

Lesson 28 Isaiah 46:1-13 God's Plan for Obstinate Israel 2

Introduction

The third major section in the Book of the Servant, the Great Deliverance, is comprised of three parts. The first part focuses on the Cyrus prophecy, God's pre-telling of His plan to use Cyrus to redeem Israel from Babylon; the second part focuses on Israel's response to God's plan to use Cyrus; and the third part focuses on Babylon, the actual destruction of the empire by Cyrus and deliverance of Israel.

We began the second part, Israel's response to God's plan, in our last lesson. We did not get all the way through because I chose to address two major issues connected to Isaiah 45. The first issue is the difficulty of interpreting far future prophecy about Israel. And the second, related, issue is the influence of Isaiah on Paul's thought.

In that lesson, I gave more attention to the difficulty of interpreting prophecy related to Israel. In this lesson, I will give more attention to Isaiah's influence on Paul. That's what I am going to start with in this lesson, Isaiah's influence on Paul. At the end I will quickly walk through chapter 46 to end the section of Israel's response to God's plan.

Isaiah's Influence on Paul

Four allusions to Isaiah 45 in Romans

Paul makes four allusions to Isaiah 45 in his letter to the Romans. I touched on these in our study of chapter 45. Here they are all again as a reminder. First, the potter analogy in Isaiah 45:9.

⁹ "Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker— An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth!
Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?'
Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands?'"

Paul makes an allusion to this illustration in Romans 9:20-21,

²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? ²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

Second, there is the affirmation in Isaiah 45:17 that those who trust God as Savior will not be shamed.

¹⁷ Israel has been saved by the LORD With an everlasting salvation;
You will not be put to shame or humiliated To all eternity.

The idea that those who trust in God's salvation will not be shamed is alluded to more than once in Romans. It appears quite significantly in the first half of Paul's thesis statement in Romans 1:16.

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

It's also in Romans 10:10-11.

¹⁰ for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

The third allusion comes from Isaiah's insistence in 45:13 that everyone will bow before the Lord.

That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.

Paul quotes that line in Romans 14:11, writing,

¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall give praise to God."

Finally, Isaiah asserts in 45:25,

²⁵ "In the LORD all the offspring of Israel Will be justified and will glory."

Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit, And righteousness spring up with it.
I, the LORD, have created it.

Two distinct uses of “righteousness” show up here in verse 8. The first is something God does. It comes from Heaven. “Let the clouds pour down righteousness.” That is a poetic request for God to act, or a poetic recognition that He is acting, or He is going to act. Righteousness is to drip down from Heaven like rain. That righteous action is paralleled with the word, “salvation.” Salvation is an action of God that bears fruit. “Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit.” So the righteous action of God, the saving action of God, is designed to bring about some result, and it is imaged here as fruit. The rain comes on to the Earth, and then the fruit grows up out of the Earth.

The second use of righteousness in verse 8 is not a righteous action that comes from Heaven, but a righteous result that occurs on Earth. The rain of righteousness has fallen on the Earth. The poet calls on that action to bear fruit. What kind of fruit? “And righteousness spring up with it. I, the Lord, have created it.” The righteous, saving action of God results in righteous fruit on Earth created by God. You know, by His righteous action.

We see later in the passage, righteousness is not only what God does or what God creates. Righteousness is also who God is. We see that in 21b and 24a.

Is it not I, the LORD? A righteous God and a Savior;	And There is no other God besides Me, There is none except Me.
²⁴ “They will say of Me,	‘Only in the LORD are righteousness and strength.’

So, In verse 21 “righteousness” is used as an adjective (a “righteous God”), and in verse 24 as a virtue (“in the Lord are righteousness and strength”). So, He is a righteous God and a Savior. There, again, is the connection between righteousness and salvation. And only in the Lord are righteousness and strength. So, righteousness can be something God does; you know, let that righteous action pour down. And righteousness can be something that describes who God is. It is a virtue or a quality that God possesses.

We also consider that righteousness can be something God creates. We saw that in that kind of poetic abstract form in verse 8, its fruit rising up. We see it with more clarification in 25b.

²⁵ “In the LORD all the offspring of Israel Will be justified and will glory.”

That word translated in the English here as, “justified,” is from the same root word as all the words translated, “righteousness.” The offspring of Israel will be justified. That is, they will be declared righteous.

Paul did not come up with the idea of justification, of God declaring people righteous. That idea is here in Isaiah. But it is a much earlier idea than Isaiah. God declared, reckoned, considered Abraham righteous by faith back in Genesis 15:6. Paul quotes both in Romans, Genesis 15:6; and Isaiah 45:25.

