

When the Water is Too Deep, and the Fire is Too Close



*A study of Isaiah 43:1-7 and
what it says to us about suffering.*

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When the Water is Too Deep, and the Fire is Too Close

Sometimes just when life seems to be coming together, our neat tidy lives can fall apart so fast it's scary, isn't it? It makes no difference whether you're old or young, very rich or not so rich, casual or buttoned-down formal, sometimes in a matter of moments a blow can come that hits so hard it makes us wonder "What happened?" Like the Tsunami Tidal Wave that swept the coast of New Guinea last month, tearing villages off their foundations and sending families careening out of control in the current. Sometimes we encounter rushing currents of other kinds in our lives, tidal waves in our health, our families, our employment, can hit with force that carries us off of our foundations and leaves us feeling out of control and unsafe. Many of you know what it feels like to encounter that kind of wave in your life, some have not, but more than likely all of us will sooner or later find ourselves forced to cope with a river that's too deep and a fire that's too close.

I'm talking about those experiences where things seem to go "from bad to worse" -- where you're hit by a blow, and while you're trying to pick up the pieces, you're hit by another blow and the pieces themselves seem to fall apart in your hands.

I'll briefly share a river crossing experience of my own. When I was 17 and a senior in high school it seemed like everything was coming together. My parents had recently retired and we lived in a beautiful home on the beach in Olympia. I was heavily involved in ministry both in my church and school, having started a ministry at school that had

quickly spread to four other high schools. My brother was studying for the ministry at Dallas Seminary, and my 31 year old sister was a missionary in Africa.

My sister had graduated at the top of her class, gone early to college to study nursing. Then wanted to be a missionary. After college she went off to the hills of Kentucky and attended a school to learn to be a nurse midwife. That's a nurse that delivers babies. She spent two years there, driving a jeep around the hills of Appalachia helping people who lived in utter poverty. In 1970, a national publication published this story called "Born in Flat Creek" about how my sister delivered her first baby at age 23 at two AM on a Christmas Eve night in 16 degree temperatures. She had heard a knock at the door and learned that a woman a few miles away across a river was in labor and was terrified that she and her baby would die because the delivery was not going well. So my sister went out in her jeep and delivered her first baby at 2 AM on Christmas Eve. It was 16 degrees and the fire had gone out.

After this, my sister attended seminary and then went to be a medical missionary in Africa. There she loved to ride motorcycle and go do her favorite job, which was to bring medical care to the isolated areas where none was available. Here she is giving a baby a shot at one of those clinics. But on February 28, 1977 at about 6:40 AM the phone rang as I was going out the door and somehow within seconds I knew that something was wrong in Africa. She was very sick they said. And needed immediate

care. Within three days she was home. And at first it seemed she was just exhausted. But there were ominous signs which her own medical training recognized as serious. She couldn't keep any food down, and she would hallucinate at night and say to my mom, I'm hallucinating that I'm only three feet tall and can't reach the sink. Then, on the third night home at 11:30 she had a serious break with reality and hallucinated that Ugandan dictator Idi Amin was coming to kill us all and we must flee our home. We called 911, and the police came, sheriff came, and the paramedics came. She spent seven months in various hospitals as doctors and researchers tried to find a cause and a cure.

By September she had undergone cognitive therapy, drug therapy, and shock therapy. My parents thought they'd have to sell their home to pay medical bills, but more than anything they wanted her to be well. Over the next two years, she made significant recovery, but over the next 18 years she was never really herself again, her nursing education was lost with many of her skills. Two years ago she began to deteriorate again, and could no longer live safely with a family member, so a year ago this week she entered an Alzheimer's unit in a nursing home and will likely spend the rest of her life living in this kind of setting. Since then she has largely forgotten who her family is and who she is. During the last month she has forgotten how to walk and rarely forms a whole sentence. Her attention span is about three seconds. [It's been a long 22 years. And on Christmas Eve 1977 I wrote the following letter to God.]

Now, for a seventeen year old this was a hard river to cross, but I found the Lord encouraging me constantly through the Scriptures, especially Isaiah 43. Since then I've known many people with much worse situations and I've noticed that many of

them refer to the same passage. Today, we're going to scratch its surface together. Maybe it's a passage you need right now today, or perhaps you'll need it tomorrow.

