

Lesson 25 Isaiah 43:22-44:23 Forgiveness of Sins

Introduction

One of the great problems of humanity is that deliverance from outward oppression and suffering does not fix our most sinister problem. The oppressors were crushed under the waters of the Red Sea. Israel came out on the other side free. Miriam's song of triumph should have marked the climax of the Exodus.

I will sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted;	The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and song,	And He has become my salvation;
This is my God, and I will praise Him;	My father's God, and I will extol Him.

Exodus 15:1-2

But the greater problem was not outside of the Israelites. The more insidious problem is inside. God's people brought sin into the camp. We all bring sin into the camp. In reality, the climax of Exodus occurs after the sin of the golden calf. Israel turns away from the revelation God delivered on Mount Sinai. So, God must turn away from them. His anger burns, like holy fire on a dry bush. Yet, somehow, He makes a way to renew covenant with this sinful people. The climax of the Exodus is the declaration of God's name that He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, and that He will by no means allow the guilty to go unpunished. God will find a way to live in His holiness among a sinful people without burning them up. And that way will be in accord with His just wrath against sin.

Isaiah uses the historical events of the Egyptian exodus as a metaphor to describe a future Babylonian exodus. Just as the redemption of the nation from Egypt did not solve the problem of evil within, so also, redemption of the nation from exile in Babylon is not going to solve the problem of evil within. The problem was not with that one particularly stubborn generation. The problem is with every generation, from Egypt to Babylon to us. The problem is the depravity of the human heart, mind, and body. We all turn away.

There is a double problem, outer oppression and inner oppression. So, the Israelites need a double solution. Isaiah addressed national redemption in our previous lesson. He addresses forgiveness of sin in this lesson. Many of the themes developed in that previous lesson will carry forward into this present one. Indeed, the four-part pattern of that previous sub-section is paralleled here in the present sub-section, in Isaiah 43:22-44:23.

First, the sin of Israel breaks relationship with God.

Second, God promises salvation.

Third, God declares His uniqueness in contrast to false gods.

And fourth, God describes the salvation He has promised.

We begin with Israel's sin exposed in Isaiah 43:22-24.

Sin exposed (43:22-24)

²² "Yet you have not called on Me, O Jacob;	But you have become weary of Me, O Israel.
²³ "You have not brought to Me the sheep of your burnt offerings,	Nor have you honored Me with your sacrifices.
I have not burdened you with offerings,	Nor wearied you with incense.
²⁴ "You have bought Me not sweet cane with money,	Nor have you filled Me with the fat of your sacrifices;
Rather you have burdened Me with your sins,	You have wearied Me with your iniquities.

That's straight to the point. God tells Israel, "You have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities." There are five verses in this passage with two versets each. The five verses are chiasmically arranged. They begin and end with weariness.

Verse 22, the first verse, begins with this complaint against Israel, "You have not called on me." Why have they not called on God? He says, "You have become weary of me." Israel has become apathetic in its relationship with God. How often does that happen in human religion? We have all become weary of religion. Especially when we grow up in it, believing the religion is about us and about what we get out of it. It becomes just a lot of stuff you do: week-end worship, holidays, ritual motions, stand-up, sing, sit-down, pray. We lose active relational conversation with God. We have no emotional connection to God through the week. We don't see life change. And so, God's people become weary of their God.

The two verses of the inner frame give specific examples of Israel's apathy. The heart has gone out of their religious practice. Verse 23a says,

²³ "You have not brought to Me the sheep of your burnt offerings, Nor have you honored Me with your sacrifices.

They don't address the heart problem underlying their religious practice. They don't see fault in themselves. They see fault with the religion. And so they quit doing it. Church has become boring. They are not feeling it, so they just stop going. The parallel verse in 24a repeats this attitude of giving up and gives emphasis to how they should imagine God feeling about their choice to just stop offering sacrifice.

²⁴ "You have bought Me not sweet cane with money, Nor have you filled Me with the fat of your sacrifices;

They have not filled God. They have not provided sweet dessert. That's not literal. Sacrifice is symbolic. God is not really hungry. He does not really have a sweet tooth. God desires a people who love Him. God enjoys the praise of His children. We give up because we don't feel it. That shows how self-centered we humans are in our religious practices. I mean, isn't the main point of worship what God feels? Not what you feel. God is the center. God is the one being honored. Even when we can't come with a joyful and loving heart, God values a contrite heart, a broken heart, a faithful heart. Why is it about what we feel instead of what He feels? What is the point of our religious action?

