

“My Purpose Will Stand”

Isaiah 46:1 – 48:22

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In these chapters, Isaiah recorded powerful declarations about God’s sovereignty, but not just over Babylon. He contrasted God’s power with the impotence of idols. God will use a pagan ruler to destroy Babylon’s arrogant empire, and He will deliver Israel from bondage for His own glory.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God:

Proclaimed the futility of idolatry. (Idols are impotent. God controls everything.)

Predicted Babylon's downfall. (Bad, bad Babylon. God will take vengeance)

Promised peace and restoration. (Israel is rebuked. God redeems.)

The overall message of this lesson is: **Our God Who Is and There Is No Other**

The ancient society of Babylon has been known for many things: their contribution to mathematics, astronomy, architecture, and it was the home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world — their hanging gardens. However, when we read what **Scripture** says about Babylon, it boasted of its mighty strength and eternalness, which God calls pride. It practiced paganism, idol worship, and the occult.

Babylon worshipped many gods. The two most prominent were Bel and Nebo. Bel, also called Marduk, is mentioned several times in Hebrew Scripture. Nebo, Bel’s son, was their god of the arts and sciences. To the Babylonian people, they were powerful gods. But, to the Lord God, they were nothing.

I like the Message Bible’s translation of how Isaiah mocked Babylon’s gods: “The god Bel falls down, god Nebo slumps. The no-god hunks of wood are loaded on mules and have to be hauled off, wearing out the poor mules because they were dead weight and can’t bear anyone’s burdens, and [they] are hauled off to captivity.” (46:1,2)

Because the Persians would be coming against them, Babylon would be burdened to pack up and haul away its gods so they wouldn’t be taken into captivity. I pictured those man-made objects bouncing back and forth on ox-driven carts. The gods would have no say in being hauled around because they weren’t alive to control anything, to save themselves or their people and they would all end up together in captivity.

Babylon's gods were contrasted with the Lord God who easily carries us from the moment of our conception to the moment we draw our last breath: "Listen, you whom I have upheld since your birth and have carried since you were born. Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am He, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you." (46:3,4)

King David also reflected on how deeply God cares for His people: "You know everything about me; everything I do; what I'm going to say. You go before me and You follow me. You watched me as I was being formed in the dark of the womb. You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to understand!" (Psalm 139)

Now, about Babylon - why would God have it destroyed? One of the reasons was their worship of worthless man-made objects: "People with a lot of money hire craftsmen to make the gods. The craftsmen deliver them, and the people kneel and worship them! They take them home and put them on a shelf, and there they [gods] sit, day in and day out. The gods are very dependable because they remain right where they're placed. Say anything you want to them - they never talk back. Of course, they never do anything!" (46:6,7 MSG)

The prophet Jeremiah provided a mocking description of idols — they are like "scarecrows in a cucumber field... they must be carried because they cannot walk." (Jeremiah 10:5a) In Dan Leppo's lecture last week, he referenced Psalm 115 which describes idols as having mouths, eyes, and ears that cannot speak, see, or hear.

Contrasting lifeless idols with the active and powerful God of Israel, Jeremiah said to God: "No one is like you, Lord; You are great, and Your name is mighty in power. Among all the wise leaders of the nations, there is no one like You. [The nations] are all senseless and foolish - taught by worthless wooden idols. The [idols] have no breath in them. [They] didn't make the heavens and the earth and they will perish. But the Lord is the true God. He is the living God, the eternal King." (Jeremiah 10: 6-7, 10-12)

So, you're probably thinking, "Ok, I get it. Idols are stupid, dumb, powerless. How does that apply to us? I'm pretty sure most of you haven't offered up your gold and were tempted to bow to a golden image of a bull. Although there are numerous idols in the world today in physical form, there are many forms of modern idols. Those served today are often mental rather than metal – such as "heart idols." God told Ezekiel His people had "set up idols in their hearts; why [God asked] should I listen to their requests?" (Ezekiel 14:2-3)

Lest we think, "I'm not in danger of worshipping idols", theologians say idols are:

- More important to you than God; that which absorbs your heart and imagination more than God; is anything that you seek that only God can give. (Timothy Keller)
- That which displaces God in your heart; what absorbs your time and thoughts. (A. W. Pink)
- That which drives your behavior and commands your time. (J. D. Greear)

Simply stated, idols are anything in our lives that causes us to neglect our relationship with God; that we spend more time with than God; that takes the place of God. We can choose to rebel by looking for satisfaction elsewhere, or we can choose to obey the Lord God and worship Him alone.

