

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

THE COMING OF CYRUS FORETOLD

“Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two-leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the Lord, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel. For Jacob my servant’s sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me” (verses 1-4).

THIS is the passage preeminently given by unbelieving critics as proof that the Isaiah who wrote the first part of the book could not have written these words. But as we have already said, that is simply discounting the whole question of inspiration. If we believe, as every Christian should, that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, that the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but that holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, there is no more difficulty in understanding that God could foretell the rise of King Cyrus and what he would do for His people than it was to foretell the coming of the Lord Jesus into the world, and the redemption that He would accomplish; His first coming and His second coming and the effects, both of His rejection and of His final acceptance by the people of Israel. All this was foretold ahead of time, and so in the same way, God through Isaiah foretold the rise of Cyrus.

Cyrus the Persian was the nephew of Cyraxares, king of Media. Media and Persia were, as a rule, very closely related. They sprang from the same stock; it was through these kingdoms united together under the leadership of Cyraxares and Cyrus that eventually Chaldea was conquered and Babylon became one of the chief cities of the Persian Empire until its eventual complete destruction.

Secular history gives fuller information about its conquest. Herodotus has much to say of it, and other ancient records relate that Cyraxares and Cyrus in alliance marched against Babylon, and Cyrus eventually took it by turning aside the waters of the Euphrates into another channel, and so came in on the river-bed under the two-leaved gates, the gates of the river itself. That is what is indicated here. God foresaw all this.

Cyrus was no mere legendary figure. The majestic rifled ruins of his magnificent tomb still stand at Pasargardae in Iran. The original inscription concluded: "Who founded the Persian Empire and was King of Asia . . . Therefore grudge me not this monument."

One reason why Cyrus and the Persians befriended the people of Israel was that the Persians like the Israelites were monotheists. They did not believe in idolatry. They did not worship idols, but abhorred them. They worshiped God under the symbol of the sun, and also believed in a great power they called Ahriman. Ormazd was their name for God.

Ahriman was the name for the power of darkness. Some people think of them as dualists as though they believed in two great gods, the god of light and the god of darkness. But it seems more likely that they really believed in one true and living God, but with a great Adversary seeking to impede the carrying out of God's counsels. A people believing in one God, symbolized by the sun (they did not actually worship it) would look with favor upon Israel, when they found that they did not worship idols.

It was because of idolatry that Israel were carried captives to Babylon, its source, but this cured them of idolatry. Soon after their arrival they found that death was the punishment there of refusal to worship an image (Daniel 3:14, 15). Undoubtedly, here and there, there have been Jews who have been idolaters because of ignorance, but the nation itself learned to abhor idolatry from what they saw in Babylon. There they suffered for seventy years until its fall under the awful conditions of that idolatrous kingdom. Never again have they been an idolatrous people.

To this day, they abhor idols of any description. That is one reason why the Roman Catholic, the Greek Catholic, the Greek Orthodox, and other branches of the Catholic Church, have had difficulty in impressing the Jews, because if a Jew looks inside one of their churches, to him it is just a heathen temple. Here are all kinds of icons and images, and people burning incense and candles and bowing down to them. To the Jew that is abhorrent. He hates and detests it.

It is only when pure Christianity, apart from all that, is presented in loving-kindness to the Jew that any impression is likely to be made upon him. Through the centuries there have been Jews who have been converted to Romanism, but frequently that conversion has been a mere pretence to escape persecution. With outward conformity to the Church of Rome, their hidden services were carried on in the synagogue worship as of old.

But where there is a real new birth and a Jew becomes a true Christian, he turns away from all this idolatry because it is something that his very soul abhors.

But God's reiterated warnings and pleadings are not unneeded. There will be a supreme test for Israel which is yet to come during the great tribulation. The son of perdition shall arise to oppose and exalt "himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God" (II Thessalonians 2:4). He will persuade men to make an image, and will have power to give life to it, that the image shall both speak and cause that as many as would not worship the image should be killed (Revelation 13:14, 15).

Many in fear of death will fail, with terrible results (Revelation 14:9-11); others will be victors over the image and will glorify God's holy name (Revelation 15:2-4). Again let us repeat, God's continued warnings and pleadings in Isaiah are not unneeded.

God foretold the rise of King Cyrus. He was to open the way for the remnant to return to Jerusalem. But, of course, this was to be but a partial return. There are those who insist that all the prophecies connected with the return of Israel have been fulfilled already and, therefore, we are not to look for any future fulfillment of them, but God says in this very book of Isaiah, "I will set my hand a second time to recover my people," and that is what He has already begun to do, as they gather back as a people to their land.

Following this revelation in regard to King Cyrus, God comes back to the subject that had occupied Him before, emphasizing man's littleness, his frailty and his lack of merit, and His own majesty and power and glory, in contrast to the idols to which the people had turned. He continues, and it is:

"I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the Lord, and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things" (verses 5-7).

