

God's Mission

DAVE BAST

Few experiences can be more painful for human beings than the experience of exile. To be forced to leave your native land is to lose all that is familiar: home and belongings, family and friends, language and culture; all the sights and sounds and experiences that have made your life what it is. Such was Israel's plight during their captivity in Babylon. Jerusalem had been sacked and burned by Babylonian storm troopers. Home was not just left behind, it had been destroyed. Family and friends were not merely far away, they were dead. Everything was gone, including hope for the future, until God spoke. We will listen today to what He said on Groundwork. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, this is now the third program in a series on the middle chapters of Isaiah; in a sense, Chapters 42 through 53; I guess more toward the end of the book, but they are at a hinge point in the book of Isaiah when the basic message turns from one of judgment primarily to one of hope and a future; and it is addressed in prospect as a prophecy to the time of the exile, even though Isaiah lived and wrote far before that in history. Nevertheless, the words were intended to sustain hope and comfort during that terrible experience of the Babylonian captivity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we find some of that... and today on this program, Dave, we are going to be looking at the very end of Isaiah 44, and then some of Isaiah 45, again as we continue with this seven-part series, now on our third program. So let's hear just a few of the words from near the end of 44 and the beginning of 45, where God promises that the exile will end.

²⁴Thus 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; ²⁶who 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; ²⁷who says to the deep, 'Be dry, I will dry up your rivers.' ²⁸Who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and he will fulfill My purpose,' saying of Jerusalem, "She shall be built," and of the Temple, "Your foundation will be laid.""

DAVE BAST

^{45:1}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. ³I 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. ⁴For 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. ⁵I am the Lord and there is no other. Beside Me there is no god. I equip you though you do not know Me, ⁶that 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."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So here is a passage, Dave, that is bristling with promises of restoration and of return and of rebuilding. As you said in the opening to this program, the people who were in exile... they weren't able to think of just kind of moving back home eventually. There was no home to move back to. Everything had been burned and destroyed, but here God says: Jerusalem is going to be rebuilt. The cities of Judah are going to be re-inhabited. The Temple is going to be rebuilt. We are going to rebuild the whole thing, and I am the One who is promising you this.

In the next segment, we are also going to wonder about this figure named Cyrus...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who God is going to work through; but meanwhile, it is clear that God is the one who is pulling all the strings and is going to make this restoration possible.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and if you listen to the very beginning, we picked it up at the end of Isaiah 44, but with the characteristic statement. If you follow this series at all and you can... incidentally, if you are interested, you can listen to previous programs online at groundworkonline.com; but in our last program we stressed the fact that God hammers away again and again. He is the Creator – and He is also the Redeemer – but first of all He is the Creator, and that is exactly how He starts this passage:

44:24²⁴Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer..." There is the redeemer part; but, "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."

You know, so here it is again; the fundamental fact about God vis-à-vis us. We are dependent upon Him because He made us. He not only created the universe, He created each of us. He formed us in the womb. He goes on, then, to be the one who will rescue us; but the other really significant thing here, I think, at the outset is He is the God who confirms the word of His servant and fulfills the counsel of His messengers. In other words, He is talking about Isaiah – the prophets – and He says: The way you can know that I am the real God is that the prophecies that I inspire through My servants will come true. I am the God who can predict the future; who does predict the future; and then I make it happen. I guess we could add to this: Not only the Creator and the Redeemer, but the ruler – the sovereign over all of history.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we know, too, and we said in the first program of this series that the New Testament makes it plain as day that these servant chapters of Isaiah all find their fulfillment finally in Jesus Christ; and that God as Creator and Redeemer – we saw that in the previous program – it is here, too; and then of course, in the great, great, great turn of all scripture in the Gospels, Jesus becomes Creator/Redeemer simultaneously, and does the redemption by becoming a creature, by becoming in flesh and then dying on a cross as a creature to pay for human sin. So that is the radical, ultimate fulfillment of the end of our larger exile – the exile from God's presence that started already with Adam and Eve when they were thrown out of the Garden. Our fellowship with God was disrupted. Jesus in His own body in person will bring it back.

