



# SUNDAY SCHOOL JANUARY 12, 2025

Prayer:

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## OLD TESTAMENT

### Isaiah 43:1-7

#### *PASSING THROUGH THE WATERS*

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.

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. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush 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.

Do not fear, for I am with you; 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."

#### *OVERVIEW*

Isaiah 43:1-7 is a passage of hope and reassurance where God speaks to Israel about His unwavering love and commitment to redeem and protect them. It opens with God's declaration of Israel as **His chosen people**, created and redeemed by Him. The text emphasizes God's personal relationship with His people and His willingness to go to great lengths to save and gather them from all corners of the earth. It highlights God's role as Creator, Redeemer, and Protector, showcasing His deep love and care for His people.

*See Addendum on "Chosen People" and "Making Sense of Perceived Exclusion"*

#### *BIBLICAL CONTEXT*

Isaiah 43 falls within the second section of Isaiah (chapters 40–55), often called "Deutero-Isaiah," which focuses on **messages of comfort and restoration for Israel** during and after the Babylonian exile. These chapters shift from warnings and judgment (in earlier Isaiah) to promises of redemption, underscoring God's sovereignty and His role as the ultimate deliverer.

**The immediate context in Isaiah 43 follows chapter 42, which ends with a lament about Israel's blindness and deafness to God's commands.** In contrast, Isaiah 43 reassures Israel that, despite their failures, God's covenant with them remains intact. This passage specifically reaffirms God's protective presence and His plan to gather His people from exile.

#### *HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL CONTEXT*

The passage was written during or anticipating the **Babylonian exile** (ca. 586–538 BCE). During this period, the Israelites faced displacement, loss of their homeland, and questions about their identity and God's promises. Babylonian dominance threatened their sense of security and faith.

*See Addendum on Nebuchadnezzar*



In the broader ancient Near Eastern context, nations often saw exile as a sign of their gods' abandonment. Isaiah counters this idea by presenting Yahweh as faithful and sovereign, promising restoration regardless of Israel's circumstances. God's declaration to gather His people "from the ends of the earth" reflects the diaspora that occurred during the exile.

### *HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME*

- **8th century BCE:** Isaiah prophesies in Judah during Assyrian expansion.
- **722 BCE:** The northern kingdom (Israel) falls to Assyria.
- **701 BCE:** Judah survives Assyrian invasion under Hezekiah, but Isaiah warns of future judgment.
- **586 BCE:** Babylon destroys Jerusalem, leading to exile.
- **538 BCE:** King Cyrus of Persia allows the exiles to return to Judah.

Isaiah 43 looks forward to the post-exilic restoration (likely in the 6th century BCE).

*See Addendum on “King Cyrus the Great”*

### *SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL & MODERN-DAY INTERPRETATION*

Isaiah 43:1-7 can be metaphorically understood as a testament to God's unwavering relationship with His people, emphasizing themes of redemption, protection, and identity. Modern readers might see this passage as a reminder of God's personal care for individuals and communities, even in times of suffering or displacement.

- **“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you”** can be understood as a call to trust in God's ability to deliver us from personal or collective struggles, such as injustice, loss, or despair.
- **“I have called you by name; you are mine”** reflects God's intimate knowledge of every individual, affirming human dignity and worth.
- The imagery of passing through waters and fire symbolizes life's trials, yet God promises to be present and protective.
- **“I will bring your offspring from the east”** symbolizes hope for reconciliation, healing, and the gathering of scattered people, applicable today in contexts like immigration, estrangement, or church unity.

This passage resonates with themes of inclusion and restoration, reminding believers to embrace God's call to work for justice, reconciliation, and the restoration of broken relationships.

### *SUMMARY*

Isaiah 43:1-7 is a message of comfort and reassurance for Israel during the Babylonian exile. It emphasizes God's steadfast love and His role as Redeemer and Protector. The passage affirms that God's people are precious in His sight, and He is committed to their restoration, even to the ends of the earth. Metaphorically, it speaks to God's enduring presence amid life's trials and His call to trust in His promises. For modern readers, it inspires faith in God's power to redeem and transform, regardless of circumstances, and calls them to embody this redemptive love in their communities.



## NEW TESTAMENT (GOSPEL)

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

### THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

"His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

*Note: There is an overlap of scripture this week from several weeks ago.*

### OVERVIEW

This passage from Luke's Gospel focuses on two main events:

- John the Baptist clarifies his role in God's plan, emphasizing that he is not the Messiah and points to the coming of Jesus, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.
- The baptism of Jesus, where the heavens open, and the Holy Spirit descends upon Him like a dove, with God declaring Jesus as His beloved Son.

These verses highlight the transition from John's preparatory ministry to Jesus's divine mission, underscoring Jesus's identity and authority.

