When thou passest through the waters

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[0:00] Isaiah chapter 43 and verse 2. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee, and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee.

When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour.
Now the prophets, as all of you know, had a very diverse ministry. They sometimes brought to the Church of God great directives and commandments which God had given to them.
They sometimes brought great promises with regard to the Church's future. They sometimes, indeed more often than not, came with great words of divine rebuke and denunciation.
They sometimes came with great revelations of a theological kind. And they sometimes came with great words of consolation.
[1:31] And you'll see that the words of our text tonight are, indeed, an instance of the latter kind of ministry.

not but that this prophet has often sounded other notes in his message. He has pointed the Church often to the glory of God as the Holy One of Israel.
He has spoken great words about a coming Messiah. And above all, he has spoken great and solemn words of imminent and terrible judgment.
But the words of our text are not words of judgment. And they are words of consolation and comfort for the people of God.
And I want tonight to meditate with you upon them for a moment. I want us to notice, first of all, the great prospect which those words hold out to the Church.
[2:48] A prospect that, at first glance at least, is surely terribly intimidating.

The prophets saying to the Church that they are going to pass through the waters, they are going through the rivers, they are even going to go through the fire.
Now, at one level, these words apply to the Church of God communally. That is, to the people of God in its collective aspect.
The body of Christ is going to go through this tribulation. But that is only possible because we go through those experiences individually.
And the prophet is bringing before us as Christians, it is solemn on this awesome reality of the place of suffering in the life of the Church.
[4:03] It is something that we can say is absolutely inevitable in our lives as Christians, that we are going to go through those waters and those rivers and those fires.

It is through much tribulation that we enter the Kingdom of God. Count it not strange, says the Apostle James, when you fall into diverse trials.
And the great answer, these are those who have come out of the great tribulation.
John Bunyan reminds us that the road from destruction to Jerusalem led inevitably through the valley of the shadow of death.
And yet for all our familiarity with that, as a great general fact of our discipleship, so often we are surprised when God's people suffer.
[5:21] And so often we are taken aback when those waters of affliction go over our own soul. It is so easy to mention that those things never happen to those whose lives are right with God.

And yet the great doctrine is standing before us here so patently and so simply. That as the Lord's people, if we are spared any length of time, we are going to know that kind of experience.
We are going to go through those waters and those rivers and those fires. We are going to know that kind of experience is something that is quite inevitable in our lives as Christians.

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But then you will also notice this, that not only is there an emphasis on the inevitability of it, but there is an emphasis also upon how enormously varied the experience of suffering can be.
It seems to me to be true that all of God's children suffer. But it is not true that all of them suffer equally.
[6:50] You will see the variety that the prophet refers to here. Sometimes they go through the waters, maybe not too deep.

There are no strong currents. The suffering is real. And yet it is relatively mild. And then at other times, for other Christians, they have to go through the river.
Where there is depth and there is a strong flowing current, it is so difficult to keep our feet. And the whole experience is so terrifying.
And sometimes that's how it is with the Lord's people. It's not only the waters, the relatively still waters, but those rushing floods or rivers, in which our faith is so sorely tried.
And then for some other people of God, it is what the prophet designates as walking through the fire. That is the highest possible degree of intensity, the pain, the insufferable pain, the incomprehensible affliction.
[8:19] The suffering that makes no sense, for which we see no reason, and from which we see no fruit.

You remember how the same prophet speaks of a darkness in which there is no light. Not all suffering is of that manner or degree of intensity.
Not all darkness is as deep as that. Not all our suffering is so difficult to understand, or so difficult to endure.
But there are those tonight in the people of God. And their hearts should be with them. And they are going through that kind of experience, where there is darkness and there is no light.
A situation where there appears to be no comfort. In which there is no mitigating factor whatsoever. In which they can see no meaning.
[9:19] And from which they can see no fruit. And it is terrible to think that the devil is saying to some of them that all that suffering is a sign after not being Christians at all.

And surely it is true that we have to embrace ourselves for this great reality. It may be tonight that we would have to say before God that our cup was overflowing.
It may be that some of us have heard a great deal about affliction. But we ourselves have never known affliction. Let us remember that the word is spoken to a people in the church.
Who themselves had not yet been overtaken by this terrible reality. These people had not yet been in the waters, or in the rivers, or in the fires.
And it was very difficult for them to believe. It was very difficult for them to believe. Messiah and Jeremiah. When they spoke of those terrible afflictions. And sometimes, in our Christian youth.
[10:42] These things seem so remote from ourselves. And sometimes we are caught so terribly unprepared.

