

## Isaiah 42:18-43:13 A sufficient Saviour in the hard times of life

### Introduction

‘I didn’t see it’ – in the world of top level football there has been for many years a major problem of short-sightedness; time and again managers declare that they did not see an incident that was apparently in their line of vision –yet on other occasions the recovery of those powers seems to be equally remarkable. The sympathy of fans in offering the loan of spectacles to referees and other officials may need to be extended to the managements of the teams on the field of play also. But it is not just professional sportspeople who have this problem –in the school environment when some rules have been transgressed and the teacher asks did anyone see anything, again the remarkable co-incidence that the entire student body chose to look in the opposite direction to the fight taking place in the corridor or did not hear inappropriate words being spoken to a member of staff. As we all know this difficulty can afflict us all. I well remember a fairly deaf person who told me with a smile not to be sorry about their difficulties because a hearing aid can be turned up or down depending on whether they wished to hear what someone was saying or even at the end of an unpleasant rant or difficult encounter a cupped hand to an ear and a shrug of the shoulders can turn the tables as their assailant is not inclined to repeat the ill-chosen words previously conveyed. How often and much more seriously does God seek to communicate with us through circumstances or through other people’s words and we choose to turn ‘the deaf ear’? If we will not listen then God sometimes has to act in more dramatic or drastic ways to get us to listen.

### 1. The Servant Who Will Not See (Isaiah 42:18-25)

(a) **The Divine Summons** (vs18-20) *Hear you deaf, look you blind 18 Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! 19 Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to Me, blind like the servant of the Lord? 20 You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing.*

All of us have had times in our lives when we did not want to answer the phone or open a letter because we knew that information would be communicated that we did not want to hear. Life has those moments –sometimes also times when we are the one who has to communicate the bad news. Israel in Isaiah’s day and even more in Jeremiah’s later wanted to listen to the false prophets who brought ‘good news’ that things were not really as bad as they appeared, or at least it would not be too long before the good times re-appeared. Sometimes in our lives there is no good news in the short-term as the difficulties we face have no immediate cause of resolution. In such situations we need to be assured that God’s grace will be sufficient and His strength our portion as we work our way, sometimes even as we are struggling desperately, through our trials. Many a time we will not know why God has allowed a trial to enter our lives; on other occasions we will not know why the difficulties have gone on for so long; we accept that God must have a purpose, but with the best will in the world cannot fathom out why? Sometimes though God does speak and we fail to notice as His means of communication is unexpected. It could be that the person He uses is a surprising choice or that the means He utilises to attain His will have not been entertained in our thoughts. In our individual lives and in our church life may we not be guilty of the charges brought against Israel in v20 *You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing.* We cannot deny, though, that here it was the people of God and not the outside world that was charged by God in this way. This is a clear warning that God’s people today can be equally unwilling to listen to what He is saying.

(b) **The Divine Purpose** (Isaiah 42:21, 23-25) *It pleased the Lord*

*21 It pleased the Lord for the sake of His righteousness to make His law great and glorious. 23 Which of you will listen to this or pay close attention in time to come? 24 Who handed Jacob over to become loot and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow His ways; they did not obey His law. 25 So He poured out on them His burning anger, the violence of war. It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand; it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart.*

Who is in control? A fair question in a school classroom as the teacher struggles to reassert authority in the face of unruly pupils; or a policeman in the face of a rioting mob; or in daily life in many parts of Iraq or Egypt or a whole host of other countries. When disappointments cross our paths or worse – to whom do we turn? Did God take time off and let us simply make a mess of the world or is He still there all the time? Sometimes He does hide His face and we simply sense the heavens as brass as our prayers appear to bounce off the ceiling. The message of the book of Job from God is ‘trust Me’ even when you cannot make sense of the world; your own situation or even a situation in the church; these are strong words in these verses. We need to trust in the sovereignty of God and keep claiming the promises of God. His reputation is at stake and He cannot fail to deliver in His time. Isaiah 55: 8-9 reminds us: *For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts;* Time and again the way God chooses to work seems difficult to accept. Paul in I Corinthians 1:23 admits the challenge of preaching the Gospel. *We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.* Yet the cross was not an accident. Isaiah 53:10 declares: *It pleased the Lord to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the Lord makes His life a guilt offering...the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand.* The exile seemed a most unlikely vehicle for enabling the Old Testament people of God to grow in their relationship with Him. It was for them a much more difficult time than the cultural changes through which Western Christianity is passing just now.

(c) **The People’s Plight** (Isaiah 42:22) *a people plundered and looted*

*22 But this is a people plundered and looted, all of them trapped in pits or hidden away in prisons. They have become plunder with no-one to rescue them; they have been made loot, with no-one to say, send them back.*

How often do we cry out earnestly to God outside of times of difficulty or even crises?

