
Remember the Basics

SCOTT HOEZEE

A lot of the Old Testament often seems like a kind of theological seesaw. God Himself seems to be up, and then at other times seems to be down when it comes to His attitude toward the people of Israel. Then again, the same is true from the human side. Israel could run hot or cold, too, when it came to displaying their active devotion to God. Up and down, back and forth, over and over again. For His part, God clearly loves His people at all times, and yet often finds that love frustrated as God gets exasperated by the fickle nature of Israel. Here and there, though, God cuts through this confusion with words that clarify who is who, what is what, and how knowing that shines a light into the future. The words we find in Isaiah 43 is one such place where this happens; and today on Groundwork we are going to dig into that chapter to be reminded of who God is and how He cares for His people. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are welcoming our listeners, Dave, to program number two in a series of, I think, seven programs we have planned for the latter chapters of the book of Isaiah. We started in the first program with Isaiah 42, and we are going to be going through about Isaiah 53; and today we are up to the next chapter, Isaiah 43; and this is the part of Isaiah, of course, where we have turned the corner, for the most part, from the first 39 chapters, which were not completely judgment, but a lot of judgment.

DAVE BAST

A lot of judgment, yes; and now we kind of turn to the hope that is promised, first to God's Old Testament people, Israel, who will be languishing in exile in Babylon, and will be brought home. On the traditional view of Isaiah, this is prophecy written a hundred years before it happened, but intended to be preserved and recited and memorized and brought out in seasons of discouragement and darkness; but also intended for us as the people of God; words that speak throughout the ages to every generation; and words that bear special witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the part of the Old Testament that really is the meat of those places where the first disciples and Jesus Himself said: Look, it is talking about Me here; and some of the most beautiful passages in all of the Bible – just lyric promises that have brought hope and encouragement to believers in every day and age; and certainly Chapter 43 is a great example of that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, in fact, there are very familiar words here; particularly the words that: When you pass through the waters they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire you will not be burned. Those words have tremendous pastoral comfort; and in fact, we have a Groundwork series that we did a while back on words of comfort, in which we focused on this chapter and those particular lines. You can go back to the archive of our programs on our website, groundworkonline.com, and look that up; but for this program, since we had focused on those pastoral lines in an earlier one, we want to focus on a couple other things that are in these same verses – some things that God has to remind the people of – some very basic things – some things that are, in fact, so basic you would think nobody would ever need to be reminded of them, but as a matter of fact, we do, and Israel did need to be reminded of some basic facts about who is who in the universe.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so let's get right into it. Here is Isaiah Chapter 43, the opening verses:

¹But 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. ²When 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, ³for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior. I give Egypt for your ransom; Cush and Seba in your stead."

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁴"Since you are precious and honored in My sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you; nations in exchange for your life. ⁵Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. ⁶I 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 – ⁷everyone who was called by My name, whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made.

DAVE BAST

So again, these wonderful words of pastoral assurance of the presence of God in difficulty and trouble; in fact, the great hymn, how firm a foundation, ye Saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in His excellent word, picks up this passage and it kind of forms the heart of that hymn. The promises of God in scripture are meat that keeps us alive. They are arms that enfold us and hold us up in terrible experiences and good times alike, and this is one of those; but more fundamentally, notice the introduction, what God says, the point that He stresses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, He said: I am the one who created you. I formed you... and then again in verse... that is verse 1, and then in verse 7 that we just read: Remember I created you for My glory; I formed and made you. So God has taken the people back down to brass tacks; He has taken them down to sort of the kindergarten level of theological knowledge here to say: Who created you, Israel? You think you are self made? You think some other gods made you? You think it is just luck and coincidence and happenstance that you are a nation? No. I am the One who created you. I formed you.