When all of a sudden the floodgates of affliction are opened. And we have no excuse because God has made it unmistakably plain.
That all of us who live our endeavour to live godly lives are going to suffer. It is an inevitable accompaniment of our being disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.
Now that suffering may assume many forms. For example, the Lord makes very plain to us. That Christians are not exempt from the ordinary trials and afflictions of this life.
There is, as the picture says, one thing that befalls the evil and the righteous. We are, as the Lord's people, exposed to illness and pain and bereavement and disruption and unemployment.
[11:56] And all those other things that the flesh of man is heir to. And the fact of our being Christians is no guarantee of any immunity against that kind of suffering.

We are involved in a common lot of mankind. But beyond that, sometimes these sufferings take the form of God himself sending a thorn in the flesh.
Some messenger of Satan to buffet us. Some messenger of Satan to buffet us. Some messenger of Satan to buffet us. It may be some painful illness. It may be some humiliating disability. It may be the lack of some gift that we think is indispensable to our own place in the kingdom of God.
And sometimes we cry to God for deliverance from this thorn. This thing that is so painful. This thing that is so inescapable.

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This thing that is such a limiting factor upon our discipleship. And we say to God, if only he would take it away, that we would serve him so much better.
[13:12] And all that God says is, my grace is sufficient for thee. My strength is made perfect in weakness. There are things and there are painful things that God leaves in the lives of Christians.

Maybe something painful in the body. Maybe something painful in the mind. Maybe something painful in our own domestic situation.
And God lays them there because God knows that without that thing we would be exalted above measure. And yet it can be a terrible affliction to bear.
So much that Paul is crying to the Lord three times for deliverance from this. But then to go beyond that still. Sometimes we have to reckon with the chastisement of God.
And that's part of the great paradox of this text. Those people were going into waters and into rivers and into fires.
[14:22] And these were fires of God's own kindling. The fires by which God would chastise the sin of his own people.

They were going into the bondage of Babylon. They were going into the exile and all the pain that the exile involved.
And sometimes we know in our own experience that there is a direct correlation between our backsliding and the painful providences of Almighty God.
We find David committing that terrible sin. And that sin forgiven. And yet for all that it was forgiven. The chastisement of God lying upon him in a most painful way for the rest of his life. Now it would seem to me entirely inappropriate for any outsider observing the life of a Christian.
[15:42] To say that the suffering of that man is a divine chastisement or a divine judgment for his aberrations and his inconsistencies.

We have no right to point the finger at others and say they are being chastised by God for their sins. But we often know in our own innermost consciences that the disruptions and upheavals and disappointments of our own lives are in our most eloquent way God's word of rebuking the way that we have lived.
Indeed there are times when almost unthinkingly we ourselves invite the justicement of God.
I don't mean invited by the way that we live but we pray in a way that is an invitation to God to deal in a painful way with our own sins.
[16:52] You remember for example how William Cooper, how he laments the condition that he himself has got into. Where is the blessing I knew when first I saw the Lord?

Where is the soul refreshing view of Jesus and his word? What peaceful hours I once enjoyed! How sweet their memories still!
And they have left an aching void the world can never fill! He knows how much is missing from his Christian life!
He knows that there has been a terrible deterioration in the tone and quality of his own discipleship! And sometimes you and I know it equally plainly and equally painfully! But the marvellous thing is this and the terrible thing is this that Cooper goes on to say The dearest idol I have known!
[17:59] What e'er that idol be! Help me to tear it from thy throne and worship only thee!

And it is so terribly easy to say out amen to that kind of prayer and to be so over born with the glory of the language that we fail to observe the terrible risk we are taking in asking God to deal with our sin in that way!
You pause and think! What is the most precious thing in my life? And there I am praying to God for the sake of my soul to tear that thing away!
And we little realise the solemnity we are asking! It is very well to pray to God, remember me Lord, with the love which thou to thine dost bear!
That is a great prayer! Provided we bear in mind that so many as I love, I reprove and chasten!
[19:13] You only have I known of all the nations of the earth, therefore will I chasten you for your iniquity!