You know, these chapters that we are looking at in this series, Dave, are often looked at in the Church during the season of Lent, and there is a good reason for that, because the suffering of God Himself – the ultimate solution to our sin – was for God to take the sin on Himself, and of course that is what He does supremely in Jesus; not waiting for us to get our act together, but coming in and doing the work Himself; and so these words have that great trajectory in scripture.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; you make me think of kind of a personal story in connection with this. You know, the idea of exile or leaving your homeland. America and Canada for the most part are nations of immigrants; and most

of us have an immigrant story somewhere in our background; and in my case, the story happened in 1909, when my father as a little boy was brought to America by his mother. His father had gone on ahead to try to make enough money to bring them over, and so there they stood; my grandmother with five little children, and her father had taken her to the wharf to see her off, and they would never see one another again – she would never see her homeland again; but he said to her: Remember, no one can take away our eternal inheritance. What God did in Christ, you know, has made us secure, really, in our eternal home. For wherever we may be on earth – whatever we may have to leave or give up – we can never truly be exiles from that home that has the work of God in salvation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as the work of Jesus Christ, the Messiah – and messiah means the anointed one of God – Jesus is the ultimate Messiah, but en route to getting to Jesus, God has some sub-messiahs in mind, and one of them is particularly surprising; and we are going to look at that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we are continuing now in the 44th and 45th chapters of Isaiah. We just were seeing the great promise of salvation – of restoration – for exiles of a new home, a rebuilding of Israel. God promises all of that, and we just made the connection that ultimately that happens through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice because Jesus is the Messiah; but in this chapter, in the verses we read in the first segment, Dave, God uses that term *Mashiach* – Messiah – but it is not about David and it is not about a king of Israel, and it is not finally about Jesus immediately; it is about somebody else.

DAVE BAST

This is maybe the most surprising thing in the whole Old Testament; I don't know, certainly in the book of Isaiah; but he is mentioned by name at the end of Chapter 44, where God says of Cyrus: He is My shepherd and he shall fulfill all My purpose; which is, in this instance, in the immediate future, to rebuild Jerusalem; to see that at least a remnant of the Israelites get sent back home. They not only escape – they can't really escape – but they are authorized to return, they are given help to return and they are given money to rebuild the city, all by this character, Cyrus, who is the emperor of Persia; and then, Chapter 45 begins: Thus says the Lord to His anointed – that is the word *messiah* – to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him; and then he goes on and on in the next verses, which we read earlier in the program, to say essentially: I am going to help Cyrus conquer the world as he knows it; I am going to help him build this great Persian empire, which would be the third of the great empires that dominated the world in the latter centuries of the Old Testament: First Assyria, with its capital Nineveh, then Babylon, and finally Persia, which was greater than either of the first two, and ended up ruling that whole part of the world. God says: I am going to do that through Cyrus for the sake of My name, not his name. He thinks he is just becoming king of the world, but I am actually behind all this to get My people home.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even... unbenounced to Cyrus, obviously, even to the point where God says: I am holding his hand. I am holding him by the hand.

DAVE BAST

And I am going to knock down gates of brass and get every obstacle out of his way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think you probably cannot exaggerate this, so what I am about to suggest I don't think I am exaggerating this: How did this sound to the people who first heard it? Well, imagine 1950s North America:

Canada, the United States... and imagine some prophet coming into the church right in the middle of the Cold War when we were afraid of Communism and all the rest... imagine God coming into some church and saying: I am going to raise up Mao Tse-Tung of China, or I am going to work through Josef Stalin of the Soviet Union. I am holding his hand. I am going to make him successful so that it will help My people. You would find that to be merely shocking and scandalous to hear that the name of this foreign leader on the lips of God's prophet in a positive light; not saying: I am going to crush Mao Tse-Tung; I am going to crush Josef Stalin; I am going to crush whoever... Idi Amin... you think of some brutal dictator in history; no, I am holding his hand and he is My messiah – he is My anointed one – My chosen one. It had to sound outrageous!