### BIBLICAL CONTEXT

- **John the Baptist's Role:** John's ministry prepares the people for the Messiah, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy about the one crying in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3-5). Here, John makes clear he is not the Messiah but one who baptizes with water in preparation for the coming of the Christ.
- **Jesus's Baptism:** This act inaugurates Jesus's public ministry. It emphasizes His divine identity and the fulfillment of righteousness (Matthew 3:15 adds this detail).
- **Holy Spirit's Descent:** The descent of the Holy Spirit affirms Jesus's messianic role, and the voice from heaven connects Jesus to Old Testament messianic prophecies like Psalm 2:7 ("You are my Son") and Isaiah 42:1 (the servant in whom God delights).

### HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL CONTEXT

- **Jewish Expectation of the Messiah:** In first-century Palestine, messianic expectation was high due to Roman occupation and oppression. People anticipated a political or military savior who would free Israel.
- **Baptism Practices:** Ritual washing was common in Jewish tradition for purification. John's baptism, however, was unique as it called for repentance and symbolized readiness for the coming kingdom.



- **The Role of Prophets:** John's prophetic ministry aligns with the tradition of prophets who called Israel back to covenantal faithfulness.

#### *HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME*

- **John the Baptist's Ministry:** Around 26-29 AD.
- **Jesus's Baptism:** Likely occurred in the late 20s AD, marking the beginning of His public ministry.
- This period aligns with the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1), which Luke uses to situate events in Roman history.

#### *SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL & MODERN-DAY INTERPRETATION*

##### **Baptism of the Spirit and Fire:**

- **Metaphorical Meaning:** The Holy Spirit represents God's empowering presence, while fire symbolizes purification and judgment. It suggests transformation through divine power and the accountability of one's actions.
- **Modern Application:** Christians today interpret Spirit baptism as receiving God's guidance and strength. Fire can also signify refining trials that lead to spiritual growth.

##### **Jesus's Baptism and Identity:**

- **Metaphorical Meaning:** Jesus's baptism symbolizes humility and solidarity with humanity. It prefigures His death and resurrection, as baptism is often seen as dying to sin and rising to new life.
- **Modern Application:** Believers can view baptism as an affirmation of their identity as children of God and a call to live out their faith publicly.

#### *SUMMARY*

Luke 3:15-17 portrays John the Baptist as the forerunner who points to Jesus, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, signaling transformative judgment and empowerment. In verses 21-22, Jesus's baptism marks the divine affirmation of His mission. The descent of the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven confirm His identity as God's beloved Son, launching His public ministry. These events connect deeply to themes of humility, divine affirmation, and the transformative power of the Spirit.

This passage continues to inspire Christians to live out their baptismal calling and embrace God's transformative work in their lives. It also invites reflection on Jesus's identity and mission as the Messiah who brings spiritual renewal.



## ADDENDUM

### Chosen People

This is a fascinating and deeply theological topic that touches on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, as well as how Christians interpret the Old Testament. Here's a breakdown:

#### 1. Understanding "Chosen People" in Context

In the Old Testament, the Jewish people are referred to as God's "chosen people" because God entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:1-3). This chosenness is reaffirmed throughout the Torah, Prophets, and Writings (e.g., Deuteronomy 7:6-9, Isaiah 43:10).

The purpose of being "chosen" was not about privilege but responsibility. Israel was set apart to represent God's holiness and justice, to be a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:6), and to bring knowledge of the one true God to the world.

#### 2. Christian Perspectives on "Chosen People"

Christians traditionally revere the Old Testament as sacred scripture, believing it lays the foundation for understanding God's plan of salvation. The question of how Christians view the Jewish identity as God's "chosen people" varies across denominations and theological traditions:

##### a. Continuity Through Jesus

- **Fulfillment Theology:** Many Christians believe that Jesus fulfills the promises made to Israel. In this view, Jesus is the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament, and through Him, the covenant is expanded to include all nations (e.g., Galatians 3:28-29, Ephesians 2:11-22). This doesn't negate the Jewish chosenness but reframes it within a broader context of salvation.
- **Spiritual Israel:** Some interpret passages like Romans 9:6-8 to mean that being "chosen" is not about ethnicity but faith in God's promises. Christians see themselves as grafted into the "olive tree" of Israel (Romans 11:17-24).

##### b. Respect for Jewish Covenant

- **Dual Covenant Theology:** A minority of Christians, particularly in modern times, affirm that God's covenant with the Jewish people remains valid alongside the new covenant established through Jesus. In this view, Jews remain the "chosen people" while Christians are also part of God's redemptive plan through Jesus.

##### c. Supersessionism (Replacement Theology)

Historically, some Christians held that the Church replaced Israel as God's chosen people due to Israel's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. This view has been critiqued as fostering anti-Jewish sentiment and is largely rejected in contemporary Christian theology.