There is no comparison between God and anyone or anything we choose to worship. God told Isaiah to ask Israel: “With whom will you compare Me or count Me equal? To whom will you liken Me that we may be compared? 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. 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.’ (46:5,8-10) God’s power is unrivaled.

The closing of chapter 46 foretold of a conqueror whom God will send to destroy Babylon and free the Israelites from captivity: “From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do. Listen to Me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are now far from My righteousness. I am bringing My righteousness near; it is not far away; and My salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, My splendor to Israel.” (46:11-13)

The imagery of a bird of prey implied the conqueror would be a great military power who would swiftly destroy. Most Bible scholars identify Cyrus the Great as the “bird of prey”. Even though Babylon was at least 100 years away from even becoming a world power, the prophesy about its destruction is another example of God’s foreknowledge and His control of history. God’s promises and plans are *always* completed. He predicted the fall of Babylon and fulfilled His prediction when Babylon was destroyed in 689 B.C.

Chuck Swindoll wrote: “Accept it or not, God is calling the shots. He’s running the show. Either He’s in full control or He’s off the throne.” Yahweh controls the destiny of all nations.

In Chapter 47, Isaiah continued writing about Babylon’s destiny. “Go, sit in the dust, Virgin Daughter Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne. No more will you be called tender or delicate. Take millstones and grind flour. Sit in silence, go into darkness, queen city of the Babylonians; no more will you be called queen of kingdoms.” (47:1,2,5)

Babylon was called Virgin Daughter because no enemy had ever conquered her. A day was coming when Babylon would no longer be a queen city but would be humiliated, driven from her throne and would sit in dirt. Her people would be treated as common slaves. And God proclaimed: “I will spare no one.” (47:3b) His wrath, whether immediate or delayed, will come upon the people of all nations because of their wickedness.

Amidst the prophecy of Babylon’s fall, Isaiah paused with a praise. He emphasized that God, not idols, is the Redeemer: “Our Redeemer—the Lord Almighty is His name— is the Holy One of Israel.” (47:4)

In addition to idol worship, other reasons for Babylon’s coming destruction were because of:

1. Babylon’s Mercilessness: God would use Babylon as an instrument of His discipline against Judah, but Babylon went too far. God said, “I gave them [Israel] into your hand, and you showed them no mercy. Even on the aged you laid a very heavy yoke.” (47: 6b)
2. Babylon’s Arrogance: “[Babylon] said, ‘I am forever— the eternal queen!’ But you did not consider these things or reflect on what might happen. God said, “You have trusted in your wickedness and have said, ‘No one sees me.’ Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you when you say to yourself, ‘I am, and there is none besides me.’” (47:7,8b,10)
3. Babylon’s Love of Pleasure: “Now then, listen, you lover of pleasure, lounging in your security.” (47:8a) This is a fairly accurate label for today’s world too. Much is spent on the pursuit of pleasure with little concern for others.
4. Babylon’s Pride: They boasted that their people would never be widows or childless, but the Lord God had other plans: “Both of these will overtake you in a moment, on a single day: loss of children and widowhood. They will come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and all your potent spells.” (47:9)

One of the things Scripture says God hates is pride which is mankind giving themselves credit for what God accomplishes. Not only does pride hinder people from seeking the Lord, as Dan said last week, pride is self-worship. Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar II, who reigned before Cyrus, was exceptionally prideful. Nebuchadnezzar boasted, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Daniel 4:30) That pride-filled sentence immediately doomed ol’ Nebby to seven years of insanity, living like a wild animal, eating grass and growing nails like bird claws.

