

Fear Not for I Am with You

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on February the 7th 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, Fear Not, For I Am With You, and is from Isaiah chapter 43, verses 1 to 28. Please be seated and have opened the passage from Isaiah 43, page 585. This is part of a series of sermons through the book of Isaiah.

As I'm sure you know, during the week a baby boy was abducted from Bendigo. Imagine how the boy felt. Fear, lost, abandoned.

Imagine how the mother felt. Grief. And no doubt if she could have, she would have done anything at all to get her son back.

[1 : 19] If a price had been asked for, she would have paid anything. No cost would be too high to her to get her boy back. And we know that fortunately he was returned and found and returned safe and unharmed.

No money need be paid. But there are often stories like that. People who are abducted. Some money or demand is made.

And often we see the appeals of the loved ones on television. The husband or the wife or the parent. Pleading for the safe return of their loved one or child.

And offering anything at all in order to get that abducted person back. That's the sort of relationship we find here in this passage between God and the people of ancient Israel.

In the book of Isaiah. His people, God's people, but through their own fault, have been taken away captive by the Babylonian Empire.

[2 : 29] And in exile in Babylon. But in this passage we get in a sense God's assurance and his plea for their safety.

In verse 1. But now thus says the Lord. He who created you, O Jacob. He who formed you, O Israel. The God who's speaking here has made this people.

He's made them to be his people. Just like a potter forms something out of clay. That's what God has done for ancient Israel. But more than that. Do not fear, he says, for I have redeemed you.

Not only has he made them and formed them. But he's redeemed them. He's brought them back from slavery and exile. Now that's referring back in the past to what God has done in bringing his people out of Egypt.

Under Moses. Through the wilderness into the promised land. He's redeemed them from the slavery they were under in Egypt. But it's also an assurance to them now in another slavery in another land that God would do the same again.

[3 : 35] And redeem them from the hands of the Babylonians. He's called you by name. That is, he's named them. He owns them.

They're his. Like any parent names their child because it's their child, God has named Israel Israel. Because they're his.

So verse 1 finishes on a climax. You are mine. What words of reassurance to people far away in exile.

You are mine. In that wonderful series, Fawlty Towers, in my favourite episode of the series, the irrepressible Mrs Richards takes the money that Basil Fawlty has illicitly won on a bet on a horse. And for a brief time, it looks as though he's won. That Basil Fawlty has got more money than he started off with. Even more than he won on the horse.

[4 : 42] And there's this beautiful scene. We're standing behind the counter. He's holding the money and he says to Mrs Richards, is this yours? And she says no. And he rubs it in his hands together and says, this is mine.

That's the passion of God here to Israel in exile. You are mine. You're not Babylon's. You don't belong there.

You're mine. I made you. I formed you. I've redeemed you. I've called you by name. You are mine. It is a passionate plea. Just like we might hear a parent on television pleading for the return of their child.

That child is mine. That is God's passion in these words to ancient Israel, his people. You are mine. Hence do not fear. Don't fear the exile. Don't fear Babylon. Don't fear abandonment. Don't fear the future. Don't fear the trials that are coming upon you. You are mine.

[5 : 47] What assurance those words are. But those words of assurance are not a promise that there will be no trouble. Not a promise that there will be no suffering.

No trial or strife. But rather, God's presence in the midst of trouble and strife. So verse 2 tells us, not when you bypass the waters in safety, not when you bypass a fire in safety, but rather when you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

Just like a parent teaching a child to swim. It's okay. I'm with you. And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. Not that they'll be easy, but that God's presence will be sufficient for safety. And when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned. The previous chapter ended with a note of the fire of God's judgment, something that all people will pass through. But here is the promise that even through the fire of God's judgment, God's people will not be burned.

A promise that's actually fulfilled just some time after this, when Daniel and Daniel's friends are cast into a den of fire. When they come the next morning to take them out, they find them alive, but not only alive, another figure standing there with them in the fire, like an angel of the Lord, God himself, keeping this promise.

[7 : 17] For the people in exile, this was not a promise of a quick fix, not a promise of a life of ease, but rather a promise that in the midst of their strife, God would be with them.

And that is all they need. Never think that being a Christian makes you immune from trouble, from suffering, from trial, from tragedy, from difficulty.

God never promises that for this life, for the Christian person. But rather he promises that in the midst of such things, he will be with us, holding our hand, guiding us, protecting us, and ensuring our safety through whatever difficulties and trials this world throws at us.

Yea, though I pass through the valley of the shadow of death, not around it, but through it, I will not fear, for you are with me. Same promise. King David knew this promise, as does Isaiah.

Isn't that comfort for us? Isn't that better comfort than saying, you won't have a problem in life? Because when you do get a problem, what's gone wrong?

