

## Prayer

Mighty Saviour, give me strength to hold on to the great blessings and wonderful gifts You have given me. Especially the blessings of Your promises, Your presence, Your peace, Your guidance, Your healing, and the gifts of salvation, faith, hope, love and eternal life. May I never forget these blessings or fail to use these gifts, and may they always be to me a proof of Your gracious love. Thank You for all You have given me: thank You, Mighty Saviour, AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

*(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)*

### Prayer ideas

*Call out to the Lord your deepest concerns, and when you have done so, wait in silence and discipline your emotions to be patient. Look for God's answers in the events of your day*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who are handicapped** *Pray for people who are physically impaired, especially any you may know in your own family*
- *Pray for those who are seeking to set up small businesses, to make a living and provide employment for others*
- *Give thanks to God for the blessings you receive from others, especially those who are very close to you*

## Meditation

There is no one essentially better than you  
For the Lord to use in His Kingdom:

There is no greater potential in anyone else  
For God to prefer others, instead of you;

There are no circumstances better than yours  
For the Gospel to be declared to others:

There is no time more ripe than the present  
For beginning to build God's Kingdom:

There is no place better than where you stand  
For doing all that God requires of you

There is no requirement other than faith and love  
For you to be a servant of the Lord!

Alleluia!

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 43:1-7

- <sup>1</sup> But now, this is what the LORD says,  
He who created you, Jacob,  
He who formed you, Israel:

Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by your name, you are mine.

- <sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you;  
or through the rivers,

they will not sweep you away;  
when you walk through fire  
it will not scorch you,  
and the flames will not burn you.

- <sup>3</sup> For I, the LORD, am your God,  
the Holy One of Israel is your Saviour.  
I gave Egypt as your ransom,  
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
- <sup>4</sup> Because you are precious in my sight,  
you are valued and I love you,  
I will give humanity in return for you,  
people in exchange for your life.
- <sup>5</sup> Do not be afraid, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and I will gather you from the west;
- <sup>6</sup> I will say to the north, 'Give them up,'  
and to the south, 'Do not hold them back;  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth
- <sup>7</sup> everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
I formed Him, indeed, I made Him!'

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## Bible Study

### Review

These wonderful words are a source of great encouragement to God's people. Here, God promises to redeem and love His people, and keep them His own forever; He has created and sustained them, and He will be with them through all life's trials (43:1-4). The prophecy also speaks of a time when God will gather His people together at a time of His choosing (43:5-7)! It is understandable therefore that a Christian reader will think of these prophecies as describing the eternal promises of God found in Jesus Christ. We must nevertheless be patient and study how these words apply to the sinful people of Israel. If we do, we will find there is more for us here than we imagine.

At this point in his prophecy, Isaiah has explained why God announced the coming of a new Servant (42:1f.), when He already had a servant available, albeit an unfaithful one, in His people Israel. The trouble was that Israel had failed, and we have just read a passage of Isaiah's prophecy that speaks very openly about Israel's sins (42:18-25), and the heartbreak this caused God. The picture is this; God had been forced to judge Israel because she persisted in sin, and He had allowed her to be exiled in Babylon. He therefore needed a new 'Servant' (42:1) who would accomplish His will, but as this passage so dramatically says, this does not mean that he no longer loves His wayward children, Israel.

The prophecy is therefore best understood as a Word of the Lord spoken to sinners. It says that God's love is not compromised, and even though His people '*walk through fire*' (43:2), meaning the fires of judgement, he will still remain with them. God's faithfulness is therefore absolute, and Isaiah's prophecy here is remarkably similar to what Paul says in his letter to Timothy; '*if we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself*' (2 Tim 2:13). On the one hand, this means that God always loves His people Israel, even though they have sinned; on the other hand, the prophecy says that out of love, God always seeks to bring the sinner back to the Kingdom. He says to all sinners '*you are precious in my sight*' (43:4); it is a very 'New Testament' message!

