

**Through the waters.** So, what is the actual message of God to us, as it comes through the prophet Isaiah? What does God mean by the words, *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you”* (v. 2)? This single quotation cannot stand alone; it needs to be understood in the context of the exile of the people of Israel.

For about 60 years, the people of Israel lived in captivity in Babylon, far from their homes in Palestine. They were discouraged, dispirited and depressed, wondering if they would ever be able to return. But now, as their exile is about to end, Isaiah reminds them that God created them, formed them, rescued them and called them by name. *“You are mine,”* says the Lord (v. 1). *“You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you”* (v. 4).

After decades of darkness, a light is beginning to dawn. The deep doubts of the people are replaced by the assurance of God’s care and protection. Isaiah is promising, according to biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann, that God *“will be with and for Israel.”* The prophet’s words establish God *“as powerful and compassionate toward Israel,”* and they expose all other gods *“as impotent and irrelevant.”*

Notice that Isaiah is not promising an easy path for the people of Israel, or for us. He doesn’t say *“if* you pass through the waters,” but rather *“when* you pass through the waters” (v. 2). Swirling waters will come, right along with raging rivers and searing fires. But in the face of these challenges, *“I will be with you,”* promises God. When obstacles arise, God will be — in Brueggemann’s words — *“powerful and compassionate”* toward us.

Isaiah never says that *“God will not give you more than you can handle,”* because that would make God the source of threatening waters, rivers, fires and flames. Nor does the apostle Paul say that in his letter to the church at Corinth: *“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and [God] will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing [God] will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it”* (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Neither the Isaiah text of today’s reading nor the Pauline text says that God pulls us into turbulent waters, pushes us into the fires, or burdens us with testing and temptations. These things happen because of our own ineptitude, because of external forces beyond our control, or because adversity is simply a part of the nature of life.

Instead, both Isaiah and Paul understand God to be powerful and compassionate, a God who is always with and for us. Think about this: *with* and *for us*. This is the God who was

with and for the people of Israel as they escaped captivity in Egypt and passed through the waters of the Red Sea. This is the God who was with and for the apostle Paul as he passed through the waters of the Mediterranean and ended up shipwrecked on the island of Malta (Acts 27-28). This is the God who is with and for us when we face troubles of our own.

God does not impose these difficulties on us. Instead, God chooses to be powerful and compassionate toward us when we are in the eye of the hurricane. As Isaiah says, *“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”* (vv. 2-3).

**A redemptive God.** After hearing these verses, some may say truly that *“God works in mysterious ways,”* but it would be more accurate to say that *“God works in redemptive ways.”* God is mysterious, supernatural, and indescribable. But to say that God works in *redemptive* ways has more real meaning for us. God is always working to redeem us, to buy us back, recover us, deliver us, ransom us, save us. *“I give Egypt as your ransom,”* says God through the prophet Isaiah, *“Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. 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”* (vv. 3-4).

The specifics of this exchange are unclear to us, lost in the history of the ancient Middle East. Exactly how Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba functioned as a ransom for the people of Israel remains a mystery to us. But what is eternally clear is that God works in redemptive ways, always acting to save us from anything that can hurt or destroy us. Why? Because, as God says to us through Isaiah, *“You are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you”* (v. 4).

**The passion of Jesus.** God’s power and compassion are seen most clearly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the one whom God called *“my Son, the Beloved,”* and said, *“with you I am well pleased”* (Luke 3:22). When Jesus passed through a storm on the Sea of Galilee, God was with him. When Jesus faced the opposition of scribes and Pharisees, he was not overwhelmed. When Jesus walked through Holy Week, he was not burned. Even his death on the cross did not end his life forever.

On Easter morning, God worked powerfully to raise him to new life. Jesus is the one who shows us how to trust God’s words, *“Do not fear, for I am with you”* (v. 5). He invites us into a community of people who are called by God’s name and created for God’s glory (v. 7). Jesus is the one who shows us how to live a life of service to others, with faith in God and

a willingness to pray, *"Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"* (Matthew 6:10). The focus is on God, not on self.

These words are the opposite of the line so often tossed around in Christian circles: "God helps those who help themselves." Remember: God didn't say that! No, the truth is that God helps those who can't help themselves. The knowledge that this is our God, a God of mercy, grace, forgiveness and compassion, should help us live in faith and work to advance God's will in the world. When we put our trust in God, we discover that we are never alone in the face of the challenges of life.

**Not without fear.** Not that this eliminates all our fears. "I wish I could be fearless," writes pastor Yena Hwang in *These Days* magazine. "Yet I am aware, fully, of all my fears. I fear high places and wind blowing against my face. I fear failure, not being good or smart enough and drawing criticism. I fear that my weaknesses will override my strengths."

And yet, she discovered that God is with her, even as she walks through the darkest valleys. She found that "God's promise is to provide support and comfort even through the shadowed valleys of our life. Our fears may show up in various places, but God will be our constant support."

In our darkest places, we discover that God is our support, and what God says through the prophet Isaiah is true: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you" (vv. 2, 5). Our Lord helps us in difficult times not because we have helped ourselves, but because we are precious in God's sight, honored by God and eternally loved.

Prayer: O Christ Jesus, when all is darkness and we feel our weakness and helplessness, give us the sense of Your presence, Your love, and Your strength. Help us to have perfect trust in Your protecting love and strengthening power, so that nothing may frighten or worry us, for, living close to You, we shall see Your hand, Your purpose, Your will through all things. Amen. (Ignatius of Loyola)

**Sources:**

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## God Didn't Say That!

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Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 43:1-7

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Social media throws quotations at us every day, and not all of them are reliable. Probably the most infamous of these sayings is, "The problem with quotes on the internet is that no one can confirm their authenticity." (Wrongly attributed to Abraham Lincoln!) Gregory Sullivan runs a website called "Quote Investigator" that examines the dubious origins of familiar quotations by Yogi Berra, Mark Twain, Marilyn Monroe, and others.

Yogi Berra is often credited as saying, "Always go to other people's funerals; otherwise they won't go to yours." Yogi never said that! The line first appeared in a novel in 1876, long before Berra was born.

Mark Twain is quoted as saying, "The more I know about people, the better I like dogs." As much as that seems to fit his humor, Twain never said that! The credit goes to a French book from 1822.

Marilyn Monroe reportedly said, "Give a girl the right shoes and she can conquer the world." Marilyn never said that! Credit goes to Bette Midler, who said in 1985, "Give a girl the correct footwear and she can conquer the world."

How about: "God will not give you more than you can handle"? Many Christians think this quote comes from the Bible, but you won't find that saying anywhere in Holy Scriptures. This is just one of many quotations inaccurately attributed to the Bible. Others include: "This too shall pass" (10<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon poem, "Deor's Lament"); "Cleanliness is next to godliness" (John Wesley in a sermon, 1778); "God works in mysterious ways" (William Cowper, "Light Shining Out of Darkness," 1773); "Everything happens for a reason" (Marilyn Monroe); "Love the sinner. Hate the sin" (St. Augustine, Letter 211, c. 424); and "God helps those who help themselves" (Ben Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanac*, 1757). In truth, God never said any of those things!

The words of the prophet Isaiah can be easily misunderstood and misapplied. When God says, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you"* (43:2), God is not saying, "I will not give you more than you can handle." Nor is God promising, "This too shall pass." God's message is really very different.