

"A SURPRISING DELIVERANCE"

If you and I were given the ability to write the script that our lives would follow, there would surely be some areas where we would want to tell the story differently than how it has actually unfolded. None of us would choose to write suffering or sorrow or disappointment into our lives. Even as Christians, we would not script the story of how we are being conformed to the image of Christ in exactly the same way that God has chosen to do so. In fact, there are times when we have a difficult time trying to understand just what it is that the Lord is doing in our lives, times when we wonder why God has chosen to work in our lives through the particular circumstances that he has ordained for us. This was the experience of the people of Israel in Isaiah's day. As they listened to Isaiah telling them first about their impending fall to Babylon and then about the deliverance that would follow it, they would never have expected the Lord to work things out in the way that he did. They would have had a hard time understanding why God chose to work through those particular means and circumstances. This is what this passage is about. It teaches us that, while God does indeed save his people from the judgment that we have purchased for ourselves by our sin, he does so according to *his* plan, not ours. In this passage, we see how *the Lord displays his glory as the one true God by working out the salvation*

*of his people in a very surprising manner.* In this sermon, we will study this theme under three headings: (1) God's anoints a shepherd for his people; (2) God's ways are questioned by his people; and (3) God reveals the worldwide scope of his plan.

### **The Lord's Anointed Shepherd**

In the first part of our text, 44:24-45:8, the focus is upon the Lord's anointed shepherd, and he is not who you would expect. But before we get to that, we need to consider how this section begins: with God reminding us of who he is. He is the Redeemer of his people. He formed us from the womb. And his power is not limited to his dealings with us. He is also the maker of all things. He stretched out the heavens and spread out the earth. Because of this, there is no possibility that his purposes will be thwarted. On the contrary, he frustrates the plans of those who set themselves against him and those he has chosen to redeem. It is true that God was going to use Babylon to enact judgment upon unfaithful Israel, but he also made it clear that he would not allow Jerusalem to remain desolate forever. In Isaiah's words, the Lord "says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins' ...and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'" God

promises that he will bring Israel back from their exile and cause the temple, which the Babylonians had destroyed, to be rebuilt. This is a promise that is repeated at a number of places in the prophetic books. And as with all of God's promises, it is a promise that was fulfilled. Israel did return to the Promised Land, and the temple was rebuilt 70 years after it had been destroyed.

The thing that makes this particular promise of restoration so significant is what what is said in 44:28 and 45:1. In these verses, God names a name, the name Cyrus. This is a reference to Cyrus the Great, the king who ruled over the Medo-Persian empire, the empire that defeated the Babylonians. The thing that makes this reference to Cyrus so amazing is that Isaiah was writing these words about 150 years before Cyrus lived. This would be like us finding a document from the Civil War era that specifically named someone who would be an important world leader today. Now, as you might imagine, this prediction about Cyrus is met by a lot of skepticism among liberal Bible scholars. In fact, it is the reason why such scholars have developed a different theory about the authorship of the book of Isaiah. They divide the book into three sections and claim that the second and third sections were not written by Isaiah but by writers who lived during the time of Israel's exile and return. How else, they ask, would the author of this passage be able to identify Cyrus by name?

This is a good example of how our presuppositions impact the way we interpret the Bible. If we conclude from the outset that predictive prophecy is impossible, then we will look for some other way of explaining a passage like this. Those who are committed to a naturalistic way of viewing the world will not believe any of the Bible's supernatural elements. You may have heard of what has come to be known as the Jefferson Bible, which Thomas Jefferson produced by removing all of the supernatural and doctrinal elements from the four Gospels and preserving only Jesus' ethical teachings. Commenting on how easy it was for him to decide what to preserve, he said to a friend that those sections were "as easily distinguished as diamonds in a dunghill." Jefferson spoke of the Bible's supernatural elements in such a derogatory way because his presuppositions were naturalistic. But the Bible rebukes those who hold to a naturalistic perspective, declaring that the Lord rules over the world that he has made. As God says in verse 7, "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things." Those who refuse to believe the supernatural elements of the Bible should not try to create a non-supernatural version of the Christian religion. They should simply admit that they are not Christians.

We learn from the book of Ezra that it was Cyrus who issued the decree that the people of Israel should return to their land and rebuild the city of Jerusalem, including the temple. There is no disputing that fact. And if we believe what this passage says, Cyrus was acting as the Lord's instrument when he did this. God even goes so far as to refer to Cyrus as his "shepherd" and his "anointed." This is surprising, because these names are used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to God and his promised Messiah. Though Cyrus was a Gentile and an idolater, the Lord used him to deliver his people from their national bondage. He is referred to as the Lord's anointed because he served as a type of Christ, the one who sets his people free from spiritual bondage.

Before we move on to the next part of this passage, it is important to say something about the statement from verse 7 that I read a moment ago, where the Lord says, "I make well-being and create calamity." If you are following along in a King James Bible, that verse is translated "I make peace, and create evil." This does not mean that God is the author of evil. He is a righteous and holy God. He cannot do evil. Nevertheless, he rules over evil and calamity. Everything that takes place in this world -- including natural disasters, and diseases, and accidents, and even the wicked things that are done by morally responsible beings -- everything is under God's sovereign control. In the words of

commentator E.J. Young, “God has included evil in his plan, and has foreordained its existence; and yet He Himself is not evil nor is He its author.” [201]