The different uses of righteousness in Isaiah 45 are all related to one another. We can put the different uses together this way, “God’s righteous act of salvation rains down from Heaven because of God’s righteous character with the result of bearing the fruit of righteousness in His people. Israel will be declared righteous.”

So, now turning to Paul’s use of righteousness and justification language in Romans, we can ask, does Paul mean one and the same thing every time he refers to righteousness in the letter? That’s a fairly significant argument in modern interpretation of Romans. Some interpreters want to insist that the righteousness applies to God. The righteousness of God is about God. And others want to insist that the righteousness of God is something that God does for people. I hope our consideration of the theme in Isaiah 45 would lead us to question the validity of limiting Paul to only one application of the concept of righteousness. Let’s consider his use just briefly.

What does the word, “righteousness,” apply to in the thesis in Romans 1:16-17?

Two different ways to interpret this verse were recognized in our last lesson. We could read Israel as the new Israel, the New Covenant people of God. If “all the offspring of Israel” applies in a spiritual sense to all who place their faith in God or later in New Testament terms, all who place their faith in Jesus Christ, then we easily understand what is meant by “all the offspring of Israel” being justified and glorying in the plan of salvation, because they are the ones who truly believe, from every nation. It’s the New Israel. That would also make sense of Paul’s statement that “all Israel will be saved.” If Paul is using Israel in a metaphorical way to refer to those who truly believe in Jesus, then he is saying that all new Israel, you know, it’s equivalent to the Body of Christ, all the people of God, or all of those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved.

But that does not seem to me at all to be what Paul is saying. And in this case, I think understanding Paul in the context of his argument will help us interpret Isaiah. So, yes, Paul is the one being influenced by Isaiah. Paul comes later. But the reality of far future prophecy about Israel in the Old Testament is that it is sometimes obscured by the lack of revelation yet given. The unfolding of revelation in the New Testament available to Paul allows us to read him and then go back and clarify some things that were not clear in Old Testament prophecy. And that’s true in this case. Paul’s teaching about Israel occurs in a New Covenant context. As such, it helps us narrow down some of the possible interpretations of Isaiah.

I can’t going through in detail the flow of Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11. That would take way too long. Again, that is in my Romans podcast. I will just outline my conclusion regarding Israel here to see how it helps us with Isaiah 45. First, here is my conclusion, and then I’ll give some supporting points. When Paul refers to Israel in Romans 9-11, he does not do so as a spiritual metaphor. That is my conclusion. In all eleven references, he is speaking of ethnic Israel descended from Abraham through Isaac. In the first half of the section starting in chapter 9, Paul un masks Israel’s presumption, arguing that they have misunderstood God’s mercy as the basis for anyone to be declared His people. And they have misunderstood God’s acceptance of all through faith. So, mercy and faith. Then, having lamented over the rejection of most Israelites from salvation in Christ, Paul goes on to make a double argument for why Israel has not stumbled so as to fall completely out of God’s ongoing plan. His first argument is that a remnant of Jews actually are saved and are included in the present New Covenant people of God. And Paul argues himself as an example. “I’m a Jew. I believe in Jesus. All Israel has not fallen out of God’s plan.” Second, God does still have a future plan for Israel. When the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, “all Israel will be saved.” That’s not a general reference to the Church. It’s not, “When the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, all the people of God will be saved.” It’s a specific reference to the people of Israel.

Does that mean all Israelites through all time will be saved? No. That’s clearly not the case throughout Romans. Only those Jews who believe in Jesus will be saved. So, why say, “all” Israel? Paul may be including all Jews who will come to faith in Jesus, the remnant now and more in the future. All of Israel that believes will be saved. They have not fallen out of God’s plan.

I think it may mean even more than that. I believe it possible that Paul is looking ahead to a significant revival of Jews. There is only a remnant of Jews who believe kind of through the present age, while most obstinately refuse to accept the Gospel as God’s plan of salvation. But in the future there will be a revival among Jews and a great number will embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe that is a reasonable way to understand Paul’s argument regarding Israel in Romans 9-11. That is my conclusion about how to interpret this.

Here are some points to back that up before looking at the parallel passages in Isaiah.

(1) In Romans 4, when Paul speaks of Abraham’s children, he does not speak of Gentile and Jew indistinguishably as Abraham’s children by faith. He maintains a distinction of Abraham being the father of those who believed without being circumcised (Gentiles), and those who believe while being circumcised (Jews). We are all Abraham’s children. But that does not erase our ethnic distinctions.

