

Lesson 30 Isaiah 48:1-22 Israel Delivered

Introduction

Isaiah foresaw two major milestones in the salvation history of Israel. He foresaw their exile to and their rescue from Babylon. Comparing the rescue to a second Exodus highlights its significance. The rescue from Babylon is just as important as that defining rescue from Egypt long ago.

Isaiah describes the exile and rescue from three perspectives. He gives the Cyrus prophecy as a beginning perspective. We are looking at future things from the point of view of a prophecy given in Isaiah's present time. He then gives us as a middle perspective Israel's frustrated response to that plan, and God's corresponding reassurance. That perspective covers the need for Israel to wait in faith through the time from prophecy to fulfillment. Isaiah concludes with the ending perspective of fulfillment. That perspective comes in two parts, the fulfillment of Babylon's fall in chapter 47; and the matching fulfillment of Israel's deliverance in chapter 48.

We considered Babylon's fall, her humiliation, hubris, and helplessness in our last lesson. Isaiah's language elevated the prophecy beyond the specific, historic case of Babylon to include the general, spiritual reality that we can refer to as, "the City of Man." That sense of self-reliance and self-determination that was expressed as far back at the Tower of Babel continues through all human history to the last days envisioned by John in the Book of Revelation.

Turning from the fall of Babylon to the deliverance of Israel, we might expect a positive vision of Zion as the counter to the City of Man. Unlike Babylon, God's people, His city Zion, will be glorious, not humiliated; will be humble, not proud; will be empowered, not helpless. But that's not the picture we are about to receive. The people of Israel are not the representative people of God we would hope they would be. They do not provide a godly example to contrast Babylon's ungodly example.

The Deliverance of Israel 48:1-22

Motyer divides the deliverance of Israel into two parallel halves. The first half, 48:1-11, emphasizes the Lord's past perseverance with Israel and the second half, 48:12-22, emphasizes His future perseverance with Israel. We start with God's past perseverance. This is Isaiah 48:1-11.

The Lord's Past Perseverance (1-11)

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| 1 | "Hear this, O house of Jacob, | who are named Israel |
| | And who came forth from the loins of Judah, | |
| | Who swear by the name of the LORD | And invoke the God of Israel, |
| | But not in truth nor in righteousness. | |
| 2 | "For they call themselves after the holy city | And lean on the God of Israel; |
| | The LORD of hosts is His name. | |
| 3 | "I declared the former things long ago | And they went forth from My mouth, |
| | | and I proclaimed them. |
| | Suddenly I acted, and they came to pass. | |
| 4 | "Because I know that you are obstinate, | And your neck is an iron sinew |
| | And your forehead bronze, | |
| 5 | "Therefore I declared them to you long ago, | Before they took place I proclaimed them to you, |
| | So that you would not say, 'My idol has done them, | And my graven image and my molten image |
| | | have commanded them.' |
| 6 | "You have heard; look at all this. | And you, will you not declare it? |
| | I proclaim to you new things from this time, | Even hidden things which you have not known. |
| 7 | "They are created now and not long ago; | And before today you have not heard them, |
| | So that you will not say, 'Behold, I knew them.' | |
| 8 | "You have not heard, you have not known. | Even from long ago your ear has not been open, |
| | Because I knew that you would deal very | And you have been called a rebel from birth. |
| | treacherously; | |

God's past perseverance with Israel remained steadfast not because of their faithfulness, but in spite of it. We pick up on the problem right away in verses 1 and 2.

The people of Israel call themselves after the city Zion. They say, "We are the people of God." They self-identify with Yahweh. They lean on Him. Just as people in many nations today self-identify as Christians, culturally as Christians, but there is no life change that corresponds. There is no witness for the Lord. They are not salt and light in the world. This people is not seeking the Lord's heart out of love and righteousness. Isaiah says they invoke the God of Israel but not in truth nor in righteousness. A major reason for announcing His plans so far in advance is to provide a witness to this stiff-necked people, to counter the religious frauds among them who claim to be His own. This is in verses 3-7.

³ “I declared the former things long ago
And they went forth from My mouth,
and I proclaimed them.
Suddenly I acted, and they came to pass.

