

SURVIVING LIFE'S HARDSHIPS
ISAIAH 43:1-7, 11-13
SERMON

This past week I reflected on people in our congregation enduring difficult times. Some people in our church struggle with the declining health of loved ones or their own diminishing health, others contend with pay cuts or lost jobs, some deal with substantial conflict in their marriages, some argue with rebellious children, others struggle with deep personal issues such as depression or addiction problems. If we're not careful, these problems can easily overwhelm us!

Today I want to speak on the fear of being overwhelmed with life's difficulties and hardships. How do we manage to survive life's hardships? The text from Isaiah teaches us that **reliance on God's powerful presence will help us survive life's hardships.** Difficulties often cause us to experience fear, anxiety, hopelessness, being overwhelmed and simply giving up on life. Listen again to these words of counsel from our text: **"Fear not for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name, you are mine" (1b)** and **"Do not be afraid for I am with you" (vs.5)** Isaiah, as God's spokesman, remind us that **reliance on God's powerful presence will help us survive life's hardships.**

Isaiah, a towering figure in the Old Testament, spoke to a generation of Jews contending with huge problems. Isaiah lived about 700 years before Christ. He received his call to ministry in the year that King Uzziah died, about 740 BC. Isaiah lived in Jerusalem. He was married and had two sons.

If you've read the book of Isaiah you know that it's a substantial book consisting of some sixty-six chapters. Isaiah's considered a major prophet. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls the remains of fifteen manuscripts of Isaiah have been identified. Isaiah's lengthy prophecy can be divided into two major sections: chapters 1-39 deal with God's punishment for the people's sin and idolatry. Chapters 40-66 highlight the re-assuring promises and comfort of God. This particular sequence of punishment followed by promise and comfort follows a general Biblical pattern of punishment for disobedience and sin followed by gifts of grace and mercy in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Isaiah wrote to Jews in Babylon who had lost their land, Temple, jobs, and consequently, their identity. These Jews felt like they had lost *everything!* Listen to their plight as expressed in **Lamentations 5:2** **"Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens, our homes to foreigners. We have become orphans and fatherless, our mothers like widows. Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment. Slaves rule over us and there is none to free us from their hands...Women have been ravished in Zion and virgins in the towns of Judah. Princes have been hung up by their hands; elders are shown no respect. Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us for we have sinned"**.

As I read this text from Lamentations this week, I thought of the people of Haiti and their enormous suffering from the recent earthquake. Though the Jews of Isaiah's day didn't experience a massive earthquake like the people of Haiti, their world had also been

greatly shaken! In some ways they suffered a more devastating blow, for in addition to losing thousands of people who were killed they also had their land taken from them, their Temple burned to the ground, their leaders tortured, and their women ravished by the invading Babylonian army. Many of the Jews were taken in exile to Babylon. It's hard for us to imagine the depths of their despair and incredible sense of loss.

God sent Isaiah to encourage his people, to give them a much-needed word of hope! Isaiah told them that **reliance on God's powerful presence will help them survive life's hardships.** God's powerful presence will protect them through their physical calamities, desperate feelings of hopelessness and unrelenting fear. Let's look at each of these and see how they apply to us, today:

1. God's powerful presence protects us through physical calamity.

Look in your Bible in **Isaiah 43:1b-2**. God begins this section by seeking to calm the fears of his people. God tells us we don't need to fear because He has redeemed us. What does God mean when he states, "I have redeemed you"? The verb, "to redeem" refers to the recovery of property that has either been taken from the original owner, or somehow has left the possession of the original owner.

Let's say your car gets stolen. You inform the police of your loss. A day later the police find your car. Wonder of wonders, the car still has everything intact! The tires, engine, battery, everything's still in the car! The police redeemed your loss. They returned the car to its original owner.

When God states that he redeemed us, he means that he has returned us to Him. For the Jews of Isaiah's day, this meant that God had reclaimed or redeemed his people from the Babylonians.

Isaiah continues in **vs.2** to assure the Jews of protection against physical calamity. Note that God does not say, "I will keep you from the waters...or I will keep you from the rivers or from the fire". Rather, God states, "**When** you pass through the waters.. **When** you pass through the rivers...**when** you walk through the fire. God acknowledges the reality that we will personally experience hardships, difficulties and problems. Though we will experience difficulties, God assures of his powerful presence through our physical calamities.

This morning we sang a great hymn of faith, called ***It is Well with My Soul***. Horatio Spafford, a wealthy, Presbyterian laymen from Chicago wrote this hymn in 1873. Spafford admired the great American evangelist, Dwight L. Moody and when Moody left for England to conduct one of his evangelistic campaigns, Spafford decided to join him. In November, 1873 due to unexpected last minute business, Spafford remained in Chicago but he sent his wife and four daughters ahead of him on a boat called the **SS. Ville du Havre**. He expected to follow in a few days on another boat. On November 22 the ship containing his wife and four daughters was struck by another ship and sank in 12 minutes. Several days later the survivors finally landed at Cardiff, Wales and Mrs. Spafford sent a cable to her husband that read, "Saved alone". All four of their daughters had drowned in the accident! In response to this great personal tragedy, Horatio Spafford wrote this great hymn of faith, ***It is Well with My Soul***. Though the hymn speaks of his sorrow, the hymn focuses on the redemptive work of Christ. The fourth stanza anticipates Christ's glorious second coming.