[8 : 36] God doesn't promise that, but he promises that in the midst of trials, even grief and tragedy, God's hand will be with us. God's hand will be with us. And that is all we need.

Just as Paul promised, that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Not that nothing will try to, they will. But that Christ's love is gripping our hand and will not let us go.

If these words are to be words of comfort for ancient Israel and for us, then the God who makes these promises needs to be an almighty God.

The parent who promises the child that, don't worry Johnny, I'll be with you always, inevitably at some point cannot keep that promise. The friend who says, I'll stick by you thick and thin, very often will give up at some point.

But God, no. Always there. Always keeping his promise. And whatever opposition is thrown at us, always strong enough to resist it.

[9 : 46] That's the point of the verses that follow. There'd be no comfort here if God promises these things, but then a bigger God, a more powerful God comes along and God is unable to keep his promise.

So what we find in the rest of this chapter is the assurance that not only does God make this promise, but he can keep it. He is the only God, the only power, and therefore you can trust him absolutely.

When he promises you that you are his. I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour, he says in verse 3.

All terms that remind ancient Israel of what God has done for them hundreds of years before under Moses in bringing them from Egypt. There God revealed himself to Moses and said, I am the Lord, Yahweh is the name.

Hear the same thing. And then a bit later on in the book of Exodus, the Holy One of Israel was the God who handed down his laws on Mount Sinai. Your Saviour, it says in verse 3.

[10:53] That is the one who has brought them through the Red Sea and is called the Saviour in Exodus 15. All of these terms are to remind Israel now in exile that God is the same God who has delivered his people already from one captivity and he will do so again.

And just as then under Moses he redeemed them at Egypt's expense, so now he will not stop at any price to save his people.

That's the point of the end of verse 3. I give Egypt as your ransom but even more than that, Ethiopia and Saba, countries of North Africa, in exchange for you. That is he's saying, I will pay any price to set you free because you're mine.

Because as he says in verse 4, you're precious in my sight and honoured and I love you. What tender words of assurance they are. God will pay whatever it takes to redeem the people he's made, redeemed and called by name.

He will not stop at paying for our salvation. I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.

[12:13] You imagine the plea of a parent on TV whose child is abducted. I'll pay whatever they ask for to get my child back. That's God here. He's assuring his people in exile that he has not abandoned them but he will pay even the most exorbitant price to redeem them back to himself.

Can you imagine God saying that of you? It's hard to think in some terms but it's true, he does.

Because these same ideas are spoken about Christians in the New Testament.

We shouldn't think that ancient Israel is the object of this and not us as Christian people but rather we are the same. He has chosen us in love. The same love that was demonstrated for Israel is the same love with which he chose us in Ephesians 1.

The same love with which he redeems us in Christ. We have the same privileged relationship with God as ancient Israel did. So these tender words of assurance and salvation are ours as well.

God loves us with the same everlasting love. He's redeemed us and called us by name. So when we hear him speaking to ancient Israel he says the same to us who are exiles in this world far yet from God's heaven assuring us that he will bring us to his place one day because we are his.

[13:49] No exile's too big. Verses 5 and 6 say it doesn't matter whether you're just in Babylon whether you're north, south, east or west I'll bring all my people back. Verse 7 makes it clear everyone who's called by my name not just those who are strong enough to come back but everyone he will not leave one behind.

Isn't that a great comfort to you to know that on that day when God's people are gathered from the ends of the earth to God's heaven he will not leave you out. He's not going to be like a faulty tour guide leader who sets off the tour guide and realises somebody's left behind off the bus.

Everyone will be there. He'll make sure of that. He'll count you. You'll be in if you're called by his name. What comfort that is to know that we will not miss that bus because God has called us by name formed us and redeemed us.

Everyone he says will be there. Doesn't that fill you with confidence in God? Doesn't it fill you with hope and assurance in a great and loving God?

It ought to. I must confess that I'm not a good shopper.

[15:04] If I decide to go out and buy a shirt don't come with me. Because invariably I need to see every shirt in every shop in not quite every shopping centre.

And I never seem to find the one that's quite right. The one that's perfect is never there in my size. The one that's perfect in style is probably not the right colour.

The one that's colour is right has probably got buttons that look silly or whatever. I'm a hopeless shopper and often go home without buying a shirt or whatever else I'm going to get.

Now the market of course is very competitive because there's lots to choose from. This one's got better sleeves than that but this has got better buttons than that and so on. Now in the ancient world of gods it's also a competitive market in a sense.

Every god seemed to offer its wares in one sense and for ancient Israel in exile it looked as though their god had failed to deliver the goods. He's been defeated by the Babylonian gods and for them as well as other people in the ancient world the question was to paraphrase a bank slogan which god?