⁴ “Because I know that you are obstinate,
And your neck is an iron sinew
And your forehead bronze.

"You have a head of that's made out of bronze!" Nothing gets through. Talk about stiff-necked! You're so stiff-necked, it says, "iron sinew, your muscles are iron." That's how obstinate you are. Verse 5,

⁵ Therefore I declared these things to you long ago, Before they took place I proclaimed them to you,
So that you would not say, ‘My idol has done them, And my graven image and my molten image
have commanded them.’

⁶ “You have heard; look at all this. And you, will you not declare it?
I proclaim to you new things from this time, Even hidden things which you have not known.

⁷ “They are created now and not long ago; And before today you have not heard them,
So that you will not say, ‘Behold, I knew them.’

God recognizes the stubborn heart of His people. He told them in advance what would happen. The initial, the positive point of that is that they would become witnesses; they would embrace the prophecy and they would proclaim it. That was the beginning of verse 6, "You have heard; look at all this. And you, will you not declare it?" Will you not declare this word? But instead of the prophecy being a witness that Israel embraces and speaks outwardly to the peoples, it becomes a witness against themselves so that when those things happen, the ones who claim to be followers of Yahweh will not give credit to some idol they have turned to for help. This is a strong rebuke to the faithlessness among the people of God. God does not expect them to persevere in faithlessness. It's not enough to say, "I'm a Yahweh follower." It's not enough to say, "I'm a Christian." We have to ask deeper questions. What are we really trusting in? Where is our security? Where is our future? What idols have we relied on to provide safety and success? God gives us the truth of how He works, so that we can rightly credit Him for the blessings we receive in life.

There are both old things and new things here. The Cyrus prophecy is the old thing. God foretold something specific and unimaginable. That truth is knowable. When it happens, there will be a clear

correspondence from the actual event that traces back to the prophecy. Something known of old will come to be. There are also new things here. I see two kinds of new things. First, God did not give the exact time and place and manner in which he would use Cyrus to deliver. Those details will be newly revealed when they happen. Second, some truth only hinted at or not mentioned at all will accompany the fulfillment of the prophecy. That's another class of new thing, wholly new revelation.

Isaiah describes Biblical prophecy as both declaring old things, and as fulfilled with additional new things. Isaiah further explains how God's approach discredits two types of religious frauds. The first religious fraud claims identity with Yahweh, but has sought security through some other means. Without proof that God has indeed acted, they are going to give credit to their own efforts and their own sources: their own idols. God provides detailed prophecy in advance to counter that kind of fraud among His people. Verse 5,

5 Therefore I declared them to you long ago, Before they took place I proclaimed them to you,
So that you would not say, 'My idol has done them, And my graven image and my molten image
have commanded them.'

You can't give credit to your idol; to your education; to your military prowess; to your success in your vocation; to your relationships; to your family; to your traditional gods; to your horoscope; to your own spiritual practices. Whatever the idol is that we are tempted to say, "You know what really gave me security? What really gave me safety? In my heart, where I'm really giving credit? It's not Yahweh. It's this thing I did. It's this thing I understood. My idol has done them. My graven image, my molten image have commanded these things to be." The other kind of religious fraud finds nothing new or wonderous in the fulfillment of the prophecy. This fraud claims to have full knowledge in advance of what God will do. To counter the know-it-all, God holds back revelation of certain details or truths until the actual time of fulfillment. Those things will be revealed new. They weren't spoken of ahead of time.

I proclaim to you new things from this time, Even hidden things which you have not known.
7 "They are created now and not long ago; And before today you have not heard them,
So that you will not say, 'Behold, I knew them.'

Isaiah is giving us here powerful insight into the nature of Biblical prophecy. Prophecy is not given so that we can figure out all the exact times and details of future events. We are not meant to know everything. Prophecy is an aid to faith, not a replacement for faith. Prophecy counters the pride of the religious person who has found success through ritual, or practice, or knowledge apart from God. Prophecy also counters the pride of the religious person who claims to have it all figured out. Faith responds to prophecy with both confidence and dependence. Confidence in what God has clearly declared and dependence in the unknown. Trusting God to bring about the fulfillment, even if it seems impossible. Faith is willing to wait and be surprised by how God's plan will unfold.