In Isaiah 43, the Lord speaks to our fears at those times when the water is too deep and the fire too close. The Lord begins to speak to his people about their fears in verse 1 saying **"This is what the Lord says, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, Oh Israel: FEAR NOT."**

Fear Not. The chapter begins with a command NOT to fear. And there's something encouraging about hearing that from God, because it says to me at least I have the option, the freedom, not to be afraid when the river overflows. And in the verses that follow the Lord proceeds to speak very personally to our fears and to encourage us with His truth to set us free from fear.

Isaiah. 43:1 But now, this is what the LORD says-- he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

In this study, I'd like us to look at three encouragement's we need when the water is too deep and the fire too close. The first encouragement is found here in verse 1, and it is...:

I. THE STRONG BOND OF GOD'S OWNERSHIP

He says "Fear not FOR I HAVE REDEEMED YOU, I HAVE SUMMONED YOU BY NAME, YOU ARE MINE"

Now, these three statements are intended to be taken together as one idea with three strands. The phrase "I have redeemed you" gives us the picture of the Lord having purchased his people out of slavery. Now when we think of being purchased as a slave, we usually wouldn't view this as a positive thing. People purchase slaves to break rocks and make bricks, not very appealing. But he goes on to say "I have called you out by name" You see, he did not purchased you because he wanted another nameless faceless slave, he wanted YOU. This speaks of your uniqueness and specialness to Him. He wanted you. And the phrase "You are mine", says, he owns us, you belong to him. He purchased you out of slavery to sin, not because he wanted a slave, but because he wanted you to be in his family.

Now, when you've set your heart on having something, and paid a great price to purchase it, you're going to go to great lengths to take care of it. And God has set his heart upon you, paid a great price to redeem you, and he has so much invested in you that he has no intention of letting you go. And he assumes responsibility for your safety and growth because HE HAS CHOSEN YOU IN LOVE. This is the foundation. If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, the Bible says you have been born from above and you are his child He has chosen you.

This touches on the doctrine of predestination. A doctrine we sometimes struggle with, find hard to grasp. But the Scriptures tell us that in some way his love for us is *eternal*. **Romans 8:28-29** "**And we know that all things work together for good to those who love him, those who are the called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew, them he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, Jesus Christ.**"

This tells us that somehow in the eternal reaches of time and beyond time, God the creator of the universe, set his love upon you, the scripture says before the foundations of the earth, he knew you, he loved you, he committed himself to you, and he predestined you to be his child and to be conformed to the most radiant model, Jesus Christ his son, in your character.

Now love is amazing and rich when it's timely, but it's even more amazing when it's timeless. Love preceded to be committed even to rebels and sinners like you and I. I have a little book I keep in my files to illustrate love that reaches beyond us. It is an address book that must be at least fifty years old, my grandmother owned it and kept in it the names and addresses of her friends and family. Now a few years ago I came across this book and began looking through wondering, who were her friends and loved ones? As I paged through I saw the names of many people I knew and many people I didn't know. Most of whom I had never met. But I was quite surprised somehow when I came to the "L" page and found MY NAME "Baby Boy Lind" with my birth date and address. Now when she wrote that in this book I didn't even have a name yet, but I was already the object of her love and care and commitment. I didn't know it feel it or grasp what it meant. It's love that preceded my life and my understanding. Now that's a little of what God's love is like. His love for you preceded your love for him, I John says "while we were yet enemies he loved us". YOU were in HIS BOOK before the dawn of time. and his love had precommitted to you. What does this mean to us? Well, I don't know everything it means, but I can tell you one thing it means: You're secure. You may not feel secure at this moment, but you are. Not because of you, but because of Him. He has redeemed you, called you out by name, and

you belong to him -- no river can change that fact.

Summary: So we can reject fear, no fear, as the bumper stickers say, because we belong to one who has loved us forever and whose love never changes. We're in his grip. We are his.

Transition: The second encouragement for deep river crossings is found in verse 2, and it is:

II. THE PROMISE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

He says "*WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS, I WILL BE WITH YOU and through the rivers they shall not overflow you, WHEN you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, the flames will not set you ablaze*"

The Lord promises that he is with us in a special way when we pass through the waters. He does not leave us alone. Now in this promise, it is very important that we understand two facts.

1. Fact 1 is that it's normal for God's people to suffer: Notice he says "WHEN** you pass through the waters.." Not "if", not "just in case", but when.**

Now this is hard for us to accept, because it means some really bad things can happen to us. Some inexplicable things. And they're truly bad things, the Scriptures don't say they are all good, rather, they say that he works them together for good for us. By themselves they're bad, but touched by his love they're turned for good.