(2) The word, "Israel," is not used in Romans except in chapters 9-11. The first ten uses of "Israel" refer clearly to the ethnic people of Israel, not to a metaphor for the Church; not for the New Israel. So, unless we can prove from the context that Paul has switched to a metaphoric use of Israel in just the eleventh case, we should interpret that eleventh use of the word, "Israel," in 11:26 just like all the other ones: as ethnic Israel.

(3) The word, "all," causes some problems because it could be interpreted to mean every single Israelite through all time will be saved. But that interpretation does not fit the context of Paul's argument. He has firmly established through the whole letter that salvation only comes through faith in Jesus Christ, and he has reestablished that truth in this very section. In the chapter 9, beginning of chapter 10, "They have not known the righteousness of God because they are seeking their own righteousness." The whole lament at the beginning of chapter 9 is there because Paul doesn't believe that every Jewish name is written in the Book of Life.

(4) "All" can be taken to mean a significant majority, like, "all of Croatia came out to cheer the national team after the World Cup." That does not mean that literally every single Croat showed up. But if you watch the YouTube videos, it certainly feels like every single Croat showed up. In that sense, all is comprehensive, meaning, a majority, or, a whole lot of people. That interpretation of, "all Israel," fits well with the argument that Paul has in mind a significant number of Israelites, and that God will surely save all those Israelites who have believed in Him. Israel has not been set aside.

So now back to Isaiah and the wrapping up of this third theme that all Israel will be saved. The language appears twice in Isaiah 45. First in 45:17.

¹⁷ Israel has been saved by the LORD	With an everlasting salvation;
You will not be put to shame or humiliated	To all eternity.

And then in 45:25 the concluding verse.

²⁵ "In the LORD all the offspring of Israel	Will be justified and will glory."
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I'll make three points that I believe are significant to interpreting this promise of salvation for Israel in Isaiah. First, even though the main focus in these chapters is on the national deliverance of Israel after exile to Babylon, the language of "everlasting salvation" points us beyond physical deliverance to spiritual deliverance. This is a promise that Israel can surely depend on the spiritual, eternal salvation of God.

Tiny, exiled Israel will not be put to shame for holding onto Yahweh, even though she is greatly outnumbered by a multitudes of gods in a multitude of greater and more influential nations. God alone is true. God alone is able to save. The emphasis on an everlasting salvation is an emphasis on the power and faithfulness of God to provide exactly what he Has promised to those who will trust in His plan. So, that's the first point. We are now talking about our salvation from sin and death to eternal life with God, based on His ability to fulfill His promises.

Second, the comprehensiveness of the language, "Israel has been saved," and, "all the offspring of Israel," emphasizes the comprehensiveness of the salvation. All the way through Isaiah we have been made aware that God will judge Israel and only a remnant will experience the blessing of salvation. So, as in Romans 9-11, the comprehensiveness of these verses is not meant to overdo that message. Every Israelite is not going to be saved. All of Israel that trusts in Yahweh and His plan will not be shamed in their commitment to Yahweh. They will be saved with an eternal salvation.

Third, who is Israel here? The two main interpretations disagree over whether Israel here is a reference to the whole people of God - Jew and Gentile - or whether Israel here is ethnic Israel.

And the two primary commentators I have been using throughout this series, Motyer and Oswalt, disagree with one another along the lines of those two possibilities. Motyer is the first. He argues that Isaiah has expanded the term "Israel" to include all the faithful, Jew and Gentile. Every knee that bows in faith has become the offspring of Israel. Here are two quotes from Motyer, the first commenting on verse 17, and the second on verse 25.

The great name Israel must now include the saved of the Gentile world. The link between *Savior* (15) and *saved ... salvation* (17) demands this. A narrower reference excluding the world-wide dimension would be inadmissible.¹

A merely national significance of *Israel* would make nonsense of the whole argument of this passage. As in verse 17, the honored name now casts its mantle over a world-wide confessional community. The words *descendants*/'seed of' indicate reality and co-equality of membership [...] Turning to the Lord (22) confers birthright (*cf.* Gal. 3:7, 29).²

To be fair to this position I should mention that Motyer also quotes Paul's words in Galatians 3:7 and 29 that, "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise."

Still, I take a different view from Motyer on this one. I agree that Isaiah 45 includes an invitation to every people, most clearly expressed in verse 22, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth." But I disagree that Israel is then used as an inclusive reference to all who will eventually believe. I do not think it is required in Isaiah 45, and I believe that Paul's careful development in Romans of both Jew and Gentile as members of God's people describes a unity that is able to maintain ethnic distinction and the special role of Israel.