DAVE BAST

Is there a more important base truth to start from? Everything else flows from this, because increasingly in our society, people are turning completely away from God, and kind of embracing the idea that everything kind of just happened. Everything came from nothing – I came from nothing – I make myself – I decide what I am going to be – I even decide what sort of human being I will be. On every level, it goes down deeper and deeper, a denial – a radical denial – of our dependence upon God. That is essentially what the practical meaning of acknowledging our creator is, it means that we are dependent – we are contingent – we are not autonomous, just on our own. We have an authority above us who made us, and to whom we must submit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And John Calvin, the great Reformation scholar, wrote this grand, grand, big, now two-volume work called: *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*; and Calvin began the Institutes by saying: Look, you have to know two things to be wise... you want to go down to the basics, you have to have a proper knowledge of God, (1), and (2), you have to have a proper knowledge of yourself; and you cannot have a proper knowledge of yourself, Calvin said, if you don't get God right because God is the One who made you in His image. So that is where we always begin, knowing who is who; knowing that God is the Creator and we are not; we are the creatures, as you just said, we are the dependent ones; but the good news that also comes through this passage is that because God created us – because God created Israel – we are precious to Him like a child.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; to put it another way: He has a stake in us; He has a stake in our lives, and if you have ever been a parent, I think you understand that on a deeper level than any intellectual acknowledgement could ever produce; you know, the idea that this is your child; whether it is flesh of your flesh or whether it is an adopted child whom you have chosen to pour your love into; the first time you hold that child, you know immediately life will never be the same because now your own happiness is bound up in the life of that child.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, I like that line from an Anne Tyler novel, *The Accidental Tourist*. The main character there is a guy named Macon Leary, and when he first has a child, he looks at the child and says: I don't think I will ever be truly happy ever again; because now your happiness is tied in with that child; and guess what? It turns out it is the same for God. Once God created a people, He knew His happiness, if you can talk that way about God, His sense of wellbeing is now tied in with His people, and when the child goes wrong, that is going to be wounding to you. It was for God, that is why He had to become the redeemer; and we will look at that next.
Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are looking at Isaiah 43, another of these wonderful Servant Songs of this part of the book of Isaiah; where God speaks mostly in the first person; initially to His people Israel, ultimately pointing to His only begotten Son, Jesus, the Servant of the Lord; but He is expressing Himself in powerful and moving terms of love and redemption, and He does that in the first verse, really, of Isaiah 43, where we have been focusing on the fact that He reminds them He is the Creator – that is the initial groundwork fact that you have to remember, and we tend to forget it; but He is also the Redeemer, and that is an even bigger part of the piece of who God is. The Creator is the Redeemer at one and the same time.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And having been the Creator, He kind of didn't have any choice. We said at the opening of this program, there is a little theological seesaw – this back and forth in the Old Testament – and indeed, there are any number of times that we can remember when God looked like He was close to just wanting to hit the reset button and wipe them all out – wipe out Israel – wipe out the creation, you know, with the flood in Genesis 11 – just wipe it out; but God can never bring Himself to do that. It is sort of like Hosea Chapter 11, too, you know...

DAVE BAST

I was just thinking of that, yes; how can I forget you? Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I just... and all parents sort of get to that point sometimes of exasperation and say: Uh! I have had it up to here with these kids; and then you take a deep breath and say: Yes, but they are still my kids. So, God always comes back to redemption, and let's pick up a few more of Isaiah Chapter 43, starting at verse 8: Lead out those who have eyes but are blind; all who have ears but are deaf; ⁹all the nations together and the people assemble; which of their gods foretold and proclaimed to us the former things? Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right so that others may hear and say, ¹⁰"It is true." "But you are My witnesses," declares the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. Before Me no god was formed, nor will there be one after Me. ¹¹I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from Me there is no savior. ¹²I revealed and saved and proclaimed; I, and not some foreign god among you. You are My witnesses," declares the Lord, "that I am God. ¹³Yes, and from ancient days I am He. No one can deliver out of My hand; when I act, who can reverse it?"

