

[Sing Psalm 137 as the last song before the sermon...]

Verse 4 speaks of how the people of God will spring up among the grass
“like willows by flowing streams.”

I couldn't help but think of Psalm 137.

Psalm 137 starts,

“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung our lyres.
For there our captors required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’”

That is where 43:28 left us –

“Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary,
and deliver Jacob to utter destruction and Israel to reviling.”

Israel would be sent into exile –

and so by the flowing streams – by the willows of Babylon –
the LORD would pour out his Spirit on his people.

It is a strange habit of the LORD (at least, strange to us!)

that he starts with the weak, the foolish,
what appears to be the wrong place – the wrong time!

Canaan was the promised land – but in Joseph's day,
Egypt became the land of life.

There were lots of widows in Israel in Elijah's day,
but God chose a Sidonian widow – a widow from Jezebel's country!

So perhaps we should not be surprised to hear that life will come –

the Spirit will be poured out –
in Babylon.

We're not going to get all the way through chapter 46 tonight –

but look quickly at 46:1 – where it speaks of Israel going out from exile in Babylon.

That is – after all – the whole theme that we have been looking at here in chapters 38-55.

In chapter 41 we heard that Israel is the Servant of the LORD –
the offspring of Abraham.

And in chapter 42, we heard that the Servant is the Chosen One in whom God delights.
But in chapter 42, verse 19, we discovered that the Servant is blind and deaf.

Because Jacob has been handed over to the looters and plunderers –
the Servant of the LORD has refused to obey the LORD!

And so last time, in chapter 43, we heard that the LORD is the Redeemer of his Servant.

That theme is at the heart of chapter 44.

If you sometimes get whiplash thinking that Isaiah is talking about Israel –
but then all of a sudden, it sounds like Isaiah is talking about Jesus –
you are on the right track!

Because Jesus is and does all that Israel was supposed to be and to do!

Even the parts about the deaf and blind servant!

After all, as Paul says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin...”
(2 Cor 5:21)

1. “But Now” – The LORD Is the Redeemer of Israel (v1-8)

*44 “But now hear, O Jacob my servant,
Israel whom I have chosen!*

*² Thus says the LORD who made you,
who formed you from the womb and will help you:*

*Fear not, O Jacob my servant,
Jeshurun whom I have chosen.*

*³ For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;*

“But now,”

That glorious phrase “but now”!

“hear O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen!”

Israel is the chosen one – the elect one – the one whom God has loved and called to himself.

“Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you:”

What does God say?

Once again, as he had in 43:1-7, he proclaims two "Fear nots"

Fear not – I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;

How will he do this?

*I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.*

*⁴ They shall spring up among the grass
like willows by flowing streams.*

They will belong to Yahweh, and they shall be identified with Israel.
The covenant promise to Abraham will come to pass:
I will be their God and they will be my people.

⁵ *This one will say, 'I am the LORD's,'
another will call on the name of Jacob,
and another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,'
and name himself by the name of Israel.'*

And so,

⁶ *Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:*

The LORD of hosts is King of Israel and the Redeemer of Israel.
And he says:

*"I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.
⁷ Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.^[e]
Let him declare and set it before me,
since I appointed an ancient people.
Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.*

Who dares to challenge Yahweh?
Who is like the LORD?
The LORD is not afraid of challengers!
He is the Creator of all things – and he alone can declare what will happen.

And so he says for a second time,
⁸ *Fear not, nor be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
And you are my witnesses!
Is there a God besides me?
There is no Rock; I know not any.'*

When God redeems his Servant, Israel, God will pour out his Spirit on the Servant's offspring.
All of Israel's history will come to its glorious conclusion in the great "but now."

It's no wonder that Paul chose that phrase!
Jesus has brought the great "but now!"
You were aliens and strangers to the covenants of promise,
But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off
have been brought near in the blood of Christ (Eph 2:12-13)
I have been crucified with Christ.

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me
but now the life that I live in the flesh,
I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20)

This is what Isaiah was talking about.
Jesus has brought the great “but now”!

And so, yes,
God has done for us what we could not possibly do for ourselves!
He has forgiven our sin – for his own sake!

But then in the central section of chapter 44,
Isaiah digs into the delusion of idolatry.

2. “Is There Not a Lie in My Right Hand” – the Delusion of Idolatry (v9-20)

Isaiah 44:9-20 shows idolatry up as the foolishness that it is.

Verses 9-11 provide the basic statement of the case:

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? ¹¹ 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.

Notice that idolatry is a communal endeavor.

Idolatry only works because the community values the same things together.
If the community didn’t care about it – no one would!

¹² 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. ¹³ The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. ^[b] 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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.

But because the community values the same thing,
the ironsmith fashions the idol with hammers.

The carpenter shapes it into the figure of a man.
Idolatry doesn’t look so bad because everyone’s doing it.

So long as everyone is a part of it, it can’t be all that bad, right?

If they thought about it, they would see how silly it is!

¹⁶ 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!” ¹⁷ 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!”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn speaks of the Soviet era in a similar way.

