

This morning, I am continuing in a sermon series that I am calling “The gospel according to Isaiah” which will take us through much of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah was what was known as a covenant mediator prophet, people who were called by God to be His spokesperson, to call out the sin of the nation and call them to repent of their sin and return to faithfulness to the covenant that God had made with them at Mt. Sinai, after He had led them out of Egypt. Isaiah prophesied to Judah, the southern part of Israel, from about 740-687 BC. The book of Isaiah can be broken up into two parts. Chapters 1-39 are mainly about God’s judgment of Israel and the surrounding nations for their sins. Chapters 40-66 are mainly about the restoration God will bring to His people once their time of discipline is completed. Earlier in this series, we looked at the three main areas where God through Isaiah was calling the Israelites out for breaking the covenant, areas that we also need God’s exhortation today: Judah’s injustice, their mistreatment of the poor and oppressed, their empty worship, their performative religion, and their idolatry, specifically the ways they were trusting in other nations for their protection and security instead of putting their trust in God.

But in chapter 40, the prophecy shifts from a focus on judgment to a focus on restoration. There are two problems that need to be addressed: the physical slavery, their exile in Babylon that has kept them out of their homeland, and their spiritual sinfulness, which is the reason behind their exile. Today, we will look at how God addresses the first issue, their slavery and exile. Next week, we will look at how he addresses the second issue, their sin.

Isaiah 45:1–13 - “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: 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 hidden treasures, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. ⁴ For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me. ⁵ I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, ⁶ so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting people may know there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. ⁷ I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things. ⁸ “You heavens above, rain down my righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness flourish with it; I, the Lord, have created it. ⁹ “Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among

the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you making?’ Does your work say, ‘The potter has no hands’? ¹⁰ Woe to the one who says to a father, ‘What have you begotten?’ or to a mother, ‘What have you brought to birth?’ ¹¹ “This is what the Lord says— the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands? ¹² It is I who made the earth and created mankind on it. My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshaled their starry hosts. ¹³ I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the Lord Almighty.”

We learn three important things in this passage about the sovereignty of God.

1) God can do or use whatever or whoever He pleases

In Isaiah 45, God gives a prophetic word to the people of Israel about an anointed one named **Cyrus** who will be responsible for rescuing the Israelites from exile and returning them to their homeland. But the unexpected thing about Cyrus, according to **verses 4 and 5**, is that he does not acknowledge God. This Cyrus who will be God’s anointed one is not a believer, not a follower of Yahweh. And yet, God will use him to rebuild the city and set the exiles free, according to **verse 13**.

This prophetic word of Isaiah’s will come true about 180 years later. Cyrus II, also known as Cyrus the Great of Persia, to whom this prophecy refers, will become the king over Assyria in 547 BC, conquer Babylon in 539 BC, and will then give a decree that the Israelites can return to their promised land. We actually read about the fulfillment of this prophecy in Ezra:

Ezra 1:1–4 - In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: ² “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at **Jerusalem in Judah**. ³ Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. ⁴ And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.”

So let's go back. Remember that Israel is in exile because of their rebellion against God – their idolatry, injustice, empty worship. But beginning in Isaiah 40, God has assured the Israelites that He has not forgotten them, that He is always with them, that He is faithful to His promises, and that He is stronger than the enemy nations who have captured them. And in chapter 45, he gives them the specific details of just how He will restore them, that He will move the heart of a pagan king named Cyrus to free the exiles and rebuild Jerusalem. And in Ezra, we see Cyrus fulfilling this prophecy.

First of all, this is another example of Biblical prophecy fulfilled, even down to naming the specific king. But secondly, let me ask you a question: how does this prophecy about Cyrus, and God's description of Cyrus in Isaiah 45, fit your understanding of the sovereignty of God? In Isaiah 45, you have an individual who is a pagan king, ruler of a mighty nation that has overthrown Babylon, another mighty nation. He worships foreign gods and does not acknowledge Yahweh for who He is. And yet God calls him his anointed, blesses him, and uses him to set his people free.

God used one pagan nation, Babylon, to discipline Israel, and He will use Cyrus and the Persian Empire to restore them. He can and will use people and events of this world to bring about His purposes.

Proverbs 21:1 - In the Lord's hand the king's heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please him.

Last year, we studied Exodus and saw another example of how God used a leader of a mighty nation to bring about His purposes:

Romans 9:17 - For Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

God is sovereign. This means that He can do or use whatever or whoever He pleases. He can override all other powers and authorities. Nothing can stop His purposes.

Job 42:2 - "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted."

Isaiah 46:9–10 - Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. ¹⁰ I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’

How does this reality affect your view of current events and politics? If God is sovereign, this means that in some real sense, Donald Trump is God’s man in the White House, so to speak. And, it means that Joe Biden was also God’s man in the White House, so to speak. Does that mean they are believers, or they seek to please God or acknowledge Him? Not necessarily – look at Cyrus and Pharaoh. But it means that God is sovereign over world events and leaders, and He is always at work to bring about His good purposes. This world is not out of His control, even when we can not understand what He is up to.

We are entirely responsible for our behaviors, and yet God is also sovereign over the affairs of this world, in some sense that we will never totally understand.