When prophetic events do come true, we should not wonder as though the fulfillment of prophecy is a surprise, and at the same time, we should wonder at the exact nature of the fulfillment and at new revelation that accompanies the fulfillment. The writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast should have astonished everybody. That's a twist that was not announced ahead of time. This is something new God added the night before Persia entered Babylon. It is a new thing unannounced. Cyrus' declaration to allow the Jews to return home after his conquest of Babylon should not cause great surprise. There should be gratitude but it's a detail that is expected. Some details will be new, but the release through a leader named Cyrus, that detail was defined. That's the old thing declared long before.

Looking ahead to the end of times and return of Jesus, I question people who declare to know exactly what is going on in the world today in connection to end times. You hear all kinds of stories of events that are happening in the Middle East. Modern "prophets" claim to understand it all. They "understand" the conflict in Russia, and they'll point the Bible verses, and they have got it all figured out. They can give us charts of how these things are going to unfold. They say before the thing

happens, "Behold, I knew them." I don't think they do know them. I think they are interpreting as they go, and some of it is going to come true, and some of it is not going to come true. I think it's mostly a fraud. When I read the Bible, these things are simply not clear. There will be revelation of new details and new truths that could not be known ahead of time, things only God could imagine or do. We will be surprised.

There are some things that should not surprise us. We should not be surprised that Israel was brought home again from Babylon, because that was clearly foretold in Scripture. I think it was shocking that Israel was brought home again after World War II. And there's a third Exodus. There's Exodus from Egypt, Exodus from Babylon, and then after Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, Jews were out of Israel for almost 1900 years: 1850 years. But details in the prophecy, the broad picture details require Israel to be in Israel. A nation in the land. And so, it is both shocking and not surprising. Oh, wow, yes! When it happens, it's in full accord with Scripture. There's something else I think is going to shock us: we are going to be full of wonder, but we are not going to really be surprised, is the coming of Jesus Christ. A consistent vision through the Gospels and into the Book of Revelation is the vision of a Son of Man coming on the clouds. And His appearance will be unmistakable. It will not be like the first coming of the Son of Man, born as a baby in humble circumstances. It will be the triumphant coming of the Son of Man. This is something proclaimed of as old. Do not worry that you are going to miss the second coming of Jesus. When it happens, everybody's going to know. When it happens, you might be surprised at the timing. You will not be surprised at the fact that this is Jesus and He has returned. This is the Son of Man pictured in Daniel 7 with the Ancient of Days, coming on the clouds to reign over the entire Earth. It's the Son of Man coming on the clouds pictured in Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, 1 Thessalonians 4, Revelation 1. This is an old thing, announced repeatedly ahead of time. This is going to happen, and when it happens you are going to see it and you will know. And we are supposed to be proclaiming it. We are to embrace that word and be a witness to it. We don't want it to be a witness against us at our lack of faith. We want it to be our joyful pronouncement ahead of time because we believe this is going to happen. We don't need to get into all the details of what we don't know is going to happen. We don't have to have it all figured out. We can wait in faith for some new details and new things to be revealed. But the thing that has been made clear, Jesus is coming back to reign. That's not going to be a surprise. In that day your faith in God as the One who fulfills His promises will be completely vindicated.

God's perseverance with His people is for the great benefit of His people, but not ultimately centered in His people. God is God-centered, not human-centered. And He must be, because He is the true center of all things. God is rightly concerned about the glorious display of His own nature, as we should all be. We should all be concerned with the glorious display of that which is most beautiful; that which is supremely good; that which is true. And that's God! God must be concerned with His own beauty and goodness and truth. Verse 8,

⁸ "You have not heard, you have not known.
Because I knew that you would deal very
treacherously;

Even from long ago your ear has not been open,
And you have been called a rebel from birth.

The fulfillment of the promise doesn't depend on Israel. Verse 9,

⁹ "For the sake of My name I delay My wrath,
In order not to cut you off.

¹⁰ "Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver;
I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.

¹¹ "For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act;
For how can My name be profaned?
And My glory I will not give to another.

