

## God Promises to Restore

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light  
Unit 2: God's Promises

Sunday School Lesson for the week of January 8, 2023  
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-4, 10-12

### Key Verse

*But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)*

### Lesson Aims

- To marvel at the way God redeemed and restored his people from their captivity
- To learn the prophet's way of encouraging and forming God's people in preparation for the future
- To ponder the way God preserves us when the journey of restoration takes time
- To see in our restoration God's view of our worth in God's eyes
- To look into how God was dismantling the last vestiges of idolatry among his people
- To call us to a fresh engagement with God as our Savior

### An Incredible Story of Redemption and Restoration

The theme for this lesson is that God promises to restore. Restoration is one of the big themes of the Bible. Multiple voices from multiple books of the Bible tell about this phase in the life of God's people. It is a truly remarkable story. As they say, you cannot make this stuff up.

Before we get into the story of restoration, we first should remember the initial condition of God's people where they had hit bottom. We could look in scripture in a number of places, but a good place to look is part of the scripture we explored in the previous lesson from Second Chronicles 7:19-22. The warning was given by God right after God had imparted to Solomon a vision of King David's dynasty lasting forever—if the descendants walked in the way of their ancestor, David.

*“But if you turn aside and forsake my statutes and my commandments that I have set before you and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will pluck you up from the land that I have given you, and this house, which I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight and will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And regarding this house, now exalted, everyone passing by will be astonished and say, ‘Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this house?’ Then they will say, ‘Because they abandoned the LORD the God of their ancestors who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they embraced other gods and worshiped them and served them; therefore he has brought all this calamity upon them.’ ”*

This warning was given by God to Solomon after the dedication of the temple. God wanted to go on record that if God's people were taken into exile by a foreign army and the temple was destroyed, it would not be because God failed to keep his promise. It would not be because God was weak and powerless. If, in the future, people passed by abandoned cities and saw only ruins where the Jerusalem temple, in all of its magnificence, had once stood, they would surely be astonished. The reputation of such a people would become a byword, a proverb, and a cautionary tale told of a defeated people. They would no doubt wonder, "Why did the Lord allow such a thing to happen?" Before that happened, God wanted to go on record so that people would know the truth: it would be because the people abandoned the Lord and embraced other gods. In other words, it would not be due to God backing out of the covenant; but because God's people did not hold up their side of the covenant. They brought the calamity upon themselves.

Unfortunately, these disastrous events all came to pass. It took about four centuries to unfold, but the descent began not long after God spoke to Solomon that night. Tragically, it began with Solomon: *"For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David."* (1 Kings 11:4) For the sake of his father, David, God did not divide the kingdom in Solomon's day, but it did divide in the following generation. The northern kingdom was taken out from the line of David. In the southern kingdom of Judah, the kings in the line of David, with only a few notable exceptions, were unfaithful to God. Several centuries after Solomon, the temple was destroyed, the city of Jerusalem was demolished into ruins, and God's people were taken into captivity by the Babylonian army.

**Can you point to a time in your life when you needed restoration? Have habits, hurts, hang ups, mistakes, or bad relationships ever taken your life to a place you wouldn't have chosen to go, but you ended up there anyway? Even if you have not experienced a pronounced descent in your life, have you ever found yourself to be in a state of dissatisfaction, and restoration was on your mind?**

Now, imagine the captives living in Babylonian exile. Imagine some time has gone by. Then, quite unexpectedly, a prophet speaks to these captives and delivers this word of hope to them in the midst of their bleak circumstances.

**<sup>43</sup> But now thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name; you are mine.**

You realize that an epic turning point was being announced. Notice how tender these words are. God reminded the captives that they were created and formed by none other than the Lord God. Whatever was about to transpire, it would flow from this defining relationship that had a long and indelible history. They were told that they should no longer live in fear. God had redeemed them. Their restoration would not happen in an instant, but it was as if the guilt that they and their ancestors had brought upon themselves had already been wiped away by the grace and mercy of God.