The Scriptures are clear that God allows us to suffer even though he loves us. Turn to I Peter 1:7 "**In this (your new life in Christ) you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, IF NEED BE, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than GOLD that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ...**"

IF NEED BE WHAT? You have been GRIEVED. "Grieved" means to be sad. Suffering makes us sad. He's saying that sometimes we need to be sad. WHY? IF NEED BE. God in his wisdom knows what we need and when. Get this into your spiritual data base. Suffering is a normal part of the Christian life and growth.

Now the Scriptures give us various reasons for trials. I'll mention four. God allows trials:

1st. For Correction, when we've sinned and need to be turned around, God corrects us. It's always important to examine our attitudes and actions, confess all known sin, and make sure we're seeking to walk with him.

2nd. For Teaching Often through trials we come to know and understand God better than we would otherwise. It still hurts though. You see he wants us to know him. He is more concerned that we know him than that we have an easy life.

3rd. For Growth, when there is an important lesson or character trait God wants us to install in our lives, a part of that character of Christ he wants to conform us to, he may allow suffering to help us grow and to shape us. You see he's much more

concerned with our growth than with our comfort.

4th. For Glory, that is, so he can demonstrate his love and power and goodness. In the Gospels, one day Jesus and his disciples were walking along and saw a man disabled from birth. They asked him "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" He said "Nobody. This is for the glory of God" and on that occasion he healed him and great glory came to God. Now ultimately, all the other purposes for trials in our lives boil down to this one, that God created us for his glory. He demonstrates his power love and goodness in our lives. Some times by delivering us from the trial, sometimes by sustaining us in it, sometimes by carrying us through it when we can't take another step, and sometimes by taking us home to be with him.

Now sometimes, Christians feel a great deal of shame and guilt when they suffer, because somewhere along the way we've adopted the belief that nothing should ever go wrong for us. And they feel a great deal of guilt and shame when things don't go perfectly. My mother felt a great deal of guilt for having a sick daughter. My mom was a pastor's kid. She had been taught to look good, never let em see us sweat, don't let down your guard, always set the example. And it just undid this belief to have a sick daughter. And though our church was incredibly supportive and encouraging, and they took the wounds like they were their own, still she still felt this weight of guilt. These assumptions we hold deep down about life, that we ought never fail, that all should go well, they make us vulnerable. Like a football player who locks his knees before he gets hit. Knees don't bend backwards. And when we hold to beliefs about life that aren't Biblical, we're prone to break when real life pushes against our belief system.

Summary: So we **must** remember that God allows suffering for correction, for teaching, for growth of character, and for his own glory.

Transition: But now the second fact from this promise in V2:

2. FACT #2 is that THE LORD HIMSELF IS WITH YOU AND I WHEN WE GO THROUGH THE RIVER.

Notice that he says, "When you pass through the waters **I WILL BE WITH YOU**" ... This refers to the personal presence of God. The word used here means "companionship for the purpose of helping". It's alot like the New Testament idea of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter . The word he used there is "paraclete", a boat called alongside another to keep it from being overwhelmed. Though he is **always** with us, he especially wants us to know he is with us when we would otherwise feel most alone.

Now, this idea of God's presence WITH his people is a constant theme in Scripture, Let me show you what I mean...

The Lord's Presence With His People

SCRIPTURE	EVENT	STATEMENT
Genesis 26	God speaking to Isaac during a famine in the land	"Stay in this land, I will be with you and bless you."
Genesis 39:2-3	When Joseph was sold as a slave in Egypt	"And the Lord was with Joseph..."
Genesis 39:25	When Joseph was wrongly accused and sent to prison...	"The Lord was with him..."
Genesis 45:8	After all that had happened, Joseph describes his experience to his brothers	"It was not you who sent me here, but God." God was with him in all these bad experiences.
Exodus 3:7-8	When God calls Moses to lead the people out of Egypt	"I have surely seen the affliction of my people, I have heard their cry, and I know their sorrows, and I have come down to deliver them"
Exodus 3:12	Moses doubts	"Certainly, I will be with you."
Exodus 6:6-7	The Lord gives Moses a message for the people	"I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians...and I will take you to me for a people."
Exodus 19:4, 6	At Mt. Sinai where God had led them	You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself ...You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."....I was with you.
Deuteronomy 13:6	Reassuring God's people before battle	"He will never leave you nor fail you."
Daniel 3:25	King looks into the furnace to see the fate of three young men he had sentenced to death	"Look! I see four men loosed and walking about in the midst of the fire without harm, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."