Stalin’s reign of terror only succeeded because ordinary Russians played along.
Ordinary Russians served as prison guards and informants,
believing that they were serving their country.

Idolatry is always a communal effort.

It makes no difference what the idol is.

What do you think will deliver you?

That is the cry of the worshiper: “Deliver me, for you are my god!”

What is going to bring you peace and happiness?

What is going to allow you to master your destiny?

There are all sorts of things that we are called to “trust”:

some trust the government – they will solve everything!

others put their trust in the family –

parents often put their hopes in their children...

others put their trust in themselves – “Just be you.”

And it’s really easy to join ourselves to “communal liturgies” –
sharing in the idolatry of our culture.

If you think about it,

no matter how individualistic we are,

idolatry is always a communal event.

If no one else valued what we value,

we might see our idolatry for what it is.

But when everyone else is pursuing the same sorts of idols,

it becomes normal, rational, and as Isaiah says (verses 18-20)

¹⁸ They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. ¹⁹ No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” 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?”

The basic question when dealing with sin (for idolatry is at the root of all sin) is this one:

“Is there not a lie in my right hand?”

What lie am I believing?

Sin claims to bring happiness—but it only brings misery.

Why do you believe it?

When was the last time that sin gave you what it promised?
“A deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself.”

How should we think about all this?

In 1 Corinthians 8-10, Paul talks about participating in an idol feast –
in a manner that makes clear that he is applying passages like Isaiah 44.

What would it mean to partake of an idol feast?

While you may never be invited to a dinner at the temple of Zeus,
you very well may be invited to eat food sacrificed to idols.

In *That Hideous Strength*, C. S. Lewis describes a fictional college,
where the “inner circle” is every bit as idolatrous as the temple of Zeus.
Eating and drinking with them *in their private meetings*
is portrayed as an initiation into the “inner circle.”

There would be nothing wrong with having lunch with one of these fellows
at the local pub –
but to eat and drink with them when they are plotting and planning
that would be to partake of the table of demons.

Many of you have already faced this.

Many more will in the coming years –
that moment of decision when you are faced with the question –
“whose side are you on?”
Will you bow to the pressure to “be one of the in-group”?
Or will you deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus?

Let me describe the way that idol feasts functioned in the ancient world.

First of all, these feasts were only *barely* religious (in our eyes).
Think of the opening of Plato’s *Republic*,
where Socrates and his friends are celebrating a feast.
The “liturgy” takes place at the temple –
and then people return to their homes to eat and drink and talk.

400 years later, in Paul’s day, not much had changed.

But the only “devotion” required is that you show up.
You don’t really need to believe anything!
Sure, Socrates got in trouble for mocking or denying the deity –
but so long as you go through the motions,
idolatry does not require faith!

So, in one sense, these feasts are only barely religious.

But in another sense, these feasts remind us that in the ancient world,
everything was religious.
Your presence at the feast demonstrates that you are a faithful and dutiful citizen.

Cicero, in the first century B.C., warned that “new religions” were dangerous,
because they would divide the republic.
Therefore, all new religious rituals must be approved by the Assembly.
There was no ‘separation of church and state’ in the Roman world.
Priests and augurs were public officials,
whose chief role was to advise the magistrates and appease the gods.

And what were the gods?

There were many Greek and Roman philosophers
who privately questioned the “existence” of Jupiter and Juno and their horde.
Many thought that the gods were personifications of the natural world –
manifestations of the “divine”
(it would be hard to find a true atheist in the ancient world).

But almost no one argued against the rituals and customs of Roman religion,
since the rituals and customs served to bind the people together.
Indeed, the festivals were the primary means of exhibiting and forming civic duty,
as the whole city came together – setting aside their petty squabbles for the day –
in order to manifest the glory and power of the city.

But there’s another twist.

Because the problem is that food sacrificed to idols is *everywhere!*
It’s clear from what we know of ancient cities,
that the meat market in the city
was closely associated with the temples.

Ancient Greek and Roman temples had dining rooms built into their courtyards.

The meat from the sacrifices would be prepared at the temple –
and wealthy patrons would invite their clients to feast in these dining rooms.

(We have many invitation letters from the ancient world

“Apion invites you to dine in the house of Serapis at the table of the Lord Serapis
on the 13th at 9 o’clock.” [AT, 619])

You could even say that ancient temples operated restaurants.

So, if you are a Christian,

what’s the problem with going downtown,
and having a meal together with your friends?

So what if the restaurant happens to have a statue of Asclepius?

In fact, that’s precisely the position held by “the strong” in Corinth.

We’re not worshipping false gods – we’re just having a meal with friends!

Friends.

I probably need to explain that too!

Friendship in the ancient world was not primarily about warm, personal affection.
It could include that – and there are some beautiful examples of that in the ancient world!
But friendship focused on the social and moral bond between people.
Friends had mutual and reciprocal responsibilities toward one another.

And if your friend was of different social class,
then the friendship took the form of patronage

In the Roman world, everyone was either a client or a patron.
Even patrons could have patrons!
After all, if you are a powerful person in your village,
then you will still need help to negotiate the intricacies of the city.
And a powerful patron in Corinth will still need help in Rome.

