong to God for God – that God personally intervenes, his plans are never hindered, and his glory will be revealed.

The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism captures this incredibly well. Let's read this together:

**Q.** What is your only comfort  
in life and death?

**A.** That I am not my own,  
but belong with body and soul,  
both in life and in death,  
to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.  
He has fully paid for all my sins  
with his precious blood,  
and has set me free  
from all the power of the devil.  
He also preserves me in such a way  
that without the will of my heavenly Father  
not a hair can fall from my head;  
indeed, all things must work together  
for my salvation.  
Therefore, by his Holy Spirit  
he also assures me  
of eternal life  
and makes me heartily willing and ready  
from now on to live for him.

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