### **Questioning God**

This brings us to the second part of our passage, 45:9-13, where the Lord responds to the questions that his people ask about how he is carrying out his purposes for them. Listen again to 45:9-10: “Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles’? Woe to him who says to a father, ‘What are you begetting?’ or to a woman, ‘With what are you in labor?’” These words seem to have been written in response to the questions that would be asked by the people of Israel when they learned that God was going to use a Gentile ruler to bring about their deliverance. It is not very hard for us to understand why this would not have been taken as the best of news by the Israelites. Of course, returning to the Promised Land and rebuilding the temple were certainly good things, but the fact that these things happened as a result of Cyrus’ decree meant that Israel was still under Gentile control. What about the promise that God had made to David, the promise that one of David’s

descendants would reign on his throne forever? Had God forgotten that promise? We have the advantage of hindsight, so we can answer that question in the negative. We know that God did not forget his promise. We know that he has fulfilled it in Jesus Christ, the true Son of David. But that was many years into the future for the Israelites who were alive at the time of the Babylonian exile. We can understand why they would have been troubled by what God was telling them.

There is a sense in which we can be tempted to respond in a similar way to the things that God is doing in our individual lives and in the life of his church. We look at the suffering that God has providentially ordained for us and we ask, 'Why is this necessary?' We look at the temptations that continue to plague us and we wonder, 'When will this end?' We look at the problems that we see in the church and we ask, 'If Christ is *building* his church, then why does it so often look like it is in a state of decay?' In one sense, it is understandable that such questions arise. It is hard for us to comprehend why God chooses to work out our salvation in the particular ways that he does. It is hard for us to see how all the things that take place in the church are part of the Lord's plan for making it into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Nevertheless, verses 9 and 10 tell us that we have no right to demand explanations from God. As you might have

noticed, the things that are said in these verses sound an awful lot like the things that God says to Job in the last part of that great book. These verses tell us that we need to learn to live with unresolved questions. That is what Job learned through his encounter with God. The book of Job does not end with Job saying, 'Oh, now I understand.' It ends with him placing his hand over his mouth, learning to be content with knowing that the Lord is God and that the secret things belong to him.

### **A Worldwide Plan**

This brings us to the third part of our passage, 45:14-25, where the emphasis is upon the worldwide scope of God's plan of salvation. This section begins with the Lord telling Israel that it should not be a great surprise for them to hear that he is going to use a Gentile to accomplish his saving purposes. After all, the Gentiles are included in those purposes. The Egyptians, the Cushites, the Sabeans, all of these and more will come to the covenant people and say, "Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him." The Lord will draw people to himself from every tribe, people, and language. He has been doing this since the day of Pentecost, and he will continue to do it until the day of Christ's return.

To the people of Israel living in exile, such an announcement would have sounded too good to be true. Not only will Israel be restored, but the Gentiles will be brought into the covenant community with them. In response to such news, the Israelites say, "Truly, you are a God who hides yourself." They are amazed to hear that God will not allow sin and judgment to be the final word for Israel. He will save them with everlasting salvation. And to top that off, he will also cause the Gentiles to come to them and admit that the Lord is the one true God.

In verses 18-19, God responds to Israel's amazement by pointing to two things: his work of creation and his word of promise. First, he says that when he created the world, he did not make it empty and void. He formed it to be inhabited. It was his purpose all along for his creation to be filled with multitudes of people. Why, then, should Israel be surprised that God intends to bring multitudes of these people, not just one tiny nation, into his kingdom?

Second, God points to the clarity and dependability of his word. He says, "I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, 'Seek me in vain.' I the LORD speak the truth; I declare what is right." It is true that Israel's sin resulted in their expulsion from the Promised Land. They had fallen under the curses of the Sinai covenant. However, this did not nullify

the unilateral promise that God made to Abraham. As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, “the law, which came 430 years [after God’s promise to Abraham], does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.” (Gal. 3:17) God’s saving purposes cannot be thwarted.

That being said, God is also careful to point out that this salvation can only be found in him. He says in verse 20 that the false gods in which the people of this world place their trust are worthless. Any god that is the product of the human imagination is powerless to save. That is a sobering thought. There are many people in this world whose beliefs about god are almost entirely based on their own personal preferences. Such people might be able to derive some degree of comfort from believing what they believe, but their imaginary gods have no power to save them.

At the same time, this passage also makes it clear that the people of this world are not without hope. God does not hide his truth from them. Through the preaching of the gospel he calls all people to repent and place their trust in him, saying “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” The gospel is freely offered to all the peoples of the earth. Jesus Christ is being preached as Lord all throughout the world. This is made clear in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, where he takes the words of verse 23 and

applies them to Christ, saying “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (2:9-10) In these verses Paul is equating Jesus with the one true God. And as verse 23 in our passage makes clear, everyone who wants to partake of the salvation that is found in Jesus has to make a break with the world and swear allegiance to Christ. To confess Jesus as Lord is to renounce all other gods.

This brings us to the last two verses of our passage, where the doctrine of justification is set forth. Verse 24 tells us that it is only in the Lord that a person can be seen as righteous. And verse 25 says that those who belong to the offspring of Israel will be justified. But who are the “offspring of Israel”? Well, the fact that this passage says that the Gentiles are included in God’s plan of salvation makes it clear that the offspring of Israel are not just ethnic Israelites. Instead, as Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians, “it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham... So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith... And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Gal. 3:7,9,29)

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In many ways, the deliverance that is described in these verses would have been very surprising to the Jews of Isaiah's day. God doesn't work out his purposes in the ways that we would expect him to. This is true on a grand scale and on an individual scale. You are not always going to be able to understand why God is doing what he is doing in your life. But if you belong to Christ, you can be certain that he has not called you to himself in vain.