Only the emperor and a few leading Senators could say that they were indebted to no man.
In Paul's letter to the Romans he speaks of Phoebe of Cenchreae.
Cenchreae was the port on the other side of the Isthmus of Corinth.
It was a smaller town – dependent on Corinth.
But Paul says that Phoebe had been a patron to himself and to many other Christians.
She was a powerful woman – in Cenchreae.
She probably had some influence in Corinth.
But now she is going to Rome – and so Paul asks the church in Rome
to do whatever they can to help her.

But if your patron invites you to dinner at the temple of Serapis
to celebrate the coming of age of his son,
what are you supposed to say?

If you say no, you are saying that neither he nor his son are worth your time.
But if you say yes, then you are eating food sacrificed to idols –
something that the Jerusalem Council forbade in Acts 15.

The Jerusalem Council had said that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised,
and do not need to observe the ceremonies of the Mosaic law.
Rather, as the letter of the Council stated in Acts 15:29,
Gentiles must “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood,
and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

Paul will make it clear in 1 Corinthians that the issue is *not*
was the animal slaughtered in a pagan ritual?
The issue is – are you identifying with your community's idolatry?
Are you entirely devoted to Jesus?

Or are you partly devoted to Jesus – and partly devoted to something else?

And this is why Isaiah speaks of the utter folly of idolatry –
“is there not a lie in my right hand”?

This thing that I am trusting in cannot possibly deliver me!
And the problem is that once I have become convinced by the lie,
my deluded heart will continually lead me astray.

And this is why the communal nature of idolatry must be answered
by the communal nature of true worship!

We need people in our lives who will be able to see when we are self-deluded!

But even more importantly,
we need to remember!

3. “I Have Redeemed You” – The Unforgotten Servant (v21-28)

²¹ *Remember these things, O Jacob,
and Israel, for you are my servant;
I formed you; you are my servant;
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.*

God calls his servant, Israel, to remember what idolatry is.
Remember that idols cannot save you.
But also remember that I will not forget you.
I will remember you, my Servant,
and speaking of what he will do first in the restoration from exile,
but then fully and finally in our Lord Jesus Christ,

²² *I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud
and your sins like mist;
return to me, for I have redeemed you.*

Remember these things.
Humanity has Alzheimer’s.
Worse yet, the people of God have Alzheimer’s.
We are forgetful.
We forget the one who formed us.
Isaiah speaks here both of the first creation,
and also the new creation—when he took Israel out of Egypt,
and created his Servant.
And so Isaiah calls us to remember what God has done,
and to remember what God will do.
Speaking to Israel *before* they go into exile,

Isaiah declares that God “has done it.”
That is how certain your redemption is.
And so Isaiah calls out, (verse 23)

*²³ Sing, O heavens, for the LORD has done it;
shout, O depths of the earth;
break forth into singing, O mountains,
O forest, and every tree in it!
For the LORD has redeemed Jacob,
and will be glorified^[e] in Israel.*

When we become obsessed with our situation – our circumstances –
we lose sight of the LORD!

But Isaiah calls on the heavens to sing! – and the depths of the earth to shout!
All creation will rejoice because the LORD has redeemed Jacob.

In Romans 8, Paul speaks of how the creation *groans* –
waiting eagerly for the revelation of the sons of God.
Paul was reflecting on what Isaiah had said!

Next time, we’ll look more at *how* the LORD will redeem Israel his servant,
(there are five “thus saith the LORD” statements that follow) –
But chapter 44 concludes
by pointing out how God “makes fools of diviners” –
and frustrates the signs of liars:

*²⁴ Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
who formed you from the womb:
“I am the LORD, who made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who spread out the earth by myself,
²⁵ who frustrates the signs of liars
and makes fools of diviners,
who turns wise men back
and makes their knowledge foolish,
²⁶ who confirms the word of his servant
and fulfills the counsel of his messengers,
who says of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be inhabited,’
and of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be built,
and I will raise up their ruins’;
²⁷ who says to the deep, ‘Be dry;
I will dry up your rivers’;
²⁸ who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd,
and he shall fulfill all my purpose’;*

*saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,'
and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'"*

Verses 24-28 introduce this great redemption in one long sentence.

Thus says Yahweh, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: I am Yahweh.

There are ten participles describing Yahweh in verses 24-28.

the four in verse 24 specify Yahweh as the creator

the two in verse 25 reveal Yahweh as the one who mocks idolaters

the three in verses 26-27 reveal Yahweh as the one who does what he says

and the one in verse 28 reveal Yahweh's particular purpose.

This great statement of who Yahweh is comes to its focus in the promise of Cyrus.

God promises that one named Cyrus would be God's instrument in delivering Israel.

He would be the shepherd who would bring Israel back to Jerusalem,

the one who would command the building of the temple.

A shepherd who would build the temple.

This is an echo of Solomon, who was the Son of David who built the first temple.

We'll come back to Cyrus next week –

but it is enough to say for now that God's purpose is to restore his city –

to redeem his people –

to blot out their sins and bring life to the dead!