

Rescue from the Darkness of Captivity

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Jim Squire, software engineer and long-time Crossings student, asks hard questions and gets profound answers – both scary and, ultimately, gracefully freeing. In this essay Jim “crosses” himself using the six-step matrix of a Crossings semester-long seminar he attended. It was centered in the prophet Isaiah’s Suffering Servant poem, 42: 1-9. Jim uses the “code language” of Isaiah 42 for both the increasingly grim diagnosis of his problem—Babylon, Blindness, Blame—and then for the increasingly Good-News generous prognosis offered to him in the Suffering Servant—Birth Pangs, Beholder, Brilliance.

CROSSINGS FROM ISAIAH 42:1-9
MY RESCUE FROM THE DARKNESS OF CAPTIVITY
by James Squire

Introduction: Garden of Eden revisited

So it came to pass that I cast aside my security blanket, and opened my eyes to the world of beliefs. It was going to be

somewhat like choosing from a menu: I get to decide what tastes good. I decide what fits. God certainly had a leg up over humanism, since he had been a "part" of my life for so long. But others were watching so I felt I had to make my choice as objective as possible.

But something happened on the road to the choice: God sent one of his faithful messengers to inform me that a certain part of that choice was not free at all. I was willing to accept that I could not reach God's level on my own. But I insisted that if I didn't choose God on my own, the choice didn't mean much. "Oh," he said, "So you're still not free. You must choose on your own." I did not feel like this was a fair fight. I expressed my frustration by saying, "This kind of God scares me." Interestingly enough, I was not scolded for this attitude. Instead, God's servant invoked Martin Luther to console me: "Whenever God is encountered apart from Christ, scared is the proper response." Then since the same arguments had already been made 400 years ago, he pointed me to the Augsburg Confession so that the discussion on Free Will could continue. As I examined this document, the topic slowly changed from Free Will to Babylon.

Babylon is the place of captivity for the Jews at the time of Second Isaiah (chapter 40 and beyond). After Israel was defeated as a nation, its people were taken against their will from their "devastated land" (49:19) to a hostile environment where they "fear continually all the day because of the fury of the oppressor." (51:13)

But this can be applied metaphorically as well. Babylon is not so much a geographical place, as it is a description of my relationship in and with the world. And that relationship is one of captivity to someone or something.

Diagnosis Level 1: Babylon

The first order of business is to agree on the nature of my Babylon. I begin by declaring my total innocence and demanding justice. I accuse the very Reformers who founded the denomination I belong to of oppressing me on the subject of Free Will. Their authority as Lutheran forebears makes this feel very much like captivity. If they didn't hold such authority for me, I could just ignore them. This is my view of Babylon.

As you might expect, they have a different view of my Babylon. In their Augsburg Confession, they point me in a different direction: "Our churches teach that man's will has some liberty for the attainment of civil righteousness and for the choice of things subject to reason. However, it does not have the power, without the Holy Spirit, to attain the righteousness of God—that is, spiritual righteousness—because natural man does not perceive the gifts of the Spirit of God; but this righteousness is wrought in the heart when the Holy Spirit is received through the Word." In other words, the Holy Spirit walks right in, uninvited, and says, "zap!!!" This, I must protest against. How can it be true that I don't even have the capacity to desire fellowship with God? I don't want the Holy Spirit invading my heart and placing a desire for God inside me, against my will. I want the right to desire God myself. Otherwise I feel like a robot. People have the right, I think, to decide whether they want God in their life. Now God doesn't have to answer such desire. But such desire should come from within the person involved or it seems to lose its meaning.

Yet, the more I think about this, the more I realize I don't do the things which I can plainly see make a lot of sense. Things like taking care of myself, and my apartment, for example. Even though they make sense, I resist doing them. Why? Because I

resist anything that means taking advice from someone else, and putting aside the way I want to do things. I hate the idea of following their advice, because if I follow it, I might lose control over my life. If I find, in my own way, a reason for self-sacrifice, that's different. But I don't like other people, like my Mom especially, telling me what is good for me. It occurs to me now that I felt she was invading my turf. I was afraid of giving up control, and as a result, I perceive now that I lost out on a lot of good wisdom. I am still like this to a certain extent, only now my Mom is replaced by good friends – peers. People who are harder to brush off. Harder to frustrate. I want them as friends, but I still don't want to sell out my control. Could it be that all this time, I've been saying the same thing to God?

Now that my eyes have been opened, I can see my Babylon for what it truly is. I can see gadgets that entertain me, such as the TV and the VCR. I can see the mess that develops after weeks when papers are just left lying anywhere instead of being put away. I can see how the TV pacifies me, as if the TV could really command me to be a couch potato for hours on end. But I also feel the absence of justice, and I long for its return. Interestingly enough, I long for that which I used to have under Mom. Things got taken care of. I got taken care of. There was something about those days that now looks good to me.

But today I live in Babylon, where nobody and nothing ever gets taken care of, unless someone holds a gun to my head, figuratively speaking. That is what Babylon is for me, and I do feel held captive by it.