And sometimes it has been a terrible exacerbation and aggravation of our affliction that we have known that we could not plead with God and pray to God and argue with God and say, Lord this is rational and this is sovereign!
Because we have known that the affliction is not sovereign at all! We have known that it is the divine response to the deterioration in our own lives!

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Because God is determined to educate us and determined to discipline us and very, very often the waters and the rivers and the fires are set in that great context of divine rebuke!
And you have that terrible and that yet marvellous utterance of the psalmist as he faces that reality in his own life! And he says, Dumb, dumb was I, opening not to my mouth, because this stroke was thine!
[20:35] He saw that it was God's hand! And it really is an inevitable part of the whole process of being Christians, that not only are we going to share in the common sufferings of humanity, and going to face the affliction of having a thorn in our flesh, but we are open constantly to the rebuke and to the chastisement of God himself!

And then you will see the great word that the prophet speaks to that situation. Here is this inevitable experience of suffering.
And then he says, Fear not! They are going to go into pain and into affliction, into many an experience they cannot understand.
They are going to go into a darkness in which there is no light. And they are told not to be afraid.
And so often, human beings give us the same advice. They can't see their fellows suffering. They can't say, don't worry.
[22:01] They can't say, back up. They can't say, don't be afraid. And sometimes, as ministers, many of us have known that same kind of situation, standing helpless before the sheer magnitude of the human tragedy.

Knowing that we have not a word of comfort, and we have stammered and blurted, don't worry and don't be afraid.
And there we see the same great thing here. God saying, don't be afraid. And I'm going to ask, is that the same kind of futile word as we say so often in a pastoral context?
And you'll see it once, that it is not the same kind of word. Because it is not a simple directive or dissuasion against fear.
It is indeed a dissuasion. It is a plea for Christian courage and Christian composure in a vessel, the most astonishing and in the most demanding trial.
[23:15] God is saying, don't be afraid. But the great glory of it is that God goes on to argue and God goes on to show cause. And God goes on to give reasons.

And God goes on to give the logic that must lie behind this fearlessness and this courage. Because the word is not simply fear not. The word is fear not for her, for her.
And behind the directive and the dissuasion there is the tremendous logic of God himself. Don't be afraid because...
And he goes on to give us the great reasons in verse 2. I will be with you. That is the great thing now.
Tonight it may seem terribly remote. But there may be a day when we shall need to bear this in mind. In the most urgent existential situation with her own faithful trial.
[24:22] And the darkness so thick that there is no light and so thick that it can be felt. Fear not. Because I am with thee. The world is full and the church is full of great eloquent professional counsellors who will say, don't be afraid.

But God is going beyond that. God is showing reasons why his own people going through those tragedies should not be afraid.
Because I will be with thee. And that is the great basis of her courage. The great word which God offers for her consolation.
I shall be with thee. I will be with thee, says at one level. I shall be with thee to protect thee. Thou shalt not be burned.
Neither shall the flame consume thee. I am going to be with thee with such effect that thou shalt be protected in and from the suffering.
[25:36] Now you pause and ponder the implications of that. It doesn't mean immunity from suffering.

Nor does it mean God promising to anaesthetise his children so that they do not feel the pain and the bewilderment and the sheer incomprehensibility of it all.
Because not only do God's people suffer, but God's people in their suffering are often bewildered and tormented. And we saw in that chapter from Job Not only that that man was in a very difficult situation objectively, as far as his circumstances were concerned, but he was feeling it.

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And his soul was sore vexed. And that man was finding it very difficult to cope. In the marvelous way, that is one of God's greatest words of comfort when God tells us that real and authentic Christians can sometimes find it very, very, very difficult to cope.
And God's presence doesn't mean that we shall simply sail gladly and joyfully through all those difficulties. We can be in them and be terribly overborne and terribly distressed.
[27:10] But God is still there protectively so that we are not burned, we are not consumed, we are not destroyed, this great presence of the perseverance of our faith, and the perseverance of our discipleship.

Then maybe that is the only promise. There is no promise of immunity from suffering. There is no promise that we shall not feel, and feel acutely the pain.
There is no promise that our lives will be spared. But there is always the great promise that nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, O Lord.
It is that faith, that relation to God, that is the great thing whose survival is assured to us in this great promise.
Thou shalt not be burned. Thy faith, thy grace, thy discipleship is not going to be destroyed. Thy faith, thy grace, thy discipleship is not going to be destroyed.
[28:40] Or again it means this, God's presence with us in order to strengthen us. It's an extraordinary thing.

