

## **Series Daniel**

### **Scripture Isaiah 41:1-4, 25-27; 44:24-45:6**

In the previous message we thought about King Belshazzar, the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, who, as Daniel pointed out, had not benefited from the experiences of his predecessor, but had “set himself up against the Lord of heaven.” At the end of chapter 5 we learned that Belshazzar was slain and that the kingdom of the Babylonians was taken over by the military forces of the Medes and Persians.

The rise of the Medes and Persians to world power status had been sovereignly announced by God in a dream to Nebuchadnezzar about 40 years before it happened. You will remember that the king saw in his dream an enormous statue. In his interpretation of the dream, Daniel had announced that the golden head of the statue represented Nebuchadnezzar, and that his empire would be followed by another empire symbolized by silver. The events at the end of chapter 5 of Daniel were the fulfillment of that dream.

The rise of the Medes and Persians had also been announced by the prophet Isaiah. There are important lessons about the sovereignty of God connected with the rise of the Medo-Persian empire, so, today, I will digress from the book of Daniel in order that we might come to understand more fully the subject of God’s sovereignty. In particular I want us to recognize “how” and “why” God took such an active role in human history. Today we are going to focus on the writings of the prophet Isaiah. We will come back to the book of Daniel next week.

### **Isaiah 41:1-4**

The prophet Isaiah began his ministry in 740 BC and he lived to about 680 BC, a span of 60 years. When Isaiah was prophet the Assyrians were the greatest power in the Ancient Near East. The Babylonians did not defeat the Assyrians until 75 years after Isaiah’s death. The point here is that several decades before the ascendancy of Babylonia to empire status, Isaiah wrote some very specific predictions about the demise of Babylon and the rise of the Persian empire.

Just as fascinating, he wrote about the return of Jewish exiles to the land of Judah about 150 years before it happened. That's the context in which we are going to think about God's purposes and His exercise of sovereignty in working out His purposes.

There are 66 chapters in the book of Isaiah. In the first 39 chapters, the primary emphasis is on the sinful behavior of the people of Judah. Isaiah frequently referred to Yahweh as the "Holy One of Israel" who had no choice but to punish His people for their rebellion and disobedience. Many years before the fact, Isaiah warned his fellow Jews that their continued sin would bring their captivity to a foreign power.

Beginning in chapter 40, the emphasis of the book is on the restoration of the people from captivity. Chapter 40 begins with the words, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, and her sin has been paid for" (*Isaiah 40: 1-2*). The words "hard service" were a reference to the Babylonian exile. In the last years of his life, Isaiah wrote as if the Babylonian exile was almost over, even though it would be 80 or more years before it would actually begin.

The sovereignty of God is the underlying theme in the last chapters of Isaiah, just as it is the theme of Daniel. Isaiah frequently asked "To whom will you compare God?" (*Isaiah 40:18*), and "Who is His equal?" (*Isaiah 40:25*). Isaiah wanted the peoples of earth to think about God, to evaluate His power and authority.

Isaiah especially wanted people to consider God's ability to control future events. Through Isaiah Yahweh said, "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'" (*Isaiah 46:9-10*).

In our reading, God invited the nations to meet with Him "at the place of judgment," where they would be able to compare the influence of their false gods against His power, and would be able to pit their strength against His, and be able to match their knowledge of the future against His.

In verses 2 and 3 He introduced an example of what He was planning. He was going to stir up a leader from the east to subdue nations. Verses 2 and 3 are the first of a long list of statements about future activities involving this special person “from the east.” It was God’s plan to announce in advance His plans so that the nations would later recognize the fulfillment of His prophetic statements as proofs that He was the Most High God over all. In the next several chapters, God, through Isaiah, provided a great deal more information about the man from the east. For example, see Isaiah 41:25-27.

### **Read Isaiah 41:25-27**

This was another statement about the how God would stir up a powerful ruler, and, just like in our previous reading, God proclaimed His ability to do what no one else could do, foretell the future. I wanted us to read this short passage because verse 27 introduced a new, very important element: What God was going to do would be considered “good tidings” for Jerusalem. The powerful ruler who would come would be “a messenger of good tidings.”

Now let’s find out why the actions of this future ruler would be good news to the Jews, and learn his name.

### **Read Isaiah 44:24-45:6**

Isaiah was a prophet to the Jews of the southern kingdom of Israel. In the first verse of this reading the LORD was speaking to these Jews through Isaiah. The LORD was reminding them that He had sovereignly and supernaturally given birth to them — they were the descendants of Abraham, and that He was going to be their Redeemer — He would rescue them from their exile.

The statement at the end of verse 26 would have puzzled the Jews of Isaiah’s lifetime. Jerusalem will be uninhabited? The towns of Judah destroyed? Such thoughts would have seemed preposterous to the Jews in 700 BC.

Next, put yourself in the place of the exiled Jews 150 years later. They could indeed testify to the truth of Isaiah’s prophecy. Many of them had witnessed the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. They had been in Babylonia for nearly 70 years, without any reasonable expectation of release from their captivity. They could not imagine that they would gain freedom from the seemingly all-powerful authority of Babylon and be allowed to return to their home country.

In Isaiah's lifetime the Jews would have no knowledge of a man from the east whose name was Cyrus. The fact is that he would not be born for another 100 years! And the Medes and Persians, whoever heard of them? Yet the LORD, through Isaiah, had announced "Cyrus is my shepherd and will accomplish all I please. He will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'"

The Jews in captivity were probably aware of the Medo-Persian threat, but Babylon was a secure city. There was no reason for the Jews to assume that there would be a sudden change in their circumstances.