Meanwhile, I can just hear the Augsburg Confessors whispering to each other behind my back, "Hey, was that the Holy Spirit that just walked by?" How silly it seems now to claim the right to desire fellowship with God! That was just a smokescreen on

my part. I have not the slightest interest in exercising that right, even if I did have it.

Diagnosis Level 2: Blindness

To take matters one step deeper, where do I turn for help from Babylon's injustice? Now I also see something else I didn't see before: My Babylon is not different from the world "out there." There is one fundamental similarity between the two, and I have already expressed it in my claim of Free Will: Freedom of Choice! We live in a choice-oriented society. I have been taught, apparently by that same society (I don't think Mom was big on Freedom of Choice), to value the freedom to choose, as if I am "the boss." So, like the Jews in captivity during Second Isaiah's time, when I seek help from Babylon's injustice, I seek help from Babylon! In Babylon, they worshipped Marduk. I worship "free choice!" To value "free choice" is fine, but when one worships "free choice" one has no need for things like "responsibility." And obviously if I see God simply as a choice, I certainly don't see him as rescuer. For me rescue comes via "free choice." Second Isaiah calls that "blindness."

The Augsburg Confessors put it this way, "... through the fall of our first parents man is so corrupted that in divine things, concerning our conversion and salvation, he is by nature blind and does not and cannot understand the Word of God when it is preached, but considers it foolishness; nor does he of himself approach God, but he is and remains an enemy of God until by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the Word which is preached and heard, purely out of grace and without any cooperation on his part, he is converted, becomes a believer, is regenerated and renewed." Enemy of God? Well, if I think of him as merely a choice, yes I am an enemy of God.

Diagnosis Level 3: Blame

For enemies of God, Babylonian injustice becomes justice. Once more, my feeble claim of Free Will is a symptom of what I have trouble seeing: How Babylonian injustice is also God's justice toward me. And why would I ever think of God as my rescuer, if I can't see him as my punisher?

The Augsburg Confessors have the answer: "If a person will not hear preaching or read the Word of God, but despises the Word and the community of God, dies in this condition, and perishes in his sins, he can neither comfort himself with God's eternal election nor obtain his mercy. For Christ, in whom we are elected, offers his grace to all men in the Word and the holy sacraments, earnestly wills that we hear it, and has promised that, where two or three are gathered together in his name and occupy themselves with his holy Word, he is in the midst of them. But if such a person despises the instruments of the Holy Spirit and will not hear, no injustice is done him if the Holy Spirit does not illuminate him but lets him remain in the darkness of his unbelief and be lost, as it is written, 'How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!'" A rude awakening, indeed.

What's scary here is I still feel like I am a good person. It's hard to know exactly where I went wrong. And yet, I am blind to God. Because I am blind to my lost state, and my total need for God (I said I desired God, I never said I needed him), I remain where I am, and the Holy Spirit, if he happens to wander by, finds me asleep. Meanwhile, God knows that deep down inside, I want to be in control. I mean in control of what is right and wrong. Good and Evil. Sound familiar? I don't often think of it in those terms. They seem weird even now as I am writing them. It's because they are scary words. But they seem to be true.

All of what I have discerned in the depths of my soul to this point tells me they are true. And so, without ever realizing it, it was I who took the bite of the apple in the garden of Eden, and it was I who then turned and hid. God knew where I was all along, and though I wasn't listening, he was saying to me, "Jim, what is this that you have done? ... Because you have ... eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

(Recently – here in 2003 – I discovered an especially vivid way in which the final diagnosis manifests itself from Psalm 85 verse 4 (NRSV): 'Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us.' In this case I find the RSV much more meaningfully translated for my situation: 'Restore us then, O God our Saviour; let your anger depart from us.' The most concrete way in which 'Babylonian injustice becomes justice' in the life of a condemned sinner is when, as the Psalmist suggests, God's 'anger' actually takes up residence in us and we feed off it. God being angry with us can actually become a way of life, as depressing as that may sound. And there is no way for us to get rid of that 'anger' ourselves, nor – in keeping with the theme of this paper – are we even inclined to. That is truly Bad News!)

I have been blamed, and now the sentencing begins. I watch from afar, in secret, as Jesus is nailed to the cross. Interesting. As they drive the nails in, I feel more and more of my absolute control slipping away. As I see those nails going in, situation after situation in my life is held up for my benefit, then individual judgment is exacted. It is hard to watch this scene

unfold. I want to plead for a second chance, but God knows I am evading the issue. Like the Jews of Second Isaiah's time, what I plead for is a new Nebuchadnezzar or a new Cyrus. A new instance of the same old rescuer. Ultimately that rescuer is Marduk, and God is rendered irrelevant in my life, even as I seem to be reaching out to him. That is the ultimate kiss-off, and fittingly that very kiss-off becomes my ultimate punishment: (42:24-25) "Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler, and Israel to the robbers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned? So he poured upon him the heat of his anger and the might of battle."

