

God With and For Us
Isaiah 43:1-7
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Let us pray
Lord, open our hearts to your word for us today. We don't want to leave here unchanged. Amen.

As we continue in the Christian season of Epiphany, exploring God's character, we return to Isaiah. Last week we celebrated that God's light has come into the world and the glory of God is upon us. This is an amazing gift. Hold onto it. Remind yourself that because you follow Jesus, God's glory is upon you in all circumstances!

Today we look at another amazing aspect of God's character; God is with and for us in all we're about.

Abraham Lincoln is quoted on the internet as saying, "The problem with quotes on the Internet is that no one can confirm their authenticity." Yeah. Abraham Lincoln never said anything about the internet!

Likewise, there are many common quotes that people have come to believe are from the Bible – and they aren't! For example, the Bible does not say, "God will not give you more than you can handle." It also does not say, "Cleanliness is next to godliness," "God works in mysterious ways," "Everything happens for a reason," or "God helps those who help themselves."

Let's be careful about carelessly repeating such quotes. They can cause great hurt and misrepresent God causing others to question if God really loves them or not. God DID say through the prophet Isaiah, **"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you."** (Isaiah 43:2)

To understand the meaning, we need to look at the passage in context. This passage was spoken to the Israelite people in exile. For about sixty years, the people had lived in captivity in Babylon, far from their homes in Palestine. They were discouraged, dispirited, and depressed. They wondered if they would ever be restored to their homeland. They wondered if they were forever separated from God.

Now their exile is about to end. The prophet Isaiah was reminding the people that God not only created them, and formed them, but also rescued them and called them by name. In this prophecy the people heard, **"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.'"** (Isaiah 42:1) God also reminded them in verse four that they were precious and honored in God's sight, and God loved them. Isn't that a powerful message?

The Israelite people, after decades of darkness and exile, see the dawn of light. Their doubts are being replaced by God's reassurance, care and protection. God was both with and for Israel.

We too go through dark times in our lives and we too have doubts about God's love. The new testament tells us that we, who choose to follow Jesus, are grafted into the family of God, adopted by God. The promises to the Israelites are for us too!

Now, notice, God did **not** say through Isaiah that the people were promised an easy path, and we aren't given that promise either. The scripture does *not* read, "**If** you pass through the waters." It reads, "**When** you pass through the waters." News flash: we live in a fallen world. Bad stuff happens in this world. Loved ones die. People are in car accidents. Home burn down. Relationships fall apart. Jobs are lost. Diseases abound. The world is not as God created it and has not been since Adam and Eve. Stuff happens in this world. Some is the consequence of human error and some is a result of evil. There will be rising waters, raging rivers and fires in our lives.

But the good news is, God promises to be with us. When we face obstacles, God is with us and for us.

This passage does *not* imply, "God will not give you more than you can handle." That expression seems to say that God is the source of all the negative of the world, that he gives us our struggles – and that just isn't true. This misunderstanding comes from Paul's writing to the Corinthian church. **"No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to**

endure it." (1 Cor. 10:13) Look at this carefully. It never says God is doing the testing. The stuff of our fallen world is the cause.

Neither Paul or Isaiah was saying that God pulls us into the waters, or pushes us into the fires, or burdens us with tests or temptations. These things happen because of poor human choices or external forces beyond our control. Adversity is simply a part of the nature of life. Notice, scripture tells us these things are common for everyone. You aren't being singled out!

What Paul and Isaiah both agreed upon is that God is powerful and compassionate. God is for us and with us as we face the challenges of life. As we work through the struggles, God is faithful to provide a way for us to make it through. Don't miss all the times in biblical history that God's people experienced **far** more than they could handle emotionally. Joseph was ripped from his family and sold into slavery. Why? Jealous brothers. David was chased by his own son and by Saul. Why? People were greedy for power. David grieved the death of his baby son. Why? He had committed adultery and had caused the death of the husband. Stephen was beaten to death and Peter was imprisoned, both for their faith. That is too much, far too much, for any to handle!

