

RUF Bible Study – Attributes of God in Isaiah
Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister¹
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Isaiah 43-44 – The un-American Idol Call of God

43:22 “Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel! 23 You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings, or honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, or wearied you with frankincense. 24 You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. 25 “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. 26 Put me in remembrance; let us argue together; set forth your case, that you may be proved right. ...

44:1 “But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! 2 Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. 3 For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. 4 They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. 5 This one will say, ‘I am the Lord’s,’ another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, ‘The Lord’s,’ and name himself by the name of Israel.” Besides Me There Is No God 6 Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. 7 Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen. 8 Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.”

9 All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. 10 Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? 11 Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified; they shall be put to shame together...

21 Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me. 22 I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you. 23 Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it; shout, O depths of the earth; break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel. 24 Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: “I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, 25 who frustrates the signs of liars and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish, 26 who confirms the word of his servant and fulfills the counsel of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be inhabited,’ and of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins’; 27 who says to the deep, ‘Be dry; I will dry up your rivers’; 28 who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’; saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’”

Have any of you heard about this reality television show that’s on now called “American Idol”? Of course you have, I’m kidding. It’s a phenomenon; in fact, episodes of American Idol trounced the Olympics on several nights in February.

In this passage, I want you to imagine American Idol – I want you to envision the idols of your heart on stage in a competition to see which one of them can do the best and get voted on. And Elohim is there too. You might think that he wouldn’t dignify such a competition with his entry, but he does. He welcomes the debate, invites it. Perhaps because he knows he’ll win. But you have to call in to vote. And you might be tempted to keep your favorite idols around at least a little longer.

In teaching through the book of Isaiah in a semester, picking and choosing what to highlight has been really difficult. One of the dominant themes in the book is this one of God exposing the idols. I realize we appear to be skipping such important verses as God’s assurance in 41:10 and 43:1-5 and the first of God’s Servant Songs. But I assure you, we’ll come back to these in future installments, pulling them into our discussion.

On this theme of idols though, we need to pull forward from Isaiah 41:21-23, which reads: *Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob. 22 Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. 23 Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified.*

God is asking for a public forum, a debate, a contest if you will. Set forth your case, he says. Bring your proofs. And one of the key characteristics he is looking for is the ability to tell what is to happen in the future and to explain the things of the past. That makes sense. If a God is powerful and able to sit above the world in any sort of majesty, he should be able to shape the outcome of things to come. Will Yahweh be able to do this? After all, he is in the competition too. Let’s see.

Let’s look at our problem, the reason, the remedy and the outcome.

The problem – our guilty boredom (43:22-28) and our absurd idol worship (44:9-20)

The first problem we see comes from the end of chapter 43 – God’s people are filled with effort, but empty of joy and passion. “Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel! 23 You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings, or honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, or wearied you with frankincense.

The contrast is: You have wearied of me/ I have not wearied you.

“We violate worship when we turn the means of grace into a means of weariness. And we enter into true worship when our hearts are revived through the finished work of Christ on the cross. That kind of worship pleases Christ, our burden-bearer.”²

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For this series, I used commentaries on Isaiah from Meyer, Webb, Orland, Oswalt and Motyer. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller, Fred Harrell and Bryan Chapell, and used notes from RUF campus minister Kevin Twit and seminary professor Dr. Jack Collins. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

Last weekend I spoke at a weekend conference and felt convicted that I should preach instead of teach at the 10:30 am Sunday morning session. So I preached from James 1, making application to the topic of the conference, so as to tie into what we'd been saying. We also sang a few hymns, prayed and I gave a benediction. I shouldn't have been surprised when I read this comment after the conference was over: "Why did we skip the last session and worship God – I want as much as I can get!" Why did we worship God?

But God's people weren't skipping worship. They were attending in body but not in spirit. They thought the ritual in itself would save them. "Ritual for its own sake, observance from moral and spiritual commitment, neither satisfies God, nor brings blessing to people. Indeed to the contrary, for they had made ritual a technique for manipulating blessing, putting the Lord at their beck and call. Thus, enslaving themselves all over again, they sought also to make him their slave!"³

"The sacrificial system was meant by the Lord to be part of the joy of possessing his law: through the sacrifices atonement was made, sins were forgiven and fellowship with God was enjoyed. But when the sacrifices were allowed to become an end in themselves, the people remained in their sin and became a weariness upon the Holy One."⁴ "There was much religious fervor, no religious reality; where they assumed they were pleasing God, they were trying his patience; where they were most confident they were right with God, they were proving only that they were still in their sin."⁵

So many high school and university students, so many Americans feel this way – I have become weary of you, God. Your means of grace just aren't exciting enough for me any more. I am tired of it.