About their destiny, Isaiah told Babylon: “Disaster will come upon you, and you will not know how to conjure it away. A calamity will fall upon you that you cannot ward off with a ransom; a catastrophe you cannot foresee will suddenly come upon you.” (47:11) The spells of Babylon’s priests, star-gazers and magicians could not stop their ruin. “You have worn yourself out asking for

advice from your astrologers and stargazers who make predictions month after month. Let them save you from what will happen.” (47:13)

Babylon would be helpless, impotent, and eventually destroyed because God is the all-powerful Sovereign over mankind and history.

As God’s chosen people, the Jews called upon Him as if they had continued to be obedient and faithful to Him, but to the Lord, they were hypocrites. “Listen to this, you descendants of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah, you who take oaths in the name of the Lord and invoke the God of Israel—but not in truth or righteousness—you who call yourselves citizens of the holy city and claim to rely on the God of Israel—the Lord Almighty is His name. I foretold the former things long ago; my mouth announced them, and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass.” (48:1-3) They didn’t call upon Him and God wanted Israel to acknowledge that the events **He** predicted had and would be fulfilled.

But Israel had “hard heads: “For I knew how stubborn you were; your neck muscles were iron, your forehead was bronze.” (48:4) God was **not** congratulating their body builders. Having “neck muscles of iron” and “bronze foreheads” were **not** compliments!

An “iron neck” and a “bronze forehead” were images of the seriousness of Israel’s rebellion; unbending, unyielding, resistant to change and to the Holy Spirit. In today’s terms, we would say they were stiff-necked and hardheaded, set in their ways. Living with a stiff neck can mean one resists the Holy Spirit. Before the Sanhedrin killed Stephen, he told them: “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!” (Acts 7:51)

Imagine God’s grief when His people bragged how powerful their idols were even though they knew **He** was responsible for the rescues and protections and conquered enemies; that **He** performed miracles and fulfilled prophecy, yet they still trusted in “wooden images and metal gods.”

Israel denied God’s power. Despite the persistent problem of Israel’s sinfulness, God told them: “That is why I told you beforehand what I was going to do. So, you could not say, ‘My idols did it. My wooden image and metal god commanded it to happen!’ You have heard My predictions and seen them fulfilled, but you refuse to admit it.” (48:5,6) To prevent Israel from giving credit to idols for what **He** caused to occur, the Lord would prophesy future events long before they would happen.

Despite their sin, God told them He would do things that their lifeless, mute idols couldn't do. "Now I will tell you new things, hidden things unknown to you. They are brand new, not things from the past. So, you cannot say, 'We knew that all the time!'" (48:7) God would unveil new things so when Israel was freed from captivity, they would believe their salvation was from Him - that **He** is in control of the past, present and future.

Some say the new things God had not yet told them would include more about the future work of the Messiah and the New Covenant. God's plans would go beyond *redemption* from Babylon to *redemption* from sin. "While God's purposes stand firm, He chooses to progressively disclose them, inviting His people into deeper awe, trust, and worship." (bibleref.com)

Isaiah often spoke of Israel's sin. He said they were stubborn-hearted, far from righteousness, rebels from birth and were persistently unfaithful. So why did God continue to pursue them? Because, God said: "For My own name's sake I delay My wrath; for the sake of My praise, I hold it back from you, so as not to destroy you completely. See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For My own sake, for My own sake, I do this. How can I let Myself be defamed? I will not yield My glory to another." (48:9-11) God deliberately chose a covenant-breaking people yet He wanted them to know: "I will be your God, and you will be My people." (Lev. 26:12; Jer. 32:38; Ezek. 37:27)

In His mercy, God delayed judgment upon rebellious Israel. Not because they deserved it, but for the sake of His own reputation and glory. He will not forever tolerate His Name, that is, His character, His reputation, His authority, and power, to be slandered. Nor would He allow lifeless man-made objects to be given the credit and praise for what **He** did. **If** He destroyed Israel, which they deserved, other nations would think the God of Israel was unable to save them. So, God chose to spare Israel, preserving the remnant, yet will still test them in the purifying fires of affliction – captivity. Even though God may choose to restrain His wrath, He **cannot** suspend His justice.