#### 3. The Role of the Old Testament

For Christians, the Old Testament is:

- **God's Word:** It reveals God's character, promises, and redemptive plan.



- **Prophetic:** Christians believe it points to Jesus as the fulfillment of messianic prophecies.
- **Moral Guide:** It provides laws and narratives that teach about holiness, justice, and faithfulness.

The Jewish identity as God's chosen people in the Old Testament is seen as part of God's broader plan to bring salvation to all nations (Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 49:6). The apostle Paul emphasized this connection, reminding Gentile Christians of their indebtedness to Jewish heritage (Romans 11:18).

#### 4. Modern Christian-Jewish Relations

Many Christians today emphasize respect and dialogue with Judaism. Key developments include:

- **Vatican II (1965):** The Catholic Church affirmed that God's covenant with the Jewish people remains unbroken (see *Nostra Aetate*).
- **Evangelical Movements:** Some evangelical Christians strongly support Israel and Jewish traditions, often interpreting biblical prophecies as related to modern Israel.

#### 5. Theological Tensions and Harmony

The tension arises from the dual respect for the Old Testament and the belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Most Christians resolve this by seeing themselves as inheritors of the promises to Israel through faith in Jesus. However, Christians are called to humility, recognizing that salvation history is rooted in God's covenant with the Jewish people (Romans 11:25-29).

#### Summary

Christians respect the Old Testament and the Jewish people as God's chosen people because of their role in salvation history. They interpret this chosen-ness through the lens of Jesus, believing that the covenant has been opened to all through Him. At the same time, many Christians affirm the enduring significance of the Jewish covenant and seek to foster respect and understanding between the two faiths.

### Making Sense of Perceived Exclusion

Isn't being defined as a "chosen people" almost a way of being exclusive and therefore, if you're not Jewish, then you can't join the club? Is the Jewish God more judgmental? These typical questions touch on the nature of chosenness, inclusivity, and the character of God as understood in Jewish and Christian traditions. Let's break this down:

#### 1. Is Being a "Chosen People" Exclusive?

At first glance, the idea of being a "chosen people" might seem exclusive, as it sets one group apart. However, in the biblical context, "chosenness" is less about exclusivity or superiority and more about purpose and responsibility.

##### Biblical Chosenness

- **Covenantal Role:** In the Old Testament, God chose Israel to be His covenant people through whom He would reveal Himself to the world (Exodus 19:5-6, Isaiah 49:6). This chosenness was not a rejection of other nations but a means of blessing all nations (Genesis 12:3). Israel's role was to serve as a "light to the nations."



- **Inclusivity Within the Covenant:** The Old Testament includes examples of non-Israelites joining Israel's community, such as Ruth the Moabite and Rahab of Jericho. These examples suggest that being part of God's people was not strictly limited by ethnicity but was open to those who embraced the covenant (e.g., Ruth 1:16-17).

### Modern Jewish Understanding

Many Jewish thinkers interpret "chosenness" as a moral and ethical responsibility rather than a mark of exclusivity. The idea is that Jews have a special role in upholding and sharing God's commandments, not that they are inherently better or that others cannot relate to God.

### Christian Perspective

Christians often see "chosenness" as fulfilled and expanded through Jesus, who extends the covenant to all people (Galatians 3:28). Christianity emphasizes inclusivity, believing that faith in Jesus allows anyone to join the "family of God," whether Jew or Gentile.

## 2. Is the Jewish God More Judgmental?

The perception of God as "judgmental" in the Old Testament often stems from the texts emphasizing God's justice, laws, and consequences for disobedience. However, this view does not capture the full picture of God as portrayed in Jewish theology.

### Attributes of God in Judaism

- **Justice and Mercy:** The Jewish understanding of God includes both judgment and mercy. The Torah and Prophets repeatedly highlight God's compassion and steadfast love (e.g., Exodus 34:6-7, Micah 6:8).
- **Covenantal Faithfulness:** God's judgments are often tied to His covenantal relationship with Israel. When Israel strays, God's judgment is portrayed as corrective, meant to bring them back into alignment with His will.
- **Hope and Restoration:** Even in texts about judgment, the Prophets frequently point to God's desire to restore and redeem (e.g., Isaiah 40-66, Hosea 11).

### Why Does God Seem Judgmental?

- **Cultural Context:** Ancient Near Eastern societies often used covenantal language, where blessings and curses were tied to obedience. The portrayal of God in the Old Testament reflects this context.
- **Focus on Justice:** The judgmental aspects often focus on issues of social justice, idolatry, and moral corruption. These themes highlight God's concern for righteousness and fairness.

### Comparison with the New Testament

The New Testament emphasizes grace and forgiveness through Jesus, which some interpret as a shift from judgment to mercy. However, the God of the Old Testament is not fundamentally different from the God of the New Testament. Both testaments reveal a God who is holy, just, loving, and merciful.

