

January 8 Lesson 6 (KJV)

God Promises to Restore

Devotional Reading: 2 Thessalonians 3:1–5, 13–17

Background Scripture: Isaiah 43:1–21

Isaiah 43:1–4, 10–12

1 But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine.

2 When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.

3 For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee.

4 Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life.

10 Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me.

11 I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour.

12 I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when there was no strange god among you: therefore ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, that I am God.

Key Text

Thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine.

—Isaiah 43:1

From Darkness to Light

Unit 2: God's Promises

Lessons 5–9

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How to Say It

Nebuchadnezzar *Neb-yuh-kud-nez-er*.

Seba *See-buh*.

Sennacherib *Sen-nack-er-ib*.

Shalmaneser *Shal-mun-ee-zer*.

Introduction

A. A Trustworthy Witness

Many citizens think of jury duty as an onerous task to be avoided. But for one man, actually serving on a jury made a world of difference in his attitude. In the case before him and his peers, a young woman was charged with theft, forgery, assault, and attempted murder. She testified truthfully, admitting freely to the first two charges and proving to be a reliably truthful witness in her own defense. It became obvious in the course of proceedings that she was innocent of the two more serious charges.

After rendering their verdict, the man learned that one of his peers had decided after the first day of the trial that the defendant was guilty on *all* charges. This explained why it had taken several hours to persuade that juror that the evidence did not support her predetermined verdict. That's when the man realized his privilege: serving on that jury gave him opportunity to work with his peers to prevent a young woman from spending several unwarranted years in prison.

Israel was called as a witness to tell the truth about God's loving faithfulness. But unlike the young woman, Israel was not always a reliable witness. Isaiah's call was for people to act as reliable, truthful witnesses of all that God had done.

B. Lesson Context

As we open today's study from Isaiah 43, time has moved forward about 300 years since last week's lesson about King Solomon. Various kings have come and gone, and the nation of Israel has been split into two parts. The Israelites have been through multiple cycles of sin and repentance. Isaiah 1:1 allows us to date Isaiah's lengthy prophetic ministry to between 740 and 680 BC. Hosea, an older contemporary of Isaiah, warned the northern kingdom of Israel to repent and recommit their ways to the Lord (examples: Hosea 1:1; 3:4–5). Sadly, the Israelites refused. Within a few years after Hosea's ministry, the northern kingdom was defeated and dispersed by the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC. Isaiah's ministry to the southern kingdom of Judah had only slightly better prospects. Isaiah 36–39 tells of Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrian army of King Sennacherib, as well as other events from the time of King Hezekiah (ruled approximately 727–695 BC). Those were dark days for the little nation of Judah. Unfortunately, the original readers in Judah mistook the miraculous deliverance from the Assyrian army in 701 BC as a sign that God would never allow Judah to fall (Jeremiah 7:2–26).

This narrative section ends in Isaiah 39 with an ill-advised action by Hezekiah: the king welcomed Babylonian envoys to Jerusalem and gave them a private viewing of all his wealth. Isaiah then gave Hezekiah a dire prophecy that the Babylonians would carry Judah and all its treasures into captivity (Isaiah 39:5–7; compare 2 Kings 20:12–19).

Beginning in Isaiah 40 (considered the start of the second section of the book, sometimes called "The Book of Comfort"), Assyria, so prominent in the first 39 chapters, is no longer a threat to God's people; Babylon is the new menace. There is also a greater emphasis in Isaiah 40–66 on promises of hope and a brighter future for God's people, in contrast with the theme of judgment that is so prevalent in the previous chapters. In this second section, Isaiah developed an important theme of God's people acting as 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" (see 43:10, below).

Just so we don't get too confused by terminology, we should point out that sometimes the word *Israel* in the book of Isaiah means only the northern kingdom of that name, as distinct from the southern kingdom of Judah. At other times, however, the word *Israel* refers to all the Jewish people in both northern and southern kingdoms together. The context will tell us what is meant at any one time.

