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### **Isaiah 43:1b–3, ESV**

- “Fear not, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.*
- <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.*
- <sup>3</sup> *For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

### **Psalms 91:2–13, ESV**

- <sup>2</sup> *I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust.”*
- <sup>3</sup> *For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence.*
- <sup>4</sup> *He will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.*
- <sup>5</sup> *You will not fear the terror of the night,  
nor the arrow that flies by day,  
<sup>6</sup> nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.*
- <sup>7</sup> *A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.*
- <sup>8</sup> *You will only look with your eyes  
and see the recompense of the wicked.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—*

- the Most High, who is my refuge—*
- <sup>10</sup> *no evil shall be allowed to befall you,  
no plague come near your tent.*
- <sup>11</sup> *For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.*
- <sup>12</sup> *On their hands they will bear you up,  
lest you strike your foot against a stone.*
- <sup>13</sup> *You will tread on the lion and the adder;  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.*

### **That moment of panic.**

When I was in my early twenties, I bought my first car that had a steering column lock. You know - that thing that keeps your steering wheel from turning if there is no key in the ignition? It's an anti-theft device, to make sure that no one can turn the wheel without a functioning key in the ignition. My car was a yellow Toyota something, maybe a Corolla, one of those small wagons that were very popular at one point. I was entering San Francisco on a curvy freeway, doing about 75 miles per hour. As I was about to turn left to take a curve, my steering column locked up. There was indeed a key in the ignition, but I couldn't turn the wheel. I tried slamming the wheel to the left. It didn't budge. I hit my brakes. There were no anti-lock brakes back then, and so I laid down rubber. I kept my cool, put the clutch in, and turned the ignition, trying to get the steering column lock to let go. But the steering wheel did not budge. The steering column lock was engaged and would not disengage. Still going over fifty miles an hour, I veered straight off the

freeway. As I left the freeway, I looked down. Underneath me was a steep embankment leading down to a street below the freeway. I'll get back to this.

Let's look at our first passage. Remember that in Isaiah, God punishes the people of God by sending the Assyrian Empire to invade and conquer Israel. Then the massive Assyrian army sweeps in from the north. It destroys Jerusalem. The Israelites are sent into captivity. This is all part of a massive military campaign whereby the Assyrian army incrementally builds up a truly vast empire, consisting of not only their original lands, but Babylonia, Syria, Phoenicia, Egypt, Israel, and several other previously independent empires. Israel is conquered and surrounded by its enemy, and many of its citizens have been sent into exile. But in Psalm 43, after preaching about God's vengeance, Isaiah shifts his tone and begins to tell the people of God that God will lead them back to their Promised Land. Ultimately, Assyria will be conquered by another colonial empire just as the Assyrians conquered so many other nations. But the important lesson isn't what happens to the Assyrian Empire historically. What matters is the faith story and the lesson it tells: God will never abandon the Israelites, even when they have gravely sinned. In other words, we as believers are never totally lost. As long as we are breathing air, God will be willing to forgive, to rescue, to regenerate, to save us. In Isaiah, the people of God have come back to God. They are no longer

living corrupt lives. At the time, the most common form of moral corruption among the Israelites was worshipping multiple, false gods, instead of the one, true God. They therefore will not perish physically or spiritually. The Prophet Isaiah speaks for God and declares:

*“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;*

*I have called you by name, you are mine.*

<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.*

<sup>3</sup> *For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

Let’s move to our second passage. It consists of approximately two thirds of Psalm 91. It is a song and prayer of joy, delivered by someone who has a deep, enduring relationship with God and knows that God will always be there for them. The psalmist declares that God will provide protection from disease, enemies, demons, plagues – anything that threatens those who truly believe and have a deep faith in God. Here is a very condensed form of it:

<sup>2</sup> *“My refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust.”*

<sup>3</sup> *For he will deliver you from  
the deadly pestilence.*

<sup>4</sup> *Under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.*

<sup>5</sup> *You will not fear the terror of the night,  
nor the arrow that flies by day,*

<sup>6</sup> *nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.*

<sup>9</sup> *Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—  
the Most High, who is my refuge—*

<sup>10</sup> *no evil shall be allowed to befall you,  
no plague come near your tent.*

<sup>11</sup> *For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.*

<sup>12</sup> *On their hands they will bear you up.*

By the way, if you are wondering about that line, “*his faithfulness is a shield and buckler*”, a buckler is a small, round shield used in swordfights. This is an amazing psalm. God will protect you because you have decided to live in the Kingdom of God. If that’s where you live, if that is where you spend your life, God’s angels will always swoop down and lift you up when you are in trouble. Notice that while the Israelites believed in a strict monotheism, that there is only one God, there are helpers who assist God, like angels.