For many of us, myself included, our prayers often only have that serious intensity when ‘our backs are against the wall’ and we are deeply concerned about what might happen in our family circle or our church family or in some other specific context. Henry Brash Bonsall, a well-known Evangelical leader and prayer warrior of the last century, was quoted as saying in the biography written by his daughter that it was during a time following a serious accident when he was bedridden in a Canadian hospital for around two years unable to move for much of it that his intercessory ministry began in earnest. Prior to that time there was prayer alongside great zeal in pastoral ministry, but it has a lesser priority in practice. The world around the Middle East thought Israel was finished for good in 586BC when the last city, the capital city Jerusalem, fell to the all-conquering Babylonian Army. The response at that time of the Edomites, whose kingdom was located in part of modern-day Jordan, and the occupying Babylonians was bitterly lamented in the last verses of Psalm 137. The whole Psalm, a bitter lament of exiles in Iraq is a cry to God from their hearts. *Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. ‘Tear it down,’ they cried, ‘tear it down to its foundations!’<sup>8</sup> Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us.<sup>9</sup> Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks (Psalm 137:7-9).* They are a hint of that fact that is spelled out more fully in oracles to the nations by various prophets in the Old Testament including Isaiah. God allows us to face trials but looks to see us stand firm when tested. James 1:12 is a most encouraging verse for us when we face such pressures. In

the New Living Version it reads: *God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterwards they will receive the crown God has promised to those who love Him.* By God's grace and through the power of His Spirit let us be overcomers for the Lord.

## **2. The Saviour Who Will Save** (Isaiah 43:1-7)

(a) **A Demonstration of Love** (Isaiah 43:1-3) *I am the Lord...your Saviour*

*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. 2 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. 3 For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead.* God here gives a reminder of what He has done in the past for His people. The first reference is to Genesis chapters one and two. First of all in the first chapter of the Bible *He who created* (bara) you Genesis 1:1, out of nothing, the world was brought into being with human beings at the pinnacle of that creation. Then from the following chapter it states: *He who formed* (yasar) you, the verb from Genesis 2 that spoke of the special attention we got as creatures made in the image of God and the implied acknowledgement that we are the focus of His attention. Jeremiah used a picture of God forming His people in his message in Jeremiah 18, during his reflections on a visit to the potter's house. God is asking His people then and now to reflect on the world He has provided for us. It was created to be a perfect environment for a fulfilling and enriched life –when humans don't mess things up! David in Psalm 8 declared in the light of such revelation *what is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour* (Psalm 8:4-5). In the light of His taking care of the bigger picture He gives His encouraging words: *Fear not, for I have redeemed you* (Isaiah 43:1b); to this Israelite prophet past redemption was from slavery in Egypt. This theme featured in many prophetic messages recorded in the Old Testament. God's promise to the nation was clear and decisive. In Exodus 6:6 God declared: *I will free you from being slaves to them and will **redeem** you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement.* The fulfilment of the promise was given in the Song of Moses in Exodus 15:13: *In Your unfailing love You will lead the people You have **redeemed**. In Your strength You will guide them. Why? v3 For I am the Lord, Your God...* This is an echo of Exodus 20:2: *I am the Lord Your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* Nothing is too much trouble to give for your salvation –even all the treasures of Africa (named countries of means here). or as the hymn-writer puts it in 'How firm a foundation ye saints of the Lord': *Fear not He is with thee, O be not dismayed; for He is thy God and will still give thee aid; He'll strengthen thee, help thee and cause thee to stand, upheld by His righteous omnipotent hand.'* God's assuring love is what we need so often when afraid in times when serious ill-health is diagnosed, or a terminal illness acknowledged; when unemployment is our plight or our family relationships break down –through it all He says I am with you –do not be afraid. I will walk with you through all the dark days that lie ahead as well as in the sunshine of life's joys. Equally in times of change in church life or other parts of our lives –Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). In that same passage the author reminds us *God has said; Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. So we may say with confidence. The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me* (Heb.13:5-6).

(b) **A Declaration of Love** (Isaiah 43:4-7) *because I love you*

*4 Since you are precious and honoured in My sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life. 5 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— 7 everyone who is called by My name, whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made.*

Can you remember the first time someone said: 'I love you'? I tried (and failed) when preparing this sermon, but more importantly I have experienced love and care from my earliest years. To know whether from a parent, or a child, a friend or relation, unconditional love; to have known a person or people whose actions proclaim: 'I love you because I love you!' Not that I love everything you have ever said or done, that's a different matter! God's love in Christ, supremely through the cross, is the perfect model of that love, to which the best human love can be at times a good reflection. The message for the Israelites about to enter exile is that the God who had kept His promises in the past will do so again. Remember and keep an account of past answers to prayer and from time to time read your diary or journal or however you have recorded these blessings to encourage your heart when fresh difficulties arise. Verses four to seven are a mirror image in some respects of the first three verses as there is the repeated call *Do not be afraid* (Isaiah 43:5); a reference to a new exodus from exile outside the promised land and a reminder in v7 of the acts of God in Genesis 1 and 2. At its heart the reason why God has done this, for them and for us is that simple declaration '*I love you*'. Do you need to grasp that afresh at this time in your life?