Do you feel this way?

God responds, and even though you have been brave enough to tell him how you feel, that he has not become weary of you. That is good news as we walk with him day to day.

But that isn't all. We also read: *24 You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. 25 "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins*

The contrast this time is: You have wearied me/ I blot out your transgressions

Now this is truly amazing. After acknowledging our boredom, our inadequacy and our sinfulness, and how wearisome they are to him, God says that he will forgive us. Indeed, "God locates his very identity in blotting out our sins and remembering them no more."⁶

This is the gospel for us. God saves sinners. And yet, something inside us doesn't want grace. We want to justify ourselves, at least a little bit. That's why, with great irony, God invites us to come up with something in ourselves that deserve his mercy. Isaiah 43:26: *Put me in remembrance; let us argue together; set forth your case, that you may be proved right.*

What do we deserve? What would you come up with? Uh, God, I have never... Well, God, I um, help people sometimes.... God, I... We are utterly left undone if we think about it for even a second. We have no case. Not before a holy God. "He's willing to be reminded of anything in their favor that they think he may have forgotten. The tone here is heavily ironic, and as such it directly addresses the fundamental problem. We humans do not like grace; we like to feel that we deserve everything we get. We want to be able to say that our good behavior has earned favorable treatment for us before the bar of God."⁷

But that isn't grace then, is it? No, grace is unmerited. The unconditional favor of God is in view here.

God forgives us – for his own name's sake. "Note that there is no connecting word between this verse (25) and 22-24. There is no logic whereby we might connect sin with forgiveness, nor does the Lord explain himself. The logic whereby the offended God is the forgiving God is hidden in his heart."⁸

Remember that the people who are likely reading this in the future are those/will be those who are in bondage. What God says is that the bondage isn't their real problem, but the sin that caused the bondage in the first place. They might be released and still not get it. God has to forgive sin, not just change their circumstances.

You may consider that God wants your whole life. He doesn't want your attendance without your heart. Conversely, he doesn't want your heart without your attendance. You need to fully give yourself to fellowship, prayer, the sacraments, the Bible and even discipline. Do you weary God? Do you understand his forgiveness to you, and how he still calls you to himself?

The second problem is our idol worship. We read about this all the way through Isaiah, but particularly right here in 44:6-20. Let's see what he says and then make application.

Isaiah exposes the emptiness and absurdity of idolatry through verses 9-17. He speaks of the futility of idolatry, commenting that idolatry makes no sense. Idolatry brings no profit. Idolatry can be commended only on the basis of blind ignorance. Idolaters are ignorant and blind. Idolatry is logically indefensible. Idolatry is dead, meaningless, profitless and grips the idolater in a hold he cannot break.

² Ortlund, 289

³ Motyer, 273

⁴ Motyer, 273

⁵ Motyer, 273

⁶ Ortlund, 289

⁷ Oswalt, vol. 2, 161

⁸ Motyer, 274

The word “nothing” at the start of this passage in verse 9 can also have the meaning, “to fail to achieve its purpose.”⁹ Idolatry fails to achieve the purpose for which we were created, to glorify God. This is truly a reason for shame. Unfortunately most people are ashamed of things they shouldn't be, and not ashamed of things they should be ashamed of.

Idols cannot rise above their makers, which Isaiah looks at in verses 10-13. The idol is frail and powerless because the one who made it is powerless. How absurd to look to the work of our own hands for salvation. How can something that is the product of diminishing human strength become something with supernatural, self-sustaining strength?

Indeed, with that in mind, it should be obvious that idols cannot rise above their materials, Isaiah's next thought from verses 14-17. How can something physical, which only by a matter of chance is made into an idol rather than used for firewood, save us? If things had been different, the worshipper is bowing before something that would have been used to cook lunch. Idols cannot rise above choice and chance. While the wood may serve to meet our physical needs, it is utterly incapable of meeting our spiritual needs. It was fine to cut the wood. It was good to use it for fire and to eat. But the step from there to worshipping that part that you did not use makes no sense.