God reminded the captives that they were called by name. The names “Jacob” and “Israel” reminded them that they were the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob. They were still called by that name. Nothing had changed that. They were loved in the same way that God loved their ancestor who carried the name Jacob until he wrestled with an angel, an avatar for God. Jacob was forever known as “Israel” from that time forward. “Israel” means “striven with God.” In that wrestling, God had held onto Jacob and Jacob had held onto God. What an apt metaphor for God’s relationship with his people!

**Can you point to particular times, specific persons, circumstances, special sermons, a Bible study, a prayer time that stood out, or a new small group where you sensed God was forming you, creating right before your eyes the relationship you have with God? Was there a feeling in those moments that God knew your name? Have you ever dwelled on the fact that you belong to God? Have felt in your heart that God would say to you, *You are mine*? Have you ever heard in your heart God tell you that he has redeemed you? Have you ever felt that moments such as these were meant to be a prelude for something more?**

Over the course of this lesson and the next we are going to marvel at the way God redeemed and restored his people from their captivity. Remember that God’s people, both Judah (the southern kingdom) and Israel (the northern kingdom) were comparatively tiny pawns next to the superpower that was the Babylonian empire, which held them in captivity. To free God’s captive people will require a most remarkable set of strings to be pulled. How do you dismantle a superpower? You do it with the ascendancy of another superpower—the Persian empire.

To understand the nature of Middle Eastern empires requires a little bit of history. Hang with me here. First, we must ask, “What do empire builders do to consolidate their power?” They take over great swaths of territory and require tribute, or payment, from the national treasuries of the smaller nations, then they find ways to subdue their subjects to maintain order and control.

- **Assyrian:** The empire that initially took over the northern kingdom Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the Assyrian empire, consolidated its power and maintained control by taking their conquered people groups from the smaller nations and moving them around and mixing them so that they would lose their national and cultural identity. This had disastrous effects on the northern kingdom Israel.
- **Babylonian:** The Babylonian empire, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., kept the cultural groups together but carted off all the best citizens of each culture far away from their homes as captives in a foreign land. The southern kingdom Judah suffered in captivity, but God’s people were able to band together and maintain their cultural and spiritual identity.
- **Persian:** The next superpower, the Persian empire, was ruled by leaders that were quite benevolent in comparison to the leaders of the other empire builders. They let the captive peoples of the old Babylonian empire return to their homes, rebuild, and even supported them in rebuilding their cultural and religious centers. God pulled the strings so that the Persian empire would be allowed to take over the Babylonian empire and be a kinder, gentler power for the sake God’s people Jacob.

As we discovered in the previous lesson, the end of Second Chronicles gives us a brief preview of the restoration of God’s people:

*“In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also in writing, saying: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Let any of those among you who are of his people—may the LORD their God be with them!—go up.” (2 Chronicles 36:22-23)*

## **Preservation Along the Way**

The redemption and restoration of God’s people will involve a journey. Part of the journey will involve waiting. Another part of the journey will involve spiritual growth. Another part of the journey will involve actual travel. God’s people will need the Lord to accompany them in order to make the journey. The prophet’s mission is to encourage God’s people and prepare them spiritually for the journey ahead.

**<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.**

The journey ahead involved waiting. Jeremiah prophesied that the Babylonian captivity of God’s people would last 70 years. This contradicted the false prophets who were giving out false hope of an early return. Jeremiah believed that the reason for the exile lasting as long as it would was because it would take this long for God’s people to be disciplined for their sins. These false prophets were downplaying the sins of God’s people and the need for discipline. Jeremiah offered hope, but it was in the form of real hope, not false hope. Waiting is not easy. Waiting gives us time for introspection, reckoning, and repentance.

The journey involved spiritual growth. Passing through waters, rivers, and fire symbolized passing through judgment and discipline. Through the hardships still to be experienced in captivity, God’s people were learning to rely on God again. They were learning not to trust in false hope and cheap grace. They were building spiritual muscles. How great it is to know that they will not be overwhelmed by their experience. The flames of adversity will not consume them. God will preserve them so that their experience will be for their good and not their demise.