When God said through Isaiah, "**When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,**" (Isaiah 43:2) God was not serving as some super lifeguard who reaches down and plucks us out of the water.

Instead, God dives in with us and helps us ride it out. God promises to accompany us, and guide us, *through* our challenges.

We will encounter tough times in our lives. And God draws alongside us, sometimes via his Holy Spirit and other times by working through people to be his hands and feet. Sometimes God's presence is felt through our Christian friends who catch us when we stumble or comfort us in our heartache and loss. They stand with us and share their strength and faith when ours is weak.

God was with the Israelites when they escaped Egypt. He worked through Moses to part the Red Sea. God was with and for Paul when he was shipwrecked on the island of Malta. Paul writes letters of thanks for the gifts of the churches providing for him so he could spread the gospel. Peter was in prison and the people prayed for his release, and an angel of the Lord led him out. In like fashion, God is with and for us when we face troubles of our own.

There's a story about a woman who was living through the pain of bereavement. She kept coming to church during her grief. She would stand and hold her hymnal open in her hands, but not sing. A friend noticed this and commented to her, "I notice you are not singing. You always loved to sing. Why don't you try to join in? It'll make you feel better."

"I'm sorry," said the bereaved woman, "but I just can't sing right now. I'm sure that I will one day.

But for now, I know the church is singing the hymns for me, and that is a great source of comfort."

Imagine, when you join in worshipping God through your singing, others are uplifted and encouraged and drawn into worship. And one day, when you need to stand silently, you'll be surrounded with the voices of others singing glory to God and reminding each other that God is present when two or more gather in his name! Please, don't withhold that gift. Not only are you lifted into the presence of God through your own worship, you help transport others into God's presence and comfort!

Hear this. God does not impose troubles on us - *God does not impose our troubles on us*. Instead, God *chooses* to be powerful and compassionate to us even when we're caught up in the struggle. This also debunks the expression that "God only helps those who help themselves." Much of God's compassionate power is revealed when we feel helpless to do anything.

Why does God help us? **"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. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."** (Isaiah 43:2-3) God is our Savior! He loves us. He is with and for us!

Reading these verses might lead you to say, "God works in mysterious ways." There certainly is a

great deal of mystery around God's work, however a better comment might be, "God works in *redemptive* ways." That also is not a direct quote from the Bible but is very descriptive of God at work in our lives.

God works to redeem us, which means to recover us, deliver us, ransom us, save us. After all, God sent Jesus that we might be redeemed and covered in righteousness before God.

Jesus knew God's power and compassion in his life. When he faced the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus was not overwhelmed. When he walked through Holy Week, he was not burned. And even his death on the cross did not end his life forever. As it doesn't for us! God worked powerfully to raise him to new life.

This is the character of God. In his power and compassion for us, he works to redeem us. He works to restore us when life gets out of kilter. He works to take us through our challenges that we may know his glory upon us.

God promises to be with us in every situation. We don't face obstacles alone. God jumps in the waters with us. He may act divinely or work through people. We are often called to be the hands, feet, and heart of God here on earth.

Think about a tough time in your life. Do you remember people speaking the right words of comfort at the right time? Calling, sending a card or showing up just when you needed it? How about that co-worker who encouraged you and stood by? Or the surprise check from a loved one who knew nothing of your

challenge? Or the way things 'just happened' to fall into place when you needed?

Could it be that this was God's redemptive work in your tough situation? I have come to recognize that 'coincidences' are more often 'God-incidences!'

Consider this. God may be nudging you, placing you in just the right place at the right time, to serve as his hands and feet offering his presence through your words and actions to someone else who needs encouragement. Will you help?

Consider these thoughts: Between God, and those he works through, you are not alone in your challenges. God's best purposes are often accomplished through people he directs. You might be the next to help in amazing ways beyond your understanding. And all because God is with us and for us!

Let us pray

Thank you, Lord, for loving us and for always being with and for us in every circumstance. Help us know your presence with us through all challenges. Thank you for your faithfulness! Amen.