Prognosis Level 1: Birth Pangs

Look again. See the suffering servant spoken of in Second Isaiah hanging on the cross. He is in a darkness worse than mine, for he has done nothing wrong. Moreover, he is going where I cannot go: to the grave, then even further, to Hell. Notice the silence with which he suffers the nails which are my Sin, suffering the punishment that is rightly mine. In him, God's final diagnosis ("you blind", "you deaf") is being silenced. And then when he emerges from the tomb, this provides God's seal of approval on this Suffering Servant and what he has done for us. In effect, God says, "Sounds Good to me!" All of which means that those nails going into Jesus' body are Good News for me, not Bad News.

(2003 again – Notice how God's anger has truly left us all and taken up residence in the Suffering Servant. His darkness may be worse than mine – because he has done nothing wrong – but it surely engulfs mine. God's anger toward sin has been lodged squarely within the bosom of the Suffering Servant, and strangely enough, that is in line with his very purpose on this earth! But what threatened to swallow us in hell is crushed by him there, and he returns to bestow on us God's love in our

salvation. By his suffering sacrifice, there is no longer any room in our 'Inn' for God's anger!)

To some it might seem cheap, and certainly not just what he has done for me. But to me it is entirely just. God is the one who sees through my Free Will facade. He is the one who turns my Babylonian injustice into justice. And ask the Suffering Servant himself if the price of my salvation was cheap! Isaiah 42:14 – “For a long time I have held my peace; I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in travail, I will gasp and pant.” And indeed, he did cry out on the cross: “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” No, the price was not cheap, not in the least. Who am I to argue? And in my position, why would I want to?

Prognosis Level 2: Beholder

Isaiah 42:1 – “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations.” Isaiah 52:13 – “Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.” Why does the writer's soul delight, and why will this servant be exalted and lifted up? Behold what the servant will do (fulfilled in the person of Jesus)! Isaiah 53:4-5 – “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.” This is what was talked about in Prognosis level 1, but the writer's plea is heard in the word “Behold!” It sounds like a command! Actually, it is called an imperative, which means an instruction pertaining to the receipt of something by the other person. Normally, we are used to “law” imperatives which are of the form, “IF you do this, THEN I'll give you that.” The

imperative "Behold" doesn't seem to fit that pattern, not in the way the writer uses it. No! What the writer is saying is "Behold the suffering servant, and by doing so, receive the justice that he has brought for you." Isaiah 42:2-4 – "He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law." The unmistakable pattern of this "Behold" imperative is that of a "Gospel" imperative, which is of the form, "Because I did this for you, you are then able to do the following." Note the reverse orientation here. The law imperative sets us up for failure, especially when the imperative comes from God. The Gospel imperative is more like a gift to us in which success is already guaranteed and fulfilled and failure is not even part of the equation.

Therefore, I am rescued from my Blindness by Beholding the suffering servant who turned out to be Jesus (thank God!). I get justice (undeserved, but given nonetheless) by feasting my eyes on his suffering servanthood and gazing at what he did for me. I am, along with the writer of Isaiah 52:14-15 – "...astonished at him – his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men – so shall he startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they shall see, and that which they have not heard they shall understand." Oh, what beauty to Behold!

Prognosis Level 3: Brilliance

So, what of Free Will? What of Babylon? How does it look to me now? It still looks the same, and sometimes I look the same in it. But look again! I have been made anew. I have not been

rescued from a place called Babylon, but rather I have been rescued from the captivity of Babylon. For now I inhabit Babylon, looking like the Suffering Servant – mainly because I now fix my gaze upon him. My beholding of the Suffering Servant as opposed to Marduk has to have some kind of effect on those who “run the asylum.” The reason is that as a Beholder, I no longer seek Babylon’s way of escaping captivity. In fact, I may sometimes choose not to escape at all, all the better to shine the Light of the Suffering Servant on those who sit in darkness. Looking good no longer means looking glamorous, like Marduk. Now it means looking like the Suffering Servant, and it means gentle treatment for the bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks, rather than tooting my own horn. And I have Second Isaiah’s (and God’s word for it: (42:16)) “And I will lead the blind in a way that they know not, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them.” I am so happy to be associated with such an agenda; it’s exactly what those who sit in darkness need.

Postscript: The Suffering Servant who found me “sitting in darkness”

Some might get the idea that a Suffering Servant would not have confronted me the way I was confronted at the beginning of this paper. On the surface, it would seem that more gentle handling would be called for. That would’ve been too bad in this case. Happily, I was confronted. What makes it fit with the Suffering Servant model is that I was confronted “right in the place where I was at.” He listened to me, heard my own description of where I was coming from, and pointed out to me my unfreedom. It seemed a bit blunt at the time, but then again, he wasn’t operating alone. The Holy Spirit was active in my life, so that I wasn’t turned off by his “assault,” but rather examined

myself to check out what he was saying. Lucky for me I did, because I discovered the assault was not against me, but Marduk. Jesus reached out to Peter, hoping to save him, by saying, "Get behind me, Satan." (Mark 8:33) Something similar took place here. Because of this servant (and others), I have been able to Behold my true rescuer from Babylonian captivity, and am now able to play the same role myself with those around me. All praise be to God that this one risked my anger enough to save me from the darkness. What a great freedom we have shared ever since.