The journey involved actual travel. When the time came, they would return to their homeland. Isaiah talks about crossing rivers, hills, and deserts along the way. God would make a highway in the desert (Isaiah 40). Comparisons will be made between the exodus from Egypt in the time of Moses and this second exodus from Babylon: *“For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight, for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.”* (Isaiah 52:12) In the first exodus from Egypt, the Hebrews had to go out in flight with the Egyptian army in hot pursuit. In the second exodus from Babylon, centuries later, there would be no army in pursuit. In the first exodus from Egypt, God went before and behind them in the pillar

of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. In the second exodus, the Lord would also go before them, and the God of Israel would be their rearguard, protecting God's people in their return home from Babylon.

With which experiences of exile, captivity, and restoration are you more familiar? As the apostle Paul wrote, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Since we can admit this, we can also say that we all have a need for restoration. We can say that God desires redemption and restoration for us. Since the nature of our sins varies from person to person, the journeys of restoration vary from person to person. Our redemption stories are uniquely our own.

Some journeys of restoration flow from experiences where it is not just about how we have sinned, but how we have been sinned against, or how we live in a world that is fallen, or how we inhabit the human condition. In these cases, we may use others words to talk about our own journeys of restoration. We may use words like "healing" and "recovery."

People who have had to break free from addictions can point to their journey of restoration. Others have suffered from family dysfunction, abusive situations, marital conflict, estrangement between loved ones, and experiences of hurt, trauma, and loss. These cause us to get stuck, so that moving forward becomes our journey of restoration.

With all the job stresses and life stresses stemming from a pandemic, an uncertain economy, and the divisiveness in our society, more and more attention is being brought to mental health. We see positive movements in our society toward removing the stigma around mental issues. Whether it is depression, anxiety, or other diagnoses, we acknowledge that many of us are susceptible to these struggles, or could become susceptible. Dealing with these battles and strains can become a journey of restoration.

Each of these journeys takes time. Isn't it awesome to know that God preserves us while we are going through our journey of restoration? When we pass through dangerous currents, God journeys with us so that we are not overwhelmed. When we walk through the fire, we can know that we will not be burned or consumed. We are covered by God's grace so that we can look clear-eyed at our strengths and weaknesses. We can rely upon divine wisdom from God's word. We can actually grow in our intimacy with God.

**What journeys of restoration are you currently on? What have you learned through the journeys you have already taken? What strengths are you discovering? How can you point to God's presence with you in your journeys? How has your journey of restoration been a journey of redemption where you are being redeemed from one state to another? How is God building character in you? How is God building resilience in you?**

**What You Are Worth**

Another part of the prophet's message has to do with the worth of God's people in God's eyes. Think how this would have spoken to the captives. Imagine what this would have done for their self-esteem, their morale, and their spiritual sense of belonging.

**<sup>3</sup> For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.  
<sup>4</sup> Because you are precious in my sight  
and honored and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.**

God identifies himself as the Lord, Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, and the Savior of the exiles. Despite appearances, the exiles are not the defeated people of an inferior deity. The Lord is the God of the covenant, who once before rescued their ancestors, the Hebrews, from slavery in Egypt.

God's activity is not limited to Israel only, but extends over a much larger arena. God was seen as the unseen force behind Persia's reach all the way to the north African nations of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba. These countries were not part of the Babylonian empire. They were the spoils of Persia's conquest, and the value of these nations offset what would have been gained from exploiting the former inhabitants of Israel and Judah. It was as if Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba were given in war to Persia as ransom in exchange for the life of the captives and their peaceful resettlement in their homeland. God's people were that precious to God. God was honoring his people and loving them in this way.

