

## **Isaiah 43:1-7**

This is what Bible scholars refer to as a “salvation oracle.” There are many of these in the Old Testament, and they all follow a pretty standard formula. First, God declares, “Fear not, do not be afraid.” And then God recounts the history of his saving actions in the past and promises to save again now or in the future.

In this case, the most immediate fulfillment of this oracle was the return of the Hebrew people from exile in Babylon. In chapter 39 of Isaiah, there is a prophecy to King Hezekiah that while God delivered them from the Assyrians, his protection would not last much longer because of Judah’s repeated violation of the covenant. They would be taken into captivity by the Babylonians for 70 years, then allowed to return to the Promised Land by the Persians. This prophecy was fulfilled in that context, but it also looks forward to the saving work of Christ, in which it finds a greater meaning.

God says, “I have redeemed you.” To redeem is to intervene on behalf of a relative to rescue them from difficulty or protect them from danger. “I have called you by name.” A parent names their child, and God calls his children by name.

“When you go through the waters, I will be with you.” Now, we tend to think of water in mostly positive terms. Water is necessary for life. Water is an agent of cleansing. But in the ancient Near East mindset, water was much more often associated with negative things. Water represented the powers of chaos, evil, death, and destruction. Think of floods, which happened from time to time in parts of the Near East world. It’s mostly a desert environment, but the rivers originate in the mountains of Lebanon and Turkey, and heavy rains in the mountains led to floods on the Jordan, the Tigris, the Euphrates, and so on. Or think of shipwrecks. Many who would go out on trade ships on the Mediterranean or the Red Sea never came back, lost at sea in storms. It appears that swimming was invented several thousand years ago, but I can’t imagine a whole lot of people knew how to do it. Besides, there were no personal flotation devices. If your ship went down, you were a pretty much a goner. So passing through the waters is a symbol of salvation from death and destruction.

“When you walk through the fire of oppression.” Fire was also a symbol of calamity and evil, often used in connection to slavery, oppression, suffering, and martyrdom. So similar to water, but water would be related more to natural disasters whereas fire would be related more to human oppression.

“I am the Lord, your Savior.” The word savior was often used to refer to someone who comes to your defense in court proceedings.

“I gave Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba as a ransom for your freedom.” To ransom is to pay the price to buy someone out of prison or slavery. It was the Persian king Cyrus who freed the Hebrew people from their exile in Babylon in 539 BC. His son, King Cambyses, was attacked by Egypt during his reign. He successfully defeated Egypt and made it part of his empire, and that included Nubia, or modern Ethiopia, which was under Egyptian control. Seba is a bit of a mystery. Many Bible scholars think it’s another name for Sheba, which was in modern day Yemen, just across the Red Sea from Ethiopia. The two nations were closely associated with each other in antiquity. This event is pictured here as a ransom. God buys the freedom of his people by allowing Persia to gain control over other nations.

“Others died that you might live.” I think it’s this line that really makes this a foreshadowing of the work of Christ. Christ died that we might live. Why did God do this? “Because you are precious to me. You are honored and loved.”

“So don’t be afraid, I will gather you, bringing you back from all directions.” The language of ingathering is often associated with salvation oracles, especially after the Exile. We know from history that the people of Israel never really were gathered together again after the Assyrians defeated the northern tribes. Exiles returned to Jerusalem, but a great number of them continued to live in other lands. By the first century, we find Jewish settlements in every place from Spain to Egypt, Turkey, and Babylon. That’s why we believe the final fulfillment of these ingathering prophecies will be at the return of Christ, when he gathers his people, “all who claim God as God.”

“I have made them for my glory.” And I would add to that, he has saved us for his glory. We often think of salvation in terms of the benefits to us, but God saves us for his own glory. God is glorified by the greatness of his work of salvation and redemption.

Today we remember our baptisms as we celebrate the baptism of Christ. This passage reminds us that baptism is not just a symbol of our cleansing from sin. It’s also a sign that we have “passed through the waters.” It’s a visual of the death of the old self and the birth of the new self. It’s a reminder that God has redeemed us from slavery to sin and death and gathered us into his own family. Our baptism points to these works of God’s salvation.