### **3. The Sovereign Who Guaranteed Salvation** (Isaiah 43:8-13)

(a) **The Invitation to Witness** (Isaiah 43:8-10) *8 Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf. 9 All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. Which of them foretold this 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, It is true. 10 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. 11 I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from Me there is no saviour.*

The imagery is from a court of law. The 'nations' are in the public gallery; the people of God are called by Him (the Judge) to give eye-witness account of what He has done, therefore letting the people know what He can do. It is in effect a call to us to share our stories with other people about God's assistance to us and love for us over the years. People will challenge our arguments for the existence of God. They may dispute our biblical convictions and standards. However, our testimonies of the difference God has made in our lives is particularly powerful. They are a living proof of the truthfulness of 'the truth' we utter with our lips. This fact is both a challenge to us, but also an opportunity; Many people are less than convinced that their lives are reaching the potential they ought to have attained; others know that they are lacking a sense of purpose and are attracted to our conviction that we know God's bigger picture for our own lives, together with His plans for the whole of the creation. A recent debate on the radio concerned the care of younger children. The background to the debate was the Westminster Government's apparent lack of support for parents, particularly mothers, who were convinced that the interests of their children were best served by this additional parental input into their care rather than placing them for the working day in some form of child-care or nursery provision. The majority of male

callers in the segment of the programme I heard were speaking about paternity leave after the birth of a child. One man who was particularly eloquent said: 'They [these politicians] don't get it, there are some things more important than money; you cannot buy quality time with your children.' We as Christians would want to affirm this opinion, but add that it is equally true that we need to give quality time to our relationship with God our creator and redeemer! Despite greater material wealth than at any time in British history materialism will never give complete satisfaction. Today, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is an openness to hear people's stories; but equally there is a wariness of superficial answers to life's questions; we have a communication battle to overcome because a majority of unchurched people gain their information about what Christians are like from the soap operas on television. This crude caricature of our faith is not a pretty picture. Christians are portrayed as either weak and wet or as militant zealots that are an embarrassment to 'normal' people. The reason for this is quite simple. The people writing the scripts together with the director's of many of these soaps have no meaningful relation with Christians so we have work to do to show the authenticity of our lifestyles. However, be encouraged because over time people will notice the difference being a Christian makes in our daily lives. God did not take away the trauma of exile from the Jews. He allowed His people to go through it, but in the furnace of that affliction new expressions of worship and witness emerged that would in time prepare the way for the spread of the gospel at Pentecost. The smaller synagogue based worship groups were the bridges to the Gentile world in Paul's ministry. Mission experts have long been saying that small churches comprised of committed people who share their faith effectively are much more fruitful in seeing people come to faith than large churches where many Christians go to hide their talents. Increasingly in the twenty-first century home based relational evangelism in small groups will be the key to the growth of the church and the larger more inspirational weekly gatherings will be reserved for the up-building of believers in the faith. Praise God for the handful of very large Evangelical Churches in the United Kingdom, but the long-term health and growth of the cause of Christ in Britain in this century will be determined more by how many innovative small churches are planted around the land, increasingly home based, especially if the secular authorities continue to progress their negative attitudes towards the Christian Churches.

(b) **The Issue to Witness** (Isaiah 43:10-13)

*12 I have revealed and saved and proclaimed— I, and not some foreign god among you. You are My witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God. 13 Yes, and from ancient days I am He. No-one can deliver out of My hand. When I act, who can reverse it?*

God is at work - never forget it! He has a long-term strategy for the mission to which He has called us. In 1720 the only Evangelical Christians active in world evangelisation were the Moravians, working away valiantly, primarily in Europe and North America; in the 1780s African American Baptist George Liele pioneered evangelistic work amongst the slaves on the estates in Jamaica; in the 1790s a handful of Baptists formed the BMS world mission with a focus on outreach in India. Obeying the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 was now back on the agenda. Other mainstream Protestant denominations followed suit there and in Africa and then throughout the world. As recently as 1908, there were only two Protestant missionaries in Albania, Phineas and Violet Kennedy. They had no co-workers until 1932; next to no money or interest in that strange land from fellow Evangelicals. The small witness continued as they persevered in God's service. In March 1992 when the Communist Party was swept from power and the first democratically elected

Government came to power only one Evangelical Church had survived with less members than one of our Wednesday house-groups. Yet the witness survived and very slowly with the aid of Christian missionaries from other countries new congregations have been planted and new believers disciplined. The total numbers of churches may still be small but they are increasing and would be significantly larger had there not been significant emigration of skilled Albanians seeking employment in Western Europe in order to support their families at home. God is building His church in Scotland as well. There have been setbacks and we in our context have gone through a time of difficulties in our ranks. Yet as we go forward in mission to reach our town for Jesus He will equip and enable us to fulfil this calling. Our task is to be God's witnesses in the place where He has put us. Is the job too large for us? Of course not! Remember *I am God* says the Lord. May we strengthen ourselves in God who is able to do greater things than we have yet asked or can imagine, for Jesus' sake Amen.