That is very striking in connection with the Persian beliefs. In their sacred writings, the Zend-Avesta for instance, they gave the primary place to Ormazd, the god of light, the one true living God. And Ahriman occupies a very large place as the supernatural foe of God, in constant conflict with Him. One is the God of light, the other is the evil spirit of darkness. One is the God of peace and the other the spirit of war. One is the God of goodness and the other the spirit of evil. So here in answer to this, God, as though addressing King Cyrus, says "I am the one true and living God . . . beside Me there is no other. I create peace and I create evil. I create light and I create darkness. There is no other power that can share omnipotence with Me."

"I create peace and I create evil." What does that mean? Extreme high Calvinists insist that God has foreordained everything that takes place on the earth; therefore that man should sin, in order that He might have opportunity to display His redemptive grace. But that is not what is involved here when He says, **"I create peace and I create evil."** It is evil in the sense of calamity. In other words, if there is a thunderstorm and great damage is done, God says, "I take full responsibility for it"; if everything is fair and beautiful God says, "This is from Me"; if there is a great earthquake, God is behind that. Whatever it is, **"I the Lord create peace, I create evil."** And so we read, **"Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?"** (Amos 3:6).

God takes the responsibility for everything that occurs, but it is not always that He is working directly Himself, but that He permits others to work. For instance, He permitted Satan to try Job. But the point here is that there are not two great powers in the universe in conflict with each other, both of whom are god, a good god and an evil god; but there is one God, though there is an evil power working against Him.

“Woe unto him that stirreth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands? . . . Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, ye that are escaped of the nations: they have no knowledge that set up the wood of their graven image, and pray unto a god that cannot save. Tell ye, and bring them near; yea, let them take counsel together: who hath declared this from ancient time? who hath told it from that time? have not I the Lord? and there is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else” (verses 9, 20-22).

What a marvelous declaration! God making Himself known in those Old Testament times as a just God and a Saviour, a God who will deal in absolute righteousness with the sin question, and yet who Himself has found a way consistent with His own infinite holiness and the righteousness of His throne, whereby He can be the Saviour of the sinner who turns to Him in repentance and faith. A just God and a Saviour!

Long ago in Greece such wise men as Socrates and Plato argued one day as to forgiveness of sin. Socrates turned to Plato saying, “It may be that God can forgive sins but I do not see how.”

That is remarkable! This pagan philosopher to a very large extent had his eyes open to divine realities. “It may be that God can forgive sins, but I do not see how.” What did he mean by that?

If God is the moral Governor of the Universe and if God is a righteous Judge, and all men are to come before Him to be judged for the deeds done in the body, how can He forgive sins? It is not in the province of the judge to forgive criminals but to pronounce sentence upon evil-doers and see that sentence carried out.

How then could a righteous God forgive sins? A way back here in Isaiah, who lived two centuries and a half before Socrates, God declares in Israel that He is a just God and a Saviour. And in the Epistle to the Romans written nearly five centuries after Socrates, we are told how God can be just and the Justifier of him that believeth in Jesus.

This is a wonderful gospel passage: **“Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.”**

Now God is revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, and these very same words can be used in connection with Him, because He said, **“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.”** “There is none other name,” says Peter, **“under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”** **“Look unto Me . . . all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.”**

What does it mean to look unto Him? God has used such simple terms to show people how easily we may come into direct contact with Him through grace. And yet difficulty is made out of the plain words **“believe”** and **“look.”** To **“look”** here simply means to turn our eyes to the only One who can help us, He who bids us to look. It is the Person that makes all the difference.

We do not look at ourselves, we know our helpless condition, but turn an expectant, obedient gaze on Him. **“Look unto Me . . . for I am God, and there is none else.”** The invitation is world-wide and with blessed results - **“be ye saved.”** Hebrews 12:2 gives the glorious Person too, **“Looking unto Jesus.”** Isaiah doubtless refers to the dying, serpent-bitten Israelites in Numbers 21:8, 9, who lived when they fixed their earnest gaze on the brazen serpent lifted up by Moses.

Chapters 45-48 are part of one section embracing chapters 40-48, in which we have the Lord's controversy with idols. He emphasizes His own power and majesty. In one of his printed lectures Col. Robert G. Ingersoll dwelt on this. He said, “What a boaster this God of the Bible is! How often He talks about Himself and what He has done and can do!” One can understand an ungodly man saying this, but who in all the universe has a right to boast save the God who created it? And why does He set forth His own glory and His own majesty and His own power? Why does He emphasize His own wisdom and His own strength and ability? It is that men may realize the importance of living in touch with Him and the uselessness of turning to anyone else.

~ end of chapter 45 ~

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