The goodness of God's people cannot be the reason that God saves. What we deserve is wrath. If there is to be mercy, it must come out of the goodness of God's nature – out of His faithfulness to His own word and out of His gracious love toward sinful, broken people. He must act in accordance with

who He is, for His own sake and His own glory. He cannot defame His own name. He must give honor to that which is supremely beautiful, true, and good. And in God's case, He is that which is supremely beautiful, true, and good. It is right for God to say,

¹¹ “For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act; For how can My name be profaned?
And My glory I will not give to another.

The Lord's Future Perseverance (12-22)

God's perseverance in His past faithfulness has been centered in the glory of His nature, who He is. That nature does not change. God will continue in future faithfulness to His promises. Verses 12-21 ensure God's future perseverance with Israel. We begin with the second half of our passage just as we began the first half, with an exhortation to Israel to listen. It is a call that has echoed out to Israel, since the establishment of Covenant with Moses. The word translated as ,“hear,” in 48:1 and, “listen,” in 48:12 is, “shema.” The Jewish prayer called the “Shema” is repeated by Jews every day in morning and evening prayers. The name of the prayer is taken from the first word of the prayer, which starts with Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” Moses called Israel to hear, to listen. Isaiah calls Israel to hear, to listen. Verses 12-22,

- ¹² "Listen to Me, O Jacob,
I am He, I am the first,
¹³ "Surely My hand founded the earth,
When I call to them,
¹⁴ "Assemble, all of you, and listen!
The LORD loves him; he will carry out His good
pleasure
¹⁵ "I, even I, have spoken; indeed I have called him,
¹⁶ "Come near to Me, listen to this:
From the time it took place, I was there.
And now the Lord God
¹⁷ Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
"I am the LORD your God,
Who leads you in the way you should go.
¹⁸ "If only you had paid attention to My
commandments!
And your righteousness like the waves of the sea.
¹⁹ "Your descendants would have been like the sand,
Their name would never be cut off
²⁰ Go forth from Babylon!
Declare with the sound of joyful shouting,
Send it out to the end of the earth;
²¹ They did not thirst when He led them through the
deserts.
He split the rock and the water gushed forth.
even Israel whom I called;
I am also the last.
And My right hand spread out the heavens;
they stand together.
Who among them has declared these things?
on Babylon, and His arm will be against the
Chaldeans.
I have brought him, and He will make his ways
successful.
From the first I have not spoken in secret,
has sent Me, and His Spirit."
the Holy One of Israel,
who teaches you to profit,
Then your well-being would have been like a river,
And your offspring like its grains;
or destroyed from My presence."
Flee from the Chaldeans!
proclaim this,
Say, "The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob."
He made the water flow out of the rock for them;
²² "There is no peace for the wicked,"
says the LORD.

In spite of their obstinacy, they are still the Israel that God has called. The “hear” in verses 1 and 2 was followed by a description of faithless Israel. The “hear” in verses 12 and 13 is followed with a description of faithful God.

- ¹² "Listen to Me, O Jacob,
I am He, I am the first,
¹³ "Surely My hand founded the earth,
When I call to them,
even Israel whom I called;
I am also the last.
And My right hand spread out the heavens;
they stand together.

The verb, “hear,” or, “listen,” in verse 12 is singular, directed at the personified nation Israel. The call to listen in Scripture always assumes not only hearing of God’s word, but also obedience to God’s word. That’s the kind of listening expected. In this case, Israel is to submit to the reality of God’s nature as sovereign over the whole creation. A second commandment to listen is issued in verses 14-15.

- 14 “Assemble, all of you, and listen!
The LORD loves him; he will carry out His good pleasure
- 15 “I, even I, have spoken; indeed I have called him,
- Who among them has declared these things?
on Babylon, and His arm will be against the Chaldeans.
I have brought him, and will make his ways successful.

The verb, “listen,” is plural this time, calling on every individual member of the nation. So the first “listen” was to the whole group; the second “listen” is to every member of the group. Listen and embrace this truth. First, Yahweh is sovereign Lord over creation. Second, Yahweh is sovereign Lord over history. He has declared something that is going to happen, and He is going to carry out His good pleasure. God will raise up a leader who will defeat Babylon. God has spoken. He is Lord of history. It will be. Listen to this! Embrace it! Live by it!