[16 : 16] Which god is going to deliver the goods? it doesn't seem to be our god. So what is going on in the imagination of god in the words that follow in verses 8 to 10 is sort of like an international expo in a sense where all the sales people of the different gods come along to parade the wares of their gods.

Verse 10 says that you are my witnesses to ancient Israel that is they're his sales reps so to speak and in verse 9 let all the nations and implied in that are their gods gather their own witnesses together let's see which witnesses can show us which product is best which shirt is best or which washing powder bleaches the whitest and so on.

Now god's at a disadvantage here because his witnesses in this great international expo of deities so called in the imagination are people who in verse 8 are blind and deaf they have eyes and ears but as we've seen in recent weeks in Isaiah God's people have failed to exercise spiritual insight they haven't heard and seen and that is understood God's word now imagine having a blind deaf witness in court putting them up in the box and saying well can you tell us what you saw on the night of July the 3rd well actually I didn't see anything because I'm blind well what did you hear well I actually didn't hear anything because I'm deaf as well the words show and expose the culpable deficiency of God's own people they fail as his witnesses they fail to see his glory and his grace they fail to testify to what God is doing but on the other hand even though the witnesses of the other nations presumably have eyes and ears we're not told that they don't in verse 9 they've got nothing to testify to the question that's put rhetorically in the middle of verse 9 is who among them that is the other gods have declared these sorts of things about

God choosing and calling and redeeming and creating and predicting things that will happen so which among those gods declared this and foretold to us the former things and all their witnesses great though they may be have nothing to say because none of those gods none of those idols have done anything like what God has done they're silent now the point of this hypothetical situation in Isaiah 43 is this it's to expose God's people's stupidity blindness refusal to believe what God is doing in exile they think God's abandoned and they think he's defeated so they're looking out for other gods they're testing the Babylonian god market so to speak God is going to make it clear to them that there is no choice that any claim of any other god is completely empty and that he is the only god that matters so he goes on in verse the end of verse 10 to say before me no god was found and after me there shall be no other he is the only god verse 11

I I am the lord and besides me there is no other there's no comparison he's an incomparable god an unrivaled god verse 12 I declared I saved I proclaimed when there was no strange god among you that is back in the book of exodus when I brought you out of Egypt through the wilderness into the promised land whatever god was there doing that no god helping me do that I did it I alone and you're my witnesses you should have seen you should have heard you should have understood but you've blocked your ears and eyes and failed to appreciate that I I alone am god I I alone are the saviour I am god and hence forth I am he there is no one who can deliver from my hand I work and who can hinder it he's unrivaled there is no choice there is only one god and he's exposing

[20 : 24] Israel's faithlessness but not only is god the only god who's acted in the past he's also the god who acts in the future as well so verse 14 says not only about the past acts but the future for your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars that is the prison bars that bind into captivity god's people and the shouting of the Chaldeans that's the Babylonians that is shouting of joy and triumph will be turned to lamentation and mourning god will destroy them as he's destroyed ancient Egypt what he's done in the past doesn't stop there he hasn't passed his use by date he's still the god and so verse 15 says I am the lord your holy one the creator of Israel your king I'm still all those things even though I was them in the past nothing's changed I haven't run out of energy or power I haven't been superseded by any other god in verse 16 and 17 various things about the ancient exodus are recalled to mind god who makes a way in the sea like he did in the red sea and who brings out the chariot and horse and lets Egypt's army be drowned in the waters as they come back over the red sea and so on but those two verses are not in the past tense they're in the present tense he is the god who still does those things he hasn't exhausted his energy and power in doing them 600 years before in

Moses time he can still do them again and he will do so for Babylon do you see the argument it's saying god's not being defeated he hasn't run out of energy hasn't passed his use by date he's still the only god so that's why verse 18 says don't remember the former things don't consider the things of old it's not saying forget your history it's saying don't just think that god was active then but now