DAVE BAST

What a powerful passage; and notice exactly what God is saying here. He is stressing one of the fundamental facts that the whole Old Testament proclaims. He is the only God in town. He is the only *real* God. I am God; there is no other; none of these other so-called gods of the nations have any real existence. They don't have any real power; and the proof of it, He says, is that I am telling you ahead of time that I am going to redeem you from exile. I am prophesying this, and only the God who is real – who actually controls world affairs – has the power to predict accurately what will happen in the future because He is the One who is going to do it. So He stresses again and again: Look, you are My witnesses. Israel, you are exhibit A of the fact that I am the real God, who ahead of time says what He is going to do, and then actually does it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and God, in this passage, even sort of almost offers that kind of a dare to the people: Look, other people have other gods, and they might say that their gods are the ones pulling all the strings in the universe. Go ahead; bring them out and let's stack the evidence up; but I'll tell you what, it is not going to amount to anything. I am the true God. I alone am the true Savior. Don't look at these foreign gods. Don't even be tempted to look at other gods, (although Israel did, which is why there is a rebuke implied here, too, yet), but God says: Don't do that. I am the One who created you. That was the first reminder of Isaiah 43, and now there is a second basic reminder: And I am the Savior. I am the only one. I am the only true Savior; there is nobody else to save you, so look to Me alone. Israel, of course, did fail in that. That is why they went to Babylon in the first place. They did look at the Baals and Asherahs. We had a series on Deuteronomy on Groundwork recently, where the people were warned to remove all the high places in the land of Canaan where the Baal altars and the Asherah poles were. We know they failed in doing that, and so that is one of the reasons they ended up in Babylon; but now God is saying: When that happens, there is something else that happens. When you forget I am your Creator and your Redeemer, something else happens, and that is you stop praising Me. You stop giving Me the praise that is due Me, and that, in turn, stops you from witnessing to the other nations.

As my teacher, John Stek, used to say: God is enthroned on the praises of Israel. God is made visible to the nations of the world when Israel enthrones Him on their praises and their songs; and when they stop singing, God kind of loses His visible throne and they are not a witness to the people anymore.

DAVE BAST

You know, this is again, part of the beauty of the Old Testament revelation of the nature of God, and the purpose of God's election of Israel, which was that they should serve as a witness again to the nations of the reality of who God is, and they should do that through their worship of Him – through their praise of Him – which included lives that pointed to Him – lives that were upright and just... We talked about justice in an earlier program in this series. So the problem when Israel fails in its vocation to be a light that through its praises of the one true God draws the nations to Him, the problem there is that God is discredited in the eyes of the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it goes the other way.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. Sometimes you will hear people say... people who just reject faith in general: You know, why is God always so uptight about people worshipping Him?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It's kind of vain, isn't it?

DAVE BAST

What is He, an egoist that has to be praised by every... everybody has to tell Him all the time how great He is? Nothing actually could be further from the truth. It is not that God needs this, it is that we need to be

doing this so that others will come to know Him and experience blessing that only comes from knowing Him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mentioned my Old Testament professor, John Stek, a minute ago, and Dave, what you just said reminds me of an analogy he always had on that very point, saying: I guess you could say it sure looks like God is egotistical and vain. Praise Me, praise Me, praise Me... but he said, not only is it necessary for the people to do this, but God deserves no less. John Stek had an analogy: Can you imagine a mother who has an only son and she works two jobs, day and night she works her fingers to the bone just to give him food and clothing and an education, and then imagine that he never says thank you. Imagine that he never does anything his mother wants him to do. He disregards her. You know, if the mother got to the day where she said: Charlie, I deserve better than this. You should thank me for what I do. Nobody would say: Wow, what an egotistical woman!

DAVE BAST

No, that's only right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you remember who God is – Creator and Redeemer – you realize it is only fitting to say thank you and to praise Him all the day long.

DAVE BAST

And nothing really should be more mind-blowing than that simple phrase that you just used: Creator and Redeemer; because there is nothing inherent that should link those two things together. You know, we have said over and over the Creator could have simply blown us off and brushed His hands; that is what we would have deserved; but the fact that this unbelievably, unimaginably powerful and great God should lower Himself to rescue us because He loves us so as His children, that is really mind-blowing. We are going to look at one last passage from Isaiah 43 that stresses that truth.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are finishing up a look today, Dave, as part of a seven-part series on the latter chapters of Isaiah, and the Servant Songs. We are finishing up now in this last segment a look at Isaiah Chapter 43, which as we have already seen is, among other things, a giant reminder to Israel of two basic facts: There is only one Creator; there is only one Redeemer. It is not you, it is not the gods of the Babylonians, it is not the gods of the Canaanites; it is Yahweh, the God of Israel. He alone is Creator; He alone is Redeemer. Remember that – remember it constantly – and your life has the proper foundation.