A third command to listen is given in verse 16. This one is also plural, directed again at all the individuals who make up the nation Israel.

- 16 “Come near to Me, listen to this:
From the first I have not spoken in secret,
From the time it took place, I was there.

And now the Lord God

has sent Me, and His Spirit.”

The first three versets in this verse communicate a fairly clear meaning. The last two versets are a bit confusing. Let’s start with the first three versets. The first is the call to listen: listen to this. The second is a declaration that God has not spoken in secret. This is a consistent Biblical theme. God’s words are not mystical, opaque, obscure, unknowable. Some are, but the great majority is not. God speaks with plain, real life language in order that His people, if they would pay attention to what He is saying, they can understand it. Sometimes He does not give us all the information we want. But if we don’t concentrate on what God has not said and concentrate on what God has said, we can understand a great part of it. God does not speak in secret. We understand: Israel will be defeated and exiled to Babylon. A man named Cyrus will come to power and defeat Babylon. Israel will be freed and return to rebuild Jerusalem. None of that is secret, mystical, symbolic language.

Then in the third verset, God declares, “From the time it took place, I was there.” God spoke at some earlier time. He didn’t keep the thing a secret. And later, God was present, He was there when His spoken word came true. “I spoke it. And then I was there to carry it out.” God perseveres in faithfulness to see His promises realized.

Now we come to the two versets of 16b. “And now the Lord God has sent Me, and His Spirit.” God does not speak in secret, but there are times when His word is not so easy to interpret. And the question here is, “Who said that? Who is speaking?” God spoke in 16a. That was clear. But 16b claims, “the Lord God has sent me, and His Spirit.” Who is saying that? It could be Cyrus, speaking, “God has sent me.”

Oswalt and Motyer provide two better options. Oswalt thinks this is the prophet Isaiah speaking. 16a tells us that God has spoken. And in 16b the prophet claims that the words he writes are those words that God has spoken. He has been sent by the Lord God with a message, and by His Spirit. That would fit well with Isaiah’s call described back in 6:9, where God commissions Isaiah, “Go and tell this people...” Motyer, on the other hand, understands this verset as pointing ahead to the true Servant who takes center stage in chapters 49-55. The prophecy of God is both unsurprising and surprising. He will set Israel free through Cyrus, but He will do more than that. Something new is coming that wasn’t made fully clear ahead of time, a different kind of servant sent from God the Father and by the Holy Spirit. That servant is the one speaking here, foreshadowing the three servant songs to come. Either interpretation, the prophet or the servant, could work here.

The rest of this section describes the journey of Israel out from Babylon, through the wilderness, back to the Promised land. God remains faithful. And yet, the faithlessness of His people still strikes a discordant note. Verses 17-22.

- ¹⁷ Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
 I am the LORD your God,
 the Holy One of Israel,
 who teaches you to profit,
 Who leads you in the way you should go.
- ¹⁸ “If only you had paid attention to My commandments!
 Then your well-being would have been like a river,
 And your righteousness like the waves of the sea.
- ¹⁹ “Your descendants would have been like the sand,
 Their name would never be cut off
 And your offspring like its grains;
 or destroyed from My presence.”
²⁰ Go forth from Babylon!
 Declare with the sound of joyful shouting,
 Send it out to the end of the earth;
 Flee from the Chaldeans!
 proclaim this,
²¹ They did not thirst when He led them through the deserts.
 He split the rock and the water gushed forth.
 Say, “The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob.”
 He made the water flow out of the rock for them;
- ²² “There is no peace for the wicked,”
 says the LORD.

The positive declaration of the Lord as “Redeemer” in verse 17 sets up expectation of triumph. God will lead His people out of Babylon in the way they should go. Verses 18-19 throw cold water on the declaration. God cannot help but remind Israel of her past failure. If only they had been faithful to the Covenant, well-being and righteousness would overflow like a river. Their descendants would be abundant, their name blessed.

After that reminder of past failure, God orders Israel to set out from Babylon. They are to proceed with joy. They are to give witness to God who has redeemed them. The language of verse 21 casts this redemption as a new Exodus. As with that long ago generation led by Moses, God will provide for this generation water from a rock on the long journey home.