Daniel 1:1–2 - In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

No one has put this better than Charles Spurgeon, the famous 19th century English preacher, who said: “In God’s word, the car of truth runs on two rails of parallel statements. A great many people want to pull up one of the rails. They will not accept two sets of truth. Predestination and free agency do not agree, so the modern Solomons assert. Who said? They do not agree? They do agree, as fully as two rails on a tram line. But some narrow spirits must set aside the one or the other. They can not accept both. This has long been a puzzle on paper, but in practice it is ease itself. So here, the practical action of the believer, throwing his whole might into his master’s service, perfectly well agrees with his falling back upon the working of God and knowing that it is God who works all things for him. David’s slaying of the lion and the bear and the Philistine is clear, but God’s delivering him out of the jaw of the lion and the paw of the bear and the hand of the Philistine is equally clear. Make it plain to your own self. I believe that when I preach, I ought to prepare and study my sermon as if it’s success altogether depended on me, but that when I am thus thoroughly furnished, I have to trust in God as much as if I had done nothing at all. The same view should be taken of your view and your service for God. Work as if you were to be saved by your works, and then trust Christ only,

because it is only by him that you are capable of **a single good work**. Work for God with all your might as if you did it all, but then always remember that it is God who works in you both to will and to do according to his good pleasure. How is it that the Philistine be killed? By God, says one. True, but not without David. By David, says another. Yes, but not without God. Put the Lord on the march with David and you put the Philistines into untimely graves. When David moves to fight, God being with him, off comes **Goliath's head**. Nor champion's heads, nor demon's helmets can stand against the man of God."

God is sovereign over nature, over time, over the events of the world, over every king and ruler, and yes, He is even sovereign over evil.

2) God is not the author of evil but will use evil to bring about His good purposes

In Isaiah, we hear Israel over and over really struggling to reconcile God's sovereign care and love for them with their circumstances. If God loves them, why are they in exile? Why do they feel forgotten? Where is God when they are struggling and hurting, when their homeland is destroyed and they are captives in a foreign land? And we are no different. In Isaiah 45, God says this to them:

Isaiah 45:9-10 - "Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'The potter has no hands'?¹⁰ Woe to the one who says to a father, 'What have you begotten?' or to a mother, '**What have you brought to birth?**'"

In this context, God is asserting his right to use Cyrus as his anointed instead of an Israelite, and He warns them against an arrogant posture towards Him that accuses Him of doing evil, that thinks they know better than God. But the potter/potsherd analogy fits other circumstances just as well. God will do what God will do, and we will not always understand why He does it.

Isaiah 45:7 - I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, **do all these things**.

One of our struggles with the idea of God's sovereignty is that it means that God either causes or allows evil to happen. In fact, some of us may wish that Satan was on the same level so we have someone to blame. But ultimately, we need to know

that God is sovereign over even evil, so that we can believe that something good can come out of even the worst evil.

For example, say that you were abused as a child. How do you understand that horrible event in the light of God's sovereignty? We know that God's will of desire is clearly that no one would ever abuse another person. He has clearly taught us to love one another and not to use others for our own purpose. This means that if someone abused you, that was not God's will of desire for you, but the actions of evil men or women.

But if God is sovereign, then we can believe that the abuse you suffered is not the final word. It can be redeemed. Something good can come out of something unspeakably evil. Because God is on the throne and has promised that He is always working all things together for good.

Romans 8:28–29 - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

This is why Joseph, after being sold into slavery by his brothers, left for dead, unjustly imprisoned, and finally restored by God to a place of second in command over all of Egypt, when he stood in front of his brothers again, said:

Genesis 50:20 - You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

And as Jesus said to his disciples in **John 9:1-3**: As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

And as Peter said in his Pentecost sermon:

Acts 2:22–23 - "Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."

So take heart – the evil that happens to you is completely the fault of those who choose to do evil against you. And yet somehow, what has happened to you is not out of God’s sovereignty, but can be used for good here on earth. And we know that one day, He will make a final end of evil. For Israel, God is sovereign even over their exile, working all things together for His good and their good. And He is always doing the same in your life as well. And so:

3) Trust that the One who is sovereign loves you

Isaiah 55:8–9 - “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. ⁹“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Belief in a sovereign God is meant to humble us into acknowledging that we do not have an infallible perspective on life and on our words. Maybe we don’t understand why God would allow Donald Trump or Joe Biden to be president, just as the Israelites couldn’t understand how God could allow Nebuchadnezzar to conquer them or Cyrus to take authority over them. But God warned them about the exile if they would not repent of their sin, and He also promised to bring them back to the land, which 70 years after the exile began, He did. And God is still true to His character and His promises today, even when you do not understand what He is up to.

As Ray Labbe used to say, “Is God still on the throne? Then I must be okay.”

Because God is sovereign, His promises never fail. He will accomplish His purposes. And so our discipleship and our work is never in vain. God is the grand composer, orchestrating all things for His glory and our good. God’s silence is not absence, and His hiddenness is not abandonment.

Look at Jesus on the cross. The one who gave His life for you is the one on the throne, sovereignly caring for you. Nothing can separate you from His love.

Romans 8:31–32 - What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Trust that the one who is on the throne loves you. He will use or do whatever or whoever He pleases, and is even sovereign over evil, working all things together for His good purposes.