DAVE BAST

The Lord's anointed, yes; and I don't think your examples are at all far-fetched, Scott. I think that is kind of how shocking it would have been because, as far as I know... I am no great historian, but I don't think Persian rulers were known for their sweetness and kindness. They were tough guys. They were brutal. They used extreme measures...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they worshipped other gods; I mean, they were pagans by all rights.

DAVE BAST

And actually, if you follow the story of the Old Testament, it makes it clear that when the end of the exile actually came, which was in the year 536 BC, the fact that the Jews in the Persian Empire could point to Cyrus's name in their scriptures made a big impression on him; and that was one of the big reasons he let them go back home. Wow, this was all predicted; so one of the stress points of Isaiah in particular is that God is the God who can predict the future because He is also the God who makes it happen. He is the God, so we have been stressing: Creator and Redeemer; but now we have to add in sovereign; the God who rules the nations; the God who superintends the events of history; the God who can take up and use the ambitions of human beings – of human rulers – and make them ultimately work in accordance with His plan. So He is the God who anoints Cyrus and holds him by the hand, just as later He would take a census that Caesar Augustus declares, and use it to bring a young mother to Bethlehem to have her child, yes. That is the God who is real.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So God is using the nations; He is using Persia to wipe out Babylon, and then the Persians take over and initially, if you were a Jewish exile – an Israelite exile – you might say: Well, great. So the players have changed. We are still in exile. The Babylonians were bad; now the Persians will be bad. How does this help us? But then, of course, it turns out it did help; and eventually it would be the Persian leaders and Cyrus's descendants and co-workers who would send Nehemiah back to begin rebuilding the Temple, and Ezra back to rebuild the walls and the Temple, and the Persians did become God's servant and the exile ended; quite surprisingly, there would be nothing on the face of it to say: Oh, good; well, the government changed hands. Babylon is out, Persia is in, and we are still their prisoners. They are not going to let us go. What difference does it make who the ruler is? They are not our ruler; except that, exactly this came true.

DAVE BAST

As we read further in Isaiah 45, it seems pretty clear that the people objected to this terminology, even: What do you mean, Cyrus is the Messiah? We don't want Cyrus to be the Messiah. We want David's son to be the Messiah; that is what You promised. So, there are verses later in the chapter where God kind of addresses this.

^{9b}“Does the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ Will you command Me concerning My children and the work of My hands? ¹²I made the earth and created man on it. It was My hand that stretched out the heavens and I commanded all their host. ¹³I have stirred him up in righteousness (that is Cyrus), and I will make all his ways level. He shall build My city and set My exiles free. Not for price or reward,” says the Lord of hosts.

So God is sort of establishing a basic lesson here, which Paul will repeat in the New Testament: Who are you to talk back to God? You are the clay, He is the potter. He can do what He wants in His own way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is a tremendous lesson from history for all of us. This is, as you said, Dave, one of the biggest surprises – if not the biggest surprise – of the Old Testament, that Cyrus of Persia is labeled a kind of Messiah. Big surprises like that in scripture have wider resonances. It still means something for us today, and let's sort of wonder maybe what the application of this even to today might be. We will do that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are dealing primarily with Isaiah Chapter 45; another very striking passage in this section of Isaiah that we are looking at; and this is the place where God names Cyrus, the king of Persia, who actually overthrew the Babylonian empire, conquered the city of Babylon in a very dramatic fashion. Ancient Greek historians tell that story, how Cyrus brought his army up to these great walls of Babylon and they found a way under them through a dry riverbed, and they took the city in a night; and again, if you are familiar with the Bible you know that Daniel at the time said to Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon, "You have been weighed in the balance and you have been found wanting; and tonight your city will be taken," and that is what happened.