Matthew 28	Jesus gives the Great Commission to his people before he ascends	"Go into all nations...and surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age."
Acts 7:55-56	Stephen, when the crowd took up stones to kill him	"Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look', he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' At this...they began to stone him." Notice in this story of Stephen, our Lord is pictured standing rather than sitting, as if to demonstrate how deeply he is involved with and understands Stephen's pain and sacrifice. Our Lord does not sit passively on the side lines when his people are suffering or when they're dying. He is there.
Hebrews 13:5	The writer of Hebrews assures Christians of God's faithfulness	"For he has said, 'Never will I leave you, Never will I forsake you.' Therefore, we can say with confidence 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"
Revelation 22:1-5	Describing heaven	And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall serve him...and they shall see his face"
II Peter 5:10	Comfort to God's people	"But the God of all grace, who has called us to his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, make you perfect, establish you, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen"

**ADDITIONAL MATERIAL
ON ISAIAH 43:1-7**

This section contains additional study material from Isaiah 43 which was not integrated into the main article above. These are of interest to those who want to explore the passage further.

Christians, you and I need to search the Scriptures and know our heritage. **God's people meet him in the river.** When you're tempted to think you're completely abandoned, the Lord says exactly the opposite it true. He's with you in a special way in the midst of that river.

Transition: Now, there's a third encouragement we need when the water is too deep, it is:

III. THE CERTAINTY OF HIS OVERWHELMING VICTORY IN US

He says V6 "Do not be afraid, for I am with you, I will bring your children from the East and gather you from the west, 6 I will say to the North 'Give them up!' and to the south 'Do not hold them back' bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth-- EVERYONE WHO IS CALLED BY MY NAME, WHOM I HAVE CREATED FOR MY GLORY"

You know, when you're in the middle of that river, it gets hard to see the other side, doesn't it. We begin to feel as if this whole game is purpose-less and end-less and hope-less. The Lord knows this so he gives us this third encouragement we need when the water is too deep, he tells us these things are **not** without a purpose or an end or a goal. He tells us that in His wisdom he is moving us through all these things to a better outcome. and to a greater victory.

In the book Affliction, Edith Schaffer, widow of Francis Schaffer, speaks to this issue of the suffering of God's people through the centuries in big ways and small ways, public ways and obscure ways Mundane and dramatic ways. And she describes Satan in his desire to hurt God, and in order to hurt God he seeks to hurt those who belong to God, and he spreads evil on the earth and we encounter it in many forms. But she suggests that in the future, in heaven, when we look back over the course of history--even our own history, we will see that God's people have suffered every

conceivable injustice and illness and injury. And that all the suffering of God's people will form a perfect tapestry, to the glory of God, and that when we look at that panorama of God's people and their suffering we will see that no once did he fail them, not once did he leave them alone or let them down. And we will see that in every case God was there with his children and has turned the intent of evil on its head and brought good upon his people instead, not always in this life, cut certainly in the next. And we will see that he was there with us all the time, and that his victory, is not just a little bit, not just squeaking by, but is overwhelming beyond our imagination.

This kind of overwhelming victory is what is pictured here in Isaiah 43:5-7 as an amazing reunion scene, in which parents and children who in this picture have been separated to the ends of the earth are brought back together by God's decree and they come streaming into this new life and a new home. He says to the four point of the compass, "Don't you dare hold them back! Because THIS is the time for my people to rejoice. " This is our heritage in Jesus.

Now I must say, that this passage doesn't give us ALL the answers and let us tie life up in a neat little box and be done with it. Many Christians have drowned in deep waters. Ill: I remember about 2 years after my sister became ill, sitting with my pastor on the beach and him asking "Do you see ANY sense in this yet, because I sure don't?" I said "I don't either". We had hoped God would heal her and she could go on to help people and write books and everything be OK. But it did not happen. But this passage tells us that at whatever point in that deep river experience we are, God is with us . And I think it tells us that glorifying God isn't necessarily about some big event out there where everything comes

out right here on earth, we're pilgrims here, this is not our home. We're can't really feel finally "at home" here. It's about trusting him day by day even in the little obscure things that nobody notices and when nobody even realized how we're hurting. And that when we stand over there looking back, we will see that He has carried us through. That's why he can say to us that while there may be tears here, there will be no tears in heaven, because you see we simply will not need them their. [Let's Pray/OR]

