

Our God Saves: Believe

The Only Savior
Isaiah 43

Greg Palys

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" (Isa. 43:1-7).

All of us in this room have something in common. We all love it that right when a problem seems impossible to solve, the only possible solution arrives and solves it. Think about it:

- A Hail Mary in the final seconds or a buzzer-beater as time expires
- An illness has only one hope for treatment—and it works!
- Only one grocery more bag prevents you from loading up all the bags and taking just one trip inside from the car, and you realize that if you just shift one to the other hand, you can get them all and still close the trunk!
- When there is only “one way”

We celebrate these situations. The bigger the problem and the potential for despair and loss, the more the joy and relief of a solution seem too good to be true. Take that feeling, multiply it by one thousand, and you have our text today.

Because Isaiah 43 deals with the most impossible problem: our sin. It recognizes that to solve an impossible problem, we need a greater solution. Israel had a problem. We have a problem. The question we will ask today, along with Israel, is: **Who can save us?** That is the question Isaiah 43 answers. So, how does Isaiah 43 answer that question?

Who Can Save Us? We Can't

We need to back up a little because this passage is a response to 42:18-25.

Pastor Mark led us to see last week that Isaiah 42 paints a picture of Israel's need, and of our need. If you recall, this section in Isaiah is addressed to a people in exile. Isaiah is speaking forward to a people who did not heed his words in Isaiah 1-39. They had chased after idols. They had ignored and stiff-armed

God. As a result, they were oppressed by a foreign power at this point. They were far from the home God had promised them. Their future was uncertain. And it certainly seemed unlikely, at least to them, that God would still use them to bless the nations.

We are also introduced to God's "servant" who was supposed to bring God's justice to the nations. This was supposed to be Israel. But we see a disconnect between what the servant was supposed to do and what they did. Look again at 42:18-25:

Hear, you deaf, and look, you blind, that you may see! Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the Lord? He sees many things, but does not observe them; his ears are open, but he does not hear. Who gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey? So he poured on him the heat of his anger and the might of battle; it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand; it burned him up, but he did not take it to heart.

They were supposed to open the blind eyes and deaf ears of others. But they were themselves blind and deaf to God and his ways. So the Lord gave them up. Their exile was evidence that they failed.

Our passage today reaffirms God's calling:

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.

No other nation can witness to God and his ways because they worshipped idols. Israel, on the other hand, was set apart to worship God. These people were God's servants, whom he chose, in order that they would know him, believe him, understand that he is the one true God, and then give testimony to the fact that he is the one true God. But they worshipped blind idols and became blind.

And isn't this our problem as well? We all rebel against God. We all should see and hear what God has made known in creation but don't. Then, we also experience our own kind of exile—consequences for sin, broken relationships, broken bodies, and worst of all: eternal condemnation if we do not repent.

Even those of us who are Christians—who are also God's people—don't we set our affections on things that can't save us and ultimately hurt us?

It's interesting; I've noticed a flip in the way some media is presenting the human condition.

There are still Disney-type movies that paint a fairly positive outlook on the main characters. They don't need wholesale redemption from sin. What they need is salvation from bad circumstances, maybe at most a little redirection in their character, but even then they can find salvation/redemption in themselves.

But how do you reconcile that with what happened this week when a man drove his SUV into holiday parade, injuring at least fifty and killing some of those? What's the answer? Is he just an exception? Can we write it off as simply mental illness or a bad day or a hatred for the people in the parade?

This gets harder to do when the 24/7 news cycle makes us aware of evils like these happening all the time. And if we're honest, it's a lot of work to keep up the front that we're a Pixar character when we have our own baggage.

I think that's why lately I've noticed a different theme. Consider how many popular movies and TV shows over the past couple of decades feature a highly flawed main character with questionable morals. Part of the goal of the creators is to draw you into the characters and make you root for them even when it's not clear who the good guy is. They blur the line between the good guys and bad guys. It's like the creators are acknowledging that deep down, we're messed up. And they don't know what to do with that. So, they relativize.

Consider *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *24*, and *Hunger Games*. Who's the good guy?

It's also interesting to see more media focused on the Villain. But in most cases, we're supposed to empathize with the villain. We're supposed to like them. And the creators even seek to level the playing field a bit by both showing that the reason the bad guy is bad is because of something done to them, maybe in childhood, and by showing the dark side of the "good" character.

It's like we're all supposed to say, "I'm messed up, you're messed up, so let's make the most of it."

So, when faced with the reality of evil, we either deny or minimize evil, at least in us. Or we relativize evil, we say "is anyone really good? And what is good?" When we deny or minimize evil, we don't need salvation. When we relativize evil, we deny the possibility of salvation.

But again, let me ask you, when a man drives his SUV into a parade, what do we do with that? We can't deny it. We can't relativize it. It is that bad. And if we're honest, we are that bad. Do we just accept it? What hope do we have? Can anyone save us?

Who Can Save Us? We Can't, But God Can

And then, we hit Isaiah 43:1.

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.

Can we all just take a deep breath? There is hope!

Israel could not wriggle away from the truth. They could not save themselves.

But God spoke into that despair and said "you, Israel. I formed you. I made you. I have called you by my name. Fear not, for I have redeemed you." God had made a covenant with Israel. They were his. He would not abandon it. They had everything to fear, but nothing to fear.

And in verse 11, he goes further – "I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior."

God is not only the one who *would* save them. He is the only one who *could* save them. This is what Israel was supposed to testify to. But their failure didn't change the truth of who God is. Hear this: your failures don't stop God from being God. And when you belong to him, Isaiah 43 is the description of how he treats you.