We conclude with the single verset in 22. “There is no peace for the wicked.” That feels to me like an odd conclusion to the buildup created by the three versets of 21. It seems jarring and out of place. “They did not thirst when he led them through the desert.” How so? How does a nation go through the desert without thirst? “He made water flow out of the rock for them.” Let’s elevate that language. Water did not just flow from the rock. “He split the rock and the water gushed forth.” Each verset builds. What does it build to? “There is no peace for the wicked, says the Lord.”

Who are the wicked? Surely, the Babylonians. Or more generally, any enemy that stands against God, declaring to His face, “I am and there is no one beside me.” The City of Man. They are the wicked. For them there will be no peace. That is true. But that is not the point being made here. Let’s go back to verse 18.

- ¹⁸ “If only you had paid attention to My commandments!
 Then your well-being would have been like a river,
 And your righteousness like the waves of the sea.

That’s not God unable to get over Israel’s past. It’s not that God just couldn’t help throw in something negative. That’s a reminder of a consistent pattern through the entire duration of Israel’s history, beginning not only with Moses, but stretching all the way back to Abraham. And we are supposed to think back that far. The language of verse 19 is the language of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12:1-3.

- ¹⁹ “Your descendants would have been like the sand,
 Their name would never be cut off
 And your offspring like its grains;
 or destroyed from My presence.”

God's promise would have come true for Israel, if Israel had paid attention to the commands of God. But from the start of the Biblical story, we see in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob an inability to persevere in faithfulness to God. The first generation out of Egypt exemplified the inability of human beings to persevere in good relationship with God. They just could not remain faithful. They could not enter the land. And they could not keep from complaining and resisting through the entire 40 years of their wilderness wandering. God provided the manna and the water. God was faithful. But His people complained and rebelled.

The great theological climax of the book of Exodus is not the redemption of Israel and the destruction of Egypt in the Red Sea. That's what we want the climax to be! The destruction of the outward enemy. But how to save Israel from mighty Egypt is not the primary problem. The primary problem of the Exodus is pictured in the burning bush. How can fire remain on a dry bush without consuming it? How can a holy God live with a sinful people without burning them up? Exodus 33:5,

For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the sons of Israel, 'You are an obstinate people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you.'"

Fire burns the bush. This is the persistent problem of humankind. Whatever people God saves, those people are their own enemy. Solve the problems of oppression, poverty, education, drought, whatever, all those are real problems, and you still have the problem of the human heart. Take them out of Egypt and they bring Egypt with them. The Old Covenant history of Israel has not solved the problem. 800 years after Egypt, the people brought out of Babylon are going to be no different. They have been tested, purified in the fire but it doesn't solve the problem in the heart. We always bring the enemy into the camp with us. Our deepest problem is the sin in our own heart.

To verse 18 again, God did not point out the past Covenant failure of Israel just to make them feel bad or to hold them under judgement. God pointed out the past failure of Israel to highlight the ongoing problem of the future. "There is no peace for the wicked, says the Lord."

¹⁸ "If only you had paid attention to My commandments!

Then your well-being would have been like a river,

And your righteousness like the waves of the sea.

That's so true. If only we could pay attention to God's commandments, if only we could persevere in faithfulness to His word, then our well-being would be like a river. The word translated, "well-being," here is the Hebrew word, "shalom." It is the same word for "peace" as in verse 22. There will be no shalom for the wicked. Emotional, psychological, and material well-being are all connected to our spiritual well-being. We cannot be whole and secure and growing if at the very center of our soul we are at war with God. Unless He becomes the center of life. Unless we begin to seek first after His glory, and His goodness, and His beauty, and His truth, there can be no lasting peace for the wicked. And that is not true only for those in outright rebellion outside the camp. It is true for every human being, including every human being claiming to belong to God. National redemption does not fix the problem of the human soul. For God to create for Himself a people that are truly His, who will truly seek Him with heart, soul, and mind, it is not enough to rescue Israel and take them home.

The great deliverance must be followed by a greater deliverance. That's where Isaiah will take us next in chapters 49-55. We have arrived at the heart of Isaiah's Gospel.