Conclusions: I've mentioned that God used Isaiah 43 to encourage me when I was 17. This was especially true one difficult evening in April 1977. It was about 45 days after my sister returned from Africa, she was on a secure floor in St. Peter's Hospital in Olympia. But somehow, at about 9:30 PM she wandered into an elevator, got to the ground floor and disappeared out the back door into the Black Hills Forest. When I came home at 11:30 PM I learned that my parents and our pastors elders and several search and rescue volunteers were out in the woods trying to find her. There was nothing to do but wait and pray and listen, I found myself wondering "what next?" so I turned to this passage and read it, and when reading wasn't enough I decided to try to play it and to sing it, so I set it on the piano and almost immediately played a very simple song I'd like you to hear as we close.

IV. THE ULTIMATE OUTCOME OF GOD'S PLAN

This tells us that the foundation, the promise, and the objective all come together ultimately in a place beyond time. And the outcome is overwhelming victory beyond our ability to express in human terms.

Jesus said you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. Paul said we can "be renewed in the attitudes of your minds".

This passage is about renewing our minds in the way we approach troubled times. It is about setting our eyes not on the pain, but on the ultimate victory beyond the pain which will make us forget the pain. "Death is swallowed up in victory". This is our destination in Christ. Christ experienced this himself "he bore the cross, despising the shame". But he set his eyes beyond this suffering on the intended outcome. He invites us to do the same.

Prayer: Lord, we thank you for the times of our lives when we have peace and when we get to walk on the shore of the river instead of through it. And for those times when we must pass through the river, we thank you for your compassion and your presence, that you see our affliction, and hear our cry, and you know our sorrows because you're there with us. Help us to cling to the strong bond of your ownership, the promise of your presence, and the certainty of your overwhelming victory in us. II Peter 5:10
"But the God of all grace, who has called us to his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, make you perfect, establish you, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen"

Observations related to this study:

- There is a love that precedes birth that is most amazing, and those of you who are parents know what I mean. We have friends who lost a baby 2 months premature a couple of years ago. Now, they'd never met Alex, but yet they loved him, mourned him, grieved the loss of him. Before our daughter was born we had names for her, plans for her, even played music for her including Johann Sebastian Back, Amadaius Mozart, and Tina Turner. It's love that precedes birth.
- You know what? You were in God's book long before that, in eternity past, when God made his plan, he set his love upon you, locked on target and purposed to take you from a rebellious enemy and conform you to the likeness of his son Jesus Christ. And his love went further than that, in fact he says "I HAVE REDEEMED YOU"...you see not only did God set his love upon you before time, the Bible says that he acted upon that love before time also, that in some mysterious way Jesus Christ was not crucified just in time, but beyond time, before the foundation of the world.
- He says the foundation that allows you and I His people to live through the darkest days of life is rooted before time, a love and a redemption accomplished before the dawn of creation. That's pretty deep. Have you ever stopped just to let God's love pour into your soul? It is amazing, a deep river, a resource that goes beyond anything we can begin to describe.
- Larry Crabb says that our most basic needs as human's are SIGNIFICANCE and SECURITY, and in Christ our need for Security is met forever completely, because we are his. John 10:10.

- Emphasis on "I the Lord" not on you and I, it's all on Him (see later verse "only source of salvation")
- This passage is about the kinds of things that frighten us and make us anxious at our core, like losing a child or a spouse, like the breakdown of a marriage, loss of our own health or breakdown of our careers.
- Those times when we find ourselves in the middle of a rushing torrent that threatens to overwhelm us. And though we might wish to turn around and go back, we really have no alternative but to go THROUGH the river and through the fire. At those times one of the things that makes it hard is that we don't necessarily know how far it is to the other side, or even if there is another side. We may feel we just can't make it. These river experiences are scary times for us, and it's the most natural thing in the world to become fearful and anxious. And in this passage, through Isaiah,
- Well, what about the family whose baby died? What about the Christian missionary who trusted God and ended up with Alzheimer's? What about the couple in the nursing home with no one and not even each other? What about the pastor's family in Nigeria who's father has just been martyred? Answer? I don't know. We don't know. The particulars are beyond our grasp, we simply don't know in detail. But God knows and he is big enough and strong enough and good enough and kind enough to keep his promises, to deliver the comfort of his ownership, the comfort of this presence, and the certainty of his victory to each of his children.
- Recommended Reading: One way to think about this was described well by Edith Schaefer in her book "Affliction". Check it out.