

"TO CARRY OR TO BE CARRIED"

If you are at least a little bit older than me, and if you have been a Boston Red Sox fan all of your life, then you will probably remember something that I learned while recently watching Ken Burns' PBS documentary *Baseball*. In 1967, the Red Sox' star player was an outfielder named Carl Yastrzemski. He won the Triple Crown that year, the last player to have accomplished that feat. He was great all season long, but during the last two weeks of the regular season, he played what some have suggested were the best two weeks of baseball that have ever been played by anyone. The Red Sox were in a tight race with two other teams for the American League pennant, and it was Yastrzemski's play over those final two weeks that made the difference and got them into the World Series. It was as if he picked the team up and carried it on his own two shoulders.

The reason why this came to mind as I was preparing this sermon is because of Isaiah's repeated use of the verb "carry" in the first part of this passage. This word is used four times in the first four verses of chapter 46, and it occurs again in verse 7. And on top of that, the synonym "bear" or "borne" is used three times in verses 1-4. It is clear that Isaiah is using these two words to set a contrast between the Lord and the false gods that were worshipped by the

Babylonians. Babylon's idols were mere statues. They had to be carried. And Isaiah uses that fact to demonstrate that these false gods imposed an unbearable burden upon those who worshipped them. Then he proclaims that the Lord is the true and living God, the God who carries those who place their trust in him.

Isaiah has a lot to say about idolatry in this part of the book. And every time he talks about idolatry, he adds something new to his treatment of this theme. In the two chapters that we are studying today, the focus is upon the contrasting destinies of those who put their trust in gods of their own devising and those who put their trust in the Lord. *While idols end up being the downfall of those who rely upon them, the one true God is able to bring salvation to people who have no other hope.* This is the theme that we will be considering as we study these two chapters today.

Carried by God

In the first part of our passage (46:1-7), the focus is upon the contrast between the gods of Babylon and the God of Israel. The gods mentioned in verse 1, Bel and Nebo, were two of Babylon's most important gods. Some of Babylon's kings were named after them, such as Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar. In Babylonian religion, the most important event of the year took place on New Year's Day. On

that day, the statues of Bel and Nebo were taken out of their temples and paraded through the streets in a celebration of their greatness. This celebration forms the backdrop for what Isaiah has to say about Babylon's gods in verses 1-2. However, in Isaiah's picture of Bel and Nebo on parade, these gods are not exalted and revered. Instead, they bow down and stoop. They are carried around on carts by livestock. And they are too heavy for the weary animals to bear. They have no power to save.

This is a vivid picture of what idolatry does to people. When man worships a god of his own imagining, that god ends up imposing a crushing weight upon him. False gods place demands on those who put their hope in them. They demand attention, money, time, and devotion. But when people look to the things of this world for ultimate comfort, ultimate satisfaction, or ultimate security, they are leaning upon things that cannot support their weight. Sooner or later, their false gods will come crashing down, taking them with them.

This stands in sharp contrast to the true and living God. He is not a burden to those who place their trust in him. On the contrary, *he carries us*. And he does so from start to finish, from beginning to end. We see this in verses 3-4, where the Lord describes his people as those "who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray

hairs I will carry you.” Think about that for a moment. If your trust is in Jesus Christ, then God has been carrying you from before the day of your birth. And he will continue to carry you for as many days as you continue to live on this earth. If the darkness of the womb could not prevent him from carrying you, then neither can the infirmities and uncertainties that come with advancing age. The Lord has made you a new creation in Jesus Christ, and he will ensure that the work of salvation that he has begun in you is brought to its completion. Regardless of how you might feel at any given moment, your God will never let you go. As he did for the people of Israel at the time of the exodus, so also will he do for you: he will bear you on eagle’s wings. (Ex. 19:4)

God’s Righteousness Brought Near

In the second part of our passage (46:8-13), the emphasis is upon the certainty of the salvation that God will bring to his people. Surprisingly, though, this section begins with the Lord speaking to his people in a tone of rebuke. God says, “Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors.” Though the overall thrust of this section is one of reassurance, it begins and ends with the Lord calling attention to his people’s sin. When Isaiah first wrote these words, he was looking into the future and addressing the people of Israel in exile.

