

I Am the Only God There Is!

Isaiah: Strength for the Weary

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Bible Text: Isaiah 45:22

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Heavenly Father, as we read the Scriptures together, send forth your Spirit that we might read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

Turn with me now, if you would, to the prophecy of Isaiah and you'll find this reading on page 607 in the Pew Bible. Isaiah 45 and we're going to read together the first seven verses and then pick up verse 22.

1 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: 2 I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. 4 For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, 6 that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. 7 I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

Then in verse 22,

22 Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.

Now may God add his blessing to the reading of his holy and infallible, inerrant word.

You'll notice in the first verse of chapter 45 and we're doing a little series of studies in the second half of the prophet Isaiah, chapters 40 through 66, and picking out some of the

great texts in this marvelous prophet, sometimes called the evangelical prophet, Gospel prophet, and today we have an assertion and you see it there in verse 22, "I am God, and there is no other."

Now, if you are making a trip to London sometime soon or maybe it's on your wish list, you should go to the British Museum and there in the British Museum is an artifact known as the Cyrus Cylinder. It goes back to 600 BC, it's 2,600 years old, the middle of the sixth century BC. And it's a cylinder, a clay cylinder. It's about the size of a wine bottle, something like that, a little thicker. And on it, it's broken in pieces but it's been put together for exhibition reasons, and on it in ancient Babylonian cuneiform is an inscription, an account, an historical account of Cyrus, the man who is mentioned here in the first verse of chapter 45. Cyrus was the first king of Persia who overthrew the kingdom of Babylon and destroyed the last king of Babylon, Nabonidus, in 539 BC. It's what is recorded in the opening verses of the book of Ezra that Cyrus issued a decree. Having conquered ancient Babylon, he issued a decree that those held in captivity in the Babylonian empire and in Babylon itself were allowed to go back home, not just Jews, there were others too but the Jews in particular. And this is part of biblical history, it's part of the book of Ezra and following it, the book of Nehemiah, and the consequences of the Jews going back to Jerusalem and rebuilding the temple and then some 80 years later, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and so on. God raised up this man, Cryus, King of Persia. His full title is the Great King, King of Persia, King of Anshan, King of Media, King of Babylon, King of Sumer and Akkad, and the four corners of the world.

He was a dictator. He had enlightened policies about letting people go home. That was perhaps more political than anything else. It was easier to control people if they were in their own environment and were allowed certain freedoms. And as the kingdom grew and the Persian kingdom was the biggest kingdom the world had ever seen; it was bigger than the Babylonian kingdom. This empire was the biggest empire the world had ever seen and in order to do that, as he expanded from the Mediterranean Sea to the River Indus over on the east, I'm back to front, so this side, the Indus River, it would have involved all kinds of...well, it would have involved all kinds of despotic things: wars, conquering peoples, killing and so on. I don't think you would have liked Cyrus. I don't think that you would have liked to have had to hang out with Cyrus the king, Cyrus the Great, as he was called.

History has looked favorably upon him because of what he did for the Jews, because of what he did in the records of biblical history, and sometimes that colors our impression of Cyrus the king but he was a brute. I had an argument with somebody yesterday, not here but in another city, in Greenville, and they see things differently there, and he was defending Cyrus and I was saying, "Actually, I don't think that you would have liked Cyrus. He did a wonderful thing, he did an extraordinary thing, God used him in the advancement of his kingdom, but I don't think that you'd have liked Cyrus the Great." So I was thinking as I was driving home yesterday from Greenville, that other city, would you vote for Cyrus? I know I'm setting the cat among the pigeons here but would you vote for Cyrus the Great? I think it's a legitimate question. Of course, they didn't vote for Cyrus the Great, he was a dictator. They had no vote. It wasn't a democratic system. They

simply yielded to his massive power. But would you vote for Cyrus the Great? Well, fortunately we don't have to answer that question but God did. That's the issue. God voted for Cyrus. God employed Cyrus. God said yes to this man, this brute of a man. I'm just saying, as they say.

Let's go back to the text. Put that in the back of your mind. Let's go back to the text for a minute. Isaiah is writing this, chapter 45 is a predictive prophecy. It's about an event that is 200 years in Isaiah's future. The birth of Cyrus is 150 years in Isaiah's future and the event that's being recorded here, the decree to let the Jews go back from Babylon to Jerusalem, is 200 years in Isaiah's future. Imagine that, that you were able to write an email suggesting what may take place 200 years from now and not just in vague general terms, but in specific detail that you could name the man in charge 200 years from now. Imagine that. I don't even know who's going to be in charge three weeks from now.