Here is a quote from Oswalt set in tension to Motyer. Notice how Oswalt maintains a distinction between the world and Israel. They are not the same thing.

The only hope for Israel and the world is in the Lord. [...] What will convince the world of God's sole lordship? It is his power in deliverance, his absolute faithfulness to his promises, the utter reliability of all he has said. This characteristic, in contrast to the failure of the gods to keep their promises, will bring all the world to the Lord's feet, ashamed of the false trust that we have reposed in the works of our own hands. [...] When the world finally does admit that its gods are nothing and Israel's god is all, that the only hope of salvation is in him, what will the true Israel's position be? Arrogance and overweening pride? Far from it. Just as the nations have bowed at the feet of the Lord in submission and confession, so Israel will know that its only boast is in the Lord. He is the one who has vindicated them and who is glorified in them. In themselves there is no good thing. All that is meritorious in them is as a result of who God is and what he has done in them.³

I believe the faithfulness of God in keeping His promise to Israel is a specific example of the faithfulness of God to keep His promise to all people. So, yes, all who believe in God for salvation will be justified. But that general truth is not the emphasis of verse 25. The emphasis of verse 25 is that all the offspring of Israel will be justified. That is not a rejection of Gentile inclusion into the people of God. It is a specific and representative example of a salvation that is made available to all peoples. Motyer is correct in arguing that all who believe are, in some sense, Abraham's children. Though I believe he is wrong here to apply such a universal definition.

All of Israel's offspring will be saved. That is a promise to those Israelites who believe and hold on to Yahweh. They will be declared righteous because of their faith in God, and they will no longer be obstinate vessels rejecting the work of the potter. They will not remain obstinate. That's the beauty of this verse. They will, all of Israel's offspring will be justified and glory. That's a total change of heart. They will glory in Him with hearts of wonder at who God is, and gratitude at the great salvation He has provided for them. And they will gain the hearts of worshippers. And they who believe will welcome the inclusion of all peoples from the ends of the Earth, who come streaming into Zion with them.

God's faithfulness to Israel expressed here to keep His promise of eternal salvation becomes a specific example that witnesses to everyone who believes in Jesus. God saves. He remained true to Israel. He always remains eternally true to His promises. That's true of Israel. That's true of everybody.

¹ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 364.

² Motyer, 367.

³ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 225.

We began this section with obstinate Israel’s refusal of God’s plan in 45:9-10. Now in the center, we see God’s promise to save extended out to all who come to Him. Israel experiences that salvation and glories in God and His plan. Change of heart. That is verse 25. But that change of heart happened in Israel’s offspring. And we’re going to go back and end the section in 46:12-13 with present, stubborn Israel refusing to accept God’s plan. Maybe Isaiah does that to emphasize God’s mercy in bringing about salvation in spite of His own people. Yeah, they are obstinate. God is going to change their heart. But don’t forget that they’re obstinate. Changed. Obstinate.

Let’s quickly walk through the text of chapter 46 to wrap up this section on Israel’s response to God’s plan. The chapter divides into two main parts. Verses 1-7 develop the contrast set up in 45:20-21 between the gods of the nations who cannot save, and Yahweh who is Savior. Verses 8-13 then bring us back to the specific instance of national salvation from Babylon through Cyrus, and God’s intention to fulfill that promise, even in the face of obstinacy from His people.

Rebellious people: the Inflexible Lord 46:1-13

God bears the burden 1-7

The first section of chapter 46 divides into a simple chiasmic structure of gods as a burden, Yahweh as the burden-bearer, and back to gods as a burden. In verses 1-2 the gods of Babylon, Bel and Nebo, are the burden.

¹ Bel has bowed down, Their images are consigned to the beasts and the cattle.	Nebo stoops over; The things that you carry are burdensome,
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A load for the weary beast.

² They stooped over, they have bowed down together;	They could not rescue the burden,
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But have themselves gone into captivity.

Far from saving the people of Babylon from the invading Persians, the idol-gods will be loaded up on beasts of burden themselves and carried out of the city into captivity. In contrast, God reminds Israel that He has been carrying her all along. God is the burden-bearer. He carries Israel. He carries you. In these verses, Israel is the burden. Verses 3-5.

³ “Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, You who have been borne by Me from birth	And all the remnant of the house of Israel, And have been carried from the womb;
⁴ Even to your old age I will be the same, I have done it, and I will carry you;	And even to your graying years I will bear you! And I will bear you and I will deliver you.
⁵ “To whom would you liken Me and make Me equal	Compare Me, that we would be alike?