I. The Lord Acts (Isaiah 43:1–4)

A. God Creates (v. 1)

1. But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine.

But now marks Isaiah's transition from a declaration of judgment (Isaiah 42:18–25) to an assurance of mercy. Examples from the past provide solid reason for hope that God had not abandoned His people (see 43:2a–2b, below). For this reason, the Lord commanded the people *fear not*—one of the most frequent commands in the Bible (examples: Genesis 15:1; Joshua 1:9; Luke 1:30; Revelation 1:17).

God's relationship to *Israel* (also called *Jacob*; see Genesis 32:28; Isaiah 41:8) is described with four verbs. First, the Lord *created* them. This concept is poetically repeated by saying that God *formed* them. This is a familiar theme throughout the Old Testament: Israel was created and chosen by the Lord God, not the other way around (see Ezekiel 20:5). Third, the Lord *redeemed* Israel. To *redeem* has the sense here of deliverance by paying a price. In combination to references of God's forming the people, this alludes most clearly to Israel's rescue from Egyptian bondage (see Exodus 6:6). The exodus from Egypt was the beginning of the nation of Israel, a redemption from slavery. Fourth, the Lord *called* and named Israel as His chosen nation, and the call and escape from Egypt was the foundation of this relationship (see Hosea 11:1).

B. God Protects (vv. 2–4)

2a. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee.

Allusion to the exodus continues with reference to passing *through the waters*, as in the miraculous Red Sea event (Exodus 14:15–31; compare Psalm 78:13). The promise that the floodwaters of *rivers* will not *overflow* recalls Israel's experience at the Jordan River (Joshua 3:15–17).

Similar flooding language was used earlier in Isaiah to speak figuratively of King Shalmaneser V (ruled 727–722 BC; see Isaiah 8:6–8). This Assyrian king overtook the northern tribes of Israel (2 Kings 17:1–6; 18:9), stopping short of taking the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The Assyrian King Sennacherib (ruled 705–681 BC) would further threaten them (18:13–17; Isaiah 36:1–37:38), though Jerusalem would not fall until 586 BC to the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar (ruled 605–562 BC; see 43:2b, below).

Such dangers were not to be feared, because the Lord promised He would *be with* the people (compare Psalm 124:1, 4–5). This echoes God's similar promises elsewhere (examples: Exodus 3:12; Joshua 1:5; Judges 6:16). This promise proves to be the key not only to Israel's deliverance but also to our own. Immanuel, meaning "God is with us" (Isaiah 7:14; compare Matthew 1:23), has come to save us from every sin that ensnares, reconcile us to our Lord, and give us life eternal (2 Corinthians 5:18–19; Colossians 1:19–23a).

2b. When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.

Whereas protection from waters recalled the past, the same was not literally true of *fire* and *flame* (see Deuteronomy 4:20; Jeremiah 11:4). Looking into the nation's future in Babylonian captivity, however, we remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's miraculous salvation in King Nebuchadnezzar's superheated furnace (Daniel 3:19–27)! Israel could faithfully, hopefully expect to experience this kind of supernatural protection in God's hands, even as they experienced punishment for their sins in a foreign land.

3a. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel.

This first title again hearkens back to the exodus from Egypt, as this is how God introduced himself when He gave the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2; the exact Hebrew expression appears also in Isaiah 41:13 and 48:17). *Lord* brings to mind the personal name by which He revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush—"I Am That I Am" (Exodus 3:14). This designation speaks to God's eternal, unchanging nature. Jesus would later also tie this name to the hope of resurrection because God is the Lord of the living, not the dead (compare 3:16; Matthew 22:32).

God is a more generic Hebrew word that could be used to speak of the Lord (as here) or of false gods (example: Genesis 31:30–32; Isaiah 21:9), with context determining which. Though Israel was called to worship the Lord God only, they were surrounded by people who venerated other, fictitious gods, and most often many such gods at once. Isaiah especially emphasized that God is not one among many, but the only God (example: 45:6).

