

## Isaiah 43.1-5a.. Spanish Wells. February 2005.

Isaiah referred to Egypt, Cush (what we now know as the Sudan and Ethiopia) and Seba as the ransom price which the Lord paid for Israel.<sup>1</sup> As I understand it, the prophet was looking forward over 150 years to the time of the Persian world empire. Secular historians (Herodotus and Strabo) tell us that, during the rule of that empire, Cambyses, the son and successor of Cyrus the Great, invaded and subdued Egypt<sup>2</sup>, Ethiopia (including the Sudan) and Meroe – a province of Ethiopia<sup>3</sup>. Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian, informs us that 'Saba ... was a royal city of Ethiopia, which Cambyses later named Meroe, after the name of his own sister'<sup>4</sup>. It seems to me more than likely therefore that the 'Seba' mentioned by Isaiah was the Meroe which, along with Egypt and Ethiopia, was conquered by the Persians. It was the Persian monarch Cyrus, the father of Cambyses, who, according to the end of 2 Chronicles and opening of Ezra, freed the Jews from their exile and authorised them to return to their homeland and to rebuild the temple there.

From our text, it is clear that the Persian conquest of these lands was no accident of war, but that God, the Holy One of Israel, compensated the Persian kings for the liberation of His people by extending their empire through these distant African lands and nations – which had never formed part of the earlier Assyrian and Babylonian empires.<sup>5</sup> He gave these '*peoples*' instead of, in exchange for, *His people*!<sup>6</sup>

God gave the Persians that which was of far greater value than silver, gold or possessions – He gave '*peoples*' and '*men*' – and many of them. He explains His willingness to pay such a ransom for His people by reference to :

(i) *What He was to them*, 3a – 'your God' and 'your Saviour'; 'Saviour is one of Isaiah's favourite titles of God. This is the first of seven references in his prophecy, compared - surprisingly - with only four throughout the rest of the Old Testament.

(ii) *What they were to Him*, 4 – they were '*precious*' in His sight, esteemed by Him of very high value – as I note is the death of His saints, '*Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints*', Psalm 116.15 (the exact Hebrew expression exactly). They were honoured by Him, he says – even though they failed to honour Him, v.23. And they were loved by Him.

In the event, according to Ezra chapter 2, only about 50,000 exiles took advantage of the opportunity to return to their land. I can't begin to imagine what this expression of God's love must have meant to those who *did* return – that their God was prepared to pay such an incredibly large ransom for them. How they must have treasured this section of the scroll of Isaiah.

The more so because this reference to their ransom price is enclosed between the 'Fear not' of verse 1 and the 'Fear not' of verse 5. In verse 1, God spoke to allay and calm their fears by assuring His people that :

- He had *created and formed* them – He was 'the Creator of Israel', v.15;
- He had *redeemed* them – out of Egypt in the days of Moses;
- He had *called* them by their name (a term expressing His intimate and tender feelings for them) – that *they* might be called by *His* name, v.7; and
- He had made them *His* – in all probability, at Sinai. Ezekiel reports the words of the Lord concerning that time, 'I looked upon you ... I spread My wing over you and ...and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine, says the Lord God', Ezek. 16.8. There it was 'You *became* Mine'. Here it is 'You *are* Mine'. It is left to Malachi to complete the set for us: 'They *shall be* Mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day that I make up my (jewels, or) treasured possession', Mal. 3.17.

How privileged – how unspeakably blessed – the returning exiles must have felt. But I hardly need to tell you this morning that our privileges and blessings are even greater.

- Had Israel been *created* as a nation? – we have been '*created in Christ Jesus*', Eph. 2. 10<sup>7</sup>. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation', 2 Cor. 5.17.
- Had Israel been *redeemed* by the blood of the Passover lamb? We have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, 1 Pet. 1.18-19 (The same word '*redeemed*' as in Isa. 43.1 in the Greek Old Testament). 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world' – he bore His cross to Golgotha and bore my sins on Golgotha.
- Had Israel been *called*? We have been called – to eternal glory, 1 Pet. 5.10. Were Israel called by name? 'He calleth his own sheep by name', John 10.3. 'He counts the number of the stars'; he calleth them all by their names', Psa.147.4. 'Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names. By the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power, not one faileth', Isa. 40.26. The Lord knows them that are his! You cannot fool Him – even if made a profession, baptized, a member of the Gospel Chapel.
- Were Israel the Lord's *own special possession*? We too are His. 'Our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify to himself a people for his own special possession', Tit. 2.14. The Lord Jesus said of those described as 'His own' (John 13.1), 'Thine they

were (by counsel and purpose) and thou gavest (x9) them me', John 17.6. His forever – none pluck from Father's hand – 'Father, into thine hands I commend my spirit', Luke 23.46.