The Lord has lavished the riches of His grace on undeserving rebels, that's you and me folks, so that we would praise Him for the spiritual blessings we have through His Son: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us." (Ephesians 1:3,7) Praise God that His patience does not depend on our performance.

God then summoned Israel to hear of His authority as the unrivaled Creator: "Listen to Me, Jacob, Israel, whom I have called: I am He; I am the first and I am the last. My own hand laid the foundations of the earth, and My right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they all stand up together." (48:12-13) Last week Dan remarked that he loved God's "snarkiness" at

times. I agree. After reminding Israel who He is and what He has done, the Lord asked them: “Which of the idols has foretold these things?” (48:14b)

God reminded Israel that His chosen conqueror, the “bird of prey from the east”, will carry out His purpose against Babylon. God said: “I, even I, have spoken; yes, I have called him. I will bring him, and he will succeed in his mission.” (48:15)

Israel’s biggest problem was spiritual. Just like with Israel, sin separates us from Holy God. A Savior was required to atone for mankind’s sins and bring us to Him. “Come near Me and listen to this: ‘From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there.’ And now the Sovereign Lord has sent me, endowed with His Spirit.” (48:16) In this verse, the speaker is Christ Jesus, the Messiah Redeemer. Did you notice that Isaiah revealed all three Persons of the Trinity? The speaker was the Son of God who said, “The Sovereign God and His Spirit” had sent Him.

In the next portion of Scripture, God laments the **unnecessary** tragedy of the years His people will suffer in Babylonian captivity. “This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you who directs you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to My commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea. Your descendants would have been like the sand, your children like its numberless grains; their name would never be blotted out nor destroyed from before Me.’” (48:17-19)

Israel **could have** had peace. Instead, they chose disobedience. They **could** have lived in the land God promised them. Instead, they would experience decades of captivity in a pagan nation. Israel could have their offspring multiply in their homeland. Instead, many died in pagan lands.

As would any loving father, I think the Lord would have said: “Oh, Israel, if only you had listened . . . if only you had obeyed!” Remember when Jesus looked out at Jerusalem and said how He wished He could gather His people like a mother hen gathers her chicks? He too wanted Jerusalem to be filled with the peace that only **He** could give.

“If only you had” These words were spoken to Judah, yet they too apply to us. When we follow the commands of the Lord and walk with Jesus, we have peace – peace the world can’t give us. Unfortunately, I have many “if onlys” in my life. Do you? If so, I hope you join me while still on this earth, to prepare our lives for the time we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, knowing Jesus alone lived on the throne of our heart.

In the closing passages of this lesson, the message in verse 20 is of redemption, return, and restoration. Israel was told: “Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians! Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it. Send it out to the ends of the earth; say, “The Lord has redeemed His servant, Jacob.” (48:20) When the “bird of prey from the east” allows the Israelites to leave Babylon, their redemption will be from God. When they return to Israel to restore the city, the temple and the Jewish community, it will be to God’s credit.

Since sin would remain a persistent theme with Israel, the last verse of the lesson is a warning from God. “There is no peace for the wicked.” (48:22) The Hebrew word for peace is “shalom”. In Scripture, shalom isn’t just an amusing gesture of peace used selfies. It carries deep meaning: wholeness, completeness, health, safety, harmony, prosperity.

The need for a Savior was made clear in the words: “No peace for the wicked”. God promised the Prince of Shalom (Isaiah 9:5), Christ Jesus, who would offer peace in every area of life where the Fall of Man brought death, division, and disagreement. Even though salvation is **God’s** gift to us, how we live our lives is **our** gift to God. And, it’s been said that *divine* shalom is impossible to achieve while living in rebellion *against* the Divine.

Despite the persistent problem of our sinfulness, God has shown persevering patience to us. This holds true for both Israel and for us. May we not take God’s patience for granted.

In closing, I would like to summarize what The Holy One of Israel (Isaiah’s favorite title for the Lord) declared both to Israel as well as to us today:

"Remember the former things of old for I am God, and there is no other.
I am God and there is none like Me."
(Isaiah 46:9)

“I declare the end from the beginning, and from long ago
what is not yet done, saying: My plan will take place, and I will do all My will.”
(46:10)

Can I get an amen!