## 3. Inclusivity in Jewish and Christian Theology

Both Judaism and Christianity have mechanisms for inclusivity:





- **Judaism:** While Judaism does not actively seek converts, it accepts them (e.g., the process of becoming a Jew by choice). Moreover, Judaism holds that non-Jews can have a relationship with God and be righteous through the observance of moral laws (the Noahide laws).
- **Christianity:** Christianity views its message as universal, welcoming all into the covenant through faith in Jesus.

## Conclusion

- **Chosenness Is Not Exclusionary:** In its biblical and theological sense, being "chosen" is about serving a purpose, not excluding others. God's relationship with Israel is a model for how all people can relate to Him.
- **The Character of God:** Both Judaism and Christianity view God as both just and merciful. While judgment is part of God's nature, it is balanced by compassion and a desire for restoration.

## Nebuchadnezzar

During the Babylonian exile, which began in **586 BCE**, the most notable leader of Babylon was **King Nebuchadnezzar II** (reigned 605–562 BCE). He was the ruler responsible for conquering Jerusalem, destroying the First Temple, and initiating the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon.

### Key Details About Nebuchadnezzar II

- **Military Conquests:** Nebuchadnezzar was a powerful and ambitious ruler who expanded the Babylonian Empire, defeating the Assyrians and Egyptians and asserting control over much of the Near East.
- **Siege of Jerusalem (597 and 586 BCE):** He first besieged Jerusalem in 597 BCE, taking King Jehoiachin and other prominent Jews into captivity. A second rebellion in 586 BCE led to the complete destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.
- **Infrastructure and Cultural Achievements:** Nebuchadnezzar is also known for his contributions to Babylonian architecture and culture, including the construction of the Ishtar Gate and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (although their existence is debated).

### Post-Nebuchadnezzar II Period

After Nebuchadnezzar's death, the Babylonian Empire declined due to weak successors and internal instability. By 539 BCE, Babylon fell to the Persian King **Cyrus the Great**, who allowed the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland, ending the Babylonian captivity.

## King Cyrus the Great

King Cyrus the Great of Persia (reigned 559–530 BCE) was the founder of the Achaemenid Empire and is renowned for his policies of tolerance and diplomacy. His decision to allow the Jewish exiles to return to Judah after the Babylonian exile was both a strategic and ideological move.

### Key Details About Cyrus the Great

1. **Founding of the Persian Empire:**



- Cyrus united the Medes and Persians, establishing the Achaemenid Empire, which became the largest empire of its time.
  - In 539 BCE, Cyrus conquered Babylon, marking the end of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.
2. **The Edict of Cyrus:**
- After taking Babylon, Cyrus issued an edict allowing exiled peoples, including the Jews, to return to their homelands and rebuild their temples.
  - This decree is mentioned in **Ezra 1:1-4** and corroborated by the **Cyrus Cylinder**, an ancient Persian artifact often considered one of the earliest declarations of human rights.
3. **Reasons for Allowing the Return to Judah:**
- **Religious Policy:** Cyrus followed a policy of religious tolerance, allowing subject peoples to worship their gods freely. He believed that honoring local gods would secure loyalty and divine favor for his rule.
  - **Political Strategy:** By restoring exiled peoples and supporting their religious practices, Cyrus fostered goodwill and stability in his vast empire. This policy reduced the likelihood of rebellions and strengthened his legitimacy as a ruler favored by the gods.
  - **Personal Belief:** While some historians see his actions as pragmatic, others note that Cyrus might have genuinely believed he was fulfilling a divine mission. The Bible presents Cyrus as chosen by God to free the Jews, referring to him as God's "anointed" (Isaiah 45:1).
4. **Significance for the Jewish People:**
- The return to Judah marked the beginning of the **Second Temple Period** (ca. 516 BCE–70 CE).
  - Cyrus's decree is seen by Jews and Christians as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy (e.g., Isaiah 44:28, 45:13).
  - He is remembered as a liberator in Jewish tradition, and his actions laid the groundwork for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

### Legacy of Cyrus the Great

- Cyrus is admired across cultures for his leadership, tolerance, and administration. The **Cyrus Cylinder**, discovered in Babylon, highlights his efforts to restore temples and exiled peoples, supporting the biblical narrative of his decree.
- In Jewish history, he is celebrated as an instrument of God's plan, even though he was not a follower of Yahweh.

Cyrus's approach was revolutionary for its time, reflecting a philosophy of governance that emphasized inclusion and respect for cultural diversity—a stark contrast to the practices of previous empires. Leaders like Cyrus, who practiced inclusivity, respect for diverse cultures, and a commitment to justice, are rare but profoundly impactful. His ability to unite a vast empire through diplomacy and tolerance rather than sheer force serves as a timeless model for governance and leadership. It's a reminder that compassion and respect for others' beliefs can coexist with strength and effective rule.