This is why he refers to them as “the remnant of the house of Israel” in verse 3.

The harsh tone of verses 8 and 12, paired with the things that God says about himself in the verses in between, suggests that the Israelites were having a hard time believing that God would keep his promise to bring them back to the Promised Land. God’s response to their unbelief shows us that there are times when it is necessary for God to rebuke his people in order to reassure them of his good purposes for them..

In verses 10-11, the Lord places an emphasis upon the absolute certainty of his decrees. It is because of passages like this that the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines the decrees of God as “his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.” (WSC 7) God is the author of all history. Everything that takes place in this world takes place because God has foreordained it to happen. He declares the end from the beginning, from ancient times things not yet done. His counsel stands. His purposes will be accomplished. They cannot be thwarted.

Some people are bothered by this doctrine. They feel that it leads to a fatalistic view of life. They worry that it absolves us of any responsibility for our actions. But the Bible does not teach either of those things. On the contrary, it makes it clear that people are held responsible for their actions. And the Bible

never suggests that God's people should have a fatalistic attitude about life. We need to remember that God's purpose in talking about his decrees in these verses is to comfort us. He wants us to know that we can have absolute confidence that what he has said will come to pass.

This brings us to verses 12-13, where we see God promising to bring righteousness to those who have no righteousness of their own. Look at how the people of Israel are addressed in verse 12. They are called "stubborn of heart." They are described as those "who are far from righteousness." These things are just as true of us as they were of them. We too are stubborn of heart. We are far from righteousness. None of us has any inherent righteousness before God. We stand in need of a righteousness that comes from outside of us.

This is precisely what God promises in verse 13. He says "I bring near *my* righteousness." This is what the doctrine of justification by faith alone is all about. It is about God's gift of an alien righteousness, a righteousness that is counted as ours on the basis of the righteousness of another, the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The righteousness that God brings near to his people is the righteousness of Christ. Those who have faith in Christ find acceptance with God not on the basis of their performance, but on the basis of Christ's performance on their behalf. Because of what Jesus accomplished in his life and

death, a great exchange takes place when we lay hold of him by faith: our sins are reckoned to him on the cross, and his righteousness is reckoned to us before God. The Bible puts it this way: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21) That is what God promises you if you put your trust entirely in Christ for your salvation. He promises to bring you the righteousness of God.

The gospel is God's promise to bring righteousness to a people who are far from righteousness. Even as Christians, we do not have any inherent righteousness, no righteousness of our own. Of course, this is not an excuse for immoral living. We are called to live righteous lives. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness." (Rom. 6:13) We are called to righteousness, but we have to rely upon Christ as our source of righteousness. The Puritan Walter Marshall expressed this well when he wrote that "believers should not act *for* life, but *from* life. They must act as those that are not procuring life by their works, but as such who have already received and derived life from Christ, and act from the power and virtue received from him." [*The Gospel-Mystery of Sanctification*, 172] In other

words, the believer's power to live a righteous life does not come from within, but from his union with Christ by faith. This is why the Lord refers to his people in verse 13 as "Israel my glory." God alone receives the glory for the work of salvation that he brings about in the lives of his people, because he is the one who does it, from beginning to end.

Proud Babylon Brought to Nothing

This brings us to the third part of our passage (ch. 47), where the Lord announces his judgment upon proud Babylon. This chapter is in the form of a dirge or a taunt-song, a song in which Babylon's downfall is foretold. But it is important for us to understand that this is not just about the destruction of the 6th century superpower known as Babylon. In the Bible, Babylon stands for the entirety of humanity as it stands in organized defiance of God. We see this in the book of Revelation, where all the kingdoms of this world are referred to as Babylon. The Babylon of the 6th century was only one manifestation of spiritual Babylon, an entity that will persist in its proud rebellion against God until the day of Christ's return.

Because of this, the things that are said about Babylon in this chapter apply to spiritual Babylon as well. To employ the names that were coined by Augustine

of Hippo, this judgment applies to everyone who belongs to the City of Man rather than the City of God. It is the judgment that awaits all who do not belong to Jesus Christ. As the Lord says in verse 3, "I will spare no one."

