

WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Five hundred and eighty seven years before the birth of Jesus Israel passed through the waters of their Babylonian exile. Babylon, the original evil empire, conquered the last vestiges of the kingdom of Israel. Jerusalem was sacked. They desecrated God's Temple, which had stood for over four hundred years. They utterly destroyed it and consigned its ancient pillars and woodwork to flames. Disaster overwhelmed individual families as well as nation. Children were ruthlessly put to death in the sight of parents or forever separated from them in this life by foreign exile. To all appearances God's promises failed.

Many Old Testament Psalms poignantly express the perplexity of God's people in the light of his apparently failed promises: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. All your waves and your billows have gone over me.*

Nevertheless, some of God's people incredibly heard the voice of the Lord over the mighty waters. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east. 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.' God promised to go to endless lengths to reunite grief stricken parents to their separated children.

The Jordan River is one river God promised to pass through with them on their eventual return to the Promised Land. The Jordan holds a special place in the lore and the history of Israel. The longest river in all of Palestine, it's the threshold to the Promised Land. In ages past, God had led Israel through the Jordan River on dry ground. "I'm going to do it again", he promises.

The Jordan River also looms large in the hymns and the collective consciousness of African-American Christians. African-American slaves never accepted slavery. The Jordan River became a symbol of freedom for slaves working on the plantations of the deep south. Escaping slaves entered the cold dark waters of the Ohio River and remembered God's promise to them and their children separated as they were by slave masters. They remembered God's promises: *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.* They hoped to be reunited with their children in the Promised Land. They remembered God's promises, *I will bring your sons and daughters.* And so they sang and remembered God's promises for themselves and for their children...

*Deep river, my home is over Jordan,
Deep river, Lord,
I want to cross over into campground.*

*O don't you want to go to that gospel feast,
That promised land where all is peace?
Oh, deep river, Lord,
I want to cross over into campground.*

*River Jordan is chilly + cold
chills the body but warms the soul
Amen
All my sorrows, soon be over*

They sang their songs of hope with unbridled fervor to conceal escape plans from unsuspecting masters.

We all have our Jordan to cross. On the other side lies the promises of God. We step into that river, trusting God to fulfill all his promises for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus leads the way. He stepped into the Jordan River and passed through the waters of baptism for us. He went through the fiery furnace of the cross for us -- to bring *us* home and to bring home our separated sons and daughters.

Several years ago a young college man dying of cancer wrote a letter to southern writer, Reynolds Price. Price had just written a book about his own battle with cancer and his faith in Christ. The dying college student wrote, "I want to believe in a God who cares because I may meet him sooner than I had expected. I think I'm at the point where I can accept the existence of a God (otherwise I can't explain the origin of the universe), but I can't yet believe he cares about us."

Reynolds responded, "I believe that the God who permitted the torture and agonized execution of Jesus on Passover does literally restore life to him on Easter morning. That is, I believe that the resurrection of Jesus is a visible palpable reality which holds extreme hope for us all. The Jesus who was unquestionably dead on Friday evening was alive on Sunday morning. However inexplicably transformed, he could be touched and

smelt. You could eat a meal with him and hear his voice.” Furthermore, Price went on to write to the dying college student searching for a caring God, “My conviction about you is that you’re bound toward a goodness you can’t avoid.” *When you pass through the waters*, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, *will be with you*. Reynolds Price expanded and revised his letter and published it under the title of *Letter to a Man in the Fire* alluding to God’s promise *when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you*. I heartily recommend his book to all of you.

At the end of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan tells us that a Christian pilgrim named *Valiant-for-the-Truth*, was unexpectedly summoned to go across the deep river of death into the Eternal City. *When the day for him to go had come, he prepared himself to enter the river. The river at that time was at flood stage and overflowing its banks. The sight of the turbulent deep waters filled their hearts with fear. His friends gathered with him at the river. Valiant-for-the-Truth stepped into the roaring river and turned and said, “I’m going to my Father’s.” He braced himself against the current and called out to his friends, “Death, where is thy sting?” He went deeper and further and his friends heard him cry out, “O Grave, where is thy victory?” His last words were “God’s grace rules the universe”. So he passed through the waters on his way to the eternal city of God—* and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

Thursday night, Jackie and Solomon Caleb, along with some friends, gathered with Leidda on the shore of a cold, deep river at flood stage. We looked into the river. We were frightened by its dark turbulence and we couldn’t see to the other side. All was dark. But when Leidda stepped into that river she heard the voice of God over the waters, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Do not fear, for I am with you.”

Holy God, Lord of life and death, you created us. You redeemed us. You have called us by name. We belong to you. When we pass through the waters, be with us. Do not let the rivers of woe overwhelm us. When we walk through fire, do not let the flames consume us for you are the Lord our God. Remember your promises. Remember your love for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

My Faith looks up to Thee, Thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior Divine
When ends life's transient dream,
When death's cold, sullen stream
Shall o'er us roll.
Blest Savior, then in love,
Fear and distrust remove;
A hither we see above, A Ransomed soul

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