Were the exiles ransomed with a payment of far greater value than silver or gold – with 'peoples' – with human lives – and many of them? We know that the Lord gave something of immeasurably greater worth to ransom *us*. He explained to His disciples that 'the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give *His life* a ransom for many', Mark 10.45. Hinge of gospel. In other words, *Isaiah* foretold that *many* would be given as a ransom instead of *their life*, 43.4, but *the Lord Jesus* foretold that the Son of man would give *His own 'life'* as a ransom instead of *many*.

How precious then must *we* have been to Him! What honour He has conferred upon *us*! How much He must have loved *us*! (verse 4)

And then God assured Israel of His presence and protection – 'When you pass through the waters, I (will be) with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned; the flame shall not set you alight', v.2.<sup>8</sup>

Let us – who have been ransomed at infinitely greater expense than the Jewish exiles – take this promise home with us.

God *doesn't* guarantee His people immunity from trouble. At some time or another, through the waters and the fire we all have to go. But God *does* do two things. First – when we face circumstances calculated to make us anxious and apprehensive – when the waters of loss, disappointment, sickness or bereavement flow so swift and deep that we can't seem to find our footing or reach the bottom – He assures us of His presence through the trouble – that He will go through it all with us. 'I will be with you' is a very brief clause, but it is enough. His presence is what we want and it's all we need. And second, He promises to keep the trouble within clearly marked boundaries. The rivers may rise fearfully high, but they will not overflow.<sup>9</sup> For God's *limitless* power is also a *limiting* power, and, though the trouble may reach our circumstances and possessions – even our bodies, God says, 'No further'. Job was ruined financially. He was diseased physically. But God's hedge was round Job himself – and nothing – but nothing – could touch him.

But I must make it clear that these promises are the property only of true Christians - those who have turned from their sins to the Lord Jesus for salvation. Else they are 'strictly private' – keep out. You are on your own. Whatever tomorrow brings. Terminal illness ...

It was the words of our text which inspired two of the verses in the hymn 'How firm a foundation':

*When through the deep waters I call thee to go,  
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;  
For I will be with thee, thy trials to bless  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.*

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply;  
The flames shall not hurt thee: I only design  
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine'.*

We can rest assured that our testimony at the last will be that of David, 'We went through fire and through water; but you brought us out into a place of abundance', Psalm 66.12.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> The word 'ransom' is the same as is used by Moses back in Exodus 30 to describe the half shekel 'atonement money' which every male in Israel had to pay as a 'ransom' – as a substitute, that is – for his soul – for his life, vv. 11-16.

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus 3.15.

<sup>3</sup> Strabo 17

<sup>4</sup> Josephus. Antiquities II, X. 2.

<sup>5</sup> It was God's love for His people which moved Him to act according to the principle of Proverbs 21.18 – 'The wicked shall be a ransom for the righteous, and the transgressor for the upright'.

<sup>6</sup> The expression translated 'instead of' occurs in Genesis 22.13 (the ram in the place of Isaac) and Exodus 21.24 (an eye as compensation for an eye etc).

<sup>7</sup> We are 'new creation', 2 Cor. 5.17.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, in one sense the history of Israel in the Old Testament days could be said to be framed by water and fire. The 'waters' might well have reminded them of the crossing of the Red Sea, when the Lord went with them and parted the waters for them. And the 'rivers' which would not overflow them might well have reminded them of the crossing of the Jordan river which again the Lord parted for them – that they might enter Canaan. On the other hand, the symbol of fire occurs in several passages in the prophets concerned with the Babylonian invasion of Judah. And the very words at the end of verse 2 inevitably suggests the experience of the three faithful Hebrew young men in Daniel 3, who – during the exile – emerged unscathed from a blazing furnace heated to seven times its normal intensity.

<sup>9</sup> Sometimes the Lord calms the storm. Sometimes He lets the storm rage and calms His child.