To claim to be Israel's only God was necessarily to claim to be *the Holy One of Israel*. Though we can think of holiness as a set of characteristics like purity, sinlessness, and so on, the basic claim here is of uniqueness. The Holy One is the special One, unlike any other. And God is not bound to Israel because of something the people did but, instead, by His own promises. Because the holy God chose Israel, the people were called to be holy as well (Exodus 19:6; Leviticus 19:2)—not just pure, but also unique in the world. The same call holds for Christians today (1 Peter 1:16; Revelation 1:6). We are to serve our unique God in unique ways that will often run counter to cultural expectations (Romans 12:2).

3b. Thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee.

Though the word *Saviour* takes on an overtly spiritual definition in Christianity (example: John 3:16–21), Isaiah's audience would likely have thought of physical deliverance (example: Psalm 18:3). Even in Jesus' day, the term frequently was applied to Roman military victors or emperors. The Lord saved Israel from its enemies because of His great mercy (example: 13:5; compare Romans 5:8).

Three nations are listed as examples of the Lord's saving Israel. First is *Egypt*, the great enslaver and oppressor of the people of Israel. Second and third are *Ethiopia*, a region south of Egypt, and *Seba*, which is near Ethiopia and with a likely association with Sheba (Psalm 72:10). The effect of naming these three countries is to emphasize the extent of the *ransom* that God paid for His people. After King Cyrus of Persia (ruled 539–530 BC) released the Jews to return to Judah (2 Chronicles 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4), his son King Cambyses II (ruled 530–522 BC) took control of Egypt and the surrounding areas. In this way, the Jews were given relative freedom in Judah because Persian attention was diverted elsewhere (see lesson 5).

After the Babylonians took Jerusalem, many inhabitants, including an unwilling Jeremiah, fled to Egypt (Jeremiah 43:4–7)—and some likely beyond to those other nations as well. This began what is known as the Diaspora. Everywhere they went, the Jewish refugees took their religion with them (examples: James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1). Hundreds of years after today's text, when the gospel began to spread throughout the Greco-Roman world, these pockets of Jewish believers would aid its spread—whether in spite of ill-considered attempts to squash the good news (example: Acts 8:1b–8) or their own evangelistic efforts (example: 18:2, 26). In large part, this fulfills Isaiah 43:5–7 (not in our printed text; compare Matthew 8:11).

4. Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life.

The grand biblical story is that God chose Israel to be the nation that received His laws to prepare the way for the Messiah (Galatians 3:24). Because Israel was chosen by God out of all the nations, they were counted as both *precious* and *honourable*. These terms should be understood as closely related to the concept of holiness (see Isaiah 43:3a, above). Israel's identity was given to them by ransom, not through their own efforts—a concept that we who follow Christ are intimately acquainted with (Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6).

II. The Lord Calls

(Isaiah 43:10–12)

A. Israel Must Testify (v. 10a)

10a. Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen.

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 writers of Israel saw the honest witness as “faithful” in contrast to the “false witness” (see Proverbs 14:5). The people of antiquity were very aware of the great damage a false witness could bring (see 25:18).

Ancient law courts were different from modern ones, but many roles are similar. It is important to identify the role that each character may represent (judge, plaintiff, defendant, witness, etc.) and the purpose for the scene (to level charges, to prove guilt, to announce a verdict, to impose a sentence). The figurative courtroom before us is packed with “all the nations” (Isaiah 43:9, not in our printed text). As the Lord's *witnesses*, the Israelites must be able to give testimony of their experiences of God's saving actions, such as those described above.

