

The Burden Bearing God

Isaiah: Strength for the Weary

By Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Isaiah 46:1-13
Preached on: Sunday, October 23, 2016

First Presbyterian Church
1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia

Gracious God and ever blessed Father, we thank you for the gift of the Scriptures that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We pray now for your blessing. Help us to draw comfort from the word of truth by the help of the Holy Spirit for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now turn with me to the prophet Isaiah 46 and we will be reading the first 13 verses. You'll find it in the Pew Bible on page 607. The prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 46. Bel and Nebo in the opening verse, Bel is the local deity of the city of Babylon and Nebo is the counterpart in the adjoining city of Borsippa. These then are idols of Babylon.

1 Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts. 2 They stoop; they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity. 3 "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; 4 even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save. 5 To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? 6 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! 7 They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble. 8 Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, 9 remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, 10 declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' 11 calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it. 12 Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness: 13 I bring near my

righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory."

Verse 4, "even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you." How many of you are very familiar with the hymn,

"How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!"

Then the stanza which is based on verse 4 of this chapter,

"Even down to old age all My people shall prove
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn,
Like lambs they shall still in My bosom be borne."

"How firm a foundation" was written by someone with the initial K. We're not exactly clear as to who wrote it. That was a favorite hymn of some Presidents and it was sung at their funerals: Theodore Roosevelt was one and Woodrow Wilson was another. It was also the favorite hymn of the General of the Confederate Army, Robert E. Lee, and following the Civil War when he became President of Washington College, this was sung at his funeral and he is buried there in the chapel. We have an alumnus of Washington College now, of course, known as Washington and Lee University, and he was present in the first service and I forgot to say Washington and Lee University. At the time of the funeral, it was Washington College. But they sang, "How firm a foundation," at Robert E. Lee's funeral.

God is a burden-carrying God. That's the message of this text. It's the message of this chapter. Actually, it's the message of chapters 46 and 47. God is a burden-carrying God. The prophet is looking into the future. He is looking 200 years into the future and he sees the coming of Cyrus, the Persian. He sees the downfall of the kingdom of Babylon. Babylon, of course, will conquer Jerusalem. The people of God will be in captivity for 70 years. Then in 539 BC, Cyrus will issue his decree letting the people of God and others who are captive in Babylon go home. And Isaiah pictures something, actually it's a picture of something he had seen in his own day, and he's looking into the future describing it in this poetic way. It didn't actually happen in this way but he is describing it in this poetic way. Bel and Nebo, these are local deities in Babylon and Borsippa, gold statues perhaps, and they are being carried out of Babylon on beasts of burden. That's the picture that he is giving in the opening of chapter 46. These gods who assigned to themselves such power are powerless in the face of the invasion of Persia and the point that the prophet is making, and it's a satire, it's somewhat of a mockery, you understand, that if the gods themselves need carrying, who is going to carry you? Who is going to carry you? He's talking to his people who are prone to idolatry, who are prone to ape the cultures in which they find themselves in.

In the next chapter and let me just summarize it for you, chapter 47, he describes Babylon, he describes her in terms of her wealth; he describes her in terms of her luxury; he describes her in terms of her tyrannical rule; and he describes her in terms of her pride. Look at some of the things that they are saying. Look at verse 8 and 10, for example. "Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, 'I am, and there is no one besides me.'" That was the claim of Babylon, "I am and there is no one besides me." And then if you drop down to verse 10, "You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, 'No one sees me'; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, 'I am, and there is no one besides me.'" Astonishing, isn't it? Proud. Ascribing to themselves words that can only be ascribed to God Almighty. Confident in their gods. Confident in their idolatry. Confident in their polytheism. And the prophet is warning his people, warning those who trust in the Lord, warning people like you and me, that man's mind, as Calvin said, is a perpetual factory of idols. Idolatry. That's the theme. Trusting in idols. Trusting in gods who cannot perform, gods who cannot deliver, gods who cannot carry the burden and themselves must be carried out when trouble comes.

