



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Through the water and the flames

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Isaiah 43:1–3

“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.’”

Once or twice a year, I seek to address directly the question of “Suffering”—because it is so much a part of people’s lives.

This evening, I turn to the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, which remind a captured nation that they belong to God and that he will see them through their time of darkness. This has a personal, as well as a broader application.

In turning to Isaiah, I want to ask three significant questions with regard to this very important issue.

God’s people had been taken from their homeland and scattered abroad. Their identity, like so many in the world, was tied up with their land. For them, it was a wonderful discovery that, though they may be wrenched away from their home, nothing could separate them from God.

In essence, they were taken from the familiar and what brought them security ... and placed into an unknown environment which would bring the exact opposite of security, namely fear and uncertainty. We are familiar with the television program ‘Who Do You Think You Are?’ Here is a nation who might well feel the need to discover their identity.

Isaiah can be helpfully divided into three clear sections, or perhaps even books and chapters. Chapters 40–55 are one of those books and when we arrive at Isaiah 40 there is an abrupt change of mood:

- A generation of people grew up knowing little of their past identity of land/faith—but they continued to hold onto hopes and dreams.

- They were deprived of Temple Worship, which was so important to them.
- In this setting synagogue worship developed.
- They still enjoyed a measure of freedom.
- Material prosperity existed.
- A hope of restoration began to develop.

Israel, created and redeemed by God, can be sure that nothing will snatch them from God's care—and, because of his love for them, he will bring about a restoration.

The nations are summoned to hear the testimony of his saving purposes. This background is essential in understanding Chapter 43 ... and the verses are 'an oracle of salvation'.

The three questions I want to ask are really the kind of questions that must have been in the hearts and minds of that small group of faithful people. But they are also questions we could all find ourselves asking at moments of testing for ourselves and those around us.

Should Christians suffer?

Some people practice a religious life where the answer to this question would be that Christians ought not to suffer. Indeed, for such people, those who do suffer are always viewed with a degree of suspicion, as though they have done something to deserve their struggles.

Their argument would be: "If we have the right level of commitment to Jesus Christ, and if we have all the faith we ought to have, then there really is no way we can suffer."

Following on from this inadequate understanding of God is a harsh implication that if people suffer then it is their own fault, through lack of faith. In these mid-chapters of Isaiah, Hebrew prophecy reaches a high point of lyrical and joyous expression, in the actual context of suffering.

We cannot deny that suffering is dreadful—and at times seems inevitable. When the prophet says, "When you pass through the waters, when you walk through the flames" he assumes suffering is an unavoidable aspect of human experience.

You will notice that the prophet does not say, "IF you pass..."—rather he says, "WHEN you pass..."

Our suffering varies. There are so many different ways people suffer. It is hardly possible to journey through life and never suffer any tangible expression of poor health. But for some the suffering may be very different. There are those for whom suffering comes in broken relationships; for others, it is a sorrow that is hard to bear. It is not our responsibility to analyse and compare each other's suffering ... but it's important to recognise that it is not an exception but the rule.

Fire and flood are two powerful and destructive forces evident in natural disasters, and serve here as metaphors for terrible events that sweep over human life. We know a great deal about both and rarely does a year pass without the impact of both on our Australian landscape.

I offer five ways in which 'passing through the waters' expresses itself:

- When, for one reason or another, we must reduce possessions and face narrowness of means, increase hard work, or become dependent upon others.

- When personal disappointment overtakes us, extinguishing the bright hopes by which our experience had been lit.
- When sickness brings us down, our strength fails and we experience helplessness or pain.
- When the failure of those to whom we looked for good has sent a pang of hurt through our heart—we feel let down!
- When bereavement has thrown a dark shadow over our lives ... and we feel there is no end to our sorrow.

Christians are not taken out of the world and so we shouldn't be surprised when we too suffer and are part of the real world, just as our Saviour suffered. The suffering of Jesus Christ challenges the level at which we understand suffering in the world. The cross is not merely an expression of physical suffering, for we also meet rejection and hate ... not just physical pain.

I recall reading in our Methodist newspaper an interview with a Women's Institute member from North Yorkshire. Her husband, who was a Steward at the local Methodist Church, had died of Leukaemia and she was inspired to produce the fundraising calendar, which was the background to the film "Calendar Girls". So much suffering and sorrow can be translated into something positive.

- Gordon Wilson from Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, was a fine example as he demonstrated what it was to forgive.
- I recall a victim of a sexual assault which became the focus of public attention ... as a Christian, she turned what was unthinkable suffering into something better.

Why are we surprised? Why does such transformation take us aback? It is because we have not correctly linked the truth that Christians may suffer—just like everyone else!

However, God can use the most extreme suffering to reveal his love and be used for good. When I served in Plymouth, I had a young person who moved from another part of the country to Devon to work in a centre, which trained blind people to improve their lives with the help of Guide Dogs. It was through her experience that I came to appreciate the work of Guide Dogs for the Blind, whose work spread all over the world.

You may not be aware of the story of the athlete who was blinded in a freak boxing accident. The doctors told him, "You'll never see again." The social workers said, "Learn Braille, stay at home, accept the fact that you will be dependent upon others for the rest of your life." But Morris Frank fought to regain his independence. The result was the development of "The Seeing Eye"—the wonderful organisation that trains seeing-eye dogs for the blind.

