

“Saved by His Suffering and His Presence”

**Isaiah 63:7-9** <sup>7</sup> I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us-- yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. <sup>8</sup> He said, "Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me"; and so he became their Savior. <sup>9</sup> In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (NIV)  
Or:

**Isaiah 63:8-9** and he became their savior <sup>9</sup> in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (NRSV)

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You may remember the golden calf incident from the story of the Exodus. Briefly, Moses went up the mountain to meet God and receive the Ten Commandments. He was up there forty days which to the people was a little too long. They thought he had died which posed a problem; if Moses was gone then they had no connection to Yahweh. Yahweh was the name God revealed to Moses. It's a form of the verb to be and it means "I am who I am and I will be who I will be". To solve this problem they had Aaron make a couple of idols, two golden calves, and, as the Bible says, "They rose up to play." In the wake of that God told Moses to take the people and go on to the land. God was no longer going to go with them fearing he'd only wind up destroying them. But, Moses had a way of changing God's mind about things and here's what he said to God:

"Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' <sup>13</sup> If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people." <sup>14</sup> The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." <sup>15</sup> Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. <sup>16</sup> How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" <sup>17</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name" (Ex. 33:12-17)."

That last question Moses asks is very important...VERY IMPORTANT!  
"What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" God's presence with his people is what distinguishes his people from all other peoples. When the ancient Israelites came up from Egypt God was evidently present with them by a whirlwind cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night.

In our passage from Isaiah Yahweh's presence with his people during the Exodus is what Isaiah was referring to. God identified with the Israelites in the distress of their slavery, indeed felt their suffering. Then he became personally

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involved in delivering them from slavery and made his presence evident among them by the visible signs of the whirlwind and pillar of fire. His presence with them and his presence alone made them distinct among all peoples. Nothing about the Israelites in themselves made them distinct. It was only the presence of their God Yahweh who had entered into their suffering and delivered them.

The Exodus story foreshadows what Yahweh has done for all peoples in, through and as Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit sent by the Father because of his/their love for us. God has personally entered into our human situation and lived and suffered as we do. Jesus' last twelve hours before dying and his actual death were worse than anything any of us want to imagine. God the Father raised Jesus from the dead as we will be and Jesus ascended into heaven to return one day. Until then God, the Holy Spirit, remains personally present with and in us pointing us to Christ Jesus, bonding us to Christ Jesus to share in his relationship with God the Father, and He begins the work of deliverance or salvation in us that Jesus authored in his life with us.

Jesus personally experienced what we experience in our doubts, our fears, our griefs, our regrets, our joys, our laughter. He knew in the form of a constant temptation what we know by instinct which is to turn against the will of God. He understands personally the inescapability of humanity's futile enslavement to be self-serving in very evil ways and he has freed us from it and the Holy Spirit is at work in us now to make that freedom a reality. His personally addressing us each so that we know the steadfast love and faithfulness of God makes us able to fulfill the one commandment that Jesus gave his followers, that we love one another as he has loved us each through laying down our lives for one another. The personal knowledge of God's love and faithfulness, of his presence in our lives, in his suffering with us through life, in the very least...the very least...has given us the ability to choose to set pride and self-centeredness aside to love and to be faithful to one another and in this we love and are faithful to the Triune God of Grace whom Moses knew as Yahweh.

God's presence with us is what makes us distinct from all other forms of human community. But this is a hard thing for us to wrap our heads around; for we who have grown up in a culture that tends to want us to believe that God does not get personally involved in his creation. Rather, God just sits aloofly out there somewhere. Our modern minds say that the only way God can be involved in his creation is by working miracles and so we hope and pray and pray and hope for miracles or we stand aloofly aside saying that miracles never happen and those who think they've experienced one have had a mental break. The very idea that God would get involved in his creation to deliver it from sin and death by personally addressing each person with his presence which somehow leaves us knowing the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, that very idea is preposterous to the Modern/post-Modern mind.

Yet, we Christians claim that God is with us just like he was with the ancient Israelites when he delivered them from slavery in Egypt. The skeptic asks, "Where is the whirlwind? Where is the pillar of fire?" Our only answer can be is that "Our whirlwind, our pillar of fire, the physical evidence of God's presence with us is the way we love one another." When God is present people

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love one another unconditionally just as God has loved us. God enters into our lives, especially into our suffering, in such away as to leave us knowing that he is steadfastly loving and faithful. His presence takes on hands and feet as we in response together struggle to die to self, together struggle to be obedient scripture, together struggle to support one another, together struggle to build one another up in Christ, together struggle to speak the truth in love, and mostly together struggle to be people who forgive. In all of this the reality of the mystery of God's saving presence with and in us becomes authentically visible for the world to see. God is making us, his people, to be a different kind of people, people who reflect the new humanity born in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the new humanity of the new creation that is soon to come. Be that people. Amen.