Isaiah, of course, has been involved with predictive prophecy from the very beginning. In chapter 7, he had predicted that a virgin will conceive and bear a child. In chapter 9, he had said that the initial ministry of Messiah would take place in Galilee. In chapter 35, he talks about the ministry of Messiah as restoring blindness and deafness and he's talking about Jesus. So predicting something 200 years in Isaiah's future and predicting something that's 700 years in Isaiah's future, it's nothing at all unless, of course, you don't believe in miracles or the supernatural. So some of you are in college and you're receiving religion classes of some description and you're encountering perhaps the skeptics and you were brought up in a sheltered environment of a homeschool perhaps and you weren't privy to the force and the zeal and the enthusiasm with which unbelievers will try to destroy Scripture.

I think it was David Hume in the 19th century, the Scottish skeptic, who said that miracles are violations of natural law and natural laws are immutable and impossible to violate and therefore miracles are impossible and it was a perfect piece of logic. It was a perfect piece of logic except if you bring into the equation God. It was a piece of logic that pre-assumed the non-existence of God and the supernatural. Of course, he was saying this in the wake of the Enlightenment and we are much further down than David Hume in the 19th century, we are in post-modernity. And as C. S. Lewis so wonderfully put it, "When you put God into the equation, everything changes." When you put the sovereign, omnipotent, creating God into the equation, what is the problem with predictive prophecy? Nothing at all. Can God predict the future? Of course. And since we believe in a Bible that is inspired, breathed out by God and profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction and instruction in the way of righteousness, our Bible is full of predictive prophecy. When you take the Bible into your hands, you have something that is supernatural. You don't believe in miracles? Hold the Bible in your hand, you've got a miracle right there.

A little side bar, if I may. What a thing of wonder the Bible is. Do not take it for granted. Hold it. Treasure it. Read it. Love it. Learn it. Hide it within your hearts. What a thing of wonder the Bible is.

How can a pagan king like Cyrus the Great be Judah's deliverer 200 years from Isaiah? Well, it's a little bit more difficult than that. Go back to the final verse of chapter 44, "who says of Cyrus," this is verse 28 of chapter 44, "who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd,'" a word that's used in the Old Testament for Davidic kings, how can Cyrus the Great, a pagan, and by the way, the Cyrus Cylinder doesn't say anything about the God of Israel. When we read the account in the Bible, when we read the account, for example, in the opening verses of Ezra, we read that Cyrus the king did this by God's authority and power but when Cyrus wrote the account himself in the Cyrus Cylinder, he gave all the glory to the Babylonian King Marduk.

How can God use a pagan king like Cyrus to advance his glory? It's an interesting question, isn't it? It's a very serious question. It's a very real question. Let me suggest that it's even more than this. Look at verse 1 of chapter 45, "Thus says the LORD to his anointed," anointed, "to Cyrus." Now, the word "anointed" in Hebrew is "messiah." Well, let me up the ante a little bit: if you translate the Hebrew into Greek like in New Testament days, the Old Testament wasn't read in Hebrew, it was read in Greek in a translation, in a Greek translation, the word in Greek is "christos." Now, that raises alarm bells, doesn't it? Christ. Cyrus. Cyrus, the christ, the christ figure. That raises the ante. That's the issue, how can God do that? What was God thinking about?

Well, let me suggest three things this morning. First of all as we look at this passage together, verses 1 to 7, the first thing I want to say is God is sovereign and he may use, he may employ, whomever he wishes to advance his kingdom and his purpose. God is sovereign and he may use whomever he wishes to advance his kingdom and his purpose. Now, look at what Cyrus will do, read the opening verses: whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations; to loose the belts of kings; to open doors that gates may not be closed; to level exalted places; to break in pieces doors of bronze, cut through bars of iron. There is nothing and no one that can be an obstacle to Cyrus the Great. He will mow them all down and take their treasures. Verse 3, "I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places." This is what Cyrus did, he built up an empire and he did it by overthrowing kings and authorities and looting their treasures. That's what he did. Then you notice at the end of verse 7, "I am the LORD, who does all these things." This is a prophecy about what Cyrus will do and God is saying, "He does this because I decree it. He did it because I let him do it. He did it because I was in control of it." And not just the good things, look at verse 7, "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity." So not just the good things about Cyrus like letting the Jews go back to Jerusalem but the calamity that followed in the wake of his tyrannical rule.

That's difficult, isn't it? Things happen on the world stage. You understand what this passage is saying, that things happen on the world stage, the rise and fall of kings and queens and emperors and presidents, at the say-so of God, at the behest of God. He is in control. That's what this passage is saying.

