



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Redeemed from the Depths

Isaiah 42.18-43.7

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### *Introduction*

1. Are you familiar with any exercises that are designed to help you see new possibilities?<sup>1</sup> All focus on the need to learn to see things differently than we're accustomed to seeing them and not limit ourselves with what someone called "impossibility thinking."
2. If we could effect meaningful change merely by looking at a picture or working through an outside-the-box exercise, the change and great accomplishments would be relatively easy. We find it hard to see another perspective because we have seen the old view so long.
3. That is the problem ancient Israel faced as reflected in our text today.
  - a. The text, especially the first part of it, is somewhat surprising. It breaks the pattern of the glorification of God and encouragement to hope seen from 40.1-42.17.<sup>2</sup>
  - b. But, when we think about the historical situation, it's not a surprise. As Brueggemann says, "Israel—the commissioned servant of Yahweh—is so preoccupied with its own sorry state in exile that it cannot get its mind off itself to attend to the mission of Yahweh" (Brueggemann, 48).
  - c. We understand why: from their perspective, they had been rejected despite being the chosen people; their specialness did not save them. And, for those who endured the captivity, appearances belied Isaiah's message of hope. They were captives of Babylon, their world's superpower. And nothing much seemed to be changing that.
  - d. Psalm 44.1-3, 9-12 is a good example of their dismay.
4. Our text is not as direct as Psalm 44. But from Yahweh's words here, it is apparent that he is responding to something similar. He rebukes them and reminds them of their judgment before returning to the message of hope, assuring them again that, however deep their despair, he would redeem them. We'll notice what he said and how it applies to us.

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<sup>1</sup> An example is the picture which, when looked at one way, looks like an old woman, but when viewed another way, looks like a young woman. What we expect determines which woman we see. What's interesting is that, when we change the perspective, we are often unable to see the view we once saw exclusively.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann makes the point that 42.18-25 "sound more like the accents of judgment in [Isaiah] chapters 1-39. They are a neat articulation of the full theology of retribution so prominent in the Old Testament and best known in the tradition of Deuteronomy" (*Isaiah 40-66*, The Westminster Bible Companion, 51).

*Body*

## I. Rebuke and Rescue: A Survey of Our Text.

## A. A servant still lacking (42.18-20).

1. In effect, Israel was accusing God of not being attentive to their plight.
  - a) Verses 18-19 use the words “deaf” twice and “blind” four times.
  - b) But, it is Israel who is blind, not God. He had called them to new behavior, to see and hear, to receive what he was doing, to look at the hope that awaits.
  - c) But, they did not hear, missing not just what God promised, but who he had always been in covenant with them (see Exod 2.24-25).
  - d) This made them unlike their exodus ancestors (Exod 14.31), and just like their immediate ancestors whose sin had led to their plight (Isa 6.9-10).
2. Failing to see, they were “trapped in holes” (vv 21-25; see especially v 22).
  - a) They had the been given the law (torah) in a way that made it both available and clear (v 21; see Deut 30.11-14).
  - b) Their failure to heed it left them in a state of misery, confusion, and suffering (v 22), the result of Yahweh’s efforts to get them to see (v 24; see Jer 30.14-15).
  - c) Their suffering was not capricious, but was just punishment for their sin: “we have sinned,” “they would not walk,” “they would not obey” (v 24).
  - d) As the result, they were suffering God’s fiery wrath, designed to evoke a repentance that was still not coming because of their blindness (v 25).<sup>3</sup>
3. Israel did not understand that “Yahweh’s covenant is demanding and in the end costly” (Bruggemann, 51).

## B. Amazingly, there was still hope (43.1-7).

1. Here is one of Scripture’s most compelling statements of God’s love for Israel.
2. “But now” (v 1) highlights the contrast. “... Yahweh’s profound commitment ... persists through and is undisturbed by any circumstances” (Brueggemann, 52).
  - a) The same God who created them will redeem (buy back) them, a figure that refers to the intervention of a stronger family member on behalf of a weaker member to assure the latter’s well-being (v 1).
  - b) Why wouldn’t he? He had “called [them] by name,” “perhaps an adoption formula” (Brueggemann, 53) and at any rate a statement of cherished possession.
  - c) So, there is no need for “fear” (v 1), no matter the circumstances (v 2).
3. In verses 3-4, the imagery shifts to the figure of “the Holy One of Israel” bartering for his people with the citizens of other nations; the point is to show God’s love for his people, perhaps in response to accusations like that made in Psalm 44.12.
4. Verses 5-7 finish the assurance in triumph: from wherever the people are scattered, they will be gathered as those “called by [Yahweh’s] name, whom [he] created for [his] glory, whom [he] formed and made” (v 7).