In addition to this, the prophecy contains a remarkable section revealing God's desire to bring His people back to Himself (43:5-7). It speaks of them being drawn from '*east ... and west*' (43:5) and '*north ... and south*' (43:6), gathering together from the '*ends of the earth*' (43:6). Instead of simply naming Israel, the prophecy says that those who will be gathered together are '*called by my name*' (43:7). Of course, this prophecy appears to speak of the gathering of Israel, but we should be careful. Does this prophecy speak of the 'in-gathering' of simply the Old Testament people of God, the Jews, or the New Testament people of God, the Christians?

There is no doubt that this prophecy has helped Christians retain the hope that Israel will be gathered back into the fold of God's perfect will when He comes again in glory. This is important, as Paul says in Romans 9-11, for God is surely faithful to the promises He has made to Israel over the centuries, even though she has sinned by rebelling against God's will and rejecting the Saviour. But there is room for us to believe that this prophecy ultimately speaks not just of Israel, but of the New Israel, God's people who are called by God's name by faith in Christ. Jesus Himself spoke to the Father about this in John 17, longing for the day when as this prophecy says, all of His people 'created for His glory' will return to Him.

Isaiah himself may never have appreciated the full extent of his prophecies, though he was doubtless aware of the great value they were to the people of Israel who sought to return to Jerusalem. This vision is of a God who will not go back on His promises to redeem His people, and show the world that He is faithful to all who turn to Him. God does not go back on His word.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The structure of the poem
- The beginning and the end of Israel (43:1,5,6,7)
- The journey of punishment (43:2)
- Israel's value to the Lord (43:3,4)

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V2 'when you walk through fire ...'**

*In the second half of the verse, the illustration is about fire. The two Hebrew verbs say 'it will not scorch you' and then 'it will not burn you'. The first means a temporary burn that heals and the second verb means a fire that consumes. You will find that the Bible versions all express this a little differently, but this is the general idea.*

### **V3 'The Holy One of Israel is your Saviour'.**

*You will find that most versions of the Bible have 'The Holy One of Israel, your Saviour' as if this followed on as part of the previous sentence. However, if you translate the line as a sentence in its own right then what I have written is completely correct, and it adds a sense of drama to the announcement.*

### **V3 'I gave Egypt ... Ethiopia'.**

*Some translations have 'I give', and the difference between the present and the past tense here is important theologically. Unfortunately, the Hebrew could be either, depending on what view you take of the grammar of the sentence. See study for explanation. The mention of Ethiopia sounds strange, but the Hebrew word is 'Cush' – which is commonly reckoned to be the Upper Nile region of the far south of Egypt, hence Ethiopia.*

### **V4 'You are valued and I love you'**

*You will not find this in other translations, which have 'you are honoured and I love you'. However, the sense of the word 'honoured' as we use the word today is not helpful. God is not giving Israel an 'honour', the word has its roots in the idea of 'increasing value', and I have therefore used this for the translation.*

### **V4 'I give humanity in return for you'**

*It is worth noting that the Hebrew uses the word 'Adam' here and the sentence reads 'I give Adam in return for you'. Unless we assume that 'Adam' is a general word meaning 'humanity', the verse does not make sense, since Isaiah uses another word (Hebrew "am") for 'people' in the next line.*

### **V7 'I formed him, indeed I made him.'**

*This is a fairly literal translation of the Hebrew which brings out the special nature of God's creation which is the feature of this verse.*

## Going Deeper

There are some wonderful details to this prophecy, for example, God's creation and sustenance of Israel and His commitment to her, whatever the cost. The whole structure of this poem illustrates this, as we will see, and God shows Himself willing to play with the Empires of the world to protect her, even though she would

not believe He would. The Lord also appeals to Israel to trust Him; although nothing could stop Israel from the consequences of her sins, neither could anything stop God from loving her. That is true love!