Here in Isaiah, God predicts this through the prophet – He foretells it – and He names Cyrus as the one whom He will use to bring this about, all for the purpose of returning Israel to their homeland.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, a couple of things to say about that. I mean, we want to think about something that is really hope filled in terms of what this might mean also for our lives today. One other lesson, though, that we should probably mention just because it is a perennial temptation for Christians... In the Bible, when God reveals His purpose behind a certain larger world event, of course, that is God's prerogative to do, right? If He says: I had this happen for this purpose, that is God's prerogative to do. The rest of us are usually warned away from making too simple conclusions: Oh, there was an earthquake that hit that city because it is a sinful city. That is God's punishment because they've got lots of sinful people. No, no; we've got to be very careful; and sort of on the flipside here, nobody on their own without God's revelation would ever have said: Oh, Cyrus; yes, that is the Messiah of God – the God of Israel. You would never tumble to that either unless God told you; so, a little caution is called for. Don't too quickly chalk up a given leader, the results of an election, the outcome of a war or skirmish – don't be too quick as a mere mortal, or even if you are a minister in the Church to say: Oh...

DAVE BAST

This is what God is saying, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I know what God is saying through that. The huge surprise of Cyrus is proof that we never know what God is thinking; He has to reveal it Himself.

DAVE BAST

I think that is a great point, Scott, and it bears repeating. In general, what we learn from this is that God controls history on a higher level than the mere human ambitions of various leaders and kings and emperors. God superintends what happens. So, we mentioned earlier in the program the three great empires of the time: Assyria, Babylon, and Persia; and in Isaiah and Jeremiah, God says of all of them, in effect: Those are just My servants. Assyria, that is a stick in My hand that I used to beat My people with, to punish them, to discipline them; Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar is My servant; Cyrus, he is My shepherd – he is My anointed one. So we learn that basic truth, but we are not given insight at the time into exactly what God's purpose is in a particular instance. We just hold onto the comfort that we have that these things don't happen just blindly or by chance. Somehow God will bring good out of them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Take away our Christian faith and you can understand why a lot of people look at world events at any given time... take any chunk of time in the last 2,000 years or 3,000 years if you want, 4,000 years... a lot of people look at it and say it is random. It is just a booming, buzzing confusion. It is just blind luck, sheer chance. Believers have the consolation of faith to say: No, it is not finally out of God's hands. That does not mean everything happens by God's will. That doesn't mean that there aren't things that happen in a fallen world that even God ultimately would not really desire, but they happen; but it is not out of control, right? It is not out of God's hands; it is in God's hands; and there is some comfort to be taken in the fact that, as my friend Neal Plantinga likes to say: When you read history and you read some great things that are done by less than great people, you sort of say: Well, God is pretty good at hitting straight shots with crooked sticks. God can wield somebody like a pagan like Cyrus and you make him do exactly what God wants to do. So, God works through all kinds of people, including unsuspecting, unwitting people who have no belief in God even, and yet they get great things done because God is sovereign, and we take some comfort in that.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, I think that is a second take-away for me. If God can use Cyrus, who doesn't even know His name, maybe He can use me. I do know His name and I honor it, but imperfectly. You know, I sometimes stumble and fall, but if He will use us despite our flaws and despite our stumbles, He will do it for the sake of the world, because God is a God who wants to draw the nations to Himself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; if God could use, and does use even yet today, secular people with no faith, no commitment to Christ Jesus as Lord, goodness, just imagine what He does with all of us who *do* have faith and who *are* committed to Him as Lord? There are no unimportant people in the Church. There are no little people in God's kingdom. Everybody has a role. God works through us all to witness to the nations, to fulfill the mission of His Church; and we need to take great confidence in that, even if it is also true that most of the time we don't see the fruit of our witness and of our labor; but God is in control and that means we trust it is there.

DAVE BAST

You know, Scott, that universal theme comes through at the end of Isaiah 45 in another of these great statements:

²²Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God and there is no other. ²³By Myself I have sworn to Me every knee shall bow. Every tongue shall swear allegiance.

If you remember the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2, those are verses that he quotes about Jesus: Every knee will bow and every tongue confess ultimately that Jesus is Lord. That is the great task that God calls us to be involved in.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you to dig deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com to suggest topics and passages you would like to hear on Groundwork.

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