The witness of the people is magnified by the Lord's *servant*, the one whom He has *chosen*. Sometimes Isaiah applies the idea of the servant to an individual yet to come. This future servant will be identified as Jesus (Matthew 12:17–21, quoting Isaiah 42:1–4). But here the servant refers broadly to Israel as a collective singular for the plural *ye* (compare Isaiah 41:8–9; 45:4). God's mighty acts made Israel the witness for the Lord to all other nations. The law required two or three witnesses to convict someone of a crime (Deuteronomy 19:15; compare John 8:17). In Israel, God had a whole nation of witnesses.

B. The Truth to Be Believed (vv. 10b–12)

10b. That ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me.

The content of the servant's testimony is tied to things that the original readers could *know*, *believe*, and *understand*. The servant Israel is called to testify about the holiness of the Lord (see Isaiah 43:3a, above). Doing so requires rehearsing their own history and also embracing the nature of God—that *before me there was no God formed*. This eternal, uncreated state is as far from our creaturely experience as can be. We have both ancestors who came before and descendants who come after us. Not so with God. There is no god who existed before the Lord.

He is the uncreated Creator. Furthermore, there is no being like the Lord and *neither shall there be* (see Revelation 1:4). Logically this follows, for how could another uncreated being or god come into being?

11. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour.

The Lord had always insisted on Israel's acknowledging that He was their only *saviour*. Worshipping other gods was only one way that Israel betrayed a lack of trust in the Lord to save them. Another seemingly more pragmatic way was to ally with foreign nations. These two means cannot be totally separated—the ancient world did not separate the world into religious and secular the way we in the Western world do today. We might think of Solomon's many foreign wives and allies and his resulting walk away from the Lord as one key example (1 Kings 11:1–8). Turning to other, foreign gods could not save Israel, but only kindle the wrath of the Lord (example: 11:9–11). As the psalmist rightly asserted, “[The Lord] only is my rock and my salvation” (Psalm 62:6).

12. I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when there was no strange god among you: therefore ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, that I am God.

Should the Israelites balk and ask how they were qualified to act as God's *witnesses*, here it is spelled out for them. Because God *declared* and *saved* and *shewed*—in other words, because God chose to be knowable to these people, to reveal himself in actions—the people were meant to be witnesses to all that they had learned (see Isaiah 43:3, above, on the implications of God's names).

We can make too fine a difference between what it meant for God to declare, save, and show; all of these are interconnected. However, we may think of declaration as God's giving knowledge of His intentions (example: Genesis 12; 15) and of His expectations (example: Exodus 20). His saving deeds have been rehearsed throughout this lesson (see especially Isaiah 43:3b, above). And finally, God did not do these things in secretive ways but openly, where other nations could see them and speak of them (examples: Joshua 2:8–13; Jeremiah 40:2–3).

In Isaiah 44, which follows, the prophet speaks at length on what has been called the “folly of idols.” This reinforces the foundational truths that there is no God but the Lord and that all other gods are human creations. Israel's witness was greatly diminished by dalliances with *strange* gods, in part because knowledge of the Lord is tied to devotion to Him. Forsaking God for a false god erodes the knowledge a person already had and prevents growth toward God.

Conclusion

A. Do I Have a Witness?

Much as we might be tempted to judge Israel's efforts to witness, we do well to appreciate that though Isaiah was not believed in his own ministry, his words were written down. These were considered precious enough (by God) to be preserved throughout generations, and Isaiah's words undergird the Christian's witness today.

As disciples of Christ, we are to be witnesses to the unbelieving world (see Acts 1:8). And though we might think of ourselves individually as witnesses, the church is the primary witness (John 13:34–35; Colossians 3:12–17). What do our worship services say about our God? How does our presence in the community tell the truth about our Lord? What are our relationships and work and pastimes saying about our holy God?

What Do You Think?

Which concept in today's lesson do you find most challenging?

Digging Deeper

Which concept do you find most encouraging?

B. Prayer

Lord, give us hearts and minds to be true witnesses of Your mighty works. Thank You for how You have revealed yourself throughout history. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Remember God's works, and witness faithfully.¹