### ***The structure of the poem***

In order to see clearly how this prophetic poem works, I have written out below its 'chiastic' structure (for an explanation of 'chiastic', see the dictionary). This type of pattern is very common in Hebrew poetry (another examples of it is in Amos 5:2-17, and the whole story of Noah – Genesis 6:11-8:22)

- The calling and creation of Israel (43:1)
  - The journey of trial and punishment (43:2)
    - The redemption of Israel (43:3)
    - The value of Israel (43:4)
  - The journey of recovery and salvation (43:5,6)
- The final end of Israel (43:7)

By looking at this poetic structure, we can easily see that the main purpose of the poem is to demonstrate the love of God for Israel lying at the heart of the poem in verses 3 and 4. It is in verse 4 that God says to Israel 'I love you', with all this means (see above). It is of course possible to see that at the time of the Exile, the returning exiles would have found this poem to be a great encouragement, but the whole poem and the surrounding chapters of Isaiah in which it is set are a wider vision which stretches far beyond that time. Today, it reaffirms that Israel is God's chosen and loved people, and that they undergo trial and suffering for having rejected their Messiah, but the path on which she is set will bring her back again to the Lord. If you have read Romans chapters 9 to 11, you will realise that what is happening here in this part of Isaiah is very similar to what happens in Paul's letter to the Romans. There, Paul has set out a magnificent and detailed rationale for the availability of salvation for all people through faith in Christ (Romans 1-8), but suddenly changes tack in his letter to explain his angst at the problem his great exposition has given him. Surely, he says (chapter 9), God cannot have gone back on His promise to love His people? In the course of chapter 11, Paul then explains in detail how God will one day bring His first 'chosen people' back into His purposes again so that by the time of God's ultimate glory, all His people are joined together.

This is a great and noble theme of scripture which we do well to remember and without which, we cannot properly interpret this passage today.

### ***The beginning and the end of Israel (43:1,5,6,7)***

Creation is always by the authority and the will of God, so the double statement in verse 1; 'He who created you, Jacob, He who formed you, Israel' is emphatic. God does not create casually; neither will He be thwarted in His will. It is wonderful for us to read that despite sin, God continues to love what He has made, and says even to the wounded and troubled nation 'do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you' (43:1). The Lord never gives up on what He has made, as if after making something, He would leave it alone to fend for itself in the world. The word for 'formed you' (43:1) indicates the constant shaping and changing which God does throughout the life of what He has made, to help and to sustain!

We remember the wonderful phrase 'do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you', because it speaks us directly, and we are entitled to treasure it because God has proved to us through the history of Israel that it is true. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He 'redeemed' her, and although the poem mentions more details of this later (43:3), the fact of that redemption never goes away. The Lord says emphatically 'you are mine', using words which appear straightforward but which come from the climax of a Jewish wedding liturgy! In what greater way can God express His love?

This scripture certainly speaks about the final gathering in of God's people (43:5,6) from all the corners of the earth, and this is a text which has been held dear by Jewish people, especially since the establishment of the Israelite state after the Second World War. We should be careful, though, not to assume that this passage gives us any timescale for this in-gathering. This has certainly happened several times in history from the time of the returning Exiles to the formation of the Israelite state, but I suggest that ultimately, the passage speaks, as Paul does (Romans 11:25-36) of what will happen at the End Times in general. If we want to tie this down in any other way, we must try to find evidence of such dates from elsewhere in scripture; but personally, I am not convinced that the rest of scripture suggests more.

### ***The journey of punishment (43:2)***

Verse 2 is a deeply moving passage, perhaps unparalleled in scripture. The beauty of it is that it does not take much explanation, once you have a clear picture of what we are talking about and what the prophecy is saying. This is a profoundly beautiful way for God to say to His errant and disobedient children Israel that they would be punished for their sins, but He would be with them in the midst of that punishment. When their nation was founded, Moses spoke about this in a great speech (see Deuteronomy 30), and warned of the possibilities of failure and punishment, even exile! But nowhere else in scripture except perhaps in

Hosea 11, does God show such passion for His people. The Lord would both punish, and also bear punishment with His people, for that is what 'I will be with you' means here in this prophecy! He also promised that the punishment of fire would scald and damage them, but not utterly consume them (see the difference between 'scorch' and 'burn' in the notes above).