We were made, you and I, for God's glory. We were made to reflect back to God something of his glory. We were made in his image. We were given hearts and faculties and minds and affection so that they might be turned toward God and given to him in faithful praise and prayer and devotion and work. And one of the tragedies that befalls us as human beings is what Paul describes in the first chapter of Romans when he describes what God does when he comes in judgment: he gives them over to the lusts of their hearts, he says in Romans 1:24. He gives them over to the lusts of their hearts. He gives them what they desire. He gives them what they want: the thing we talk about all the time; the thing that our hearts and minds return to in conversation; the thing that we wake up thinking about; the thing that we go to bed thinking about; the object of every conversation, it seems; the affection that our heart gives to whatever this happens to be.

Adam and Eve thought it lay in a forbidden fruit. If only they could have the forbidden fruit, everything would be fine. They would find peace and joy and meaning and purpose if only they could have the forbidden fruit. Abraham thought it might be found in a son, a son that he had longed for and prayed for. And when he finally got that son, it became an object of such affection for him that God had to test him. God had to test him, taking him up Mount Moriah and asking him to slay his son as an act of obedience, as a test to see who comes first. Jacob thought, well, Jacob thought if only his father could love him and everything would be fine. If only he could win his father's affection, everything would be fine. If only his father could say something nice about him then everything would be fine. So he hoodwinked his father into giving him the blessing and everything from then on turned sour. And before long as you read in the Bible, you're in that passage where Aaron is saying the most incredible thing to his brother, Moses, that while Moses was up on Mount Sinai, Aaron asked people to give their gold jewelry and he cast it into the fire and out popped a golden calf, just like that. It just popped out of the fire, just like that.

Idolatry blinds us. There is a stupidity to idolatry. It seems reasonable but upon analyses it's stupid. Turn back to chapter 44 and verse 9. Let me read a section here because we

have a piece here of Hebrew mockery, taunting, taunting those who would put their trust in idols. "All who fashion idols are nothing," verse 9 of chapter 44, "All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified; they shall be put to shame together. The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, 'Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!' And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, 'Deliver me, for you are my god!'" Then in verse 20, "He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'"

Do you see the picture that the prophet is painting here? You're walking along and suddenly you realize there is someone holding your right hand. It's an idol. It's the one that you love. It's the one that you give your affection to. It's the fulfillment of all of your dreams but it's a lie and you cannot see it. You are deluded. You are blinded by it. He talks about a man who cuts down a tree and with half of it he lights a fire and he cooks a meal and so on, and with the other half of the wood he carves into an idol and he bows down and worships it. It's all nonsense, if it wasn't so serious. Every idol bears that little insignia, "Made by man in man's image." And it blinds and it cheats. It promises and doesn't give and doesn't fulfill. It's an addiction just like drugs and sex and alcohol. Often addiction, so idolatry can be an addiction, a powerful urge that takes control.

Paul talked about seeing it all in Athens, a city filled with idols. As he walked around in the public spaces, there was Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty; and that was Ares, the god of war; and there was Artemis, the goddess of fertility and wealth; and then there was Hephaestus, the god of craftsmanship; and over it all was the Parthenon of Athena, to the goddess Athena and she was the goddess of almost everything: wisdom and courage and inspiration and civilization and law and justice and mathematics and strength and arts and crafts and skill.

In chapter 48, verse 5, "I declared them to you from of old, before they came to pass I announced them to you, lest you should say, 'My idol did them, my carved image and my metal image commanded them.'" Like sometimes people say, "Nature did it," and you ascribe to nature all of the attributes of deity. What good are they? Can they save you? Can they help you? Can they carry you? And Isaiah mocks. He's looking into the future

but he mocks the Babylonians and he says to them, "Look at your idols. Look at the things that you have given your heart to, the things that you have given your affection to. Look at them. They are being carried out on beasts of burden. Mules and donkeys are carrying them out of the city because they are helpless."

When I was a teenager, I think I might have told you this story before. When I was a teenager and for circumstances that we needn't go into just now, I had a bedroom that was downstairs and it was near the front door. And on top of the wardrobe in the room, forget about closets now, just think of a wardrobe and on the top of the wardrobe there was a shoe box and in the shoe box were important papers: birth certificates and a will, as I recall, and insurance papers. I had rifled through this box one time to see what was in it. I remember asking my mother, "Why is this box in my bedroom since it contains so many important documents?" And she said, "Well, it's near the front door," was her logic. So I wrote on a piece of paper and stuck it to the box, "If house on fire, please grab," because it was seemingly important but they had no power to save themselves just like these gods, these Babylonian gods. When trouble came, when the Persians came, when Cyrus came, somebody had to grab them and take them out because they were helpless.