This is the truth. And it requires faith. Israel experiences hard times and defeats. The ultimate shame will come when Babylon destroys the Temple. The Babylonians cannot carry God off because he is not represented by any physical form, but they will carry off all the valuable utensils used in Temple worship. And they will burn down God’s house. Even so, God declares, I have carried you. Do you understand that? Do you understand that I am the one who carries, even through the valley of shadow of death? Do you believe that?

To whom will we liken God? Is he a made god, fashioned physically and conceptually out of human imagination, or is He the God who makes? Verses 6-7 return to the made gods who must be carried.

⁶ “Those who lavish gold from the purse Hire a goldsmith, They bow down,	And weigh silver on the scale and he makes it into a god; indeed they worship it.
⁷ “They lift it upon the shoulder and carry it;	They set it in its place and it stands there.
It does not move from its place.	
Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer;	It cannot deliver him from his distress.

The gods of our own imagination are always a burden. They don't carry our burdens for us. They become a burden on us. I think of the modern god of self-determination. You can define yourself any way you want. You can be whatever you declare you are. You create your own destiny. What a heavy spiritual, emotional, and psychological burden to be laid on anybody, especially on young people. It may sound wonderful, in a sense, to our independent, self-centered natures. I'm the captain of my soul. I am what I want to be. But really, are you? Can you define yourself? Can you even know who you are? Can you unravel your heart and your sin? Can you know goodness? Can you know what's at the center of you? Who you're really meant to be? And how is it that you can make your own destiny? I mean, what power do you have to control the flow of this life, much less the reality of death and what comes after? What a burdensome god this modern god is! "Define yourself!" it says. And yet, it is impotent to fulfill and impotent to save. The made gods are a burden.

God fulfills his purposes 8-13

The second half of the chapter insists that Yahweh alone can in all certainty declare His purposes and execute them. He does not rely on us to carry out His plans. We don't carry Him: He carries us. He makes it happen. And we return here to the specific plan to use Cyrus in 46:8-11, and then we end with Israel's rejection of that plan in 12-13.

⁸ "Remember this, and be assured;	Recall it to mind, you transgressors.
⁹ "Remember the former things long past,	
For I am God, and there is no other;	I am God, and there is no one like Me,
¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning,	And from ancient times things which have not been done,
Saying, 'My purpose will be established,	And I will accomplish all My good pleasure';
¹¹ Calling a bird of prey from the east,	The man of My purpose from a far country.
Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass.	I have planned it, surely I will do it.

God proclaims what will be, and in His own time He makes it to be. He establishes His purpose and accomplishes His good pleasure. Cyrus is the specific example here. The man nobody heard of, in a country nobody would have included, with the power structures to take over after the Assyrians fell. But God sees ahead, and God will make it be. God will call the man of His purpose from a far country. This shepherd messiah will not be a Jew. He is likened to a bird of prey from the east. Persia is to the east. Cyrus will swoop up and then down on Mesopotamia from the north. He will be a man of war. And like it or not, he is the one who will set the Israelites free. That is God's plan.

Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass.	I have planned it, surely I will do it.
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God knows they will not like it. They will worry over whether or not God has abandoned His promises to the house of David. They will resist this Gospel plan. God will do it anyway. Verses 12-13.

¹² "Listen to Me, you stubborn-minded,	Who are far from righteousness.
¹³ "I bring near My righteousness, it is not far off;	And My salvation will not delay.
And I will grant salvation in Zion,	And My glory for all Israel.

C. S. Lewis describes his salvation experience as "one who came dragging and kicking." Or was it "dragging and screaming"? God's glory will be made known to Israel in the way God chooses to make it known, in spite of their obstinacy. "I will bring my righteousness near. My salvation will not delay. I will grant salvation for Zion." Thank the Lord that His plan does not depend on our understanding or our approval. He will provide salvation. That's the plan. This Cyrus is not the Messiah. He is a forerunner of the Messiah. He brings national redemption. He does not bring spiritual, eternal redemption. The true Messiah will also be rejected. In fact, the plan of salvation depends on it. He will be resisted, rejected, and crucified. Nothing can thwart the plan of God. This is the plan. And death cannot hold Him. And no matter how hard God's people stumble, He will make a way to bring them home, to turn their hearts to Him in the end. This is his promise.

²⁵ "In the LORD all the offspring of Israel	Will be justified and will glory."
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