We sometimes forget that our sovereign God can use the most unlikely pagans to accomplish His purposes. God raised up Pharaoh in Egypt and demonstrated His power over the people of Egypt when the Hebrews were held captive there (*Romans 9:17*). He used Herod and Pontius Pilate to accomplish His plan in the crucifixion of Christ (*Acts 4:24-28*). In our study of Daniel we have learned how God used Nebuchadnezzar to punish the people of Judah and to prevent other nationalities from taking over the Jewish homelands while they were in exile. Isaiah stated that Cyrus would be another useful pagan example of how God would engineer human history to accomplish His will.

Amazingly the LORD called Cyrus His "shepherd" (*44:28*) and His "anointed" (*45:1*) literally, "His messiah," the same terms used to describe Jesus five centuries later. These terms applied to Cyrus, just as they applied to Jesus, because God was going to use him to carry out a divine commission. Cyrus would have a twofold mission: First, to free the Jewish people and enable them to rebuild their temple and city, and, secondly, to bring God's judgment on Babylon.

Let's analyze these two purposes. First, God intended the downfall of Belshazzar and the ascendancy of Darius the Mede to be a blessing to the people of God. The book of Daniel does not explain the actions of Cyrus, but within one year after the city of Babylon was taken, Cyrus issued a decree which allowed the return of the Jewish people to Palestine (*II Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4*).

There is an interesting tradition concerning the decree of Cyrus. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that Daniel quoted the words of Isaiah 45 to Cyrus, and that the king was so stunned by the prediction that he arranged for the Jews to leave Babylon and to rebuild their city, providing them with financial resources and military protection. The accuracy of the writings of Josephus cannot be verified, but the decree of Cyrus was authentic, and a contingent of Jews did return to Jerusalem (*led by Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar*).

Cyrus was the ruler who brought the years of Babylonian exile to conclusion. God had predicted that the exile would be only 70 years, and that's exactly how long it lasted. Just imagine all that God had to "manipulate" before Cyrus rose to power and was able to conquer Babylon and be in the place of authority to give permission for foreigners in Babylon to return to their home lands. Cyrus was a testimony to the sovereignty of God.

Concerning the second purpose of God in designating Cyrus as His "shepherd" and "Messiah," chapter 45 explains that God would enable Cyrus to "subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their "armor" or power. There are many verses in the last chapters of Isaiah that explain what God was going to do to Babylon. Here's one example, "Sit in silence, go into darkness, daughter of the Babylonians; no more will you be called queen of kingdoms. ... You said, 'I will continue forever, the eternal queen!' But you did not ... reflect on what might happen. Now then, listen, you wanton creature (Babylon), lounging in your security and saying to yourself, 'I am, and there is none besides me; I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.' 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. You have trusted in your wickedness. Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you when you say to yourself, 'I am, and there is none besides me.' 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" (*Isaiah 47:5-11*).

I could go on with such readings, but you get the idea about what God thought of Babylon and what He had determined to do to the city. The LORD even provided some details about how the city of Babylon would be taken. Look at chapter 45, verses 1 and 2. The LORD said that He would “open doors before Cyrus so that gates will not be shut.” He said that He would “go before Cyrus to “level the mountains.” This phrase meant that the LORD would “smooth the way,” or “show him the pathway.” The LORD then said that He would “break down the gates of bronze and cut through the bars of iron.”

You will remember that the Persian army diverted the River Euphrates so that soldiers could wade in shallow water under the walls of Babylon, thus bypassing the city’s otherwise impregnable defenses. God gave the Medo-Persian army a wide-open pathway into the city. The impregnable city fell in a day.

How should we summarize the purposes of God? According to verse 4, Cyrus would enjoy a special relationship with God “for the sake of Jacob,” that is, for the Jewish people. The LORD would summon Cyrus by name, and bestow on him a title of honor, “shepherd” and “messiah.” However, these privileges would not be extended to Cyrus for his own sake. Rather, God’s purposes were centered on His people, the Jews.

As we wind up this study and think about the application to our lives, I want to read another short passage from Isaiah: “Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart. Remember the former things, those of long ago.” That is God’s admonition to us. Now here is what God wants us to take to heart: “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. ... What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do” (*Isaiah 46:8-11*).

We need to keep in mind that prophecies are like promises. When the Lord announced to His people in the Old Testament what He was going to do, it was a promise that He would do it. Usually, at the time the prophecy/promise was given, no one could understand how it might happen, but, in perfect hindsight, we have a Biblical and historical record as proof that God does what He says He will do, no matter how impossible and desperate the circumstances might seem from a human perspective.

Incidentally, the Bible is the only scripture of all of the world's religions that has verifiable prophecies. These Old Testament prophecies are evidence for all to see that the Lord's word can be trusted and relied upon. Hundreds of His prophecies have been fulfilled and can be verified by any person who wants to do the research. God has proven, over and over, Who He is.

Today we have an additional basis for our faith; we have a completed New Testament — a record of the fulfilled prophecies concerning Messiah Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit in overcoming the human sin nature. We have irrefutable proof that the Word of God is good news for us. We must never be in despair and without hope.

There still remain some prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled. These prophecies have been given to us for our hope and encouragement. We may not agree on how the future will work out, but we can count on their complete fulfillment.

Our God is sovereign and omnipotent. All people on earth, whether believers or skeptics, are called to face the irrefutable evidences of divine prophecy and fulfillment, and yet-to-be-fulfilled promises. We must take God at His word, and place our trust and confidence in Him. The Apostle Peter wrote: "God has given us his very great and precious promises (and prophecies) so that through them" we might be the kind of people He wants us to be.

We must not be discouraged with all of the evil and injustice in our world. We must believe and declare that God is supreme and will have the ultimate victory,

God isn't just watching the entire parade of history, He is directing the parade.