Oh, you may not be impressed by the idols of the Ancient Near East because you are far more sophisticated than to have a golden statue or a carved image on the mantelpiece in your home that you bow down and worship. No, our idols are much more sophisticated than that. The idol of romantic love. "If only I could fall in love. If only I could find the woman of my dreams or the man of my dreams." Poor Jacob. He fell head-over-heels for Rachel the moment he saw her. It was love at first sight for Jacob. Unusual in the patriarchal age to marry for love. He was ready to work seven years in order to get her and his tricky little uncle Laban gave him Leah, the not so pretty one, and Jacob was willing to work seven more years to get the woman he loved because if he got the woman that he loved, everything would be okay. And it was never okay. What he reaped was trouble and sorrow and heartache and pain.

For others, it's success. Tim Keller in his wonderful book, "Counterfeit Gods," says, "More than any other idol, personal success and achievement lead to a sense that we ourselves are a god; that our security and value rest in our own wisdom and strength and performance. To be the very best at what you do, to be at the top of the heap, means to you that no one else is like you. You are supreme. You are a god." "Success. If only I could get success like that."

Oh, and there are others, of course, things we give our affection to and time to and money to in a way that we don't to anything else, really. Perhaps not even church or reading our Bibles or prayer. And what sort of things would they be? Sport. Well, that hurts. Or music. Or entertainment. The weekend, that's mine. The breaks away. Position. Office. Politics. America. Do you think the next President is going to save you? Look, I got into a heap of trouble for last week's sermon so don't misunderstand what I'm saying. But do you think the next President is going to save you? Do you think that he can carry or she can carry your burdens? Can they make you right with God? Can they hear your prayers that you utter in the middle of the night for a loved one who is dying of cancer? We give

our affections to these idols. We give our time to these idols. We give our energy to these idols.

Go to verse 4 again, our text, "even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." Now, there are several verbs for "carry" here in this passage but the two used there in verse 4 are used again in the fourth servant song in Isaiah 53 in that text that says, "surely he has borne," carried, "our sorrows. He shall bear," carry," their iniquities." It's the same verb and Isaiah is saying to you, he's not saying to you here but he's saying to you in a few chapters from now, he's saying, "The one who can carry you is the Lord Jesus. He can carry your sins all the way to the cross and nail them to that cross and bear in its fullness the unmitigated wrath of God that they deserve." He can do that. He can hear the cry of the widow and the orphan, even down to gray hairs.

You notice in verse 3 he talks about you "have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb," from the time in the womb to adolescence and teenage years, "even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you." Gray hairs. Did you see them, all the elders, the gray hairs? Well, my dear friends, let me talk to the gray hairs because I am one of them. This God of ours, this glorious wonderful God of ours, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he will never let you down. He will never let you down. Even to old age. You know, old age is not for wimps. It's not. To watch a loved one fade away. One of my dearest friends in all the world lost his wife this past week. He sends the most detailed emails, long, lengthy emails baring all his heart. He described the moments when she passed into the nearer presence of the Lord Jesus, but in truth she had passed a long time ago; she had gone into the darkness of a mind that no longer recognized him or anything else, for that matter. And how he was borne on eagle's wings through it all, how he was carried.

There is such a thing as ageism. Your company wants a younger man or woman in the post that you now occupy, somebody with greater energy and a new vision and a new youthfulness and a new zeal, and suddenly you find yourself shunted off into the side somewhere. "Even down to gray hairs I will carry you."

So what are you putting your trust in this morning? What are you putting your hope in, your confidence? To what do you give your affections?

Oh, I love this hymn. It's sentimental. I know it's sentimental.

"From sinking sand He lifted me,
With tender hand He lifted me,
From shades of night to plains of light,
O praise His name, He lifted me!"

He carried me. Is that your testimony this morning? "Flee, little children, flee from idols," the gray headed John the apostle said, "and grasp hold of the Lord Jesus with both hands and with all your affection and he will never let you down."

Father, we thank you. Thank you for this passage. Thank you for this wonderful extraordinary truth. Pray that we might grasp it, listen to it, remember it, and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.