The central verse is 23b.

I have not burdened you with offerings, Nor wearied you with incense.

If the ritual practices instituted by God seem to us burdensome or wearisome, then ought we not ask, "Why? What is it about my heart? What is it about my practice of these rituals that creates this burden? God did not require ritual sacrifice, whether offerings of food or incense, with the intent that we just suffer through it. The point was not to create a cross for people to have to bear so they could prove their spirituality, however distasteful. You say, "I hate going to church but I go. Therefore I am spiritual." It's not the point. The point was not to be wearisome.

Ritual action is given by God to provide opportunity to relate to Him personally and in community. The examples here are Old Covenant, but the meaning applies just as much to ritual sacrifice as it does to baptism, the Lord's supper, prayer, and songs of worship. Whether the ritual provides an opportunity to express confession, or lament, or honor, the goal is to focus on Him and on our relationship to Him. Whether it's through confession of sin, or lament of our circumstances, or expressing our honor and love, this is a relational opportunity.

So God says in this verse, "I do not burden you. I did not weary you. You have become burdened and wearied because you have distorted in your heart and mind the purpose of the rituals I gave you."

It is important to remember that the reward of religious action is not foremost our own experience of fulfillment, or of peace, or of joy. The reward of religious action is God Himself. He is the treasure. I take the opportunity to express my faith, my devotion to Him, and I can do that whether I feel peace and joy in the moment or not. Peace and joy are a right fruit of my relationship with God, an appropriate and desirable outcome of my religious expression. But the emotion is not the goal and is not guaranteed every time I worship. If we focus on how worship benefits us, we will lose that

¹ “But now listen, O Jacob, My servant,	And Israel, whom I have chosen:
² Thus says the LORD who made you	And formed you from the womb, who will help you,
‘Do not fear, O Jacob My servant;	And you Jeshurun whom I have chosen.
³ ‘For I will pour out water on the thirsty land	And streams on the dry ground;
I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring	And My blessing on your descendants;
⁴ And they will spring up among the grass	Like poplars by streams of water.’
⁵ “This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’S’;	And that one will call on the name of Jacob;
And another will write on his hand, ‘Belonging to the LORD,’	And will name Israel’s name with honor.

God will make a way for forgiveness of sin. The court scene found Israel guilty and decreed punishment. But the first line of this whole passage was, “I will not remember your sins.” That’s the thought that preceded the courtroom scene. It was not an admission of injustice. God does not ignore sin. He is not going to pervert the court. God’s holiness demands that justice be satisfied. He will find a way to satisfy the demands of justice, so that the guilt and damage of sin might be resolved, and then it’s forgotten. It’s not forgotten without being resolved.

We do not know here in Isaiah how that will work. But we do get a hint of something that Isaiah has not yet developed in his prophecy. Included in his promise to deal with Israel’s sin is this promise to pour out the Holy Spirit on Israel. Did you hear that in the text? This is new. It is just a glimpse of God’s future plan to both forgive and to, also, empower His people to move forward in righteousness. He foretold long time ago, through Moses in Deuteronomy 30 that He would do a new work in His people when He brought them back from Exile. That work would be internal, described as a circumcision of the heart. And that work would empower God’s people to love Him with heart, mind, and soul in a way not possible from just depending on their own strength.

I love how Isaiah uses the language of water poured out on the thirsty land to introduce this promise of the Holy Spirit. The image of water connects us back to our previous passage. “Passing through the waters” first reminded us of deliverance from Egypt. But we quickly realized that the Egypt motif was not pointing back to what God had done; it was reminding us of what God had done, so that we might believe in what He was going to do. The new exodus would take Israel, not up through the Red Sea to the Promised Land, but down across the Euphrates river to the Promised Land. It’s not up from Egypt, it’s down from Babylon.

The first use of water imagery promised protection, a passing through the waters. The second use of water imagery in our last passage promised provision. Just as He provided water to Israel through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan, so also God promised to provide water through the wilderness from Babylon to Canaan. This promise was in the very last verses of that previous lesson, 43:20-21.

²⁰ “The beasts of the field will glorify Me,	The jackals and the ostriches,
Because I have given waters in the wilderness	And rivers in the desert,
To give drink to My chosen people.	
²¹ “The people whom I formed for Myself	Will declare My praise.

