

Spiritual Rebuilding V

Isaiah 44.24–45.3

We've looked at how the defeated people of the Old Testament church suffered their long exile and how they were suddenly, after seventy years, given a second chance, and we've seen the various steps they took to make sure they didn't repeat the mistakes that led to the disaster. First they sought to atone for their sins, and to do that before doing anything else; second, they determined to live by God's word even in what might be thought of as the unimportant things; and third, they avoided too much contact with those who might tempt them to ignore God's word and live by the standards of the non-Christian world. And those are important lessons for today's Christians to learn from our forefathers, and I hope we are all doing our best to imitate their priorities.

But those are lessons to learn about how we live: according to other parts of Scripture, there are lessons here to be learnt about the nature of God, and it's important to learn those lessons too: if we're only concerned about our selves, we're always going to have something to be concerned about. Remember the basic principle that Jesus taught us: *Seek first God's righteousness, and all these other things will be added unto*

you. So let's take a look at what we can learn about the things of God in all this.

The person who opens all that up for us is the prophet Isaiah, or one of the prophets who contributed to the book named for the prophet Isaiah. The book of Isaiah as we now have it is a series of prophecies covering the whole period from the decline and fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, to the decline and fall of the southern kingdom Judah, on through the exile, and to the opening years of the return to Jerusalem. Chapters 40–44 of Isaiah are God's word of comfort to His people while they are still in exile, but beginning in 44.24, the prophet begins to explain what's behind the miracle of a return home after seventy years. That's the job of prophets: to interpret the times, to tell us what God is doing in the events of history, whether they are past events, present events, or events still to come. Our passage this morning deals with the return from Babylon as a current event, and explains what it reveals about God and His nature. Let's take a close look at it.

24 This is what the LORD says— your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: notice first that word 'redeemer': it's not a description of what God has done, it's a description of Who God is—He is His people's redeemer. He is the one who rescues His people when they are in trouble, because they are His. Because they

are His own creation: He formed them in the womb, He is directly responsible for their nature, He is the true father of His people, more so even than their earthly fathers. Our earthly fathers generated us, gave us existence, but God formed us, fashioned us, gave us our potential. That was literally true of the chosen people of the old covenant, and it becomes true of us when we put our faith in His Son Jesus Christ: He adopts us as His children, grafts us into the chosen people, and gives us our potential in the new life brought about by faith.

And this is what He reveals about Himself through the prophet to all His children: *“I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, 25 who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, 26 who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be inhabited’, of the towns of Judah, ‘They shall be built’, and of their ruins, ‘I will restore them’, 27 who says to the watery deep, ‘Be dry, and I will dry up your streams’, 28 who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt”, and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid”.*’ Not hard to see the point here, is it? It’s all God. He did everything His people needed: He made everything, He showed up the false prophets for the fools they were—there had been plenty of prophets

who prophesied that no harm would come to those who disobeyed God's word, Jeremiah had all sorts of arguments with them. It was God Who led Nebuchadnezzar to the gates of Jerusalem to prove those false prophets wrong, and it was God who said I'm going to use Cyrus to do what I've got planned next. *He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please. He will even tell Cyrus what to say: he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt", and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid".*' Cyrus will say it as though it's his own idea, but it will be God who is doing all of it. And what God says to His people is just that: it's all God. None of it's random strokes of luck, none of it is just historical forces working themselves out, it's all God at work.

That's what God says to His chosen people; but the passage goes on to show us God saying the same things to Cyrus Himself. *45:1 This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: Everything Cyrus has done has been God's doing—even the victories he has won on the battlefield were due to God's intervention; Cyrus conquered Babylon because God wanted Babylon conquered. God led him to victory because of His purpose for His chosen people—but God also has a purpose for Cyrus, and He goes on to speak to Cyrus:*

2 I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. The riches stored in secret places we know from Babylon's own historical records were the treasures looted from the temples of the nations it conquered, including the treasures from the temple in Jerusalem, which Cyrus sent back with the returning exiles. But that was His purpose for Israel; God also has a purpose for Cyrus. Cyrus is a tool in God's hand to bring the Jews home, but God wants him to be more than that. God wants Cyrus to know Him the way the returning exiles know Him. God is not only doing all this so that the Old Testament church can recover from its faithlessness, but so that Cyrus *may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name.* God knows Cyrus by name, and is calling him not only to do God's will, but to know God for himself. He wants Cyrus to know why he has suddenly started winning all these battles and becoming the most powerful leader in the world. Not so long before this, he had been a minor official in Persia. God calls Cyrus by name, and reveals Himself to him.

The Bible doesn't tell us how Cyrus responded to this. It would be interesting to know, but it's not really our business. The question for us is whether we recognise

this God. This passage is not about us, it's about God; and the basic lesson of this passage is that nothing is about us, everything is about God. Every person, Christian or not, every nation, civilised or not, every animal, every tree and mountain, all creation is about God. If we think life is about us, the God described here is a stranger to us. Most of us have felt God's call on our lives in some way, or we wouldn't be here this morning. But God calls again and again, and if we're not paying attention, the God we once recognised may be a stranger to us now. He has some new work for us to do, some more armour to strip away, more bronze doors to break down, more trusted prophets and diviners to expose as con-men, more wisdom to expose as nonsense, and He will do it when we grasp again that it is about Him, not about us. These words come from a time when He had new work for the Old Testament church to do. He'd given them plenty of time in Babylon to learn from their mistakes; then He sent them back to work in the world, to witness to His never-ending love and care for His people, and His never-ending invitation to the whole world to become part of His people.

The first batch of exiles to return was a very small group, and they struggled for a long time before God opened more doors for them. Remember last week's reading, where we heard that their plans were frustrated *during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to*

the reign of Darius king of Persia. That's about eighteen years. They were frustrated because their plans still weren't God's plans. So for eighteen years those new foundations sat there, with no building going on. Because it wasn't about them, it was about God. Then God called a second group of exiles to return home, because it was God's time.

No one knows where the Diocese of Pittsburgh, or St Peter's, is in the recovery from the setbacks we have suffered. But when we are ready for a new door to be opened, when we are ready for it to be about God and not about us, He will do what only God does.

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