We wonder how someone experiencing the unexpected death of all of his children could possibly write a hymn celebrating the redemptive work of Christ? He survived by depending on God's powerful presence. **Reliance on God's powerful presence helped this man survive physical calamity!!** God's powerful presence will protect you and me through physical calamity! Are you enduring some form of physical calamity in your life today: a health problem, loss of income, loss of your home, loss of a loved one? Ask God to fill you with his powerful presence! His presence will help you!

2. God's powerful presence protects us from a sense of hopelessness. Look in vs.4 God informs the Jews of his fond feelings for them. God calls them "precious" and "honored". Further, God reminds them of his love. Since he loves them, he will give men in exchange for them. What does this mean? The Babylonians will take others captive as slaves and will be well stocked. In fact, they will be so well stocked with slaves that when the time is right, God will allow his people to return to Jerusalem. They did return!

We know from the Bible that under Nehemiah and Ezra thousands of Jews returned to Jerusalem. Groups of Jewish exiles returned from Babylon, as well as Egypt, Syria and many other countries. Note in the text how God opens the doors of opportunity for the people to return to Israel. Look in vs.5 **"I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, "Give them up!"**.

God, speaking through Isaiah, informs his people that he will re-populate the Promised Land with his people. God does this to protect his people from a sense of hopelessness. The people had been wallowing in despair. God wanted the people to regain a strong sense of hope!

Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankl labored in four different Nazi concentration camps between 1942 and 1945. He lost his parents, brother and pregnant wife during his years of imprisonment. After the war, Frankl wrote a best selling book called **Man's Search for Meaning**. In this book, Frankl argues that we cannot avoid suffering in life but we can choose how to cope with it, find meaning in it and move forward with our lives.

As Christians we believe that God has a plan for our lives and that nothing happens by chance. We affirm that God stays with us always as He promises in scripture and that his powerful presence protects us from a sense of hopelessness.

I love these words from **Psalm 42:5 "Why are you downcast O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and My God"**. I find it interesting that the psalmist repeats these same exact words in **Psalm 42:11 and Psalm 43:5**. Why did the psalmist repeat these phrases? Repetition in Hebrew indicates significance and importance. The psalmist wants us to receive this message!!

I loved watching the television scenes recently of Haitian children, flown to Miami to meet with their new American parents who had adopted them. What joy and hope for both parents and children! The presence of those Haitian children and the reality of finally clearing all the necessary adoption hurdles must have given those new parents a profound sense of hope.

The presence of their Haitian children quashed the sense of hopelessness from their adoptive parents. Many of these parents believed they would never manage to navigate all the red tape to get those children out of Haiti.

In a similar way, the powerful presence of God can protect us from a sense of hopelessness in our lives. Whether you're battling depression, alcoholism, addiction to a certain prescription drug, trying to survive your Chemistry class in high school, or attempting to pay off your enormous credit card debt, know that hope exists in the powerful presence of God! **Reliance on God's powerful presence can protect us from a sense of hopelessness!** Finally,

3. God's powerful presence protects us from reliance on other gods. Look in **Isa 43:**

11-13 God wanted the Jews to know with clarity and certainty that He alone was God. They could not and should not rely or depend on the gods of the Egyptians, gods with names like Isis, Ra and Osiris, or Babylonian gods with names like Marduk, Enki or Ishtar or, gods of the Canaanites with names like Moloch, Dagon, Asherah or Baal.

The Jews believed in one God named YHWH. YHWH alone would save and deliver them. *His powerful presence would protect them from reliance on other gods.*

Turn over a page to **Isaiah 44:6** where God repeats the same, essential message. **“This is what the Lord says, Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty; I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God”**. Remember what I said earlier in my message about repetition in Hebrew indicating significance? God repeats his message in chapter 44 about his divine uniqueness because God wants his people to understand with certainty that He alone is God! There simply is no other god! YHWH's powerful presence protects us from reliance on other gods. Why rely on something that doesn't really exist? Human intellect and hands created the gods of the Egyptians, Canaanites and the Babylonians. They weren't truly divine!

Today, we worship gods that aren't really divine. Like the ancient Egyptian, Canaanite and Babylonian gods, we've created these gods with our minds and hands. We foolishly believe we can depend on these gods to help us, to give meaning and significance to our lives. We call these gods leisure, happiness, relaxation, affluence, pornography, material well-being, education, work, valium, cocaine, methamphetamine, oxycodone, marijuana, etc. Of course, many more idols exist. Some of these idols can be good when used in proper perspective. But when one treats them as an idol, it's never good.

Hear it loud and clear: Only YHWH, the true and everlasting God who we know because Jesus Christ has revealed God to us, can provide true salvation and meaning to our lives. **Reliance on God's powerful presence protects us from reliance on other gods.**

As I close this morning, I want to invite our elders and prayer leaders to get up and be available for prayer. We did this last week. I'm repeating it this week because prayer's important and the message today might have sparked an urge in your heart or mind that you need prayer. We all need prayer! I really want to encourage you to get up out of your seat and make use of this opportunity to pray! Every one of us has problems and difficulties. Every one of us needs prayer! We, as leaders of the church would love to pray with you. I've noticed the people don't feel comfortable coming forward to pray. Let's change that tendency today! Please feel free to come up in front for prayer. Remember, we all need prayer. If you want to stay in your seats, continue praying for the people of Haiti.