National redemption requires water to keep the people going until they reach the Promised Land. And that’s literal water, not spiritual water. But now, in this third use of the water imagery, we see the need for spiritual provision to keep the people going until they reach the Promised Land. The Holy Spirit will be poured out when Israel’s descendants are redeemed from sin.

We also see in this passage that spiritual redemption will result in a transformed sense of identity. Israel is getting a new power. Now through the indwelling Holy Spirit they are also getting a new sense of who they are. Instead of trying to define God and religion with human beings at the center, God’s redeemed people will gain this new spiritual perspective with God as central to their own definition, even of themselves. Verse 5,

⁵ “This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’S’;
And another will write on his hand, ‘Belonging
to the LORD,’
And that one will call on the name of Jacob;
And will name Israel’s name with honor.

Religion had become weary because the point of the ritual had become human-centered. An internal turning of the human heart is necessary to experience the joy of relationship with God. In heart and soul, these people now are going to begin to say, “I am the Lord’s.” They are seeing themselves in a new light. That’s who I am. I am one “Belonging to the Lord.” That reminds me of John who wrote the Gospel of John, of his designation of himself in the Gospel, “the beloved disciple.” Is this who you are? Is that how you define yourself? This is who I am. I am the Lord’s. I am one belonging to the Lord. I am a beloved disciple. With this new identity, the name of Israel is not a name of shame, of a people worn out by their own God and given over to sin. The name of Israel is called on in honor. It’s now a people who know their God, who live to glorify God.

God’s promise of deliverance from sin addresses both the guilt of sin and the power of sin. God will find a way to “remember our sin no more” and He will “pour out his Holy Spirit.” The guilt and the power of sin are defeated. That is the promise.

The Certainty of the Lord’s Promise (44:6-20)

We consider the certainty of that promise in the third passage of this section, in Isaiah 44:6-20. The certainty is established by the character and ability of the One who makes the promise. God is absolutely unique in His character and ability. He stands above. He stands alone. All other options turn out to be a mirage in the desert, holding out a promise of living water that will never ultimately come true. To establish the certainty of God’s word, Isaiah first affirms who God is and then un.masks the alternative. So in this third passage of our lesson, we begin with who God is in the first three verses, Isaiah 44:6-8.

The Uniqueness of Yahweh (6-8)

⁶ “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
‘I am the first and I am the last,
⁷ ‘Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it;
From the time that I established the ancient nation.
And let them declare to them the things that
are coming,
⁸ ‘Do not tremble and do not be afraid;
Have I not long since announced it to you
and declared it?
And you are My witnesses.
Is there any God besides Me,
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
And there is no God besides Me.
Yes, let him recount it to Me in order,
And the events that are going to take place.¹
Or is there any other Rock? I know of none.’ ”

I love that! Right? We start with the absolute uniqueness of God.

⁶ “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
‘I am the first and I am the last,
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
And there is no God besides Me.

We’ve already heard this in Isaiah. “I am the first and I am the last.” It was in 41:4, it’s here in 44:6, it’s going to come again in 48:12. And it’s the same language that appears at the beginning and end of the book of Revelation. This is a theme of Scripture. This is God’s name, “Yahweh, I am. I am the first and I am the last.” The second verset makes clear this is a claim to unique divinity. “There is no God besides Me.” That is a claim of uniqueness, and that uniqueness is made visible to God’s people through the works He has done and through the fulfillment of His promises in the works He will do.
Verse 7,

¹ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1911-1912.

⁷ Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; Yes, let him recount it to Me in order,
From the time that I established the ancient nation.
And let them declare to them the things that are coming, And the events that are going to take place.

As we have seen and will continue to see, fulfillment of His Word is a major aspect of Isaiah's argument that God alone is truly God. And here, together with that theme, we also come back to the theme of the previous lesson that God's people have the responsibility of giving witness to their knowledge and experience of God. That was in verse 8.

⁸ 'Do not tremble and do not be afraid; Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it?
And you are My witnesses.
Is there any God besides Me, Or is there any other Rock? I know of none.'

This is who we know God to be. He is first and last. He is the only God. He has blessed His people in the past, and He will keep His promises of blessing in the future. He is the Rock upon whom we will build our lives. There is no other. And this is our witness. We are witnesses to the uniqueness of God.

The Absurdity of Idols (9-20)

With that uniqueness established, we are able to believe in the certainty of His promises because of who He is. He is first, He is last, there is no other god. And then, following his previous pattern, Isaiah continues to affirm that uniqueness by denouncing false alternatives and highlighting the uncertainty of trusting any other offer.