we've got to choose a modern up-to-date god like our modern world seems to think so often the pressure inside and outside the church today is to get rid of our old-fashioned god and let's get one who's up-to-date with the times let's remake god in the sort of modern trendy image a lot of bunkum the same god of the past is the present we can't remake god in a modern image he's more modern than any of us are and we'll see that in years to come no doubt god is the god of all time don't choose a god for one age and then another for another is what this is saying that god who acted in the past with such power and grace is going to do a new thing now same sort of thing but as we saw last week even a better and bigger exodus don't you see don't you understand he's saying you should do open your eyes and see your ears and hear but no they're blind and deaf he's going to do it again and make a way in the wilderness provide water like he did water out of a rock now there'll be water flowing in the desert it'll all happen again in a bigger and better way god will reveal his glorious power again there's a great sense of personal appeal in all of this this is not just the lord god sort of having ferocious words to his people there's a passion about this the passion of the rejected parent the passion of the spurned lover i've done this in the past i alone saved you i called you i'm the one who did the exodus and i can still do all of those things why have you turned away from me why have you brought your eyes and ears to me what he's saying there is a passionate appeal here to god's people to turn back to him and place their faith and trust in him why does he do all these things verse 21 tells us for my glory for my praise the reason why he saved his people and the reason why he'll save them again is not just for their benefit but for his praise and his glory might sound a bit selfish but that's the purpose of god in this world he doesn't save you and me so that we'll have a jolly nice time thank you very much he saves you and me so that his glory in the world will be seen he saves ancient israel so that his glory will be seen throughout the whole world not just for israel's benefit israel is to be witnesses of it that is their very life their very existence is to testify to the grace of god and the glory of god in the world the same for christian people today that as the world sees us reflecting the glory of god and living for his glory then they will see the glorious god behind it all and the earth will be filled with his glory like the waters cover the sea that's our purpose in life not to sit back and wallow in the grace that is ours but to live for the glory of the god who saved us we are made and redeemed for the glory of god all of us twice in this chapter isaiah makes it clear that that's why israel is made and twice in this chapter the very next verse exposes their inability to live up to that calling verse 7 you whom i created for my glory goes into verse 8 the blind and the deaf verse 21 the people whom i formed for myself so that they might declare my praise goes into verse 22 which exposes their false religion in effect their inability to reflect the glory of god their complaint it seems in verse 22 is that they have been weary for god that is god's demands are too excessive for them to be too hard to offer the right sacrifice or something it's made us tired it's a fairly weak complaint to god they've got their religion wrong yet you did not call upon me well they have offered some sacrifices they have practiced some religion but it's not really a god centered religion after all they're found it weary they're found it burdensome their worship is not satisfying to god beginning of verse 24 but the irony is not that the people are wearied and burdened by god but that god is wearied and burdened by them the end of verse 24 but you have burdened me not with your sacrifices but with your sins you have wearied me with your iniquities what an irony what a tragedy they've wearied and burdened god with their sins and iniquities we might wonder why in this chapter god promises such extraordinary things to a people who burden him with sins and iniquities but without explanation verse 25 having just said how they've burdened him with sin then says i am he who blocks out your transgressions no reason no rhyme no logic an extraordinary statement of the mercy of god there's nothing in israel that warrants it they make no claim on god to receive his mercy that's the point of verses 26 to 28 but rather god's mercy is motivated by god's own glory so verse 25 goes on i am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake why does god forgive why does god extend mercy to sinners not because they deserve it but so that god's glory would be seen because if god left israel in exile in babylon if god abandoned them forever as they deserved where would god's glory be seen in the world then indeed the opposite they would see that god is defeated god's abandoned his people what god is that but god motivated by mercy for and for his glory sake will save them again forgive them again bring them home to him not for their sakes but so that his glory will be seen in the world and he will carry the burden of their sins and iniquities we find out how later in isaiah chapter 53 god's mercy is something that i think generally both irritates and excites us i think sometimes we're irritated by god's mercy because we don't like getting something that we don't actually earn or deserve we feel a bit embarrassed and uncomfortable by it we think that we

should have a claim of righteousness that warrants receiving god's mercy and grace but on the other hand of course god's mercy should excite us precisely because we can't earn it and don't earn it and it is his free gift to us this is the israel that god promises to be with forever a sinful nation burdening him with their sins no different from us don't think that these promises will come only to god's perfect people there are none they come to you and i like ancient israel burdening god with our sins but knowing that he carries them in the cross of christ therefore these words are wonderful comfort to know the same promises of divine presence are ours as ancient israel to know the same assurance of divine protection in trials is ours as well as ancient israel to know the same guarantee of being brought safe to god's perfect place is ours as well as ancient israel before sue horrocks died last year at the age of 39 the words of this chapter were on her mind one night she woke up in hospital with the words of verses 1 and 5 on her ears fear not for i have redeemed you fear not for i am with you god's promise to her was not to take away her cancer miraculously and heal her but rather in the midst of it in the valley of the shadow of death to be with her and she knew that that was a sufficient promise she knew that that was all she needed she also knew it was her dying wish along with gordon her husband's to bring god glory that was the call of ancient israel that's the call to all of us to bring god glory and to trust his sufficient promise when through the deep waters he calls thee to go the rivers of grief shall not be overflow for he will be with thee in trouble to bless and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress when through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie his grace all sufficient shall be your supply the flame shall not hurt thee his only design thy dross to consume thy gold to refine the soul that on jesus still leans for repose he will not he will not desert to its foes the soul though all hell should endeavour to shake he'll never no never no never forsake rot he'll vir lo

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