This chapter tells us a number of reasons why Babylon stands condemned. One of the first things that it tells us is that Babylon has a false sense of security. She says, "I shall be mistress forever." She thinks that she is the source of her power. World powers tend to think that their greatness is due to something inherent within them. They think that their power will last forever. But if they would only take a look back at history, they would see how very wrong they are. Even the greatest empires in the history of the world have eventually met their end. And this bears witness to the fact that a great and definitive end awaits all who belong to the City of Man.

Babylon is also rebuked because of the fact that she lives a life of self-indulgence. The Lord calls her a "lover of pleasures." This does not mean that pleasure is inherently evil. God created all the pleasures that this life can offer. But none of the pleasures of this world are to be made into man's chief and final end. As Augustine put it, Christians should use the good things of the earth as pilgrims who are not detained by them. [*The City of God*, 1.29] This is where Babylon goes wrong. She is detained by the things of this world, and she will

one day learn that the treasures she has amassed for herself in this world will not last.

The Lord also rebukes Babylon for its self-deification. Look at what Babylon says in verse 8: "I am, and there is no one besides me." These are the same words that the Lord has repeatedly spoken about himself in the previous chapters. Isaiah is telling us that Babylon sees itself as a god. This is also true of many of the people around us, even though they might be reluctant to put it as bluntly as Isaiah does. Nevertheless, the supreme authority in their lives is self. For all practical purposes, they see themselves as god.

Babylon is also rebuked for thinking that her wickedness will remain unexposed. She says, "No one sees me." This is a problem of immense proportions in the world in which we live. The internet and the smart phone have made it possible for people to view things in secret that only a few years ago could only be accessed by going to extremely seedy places. Do not let yourself be deceived into thinking that the things that you do in private will remain secret forever. The Lord sees everything, and a day is coming when it will all be exposed.

One other thing that is said about Babylon in this chapter is the fact that her religion is magical. She uses enchantments and sorceries to gain control. She

looks to the stars and the phases of the moon to gain knowledge. These things are still done in our culture. There are plenty of mediums and fortune-tellers, and daily horoscopes are even printed in the newspapers. But these are not the only ways this problem manifests itself in our world. C.S. Lewis once wrote an essay in which he pointed out the similarities between the attempt to control the world through the use of magic and the attempt to do so through the use of technology. His point was not that technology is inherently evil, but that our culture tends to view technology in a way that bears a striking similarity to the way people in other cultures have viewed magic. Think about the way our society talks about technology, especially in its advertisements. Think about the almost messianic adulation of Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple who died this week. Listen to this excerpt from one magazine article:

“There are several things that Steve Jobs isn’t. He isn’t, for one thing, democratic. He isn’t utopian... He is messianic, and his life stands as an illustration of the difference between the two objectives. He was never driven by a vision of a better world; he was driven by a vision of himself as a person whose decisions guide the world. He wanted to build a device that moved the

world forward, that would take people further. He wanted to build a reality that wasn't there." [Tom Junod, "Steve Jobs and the Portal to the Invisible" *Esquire* Jan, 2010]

Many people in our society are under the illusion that technology gives them control of the world. But they are just as wrong as the people of Babylon were about their sorcery and their astrology.

God's final word to Babylon is chilling. He says to her: "there is no one to save you." This is God's final word to everyone in this world who is not united to Jesus Christ by faith. In the end, you will either be crushed under the weight of your idols or you will be carried by the living God into an eternal inheritance in his kingdom. You cannot carry yourself there. Left to your own devices, you are far from righteousness. But if you profess faith in Christ, "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart... For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." (Rom. 10:8,10)

The contrasting destinies that are described in these two chapters are summed up in the hymn that we will sing at the close of today's service. For those who belong to Babylon, this is what the future holds:

*the day of grace is past and gone;
trembling they stand before the throne,
all unprepared to meet him.*

But for those who are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, this glorious future lies ahead:

*no gloomy fears their souls dismay;
his presence sheds eternal day
on those prepared to meet him.*