God can use suffering in Christian lives very powerfully—and many of us are aware of the truth that an aeroplane takes off best against the wind. Difficult conditions in life need not prevent good outcomes.

Vance Havner, reflecting on the positive outcome that may be the result of suffering, wrote, "God uses broken things. It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume ... It is Peter, weeping bitterly, who returns to greater power than ever."

Where is God when Christians suffer?

You and I cannot possibly identify with everyone's situation and painful experience. However, I have learned through the distinctive privilege of being with folks at times of suffering that God is not absent from such moments.

- God is so often nearest to hearts that bleed, for they are nearer to Him. An openness can emerge in such pain.
- God is found at the bedsides of dying men and women ... and they can become places of light.
- We may become aware of God, even in the midst of suffering.

Psalm 46 has proved a help to many. "God is our refuge ... and a very present help in trouble." A seaman, whom I knew well, told me that he could not hear that psalm read in church without a great lump coming to his throat. There were so many times in his experience when he had known God to be a help in time of trouble. He spent three days adrift in the English Channel, after his ship had been attacked by aircraft and sunk.

Isaiah 43 begins with the words "But now..." The introduction demands we look at what lies before. In the previous section we are given a sombre reminder of divine judgement, and now the prophet turns to one of his favourite themes and that is the unfailing grace of God. We notice his:

- Sympathising presence—"I will be with you." Our friend will be with us. It may well be that his presence, which seems hidden at times, especially during the dark years of heartbreak in exile, is such that he will never leave us nor forsake us. That's exactly what God continues to do.
- Trusting power—The rivers may rise high but they shall "not overflow". His hand is on the adverse forces which oppress us, and there is a mark beyond which they do not come. This power alone provides the strong anchor of hope and no hazard or circumstance can frustrate the one who trusts in God. It is an inspiration to see God's people rise to the great challenges as they trust him.
- Sustaining grace—The fire may rage, but faith and love will not fail us. The ultimate security of the Christian does not rest on the basis of nationality, as so many Jews might have felt, but upon God's joyous acceptance of our lives in Christ.

Paul Claudel, a French poet, dramatist and diplomat, was also a devout Christian. He wrote, "Christ did not come to do away with suffering; He did not come to explain it; He came to fill it with His presence." We need to be prepared to look for God in the middle of suffering and not to be too surprised when we discover that he is often to be found.

Why does God suffer?

This question can seem curious to ask in this context—for how could an omnipotent God, the creator and sustainer of all things, the Alpha and Omega—how can God suffer? This is a profound Christian contribution to the discussion on suffering.

The mystery of the cross and the reconciling work of God is that he shares our pain, our anguished cries of heartache, the unspeakable agony of the spirit. Our God who has not only created this people, but clearly demonstrated his will and his power to preserve and save them, is One who is unlikely to be thwarted by suffering itself. He will count no cost too great to hold onto our lives.

I am always pleased to celebrate Christian youth work. I remember talking with a group of Boy Scouts just a few years ago about grips and how you could help somebody who is in need of rescue. There are some grips which seem at first glance to be easily escaped from, but in reality are so firm. The desire of Christ to hold firm to us is so great that he will never lose his grip on our lives.

In some unfathomable way, God suffers with us. In the Old Testament, we observe Daniel's three friends who were thrown into the incinerator. The King expected them to collapse in a

moment ... no-one could survive such heat! Although their robes were burnt off, their flesh remained unscarred. They survived because God was with them.

The language of Isaiah 43 offers metaphorical images that would be familiar to an Israelite audience. There is the anticipation of a journey through a desert which the exiles are shortly to undertake. So when we are told that God will be with us, it is more than just a word of reassurance—it is the strong promise that, however hazardous the journey presented to us, we will never find ourselves alone ... even though we may feel very lonely in our worst moments.

The whole of this section of scripture points to a God who saves us—for God goes to extraordinary lengths to get his people back from exile—and that anticipates what he does for us in Christ. In his saving act upon the cross, we see God enter into our suffering and offer us a way forward.

There are times when we struggle to explain the story of a nation living in exile and returning was not easy. However, we are regularly presented with images of the rootless people of African nations re-discovering where they belong.

The controversial and demanding reality of immigrants who are seeking asylum is not for us a picture merely from history. However, it is possible to be rootless in more ways than being distanced from our land.

Israel had come to a place of humiliation and weakness, which they understood as not being due to the vagaries of circumstance, for God had brought her low. However, God's love is invincible and he will redeem his people. They will one day return to the land, to the Temple, and to all that God was—and is—to the People of Israel.

Simplistic answers to the question of suffering must be avoided—yet we rest in the assurance of that fourth person who walks through the flames with us.

I often refer to Charlie Brown. Linus and Charlie Brown are walking down the street and chatting with one another.

Linus says, "I don't like to face problems head on. I think the best way to solve problems is to avoid them. In fact, this is a distinct philosophy of mine. No problem is so big or so complicated that it can't be run away from!"

Isaiah 53 speaks of the Suffering Servant which helps us to understand Jesus Christ, who not only lived alongside us, but died for us. His suffering then sanctifies all of life ... even the difficult parts.

When I was at a point of need in my life, I was directed by a friend to Henri Nouwen's marvellous little book, "The Wounded Healer." I conclude with these words, which I hope you find as helpful as I did

"The Master is coming—not tomorrow,
But today;
Not next year, but this year;
Not after all our misery is past,
But in the middle of it;
Not in another place,
But right here where we are standing."