So, just as believers in Yahweh are to serve as His witnesses, Isaiah calls believers in false gods to serve as their witnesses. And he is going to ridicule their witness. It is going to be a cutting rebuke. Before I read it, I want to let you know how this critique of idolatry has been viewed in modern Biblical studies.

A common objection of modern scholars is that Isaiah fails to understand pagan idolatry. They say he has missed the point that these idols are merely symbolic representations of the gods they worship, not the gods themselves. That argument is faulty for two reasons. First, it's not that simple. Ancient Near Eastern idolatry did recognize physical idols as a manifestation of the god worshipped. The phenomena is the god. Similar to how a storm was not something a storm god did, but the manifestation of the storm god himself. The god is somehow manifested in its physical representation. The god is not wholly localized. He could be manifested in many idols. But it is also not correct to say the idol was merely a symbolic representation. In critiquing Isaiah, modern scholars using this argument show that they are the ones who fail to understand pagan idolatry. This is a real problem. How can you take a block of wood and them claim that it's actually a manifestation of a god? That was part of the claim.

The argument is faulty for a second reason. Isaiah is not providing here an overly simplistic view of idolatry, so that he can knock it down using a strawman argument. You know, an argument that doesn't really work, but only works on Isaiah's simple presentation of idolatry. That is not what Isaiah is doing. He is intentionally boiling idolatry down to essential elements to show its own inherent absurdity. You might argue that Isaiah is unfair or incorrect in his critique. But at least recognize the strategy he is using. This is not a strawman strategy. To show the absurdity of idolatry is to undermine the entire pagan worldview.

Robert Alter is a professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkley. In my online transcripts of this series, I have been using Alter's translation as the basis for the scanning of the text. That means I am following the way he organizes the poetry into verses and versets. Alter is not a Christian. He does have profound insight into the literary nature of the Old Testament. I am telling you all of this to set up a quote from Alter where he addresses the misconception of another modern Jewish scholar. Here is a paragraph from Alter on how we should view Isaiah's negative view of idol-gods.

The lengthy polemic against the manufacturers of idols that begins with these words is a hallmark of our prophet. No other biblical writer so scathingly reduces paganism to mere absurd fetishism. In the mid-twentieth century, the Israeli Bible scholar Yehezkel Kaufman used such prophecies to argue that the Israelites were so far removed from paganism that they failed to understand that idols were conceived merely as symbols of the gods they represented. One may question that view because polemic or satire is a literary vehicle that thrives on exaggeration: the prophet, in order to show vividly that idolators worship imagined entities, not real gods, represents them absurdly carving gods out of wood, using the leftover wood for fuel, and bowing down to their wooden carvings as to gods.²

Adding to that view, John Oswalt emphasizes the persuasive objective of Isaiah's strategy. Oswalt writes,

Instead of a logically developed summation in which previous points are enumerated, the author paints a detailed picture whereby he appeals to the imagination to drive the final nail of persuasion. Here, when he has finished his sarcastic picture, it is simply unthinkable to compare these gods to God.³

Okay, now we are ready to consider the detailed picture Isaiah paints. Here is his argument, his polemic. Some Bibles print this as prose in paragraph form. Other Bibles scan it as poetry. Alter scans it as poetic verse, so I'm going to read it that way. This is Isaiah 44:9-20,

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| <p>⁹ Those who fashion a graven image are all of them futile,
even their own witnesses fail to see</p> <p>¹⁰ Who has fashioned a god or cast an idol</p> <p>¹¹ Behold, all his companions will be put to shame,
Let them all assemble themselves, let them stand up,</p> <p>¹² The man shapes iron into a cutting tool
fashioning it with hammers.
He also gets hungry and his strength fails;</p> <p>¹³ Another shapes wood,
he outlines it with red chalk.</p> <p>and makes it like the form of a man,</p> <p>¹⁴ Surely he cuts cedars for himself,
and raises it for himself among the trees of the forest.</p> <p>¹⁵ Then it becomes something for a man to burn,
he also makes a fire</p> <p>He also makes a god and worships it;</p> <p>¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire;</p> <p>He also warms himself and says, "Aha!</p> <p>¹⁷ But the rest of it he makes into a god, his
his graven image.
he also prays to it and says,</p> | <p>and their precious things are of no profit;
or know, so that they will be put to shame.
to no profit?
for the craftsmen themselves are mere men.
let them tremble, let them together be put to shame.
and does his work over the coals,
and working it with his strong arm.
he drinks no water and becomes weary.
he extends a measuring line;
He works it with planes and outlines it with a compass,
like the beauty of man, so that it may sit in a house.
and takes a cypress or an oak
He plants a fir, and the rain makes it grow.
so he takes one of them and warms himself;
to bake bread.
he makes it a graven image and falls down before it.
over this half he eats meat as he roasts a roast
and is satisfied.
I am warm, I have seen the fire."
He falls down before it and worships;
"Deliver me, for you are my god."</p> |
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² Alter, 1916.

³ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 171.

Thus the Achilles' heel of all paganism is idol making. If it can be shown, as Isaiah does, that it is folly to believe that supreme power resides in a block of wood that was a tree until someone cut it down and with great effort made it into a god, then a deathblow has been struck at the root of paganism. If the gods are coterminous with this world, as idol making demonstrates, then it is folly to think that they can radically reshape the world according to some transcendent purpose. They are blind, deaf, and dumb, locked into the cycles of nature, and those who worship them reduce themselves to nothing, meaningless blobs of protoplasm, which live, propagate, and die, all to no end.⁴

Understanding the ancient pagan view helps us understand Isaiah's denouncement of the false gods that Israelites and all the surrounding nations turned to. But how is that denouncement relevant to us in our modern context? We're not tempted to turn from God to idols made of wood. Are we?

Well, maybe not idols made of wood. But human beings have never stopped looking for solutions to the deepest needs of heart and soul in the things they themselves have created from what is already present in the universe. So it would do us well to ask, what did the ancients seek to gain from their idols? Can we relate to that? Well, we can boil most of it down to these four longings. A longing for control over life's circumstances; a longing for pleasure; a longing for identity; and a longing to worship.

How modern does that sound? A longing to control circumstances, to make things work out for you and loved ones? Is that modern? How about, a longing to experience pleasure? Yes, that's modern. A longing for identity, to know who you are, to belong, to have value? That certainly sounds modern enough! And I believe the longing to worship fits right along with modern desires. I'll come back to that one in a moment.

What, then, are our gods? What do we call on to help us satisfy these basic longings? Even if we are no longer calling them gods or no longer make physical representations of them, what idols of the heart do the modern people seek out to meet the desire for control, for pleasure, for identity, for worship?

For example, what are we seeking when we make a particular relationship central to life? What are all the love songs about? What do we seek when we make money a primary goal? What are we looking for in vocational success? Why do we value our educational accomplishments? What do we want from adventure or entertainment? What do we want from a toned down, culturally appropriate religion?

I'd say it all boils down to the same thing. We either want control, some kind of power that will enable us to manipulate life's outcomes, so that we can attain stability or secure blessing or avoid calamity; or we want pleasure, whether the pleasure of adventure, or the pleasure of relaxation, or the pleasure of sex, or the pleasure of escape. Or we want identity. We want to define ourselves in a way that enables us to belong and to have value. Or we want to worship. That's a need in the human heart not always clearly defined, but it is always there. Whether we worship a sports team, an actor, a singer, an influencer, a man, a woman, our children, mother earth, the one power, the stars - we want to recognize something beyond ourselves to fill a gap inside. And this is linked together with our desire for identity and belonging, this need to worship something more than us.

These four things, probably more, but at least these four things: control, pleasure, identity, and worship - that's what we want deep inside. And that's why we fashion our own idols out of what we see around us: relationships, money, success, entertainment. We are trying to fulfill these deeper longings. And just as naturally as the ancients, our sin nature urges us to turn away from the One true God as the source of these longings. We turn from Him to the creation and to our own definitions of life. The problem is not the base desires. The problem is that we have twisted imaginings of what we want and have given up on the one true source that can fulfill what we most desperately want.

⁴ Oswalt 174–176.

²³ Shout for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done it! Shout joyfully, you lower parts of the earth;
Break forth into a shout of joy, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it;
For the LORD has redeemed Jacob And in Israel He shows forth His glory.

“The Lord has done it!” The creation is not the source of redemption. God is the source. God is the center. The creation exists to display, and manifest, and rejoice in the glory of its creator. That glory is supremely displayed through God’s unflinching justice and incomparable grace. He makes a way for a sinful people to live in fellowship with a holy God. What’s the right response to that? A song of joy!