In much of the rest of this chapter, God goes on to explain how he will save his people. He will deliver them from Babylon. He will judge Babylon for what they did to his people. And all of this is meant to remind the Israelites of the Exodus. The Exodus was God's greatest work of deliverance in history. It showcased his greatness and the lengths he would go to deliver his people. Israel could hang on to God's promise to deliver them from Babylon because he had already proven himself in the Exodus. It was just business as usual for God.

So, here's a question for you: does Isaiah 43 remind you of anything in the New Testament? Look at Ephesians 2:1-6 with me:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

Verses 2-4 beg the question: who can save us? We can't. We're dead. We're children of wrath.

But God! Even when we were dead, he saved us – and here's the key—made us alive together with Christ. Here's another example: “[B]ut God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Our situation was hopeless—But God.

Isaiah 43 reads like an Old Testament “but God” statement. In other words: at the moment when everything seems most hopeless, God steps in—all is hopeless, “but God.” God is the only savior. He is the greater solution to an impossible problem. And we know now in full what they only knew in part: God saves his people from the ultimate problem, sin, through Jesus.

This is why we worship Jesus. And this is why God alone deserves all the glory for being the only one who can save through Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christian, you have been through a new Exodus. You have been delivered from slavery to sin and exile. How can we then look to anything else for salvation? We have many idols, but can they save? Let's commit for another week to turn to the only God who can save!

- Can performance in sports or academics save you? No, but God can.
- Can security (financial, relational) save you? No, but God can.
- Can the next thing that will finally get you where you want to go, can that save you? No, but God can.

- Can trying to be informed and organized enough to keep everything under control, can that save you? No, but God can.

Can deliverance from your difficult circumstance. "If I could just be free from this..." Can that save you? But God can.

Maybe you are not yet a Christian. Can you save yourself? Do you think you don't need to be saved? You do. We all do. And God can. And he does through and only through Jesus. Place your trust in him today. And join us in enjoying all that that means for us.

Who Can Save Us? We Can't, But God Can, So That Means . . .

Here is where we get to simply sunbathe in this passage. We have answered the question: who can save us? We can't, but God can. Now we get to work through the implications. And this passage has many.

Let's focus on verses 1-7. Look at how sweetly God speaks to his people:

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.

Remember: God's audience is in exile. They have been taken from their homes. They don't belong to themselves. They have had to lose some of their identity: losing ties to their culture, their language, and as we see in the book of Daniel, maybe even their name. But God promises to be with them.

There is water, but they won't drown. There is fire, but they won't burn. Everything to fear, and nothing to fear, because they are his.

Commentator J. Alec Motyer helped me see that the very fire God is delivering his people from is in fact God's! In Isaiah 42:25, God had sent them into the fire of exile. It is this same fire he promises to keep his people from.¹

The fire is God's. And the deliverance is God's. It's all God's.

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 (Isa. 43:3-5).

When God mentions Egypt, Cush, and Seba, he's speaking about areas around Egypt. He's reminding Israel of the Exodus again. He's saying, because you are precious and honored and loved by me, I will do whatever I need to do to get you. Because they were his people, he was willing to drown and kill the first-born of the Egyptians who shook their fist at God and would not let his people go. The next verses go on to say:

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

¹ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 330.

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” (vv. 5-7).

Again, God reminds his people not to fear, even though their circumstances seem dire. They were a scattered people. It would be like going outside on a windy day with a piece of paper ripped up into a million pieces. There is no way you are getting that whole paper back together again.

But God says that he hasn't lost anyone because he knows them all intimately. No matter how far God seemed, they were all made by him and for him, and he would get every last one.

But here's the question you might be asking: what does this have to do with me?

Here is where we need to revisit the servant.

Israel was meant to be God's servant. But the nation failed miserably. As Pastor Mark explained last week in Isaiah 42, though, as we go through Isaiah we start to get the picture that the servant is one person and able to do more than Israel could. We know now that the servant is Jesus. And we will see that even more clearly as we go through the rest of Isaiah.

Jesus is the true Israel. He did everything Israel should have done. They were blind and deaf, but he opened their eyes and ears.

If you are a Christian, you are now “in Christ.” Remember this from earlier:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

This is saying that we get the good things we get by being in Christ. His obedience, his righteousness, means our blessing. How he goes, we go.

We must be careful when reading Old Testament prophecy. It can be tempting to flip to a page and turn every “you” into “me”. On the other hand, you might be tentative about gaining anything besides general knowledge about God from the Old Testament. After all, we want to understand what the Bible is saying, not what we want it to say.

And now, if you are in Christ, you get all the blessings that God promised to his obedient servant.

God promised these things to the servant. Jesus is the servant. We are in Christ. So, the things God promises to his children in this passage, we get to take for ourselves.

Are you passing through waters, or walking through fires? Are you facing loss? Do you see the culture changing? Fear not. The waters are real, the fire is real, but God is in control of the waters and the fires. And he has said: you are mine.

Are you worried that God sees you as the least of all his people? Are you worried that God has overlooked you, that you'll be in the nosebleed section in the new heavens if he lets you in at all? Hear this: If you are trusting in Jesus, then you are precious in God's eyes. He honors you. And he loves you. Because Isaiah 43 says so.

If you are in Christ, the only savior, then these promises are true for you! Don't hesitate to claim them!
It isn't too good to be true.

Let's leave today fully realizing we do not deserve to be seated in the heavenly places with Christ. We are the impossible problem. *But God* is a greater solution. And so: we get these promises:

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