

# Isaiah 43: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Isaiah chapter 43. 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 flames shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my eyes and honoured 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 Saviour. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange God among you. And you are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and I am God. Also henceforth I am he. There is none who can deliver from my hand. I work, and who can turn it back? Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. For your sake I send to Babylon, and bring them all down as fugitives, even the Chaldeans, in the ships in which they rejoice. I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior. They lie down, they cannot rise. They are extinguished, quenched like a wick.

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches. For I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself, that they might declare my praise. Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob, but you have been weary of me, O Israel. You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings, or honoured me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, or wearied you with frankincense.

[ 3 : 09 ] You have not brought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins. You have wearied me with your iniquities. I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Put me in remembrance. Let us argue together. Set forth your case that you may be proved right. Your first father sinned, and your mediators transgressed against me. Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary, and deliver Jacob to utter destruction, and Israel to reviling. Isaiah chapter 42 spoke of the calling and equipping of the servant, to establish his justice, a proof of the Lord's sovereignty over the idolaters and their false gods. The chapter concluded, however, with the description of the sorry state of Israel, supposed to be the Lord's servant, yet blind and deaf and suffering under the Lord's hand of judgment. Chapter 43 opens with God's word of hope, spoken into this dark situation.

The Lord is the one who first formed and created Israel, and when they have been brought low, he is the one who will raise them up again. Once again, with words found more commonly in Isaiah than anywhere else in scripture, and which are especially found in this section of the book, the Lord tells his people, fear not. The one who first called and established them, the one who calls them by name, will also redeem them. Israel would pass through terrible trials, yet the Lord would be with them every step of that way. They would be tried through invasion, oppression, exile, and many other such things, but they would not ultimately be destroyed or harmed.

The Lord would preserve and be with them through it all. Perhaps the greatest assurances of the Lord's commitment to his people are found in the way that he binds himself to them in such a manner that his identity is at stake in their deliverance. In verse 3, the Lord declares his name to his people, with titles that manifest the way that he has taken them upon himself. The Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. The identification of the Lord as the Holy One of Israel, of course, is repeated throughout the book of Isaiah, being a key unifying thread of the entire work. The Lord is the father of his son Israel. They bear his name, and he bears their name, as he will say in chapter 49 verses 14 to 16. But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me. Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are continually before me. Whether or not the references to Egypt, Cush, and Siba should be taken as very concrete historical references. The Lord's great love for his people is seen in history in his judgments upon great nations for the sake of their redemption. For instance, in the Exodus, the great plagues wrought upon the land of Egypt were done by the Lord in remembrance of his covenant. In particular, he speaks of these nations as Israel's ransom. The judgment of the Lord fell especially heavily upon Egypt, for instance, in order that his people might be released. Perhaps we should see the Passover behind this, where Israel was marked out and redeemed as the Lord's firstborn son, in part through bringing death upon the firstborn of Egypt.

Considering the lengths to which the Lord would go in his love for his people, we should not be surprised at his promise to bring their exiles back from the corners of the earth, restoring the people that he first created. The Lord's returning of the exiles of Israel is a recurring theme in the book of Isaiah. Back in chapter 41, the passage opened with a trial being set up and the nations summoned to it.

These trial themes continue in this chapter as the Lord directly challenges the idols and their worshippers once more. In chapter 42 verses 19 and 20, Israel was characterized in the following words.

[ 7:14 ] 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. Now the Lord says that these people should be brought forth before all of the nations who are also assembled. They are to give their testimony to the Lord's deity, demonstrated in the fact that he foretells and rules in the affairs of men throughout history. Even if Israel had not responded to the Lord's work as they ought to have done, they had most definitely seen it and could testify to it. They are described as his witnesses, but also as his servant. If these terms are paralleled, the implication is that their work occurs through their experiencing of his deliverances in history, and their bearing witness concerning them to the nations. The Lord is the only God. The claims of all pretenders to God's throne are shown to be hollow. No other people can stand forward and testify of the work of their idols in their history in the same manner as Israel can do concerning the Lord's actions in theirs. The Lord is both unique and supreme. No one can rival him. The Lord had earlier spoken of

Egypt, Cush, and Seba being given for Israel's ransom. Now he speaks of the Babylonians and the Chaldeans in a similar manner. The Babylonians, who would be the greatest power the world had yet known, would be overthrown and made fugitives, all on account of the Lord's steadfast commitment and concern to deliver his people. As John Oswald aptly puts it, the deliverance of Israel is not on account of who they are, but whose they are. The Lord revealed his name and identity in the context of the exodus from Egypt, and now he is going to accomplish a new exodus. The language of verses 16 to 21 clearly refers back to this earlier exodus, presenting it as the paradigm within which the new exodus will occur. The Lord had divided the waters of the Red Sea so that his people could pass through on dry land. Now he talks about making another way in the sea or path in the mighty waters.

The Lord had drawn out the army of the Egyptians to pursue his people and to be destroyed in the deep. Now he will again bring forth chariot and horse, summoning them to their destruction. Yet even in this recollection of the events of their deliverance from Egypt, the Lord says, Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. What he is about to do is going to eclipse what he has done in the past. We have similar statements in places like Jeremiah chapter 16, verses 14 and 15.

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but, As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country, and out of all of the countries where he had driven them. For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers, creating a new path through the waters, defeating their enemies, and then providing a way through the wilderness, he would bring the people back. Though figurative language, not to be fulfilled in some literalistic sense, all of this speaks to the remarkable character of the restoration of the Lord's people after the exile. We should also hear here anticipations of a greater redemption that the Lord's people would experience in history, deliverance from death itself, and the bringing in of the new creation. None of this occurred in response to the sacrifices of Israel. In the very first chapter of the prophecy, Isaiah challenges the religious practice of the people, where they trust in ritual, and are actually displeasing the Lord by their rituals that are performed with blood on their hands. The Lord there describes them as like an occupying army, trampling his courts.

Even though Israel might think that they've been currying favour with the Lord by bringing forth their burnt offerings and sacrifices, in actual fact what they have been doing is bringing their sins and transgressions before him, burdening him with their sins, wearing him with their iniquities.

[ 11 : 21 ] When the Lord redeems them, it will not be on account of anything that they have done towards the Lord, anything that they have merited from his hand. Rather, it will be purely for the Lord's own sake, out of his own love for his people. If they have any doubt about this, they should bring forth the evidence. Israel has been sinning from the time of their first forefathers, and the people who have mediated between them and the Lord, the priests and the prophets and others, have all transgressed against the Lord. Even Moses, the great mediator of the Exodus, was not allowed to enter into the promised land because of his sin. If they want to know why judgment is falling upon the priests and the temple, and why the nation is being delivered up to destruction, this is why.

A question to consider, what do passages like this teach us about the way that the sacrificial system worked?