Well, let's back away a little. If God has a plan for the future, this is a plan for the future, this is a 200 year future plan, if God has a plan for the future, you can't complain about the present because the present is advancing to the future. It's heading to that future and if

that future is going to take place, it takes place through this present, through what's happening right now. If you don't like what God is doing now, it's because he hasn't finished yet. If God has plans for the future, no detail is too small in order to accomplish that future. Do you follow the reasoning? Think about what would it take to ensure that Cyrus would become the emperor of Persia 200 years in the future. What events would need to take place? What circumstances, what providences? Personal, corporate, familial, national, international, what detail needs to take place in order to ensure that future? All of the details is the answer. It would only take one detail to go astray and perhaps there wouldn't be a Cyrus. It would only have taken his grandmother to die and maybe there wouldn't have been a Cyrus. And you're asking why cancer? Why bereavement? Why the loss of someone I love? Why is my child not a believer? And I'm saying to you I don't have a specific answer to those questions but I do know this: God is in charge. God is in control. God is sovereign.

When Huldrych Zwingli at the time of the Reformation was writing a catechism on the doctrine of providence, he defined it this way, "All things are so done and disposed of by the providence of God that nothing, nothing takes place without his will or command." Nothing takes place without his will or command and he based that answer to what is providence on Jesus' observation in the Gospel of Matthew that not two sparrows fall to the ground without the will of his heavenly Father. Two sparrows. There was a turkey sight in the churchyard this morning. Did you see it? Well, those in the first service saw it and there are pictures to prove it. There was a turkey in the churchyard this morning and there was a black cat stalking this turkey in the churchyard this morning and that too, my dear friends, was by the decree of Almighty God.

God is sovereign and he may use whomever he likes to accomplish his purpose. The second thing I want us to see is this: that there is always a purpose. There is always a purpose even if we can't see it, even if we can't understand it. There is always a purpose. Now, what is God's purpose here? Let's look at the text again. Verse 3, "I will give you the treasures," this is speaking to Cyrus, "I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that," this is the purpose, "that you may know that it is I, the LORD." What is God's purpose that Cyrus would become a believer? That Cyrus would acknowledge God as Lord? Now, didn't I just say the point is that Cyrus didn't become a believer, didn't I say that God is in control? Well, yes, he is but we're going to go deep for a second so hold your breath for a second while we just go deep for a couple of minutes because we need to distinguish here between two wills of God. There is the will of God's events, what is sometimes called the decretive will of God, and that will is always done. That will is never frustrated. Things happen because God wills them to happen and he wills them to happen in the way that they happen and he wills them to happen before they happen. But then there's another will, he wills that you love one another and we break that will and we frustrate that will. It's called the will of God's command. There is the will of God's events and there is the will of God's command. There is the decretive will of God and there is the preceptive will of God and they are two different wills. One is never frustrated and one is always frustrated.

It was God's will of command that Cyrus become a believer and confess God, but he didn't confess him. In the Cyrus Cylinder he gave all the glory to Marduk, the Babylonian god. But there's another purpose here and look at verse 4. Yes, God had a preceptive will that Cyrus may come to acknowledge that the God of Israel is the only God there is. "For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen," what is God's ultimate will here? What is God's ultimate purpose here? To save the Jews who were in Babylon and to enable them to return that there would be a remnant according to the election of grace that would ensure that God's redemptive purposes would be fulfilled to ensure that Jesus would be born of the virgin Mary in a stall in a manger in Bethlehem. That's God's ultimate purpose, for the sake of Israel. God's ultimate purpose here is his church. "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

There's always a purpose. Why did God use this tyrant, this dictator with perhaps enlightened views on humanitarian principles? Well, the Shah of Iran when he was around, referred to the Cyrus Cylinder, of course there was political machinations in this statement, but he referred to the Cyrus Cylinder as the first declaration of human rights. Well, historians have quibbled with that but God always has a purpose.

Don't you wonder what God is up to sometimes? Thirty years ago and it was at least 30 years ago, I was speaking at a church, the church that I was a minister of in Belfast, and I was speaking to a women's meeting on an afternoon. It was a mid-week afternoon meeting, women's meeting and they had asked me to speak on the doctrine of providence and in my car there was a tape deck. Do you remember tape decks? There was a tape deck and I had some tapes by some preachers on providence and I had been listening to them for a couple of weeks just to get some ideas as to where this talk should go, and when I came out from the meeting, my car wasn't there. It had been stolen. And a couple of days later, it was a Sunday morning and I was walking down the aisle after the benediction, and there were two policeman at the door to greet me and they said, "Are you Reverend Thomas?" I said, "Yes." "Well, we found your car," and it was at a parking lot at the other side of the city, and too much information, but because of the circumstances in Belfast in the early 1980s of bombs and so on and the cars, the police did not open these cars. They didn't go anywhere near these stolen cars. It was known and therefore I had to open the car. They stood at a distance and I had to open this car door and I have to tell you, I held my breath as I did so. But what I remember vividly is when I opened the car door, the tape deck had gone. They had stolen it but they had left the tapes on providence. What was God up to? Well, teaching me a lesson about providence.