The way that very, very ordinary people are able to endure tragedy. If we had speculated before the event on how they would have stood up to that kind of strain, they would have said they could never stand it.
There is a great word in the 40th chapter of the same prophecy. But the prophet tells us that in situations where even the young men faint and fall and become weary, that is the great warrior class of Israel, they couldn't stand the strain.
They couldn't stand the strain. But those that wait on the Lord, they shall renew their strength. They shall mount up on wings as eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint.
The strength of patience, and the strength of contentment, and the strength beyond that, to make melody in the heart and to be thankful always and in all things.
[30:14] Now I offer it to you tonight only as a challenge. There's a mountain to climb and a peak to scale.

The great Everest in the way of our discipleship. So to live and so to believe that when we pass through the waters and through the rivers, our hearts are making melody to the Lord.
That surely is the greatest triumph of grace. And let none of us put the need for it too far from ourselves.
Tonight it is so easy for you and me to say, each day I rise I will bless thee. That you and I can remember days when that wasn't easy.
And you and I must tonight postulate, and we must foresee days when the words of that psalm will seem to us to embody the most difficult of all God's commandments.
[31:45] And our hearts will say, Lord, how today, how this each day that is today, can I bless thee in this darkness and bewilderment and sorrow and despair.

How often we have failed to live by that standard. And what an awesome challenge it is. And yet what a great vision and what a great possibility.
I can do all things in Christ's strength. One day in the waters, one day in the rivers, one day in the fires.
And when that day comes, will there be melody in our hearts.
Will we have the grace that the aged martyr Papias had in the early days of the post-apistolic church, as they bound him to the stake and asked, would he now deny his master?
[32:58] And he said, these eight years I have followed him, and he hath done me no wrong, and why should I deny him now?

And the whole terrible reality is that I stand tonight light years away from this kind of situation.
I am not in the waters, and I am not in the rivers, and I am not in the fires, and in many ways have never been. There is this as a solemn reality and possibility for us as the Lord's people.
A thing for which we have to be prepared. And the great possibility in it, that when that moment overtakes us, God's presence will make us strong.

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But then we go beyond that. It's not only that God says, I will be with you to protect you, and I will be with you to make you strong, and help you to triumph and be more than a conqueror in that kind of situation.
[34:14] But God is saying too, I will be with you to take you through. You see how the language is? When they'll pass us through the waters, and through the rivers, and through the fire.

Somebody has said, commenting in Psalm 23, the valley of the shadow of death is not a cul-de-sac. There is a way in, but there is also a way out.
And the Lord never takes his church into that valley to leave them there, but to take them through. These are those who have come out of the great tribulation.
The great thing is not that they've been in the great tribulation, but they have come out. Or as it is in Zephaniah, I will bring the third part through the fire.
We make so much of God bringing the third part into the fire. But the great message of the prophet is not that God brings them into the fire, but God brings them through the fire.
[35:39] Now it may again be very, very remote from most of us, but there are tonight some of the Lord's people, and they cannot remember when they lasted a day without pain and without a shadow.

And look forward as they may. They cannot see any prospect of a day without pain and a day without a shadow.
It seems to stretch back behind them endlessly and to stretch forth before them endlessly. And they have tonight to try by faith to penetrate that tangible reality of pain and discomfort and a family tragedy and to see that God will bring them through and to get the great division of that possibility when they emerge out of the valley of the shadow of death and are able to sing again with the psalmist goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
Isn't it a great thing that God has promised one day to wipe away all the tears from our eyes? Let's not become sentimental and let's be absolutely realistic.
We don't spend all our days in tears. We don't spend all our days in the valley of the shadow of death. We don't spend all our days in these rivers and those fires because the prophet says, when they'll pass us through, we shouldn't be morbid and pretend that we never have anything but trouble.
[37:43] But each heart knows its own sorrow and each one's troubles are sufficient for himself. But God is promising, I will be with thee to protect and to strengthen and at last I will be with thee to bring thee through.

They shall be brought with gladness great and dimirth on every side into the palace of the king and there they shall abide. A great emergence out of the clouds into the sunshine of God's presence and of God's glory presenting us faultless in the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.
Let me ask one more question. We see that God is giving us this prospect, this possibility of suffering. God is giving us the advice, the directive not to fear because he himself is present with us.
And then the question, why is God doing it? Why is God going to be with us? Why is God going to protect us and going to strengthen us and going to deliver us?
Why is God going to do all of these things? Well, surely to begin with for this reason, thou art mine. And sometimes you've got to stand and look at yourselves.
[39:14] Sometimes even pinch yourselves and remind yourselves of that reality. Thou art mine. I have called thee by thy name.