Christians must remember the truth of this which affects Jewish people to this day. We can gain hope ourselves from this promise, but only through the experience of Israel.

### ***Israel's value to the Lord (43:3,4)***

Israel was always special to the Lord, from her beginnings in the life of Abraham and the forefathers onwards. The ancient stories in Genesis form a model example of life lived in covenant relationship with God, and we are reminded of the value God placed on His chosen people in Exodus 19:

*'Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine. But you shall be for me a priestly Kingdom and a holy nation.'* (Exodus 19:5,6)

The Lord, of course, is not one to change His mind, or play with people. The words used in verse 3 are as emphatic as is possible in Hebrew, and set out the great statement of God's creative presence and power. The Lord introduces Himself as 'I am', the great mysterious and holy name of God first revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:1-7), and Isaiah adds to this His favourite and unique name for God; 'the Holy One of Israel'. All this is Isaiah's way of emphasising that God alone will judge and God alone will save; he says 'The Holy One of Israel will be your Saviour' (43:3)! Redemption has already taken place when the whole of Egypt (signified by the use of the names Ethiopia and Seba) paid the terrible price for Israel's freedom (Exodus 12), and God does not forget this; 'I gave humanity in return for you, people in exchange for your life' (43:4).

There is no doubt, God places an infinite value on the life of His people; that is His love.

## Application

When we are in a position to understand this passage, Christians can only stand back in awe at the Lord's love for His people, and His desire to be 'with them' even in their punishment for failing to do His will. For us, it all seems paradoxical, but such are the paradoxes of love we even observe in human relationships. Why should we be surprised therefore to find this in our relationship with God? True love is just, and true love never ceases.

As God's people today, the best thing we can do is to allow this scripture to help us have a proper relationship with God's people, the Jews. Secondly, we can learn from this that if this is the quality of God's love for His Old Testament people, then His love for the Church is no less. In fact, comparisons are irrelevant, and we can expect that God will love us absolutely because it is His nature to do so, even when we fail. Indeed, the special message of this text that the deepest love is evident when we discover that God is with us even when we are suffering the consequences of our own sin. He is with us because He loves us and longs to bring us into a place of safety and security in faith, and only our own stubborn nature can prevent Him from doing this.

Isaiah 43:1-7 is one of the most significant and revealing of passages of scripture in the Old Testament, and it is one to which a Christian can return again and again for inspiration. Jesus has saved us, Alleluia! He has done so because despite all human sin and failure including our own, God's love rises above all things.

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## Discipleship

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. In your group, read through this passage and discuss what you believe is said specifically about God's love.
2. Share with your group your personal reactions to verse 2, and what it means to you despite its original scriptural meaning.
3. How do you believe the Jews will be brought back into the purposes and will of God, before the End?

### ***Personal comments by author***

*I find this a deeply moving passage of scripture upon which to write. It is my hope that those who read this text and are prepared to read it for what it is rather than take it and manipulate it into what they want, will find*

*that it is a true spiritual inspiration, and a guide to God's love for His people, Old or New Testament. In this life today, we need all the reassurance we can get!*

### ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

- *Meditate upon what, for you, are the fires and the waters by which you have been tested. Fast and pray to ask the Lord to reveal your faults and sins to you, confess these in Jesus' name, and give thanks for God's love.*
  - *Take this passage of scripture with you on a walk or on some journey, and read it several times, allowing it to speak to your soul. Let God do in you whatever He will through these great prophetic words.*
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### **Final Prayer**

Great and mighty Lord, all praise belongs to you. I was down and You lifted me up, I was in despair and You gave me hope, I was ignorant and You taught me, I was unhealthy and You made me whole, I was focussed on myself and You opened my eyes to my brothers and sisters. Now I know Your love is real; all praise belongs to You. AMEN

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