DAVE BAST

And now, as we close out Chapter 43, we get into the specifics of how He will redeem Israel in their context and situation at the time, which is exile in Babylon; and what that is going to entail is bringing them back through the wilderness, through the barren wasteland, to the Promised Land; so God speaking through Isaiah says:

¹⁸Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. ¹⁹See, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up. Do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. ²⁰The wild animals honor Me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland to give drink to My people, My chosen. ²¹The people I formed for Myself that they may proclaim My praise.

So, it is help along the way, as He is going to bring them back home.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's right; and as He is going to bring them back home, this whole chapter is a giant reminder, a review of who is who and what is what, and therefore why the people owe God their praise. The new thing will be returning from exile, but in a way it is the same thing God has been doing all along, which is loving His people, taking care of His people; because He made them He loves them; therefore, He cannot help but stick with them even when they mess up; and so, praise for God is therefore the vocation of the people; and you have to remember the basics. You have to remember all that is has long been true about God; and I think for the Church today that remains a challenge. We mentioned it in passing earlier, but can think a little bit more of it now; we live in a society that really always wants what is new and novel; the new and improved; not what is old and stale and stodgy from the past; and that might be a challenge for remembering the basic things that this chapter is talking about.

DAVE BAST

You know, it is a challenge in the Church today. I think if we are active worshippers or active parts of a congregation, we have experienced this; that it is a struggle to blend the old and the new. Tell me the old, old story, but sing a new song to the Lord. In the Christian faith – in biblical faith – the new is always a new expression of the old truth of God as Creator and Redeemer – of the Covenant God who keeps His promises with His people, and those promises find their “yes” always in Jesus. So, yes, there is an element of newness. God continually surprises us. He does new things in saving and reaching out; but it is the old truth to which we bear witness; so that is the struggle, I think; for us to encounter the new – to embrace the new without leaving the old.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; that is what the liturgical scholar who passed away a couple of years ago, Robert Webber, used to call the ancient-future of the Church; so my colleague, John Witvliet, at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, and he teaches worship at my seminary, Calvin Seminary, John always emphasizes to students that, at its best, every one of our worship services today is a rehearsal of, a recapitulation of, all of salvation history, from the creation on. The creation, fall, redemption, consummation; every worship service is Trinitarian New Covenant renewal, and the way we do a Trinitarian New Covenant renewal in worship, by what we sing, by the actions we perform, by what we hear preached, by the equipping of us for discipleship through worship... by what we hear... it may have always new expressions – new sermons, new songs – but what is being rehearsed is what is old, because if we are not rooted in that, then we have lost our foundation and we have lost our mooring, and our praises for God are going to become different than what they need to be. So, ever new and ever old; the temptation today is to do only the new. I mean, I even heard of a church a while back that took great pride in the fact that they never, ever sing a song that is older than five years old. It is like, the tradition didn't exist until we got here, and we are going to start from scratch in our congregation. No creeds, no confessions, no old hymns, it is just going to be all brand new, and I think Isaiah, and God through Isaiah here would say: Not quite so fast with that out with the old stuff, because the old stuff is your foundation.

DAVE BAST

And, the old stuff is part of our family tree – it is part of our DNA. The people of God did not suddenly spring into existence around the year 2000 or so, or even 1980, for that matter. It goes all the way back through the early Church into the people of Israel. One of the things we said in the introduction to the first program in this series is that there are not two stories in the Bible; it is one, Old and New Testament, yes; Israel and the Church, yes; but essentially one people of God celebrating the actions of the Creator/Redeemer who most fully in Jesus Christ has come to rescue us from exile; from wherever that may be; in our own individual lives; from a distant place, and to bring us home again. That is the story of what God is doing, and that is what we sing, as He does it in new ways and new forms, but it is the old story.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always want to know how we can help you dig deeper into the scriptures. So visit our website, groundworkonline.com, and there you can suggest some topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/remember-the-basics>

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