There is a beautiful picture given in the next verses (Isaiah 43:5-7) about the gathering not only of the exiles in Babylon, but also other offspring of Israel scattered long before the Babylonian deportations:

*I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, 'Give them up,' and to the south, 'Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.'*

Later in Isaiah, the language of ransom was used again in reference to the liberation and return of all these descendants of Israel: "So the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with rejoicing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (Isaiah 51:11) Jeremiah also used the concept of ransom: "For the LORD has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him." (Jeremiah 31:11)

Most notably of all, Jesus saw his ministry through this lens: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45) The apostle Paul believed he was appointed a herald and apostle to spread this news: "For there is one God; there

is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all.” (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

Jesus, who was completely innocent, sacrificed his life on the cross and paid the ransom for sinners. He paid with his life the ransom to free us from the bondage of our sin. No price has ever been paid which is worth more than the life of God’s Son. Our redemption and restoration are worth that much to God. We are worth that much to God. The question for us is whether or not we want to leave so precious a gift on the table unused.

**How have you appropriated in your life the knowledge of your worth to God in light of the ransom paid for you? How are you using the precious gift of redemption? How are you cooperating with the Holy Spirit in God’s plan of restoration for you?**

### **There Is One God and Savior**

Next, Isaiah imagined a court room scene where the nations would gather and evidence would be presented as to who the one true God of the universe is:

*Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Who among them proclaimed this, and foretold to us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, “It is true.” (Isaiah 43:8-9)*

In this court room scene, it is as if God is gathering from among the nations those who have been spiritually blind and deaf. Based on the events that are unfolding before them, God has a great case for people to believe that he is the one true God. No other nation, which worships other gods, has a case. In this court room scene, God wants the captives to be God’s witnesses.

**<sup>10</sup> You are my witnesses, says 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 shall there be any after me.**

The captives can give witness to how awesome God is because they know the events that are unfolding. No other nation can present nearly as good a case. The Babylonians believed that their god, Marduk, made them superior to other nations and their gods. That belief legitimized in their minds their conquest and exploitation of other nations.

By raising up Cyrus, a Persian ruler, to conquer Babylon and free the captives, the Lord, the God of Israel, was revealing who the true God of the universe was. God can direct the movements of all the nations when God wants to do this. The other so-called gods were no gods at all. If this were a chess game, God was demonstrating that he owned all the chess pieces.

- <sup>11</sup> I, I am the LORD,  
and besides me there is no savior.**
- <sup>12</sup> I am the one who declared and saved and proclaimed,  
not some strange god among you;  
you are my witnesses, says the LORD, and I am God.**

Throughout the book of Isaiah, we are given insight into God's strategy to dismantle the last vestiges of idolatrous thinking among God's people. If the Babylonians had been banking on turning the hearts of the captives away from God, they would have lost that bet. The seventy years in exile served to discipline God's people and help them move past their former idolatrous ways. They learned to rely upon God again to get through their years in captivity. Their liberation from captivity demonstrated that the God of Israel was and is the one true God of all nations and people.

According to God, no other god was formed before God, nor shall any god be formed after God. Besides the Lord, there is no savior. God was the One who declared and saved and proclaimed, not some strange god among them. God had demonstrated this full well, and the captives were witnesses of God's saving action.

The first two commandments are 1) you shall have no other gods, and 2) you shall have no idols. Together, these two commandments could be called the Priority Commandment. Making God our priority is the way to take part in the restoration of our lives. Recognizing that we have one Savior should call us again and again back to God. Nothing can fill the hole in our lives that God was meant to fill. God promises to restore.

**What needs restoring in you? If you cannot think of anything, could that be a problem that needs to be addressed? Are you giving other things a priority in your life in a way that is distracting you from your relationship with God? Do you need a fresh engagement with the Savior? How might you cooperate more fully with the restoration that God wants to work in you?**

### **Prayer**

Lord God, you led your people in an amazing journey of restoration. Lead us in our own journey of restoration, that we might know you more as our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who paid the ransom for our liberation from captivity, Amen.

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