What was God up to in Cyrus? Of all people, God would Cyrus as a messianic figure, as a Christ-like figure, as a deliverer at a certain point in history? Well, God had a purpose in it and that purpose could only be seen 700 years later when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. And I think we can see that purpose now, though I venture to say Isaiah's initial hearers probably could not see it.

And I have a third point. What kind of God can do things like this? Predict prophecy 200 years into the future? Use a pagan king like Cyrus to advance his glory? What kind of God can do that? And I'm saying this God, this Bible God, this God that is spoken of in

Genesis, this God that is spoken of in the book of Revelation because there is only one God. And he says to Cyrus here, "I'm the only one. I am the only one." Look at verse 5, "I am the LORD, and there is no other." Look at verse 22, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other." He wants you to say, "You're the only one." You know, sometimes that's said when there's been a little bit of suspicion and a partner has been suspicious of the affections of the other, suspicious that there might be another person, and perhaps months of suspicion and lies have taken place and then there's that moment and he looks at her or she looks at him and they say, "You're the only one. You're the only one that has my heart. You're the only one who has my affections." And God is saying to Judah here and he's saying to you and he's saying to me, "I am the only one and I want you to say I'm the only one."

The problem, you see, we don't have time to look at it now but in chapter 46 you'll see a little bit of the problem. The problem is what Judah was actually doing at this time. I'm in chapter 46 and verses 6 and 7, "Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship!" Do you see? They were worshiping idols. They were making idols out of gold and silver and they were putting it on a little shelf and they were bowing down and worshiping them and you're saying, "I'm not very impressed with the idols of the Ancient Near East. I don't have little gold or silver idols that I place on a shelf and bow down and worship them." No, perhaps you don't, our idols are much more subtle than that. Our idols are whatever we give our affections to that usurp the place of God. Our idols are what we give total loyalty to and demand total loyalty and they take the place of God. Our idols are those things that we say, "I will obey you and you only regardless of everyone and everything else, including God." And God is saying to you and to me, "Cast those idols away because I'm the only one. I'm the only God there is." Verse 22, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! [Because] I am God, and there is no other."

There is a marvelous little description of this in C. S. Lewis's "The Silver Chair," one of the "Narnia Chronicles." And Jill is speaking to the lion, Aslan, and Aslan says to her, "Are you not thirsty?" And Jill says, "I'm dying of thirst!" "Then drink," said the lion. "May I? Could I? Would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill. The lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl and as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. "Will you promise not to do anything to me if I do come?" said Jill. "I make no such promise," said the lion. Jill was so thirsty now that without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. "Do you eat girls?" she said. "I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the lion. "I didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry, I just said it." "I daren't come to drink," said Jill. "Then you will die of thirst," said the lion. "Oh dear," said Jill coming another step nearer, "I suppose I must go and look for another stream, then." And the lion said, "There is no other stream."

He is the only God there is and if you would quench your thirst, the thirst to be whole, the thirst to be at peace for the first time in your life, the first time to know a peace that

passes all understanding as you realize that you've come into a living vital relationship with this God, the only God there is, you realize that you've come home. Will you say with William Cowper,

"The dearest idol I possess,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from my breast,
And worship only Thee."

Would you vote for Cyrus? Well, God did in a most extraordinary way that baffles our understanding because he had a greater purpose in mind, the salvation of the likes of you and me, the deliverance of his people for whom he had made a covenant that could not and would not be broken. And he says then and he says now, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other."

Father, we are amazed by things that you do. We would surely do them differently. We would order things differently. Our world would be tidier, neater. But your ways are not our ways and your thoughts are not our thoughts and you are inscrutable. We thank you that we can discern here an overriding purpose, the salvation of your people, the deliverance of your people, the building up of your church, and the gates of hell not prevailing against it. So teach us, we pray, to order our days and to apply our hearts unto wisdom. Teach us this morning afresh. You are the only one. You have our minds, you have our affections, you have our hearts, and we would that you would have all there is of us now and forever. For Jesus' sake. Amen.