The individuality, the particularness of God's affection and God's love and God's knowledge. It's not simply that this great group is God's but that I am God's and you are God's.
We belong to God. God stands over us and says, that man is mine. And that man knows his own sin. That man knows his own ungodliness.
And look at that man's life. That man doesn't look like a child of God because that man has got terrible trouble in his life. And that man's life seems to lack dignity. It has no patent nobility.
And yet God is saying, that man is mine. We are the children of God. And as a father pities the children, so the Lord pities those that fear.
[40:20] A mother may forget. And I will not forget. But I will not forget. But I will not forget. Thy walls are always before me. And thy name is engraven on the palm of my hand.

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That is the reality. Thou art mine. And because of that I am with thee. I am with thee. It goes beyond that. I have redeemed thee.
In verse 1. Not only are we gods. In that great propositional sense. But we are gods by virtue of this great act of redemption.
I have paid a price for thee. I have given the blood of my son. Not corruptible things are silver and gold, but the precious blood of Christ.
And God is not going to allow that water or those rivers or that fire to destroy you for whom he has paid such a colossal price. I have redeemed thee.
[41:29] And I am not going to let the river have thee. And I am not going to let the fire have thee. Because I have paid this great price. And furthermore, the great word of verse 3.

I am the Lord thy God. I am thy Saviour. I give each of you for thy ransom. God is committed to us. He will be with us because we are his.
He will be with us because he paid such a tremendous price for us. He will be with us because he is committed to us. I am thine in commitment. The pledge of all that he himself is.
And then finally, the greater word still of verse 7. I have created him for my glory. I have formed him. Yea, I have laid him for my glory. Why will the water and the river not wash me away? Why will the fire, why will it not destroy me?
[42:38] Why will it not destroy me? Because of God's glory. It was a terrible word they were saying about God's people. That God took them out into the wilderness and then God lost them.

That was the charge. Or could have been the charge. And bearing in mind tonight that our position as Christians is open constantly to even to angelic scrutiny.
Which things the angels desire into. To look into. Let us see the glory of that. Suppose tonight God lost you.
You can't just imagine the message going round heaven and going round hell. God's lost one. God's lost one. And surely not at last is the great guarantee. I had pity for my name's sake. I had pity for my name's sake.
[43:51] And despite all the provocation and all the backsliding and all the infidelity and all the idolatry and all the carnality of that man.

My name was involved in the salvation of that man. And I had pity for my name. For my name. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from me.
For thine is the kingdom of the power. And the glory forever. How magnificent it is.
And at one level. How transfigured a triviality. That our salvation and God's glory should be entwined inextricably the one in the other.
I will be with thee. Because you're mine. I will be with you because I've paid a great price for you.
[45:03] I will be with you because I'm committed to you. And I will be with you because my glory is involved in your perseverance and in your salvation.

The last word to say to ourselves on that surely is this. Let us get some sense of our own dignity. Let's not see ourselves as the world sees us. Let's not see ourselves as we often do simply as inconsistent and worthless sinners.
Let's see ourselves as people so precious to God that he says to us, I will be with thee. I will be with thee. Wherever and at whatever cost.
I will be with thee. Indeed, says the psalmist, I am poor and needy. Yet the Lord thinks upon me.
[46:10] And tonight whoever we are, if we are one of the Lord's people, that is the most magnificent reality in the whole universe.

It's amazing that God has never been without being in love with us. There never was when God was not.
There never was when God was without loving us. God has never for a moment forgotten us. Or lost sight of our need.
Or compassion for our predicament. Let us pray. O Lord, we thank thee for the truth and power of thy word in itself.
And we pray thee to take that word in all its unexpounded and uncomplicated grandeur. And to apply tonight to our souls for our salvation and growth.
[47:23] Lord, we are precious in thy sight. May we know something of the consolation and something of the constraint of that.

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May we know, Lord, that we have no sovereignty over our own lives. Because we are thine. And may we know always the glory of thy commitment to us.
That thou art ever near us to hold and sustain us. Be with us as we part. Forgive our sin for our Savior's sake. Amen.

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