## C. The point is breathtaking.

1. Despite their consistent failure to listen and obey, God will redeem!
2. “A tiny, miserable and insignificant band of uprooted men and women are assured that they—precisely they—are the people to whom God has turned in love; they, just

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<sup>3</sup> Verse 25 is similar to Amos 4.6-11, directed to the people of north Israel who suffered under the Assyrians.

as they are, are dear and precious in his sight. And think who says this—the lord of all powers and authorities, of the whole of history and of all creation!”<sup>4</sup>

## II. Coming to Terms with Reality: Application to Our Setting.

- A. We need to hear this text because Israel of the Babylonian captivity era is not the last incarnation of God’s people to need the hope of God’s love despite persistent blindness, deafness, and disobedience.
- B. This text teaches two lessons that we need today, individually and corporately.
  1. Sometimes, what ails us is a refusal to admit our condition and fault.
    - a) Israel hit rock bottom and finally admitted their sin—or at least Isaiah admitted it for them (42.24)—but it is clear that their problem persisted because they did not or would not see their condition.
    - b) I like the statement I heard recently to the effect that “shame is the gateway to grace” (a line from the TV show, *The Unit*, CBS Television, December 12, 2006).<sup>5</sup>
    - c) At a personal level, we are often distant from God because our pride refuses to acknowledge our sin and need.
      - (1) Like Paul, we may have always lived in all good conscience (Acts 23.1); we need a light to dawn on us that we are in fact sinners (1 Tim 1.12-15).
      - (2) This is especially a problem for us who are church goers; we may confess “our sins” in general terms without dealing with the one sin we just will not surrender (cf. Luke 18.9-14, 18-23).
    - d) At a corporate level:
      - (1) The problem is twofold:
        - (a) failing to see when change must occur and
        - (b) imagining that whatever problems exist were caused by someone else.
      - (2) Like the Ephesian church at the end of the first century, there are many good works, much sound doctrine, and exposure of false doctrine, but no passion for seeing ministry grow; it’s a church that “keeps house” (see Rev 2.1-7).
      - (3) Or, like the church at Laodicea, we may be drifting along: nothing really bad happens, but nothing really good does either; there is only habitual “churchiness”; the best word to describe us is “lethargy” (see Rev 3.14-22).
  2. The good news is that God will keep working on us, even when we are not listening and moving forward (cf. 1 Tim 1.13; also 1 Cor 15.9-10; Gal 1.13-15; Phil 3.6).

## Conclusion

1. In searching for a way to bring the twin lessons of our text home to our setting, I discovered it in what may seem to be a strange place: the plaintive prayer of “Hello God,” a song penned by Dolly Parton for her “Horns and Halos” album. It’s a comment on our times and a discerning look at what’s necessary to change them.<sup>6</sup>
  - a. The song begins with a series of questions to God: Can he hear us? Is he listening? Will he help us? Parton observes that we need God’s love because we’ve abused our free will.

<sup>4</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 118, in Brueggemann, 54.

<sup>5</sup> The episode is entitled, “Silver Star.” Writing credits are given to Eric L. Haney, David Marnet, Emily Halpern, and Randy Huggins. See [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0910504/?ref\\_=ttep\\_ep24](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0910504/?ref_=ttep_ep24). Accessed October 31, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> “Hello God” lyrics are available at <http://www.metrolyrics.com/hello-god-lyrics-dolly-parton.html>. Accessed October 31, 2018.

- b. The end of the song is confession. It pleads with God not to let us go and seeks forgiveness. It asks for one more chance to show our love for him.
- 2. The good news is that he will give us that chance, for he wants to redeem us from the depths. Will we listen and obey?

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