Now, the Israelites were concerned with physical, earthly - and not eternal - protection. They were an endangered people constantly being threatened by aggressive empires. Remember that they were living under the Old Covenant and the Jews only incrementally over many, many hundreds of years developed a true notion of an afterlife. Their concern was that they receive God’s protection here and now. The Old Covenant promised them 1. land, 2. children, and 3. God’s

blessing. As they didn't fully believe in Heaven, this was their form of eternal life – having descendants who will live under God's protection in a land given to them by God. The promise is good for as long as there is an Earth. Only when all human life ends, only when the world ends, will the Israelites disappear as an earthly people. We live under the New Covenant, however. We want to be protected spiritually. We want our eternal lives protected.

But God made us so that we also turn to God when we are in danger here on Earth. We look to God when we are sick, when we face financial disaster, when we lose a job, when a spouse leaves us, when a loved one is sick or injured. Earthly pain often leads to something good by bringing us closer to God, by keeping God in our minds and in our lives, by reminding us of our dependence on God. God wants us to turn to God whenever there is a threat either here and now, or a threat to our eternal lives. This makes us stop living in a corrupt fashion, puts us back firmly in the Kingdom of God. Now, does God always send angels swooping down to rescue us? Not necessarily to protect our physical lives or the physical lives of our loved ones, or to protect us from earthly ruin. At least not always. But God will see that the best thing happens. Even if the outcome doesn't seem like the right thing to us, if we trust God, if we turn to God in times of fear and anxiety and panic, God will be there with us. Extremely importantly,

God will get us through whatever happens. God will walk us through our suffering. And eventually, we will learn that God did do what was best, even if it certainly didn't seem that way at the time. When the suffering is over, perhaps sadly, we or a loved one has passed and are with God for eternity. Now, you might ask: should we just stop worrying about suffering here and now, either in our lives or in the lives of our loved ones, and only focus on eternity? Is that the lesson? No, it's not. The fact that we turn to God when we or other people are in danger is simply one aspect of living like Jesus: we love the people around us, and we want the best for them.

So, there I was, flying off a freeway at fifty miles per hour. I did indeed turn to God. There wasn't much time. I asked God to please have this end with me alive and uninjured. I let go of my useless steering wheel and spoke to God: *Let me walk away from this, please. I don't care about the car. I just want to keep on living and to not be hurt. God, I do trust you.*

My car did not go airborne. It just barely stayed on the ground as I raced down the steep embankment. I slammed through thick bushes. It was only a handful of seconds, but it seemed to go on forever. My brakes did nothing as I bounced through the loose, uneven dirt. But eventually, I came to rest. I was inches from a street sign for the street that was below the freeway. I got out of

my car and walked around it. It was completely undamaged. I did have to be towed out of there, but a day later, I was driving my car again. And yes, I disabled the steering wheel lock permanently.

It's obvious that from my perspective, God did indeed do the best thing possible. But there's more to it. I was young. I was a technical guy very much caught up in a material world. I was not someone who lived each day deliberately following in the footsteps of Jesus, walking through the Kingdom of God, dedicating my life to living the way God wants me to live. That accident was a reminder of just how much I needed God, of how fragile my life was, how dependent I was on whatever God planned for me. The Assyrian people still live today, largely in northern Iraq, but also in surrounding nations. However, their empire is long gone. Interestingly, Israel is still there, ancient Jerusalem survives to this day. Our goal should be survival, not just in a literal, earthly sense, but in a spiritual one, as well. Only God's empire will last forever - and we want to make sure that when the end of earthly life comes for us, that's where we are.

When the tow truck showed up to drag my car away, the driver, who was a young guy like me, was amazed. He stood there with wide eyes as I told him what had happened. Then he said that I was very, very lucky. I didn't think of it at the time, but I should have told him that I wasn't lucky at all. I was *blessed*. God had

decided that this incident would end without me being hurt, without anyone else being hurt, and without my car being damaged. But the big lesson is that we don't know what will happen next month, tomorrow, or even tonight. We are totally dependent on God. We pray every day. We should have God in our minds many times a day. We shouldn't wait to turn to God only when the steering column on our car locks up. Just remember what our Psalm tells us about how to ensure that no evil will befall us:

*Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—  
the Most High, who is my refuge—  
10 no evil shall be allowed to befall you.*

Please pray very briefly with me.

*God, keep us in your kingdom. Do not let us wander. We accept the pain of life that comes with the joy of life. We trust you to absolutely do the best thing every time. Help us remember to keep you in our minds, not just when our steering wheel locks up, but even when things seem perfectly fine. Amen.*