Isaiah finishes in verses 18-20 by explaining that idols cannot undeceive human hearts – instead, they have a blinding and binding power. Worship either leads to transformation or degradation and degeneration. Verse 19 is a devastating analysis of the fallen mind. In Verse 20, the idolater is hooked on idolatry. Idolatry blinds us. It is astonishing how absurd idolatry is, but it is even more astonishing that we don't see it! This can only be explained by the blinding power of idolatry, and the deceitfulness of our hearts (Jer 17:9). The Hebrew actually says “he has blinded.” But it is ambiguous. “He” could refer to God (i.e. a kind of judicial hardening He sends) or the idol (this dead idol still has power to blind us.) Idols create delusional fields. Only a deluded heart can explain our idolatry – because it is so absurd. Idols are lies, they preserve the illusion of self-control, but their limits are your limits. They have no power because we who have made them have no power.

Okay, that finishes the easier work of seeing what Isaiah is saying. Now comes the harder work of applying this to our lives. Do we have any idols to give up to God? Will we keep them around at all?

Identifying our idols is some of the hardest work we can do. Rev. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan has done great work in thinking about and communicating the work of dismantling our idols. What follows comes from a distillation of his work.¹⁰

Again, what are idols? Paul develops a profound “anatomy of sin” in the book of Romans. He shows us that sin goes much deeper than mere behavioral violations. Sin begins at the motivational level, and thus, in Romans 8, he will show that sin cannot simply be resisted at the volitional level through mere will power, must primarily be rooted out at the motivational level through the application of gospel-truth by the Holy Spirit, the spirit of “sonship” (Romans 8:12-16). But in Romans 1-7, Paul first has shown us what really sin is and how sin operates deep under the surface of our lives. Paul tells us:

1. Our root problem is our unwillingness to glorify God, to give him the centrality which is his due. (Rom. 1:21 - *for though they knew God, they neither glorified him nor gave thanks to him*).

2. Therefore, we choose created things as “gods.” In order to deny God control of our lives, each of us chooses a created thing or things to live for and worship instead. (Rom.1:25 - *worshipped...created things rather than the Creator*.) This happens because we must worship something.

3. Therefore, each life is distorted by a life Lie. At the base of all our life choices, our emotional structure, and our personality is a false belief system centered on an idol--that something besides God can give us the life and joy that only God can give. (Rom.1:25 - *they exchanged the truth of God for a lie*; Rom.1:21 - *but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened*.) We look to something besides Jesus to be our “savior”, our “righteousness,” that which makes us good and acceptable.

4. And also, each life is a kind of bondage. No one is actually “free”, for whatever we give ourselves to live for, we must serve. (Rom.1:25 - *worshipped and served created things*.) Since every human being must have an ultimate “good” by which all other choices are made and values are judged, we all “offer ourselves” to something (Rom.6:16). Therefore every human being is in “covenant service” to a “lord” which works its will over through our bodies. (Rom. 6:16-19)

5. Even after conversion, our old false saviors/lords and their attendant false belief systems still distort our lives unless the power of the Holy Spirit continually renews our minds and hearts. (Romans 7:14-25)

6. The key to freedom is the application of gospel of grace (Rom.6:14 - *Sin will not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace*.)

With that backdrop on the how and why of idols, we are ready to expose them and then deal with them.

You need to look at the various possibilities of your idols. Richard Keyes writes: “Idols are not just on pagan altars, but in well-educated human hearts and minds (Ez.14). The apostle Paul associates the dynamics of human greed, lust, craving, and coveting with idolatry (Eph 5:5, Col 3:5). The Bible does not allow us to marginalize idolatry to the fringes of life. All too often it is found on center stage...At the most basic level, idols are what we make out of the evidence for God within ourselves and in the world -if we do not want to face the face of God Himself in His majesty and holiness.” We all have places we run to instead of God. These aren't altars with multi-headed or multi-breasted beasts. They are far more subtle and therefore more deadly than that. What are they? Consider:

Power idolatry: “Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I have power and influence over others.

⁹ It's the word “tohu” (toewho), the same as in Genesis 1 for “formless.”

¹⁰ which can be found and ordered from www.redeemer.com

Approval idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I am loved and respected by _____"

Comfort idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life."

Image idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I have a particular kind of look or body image."

Control idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of _____."

Helping idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--people are dependent on me and need me."

Dependence idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--someone is there to protect me and keep me safe."

Independence idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone."

Work idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I am highly productive getting a lot done."

Achievement idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I am being recognized for my accomplishments, if I am excelling in my career."

Materialism idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions."

Religion idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I am adhering to my religion's moral codes and accomplished in it activities."

Individual person idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if—this one person is in my life and happy there and/or happy with me."

Irreligion idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and with a self-made morality."

Racial/cultural idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--my race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior."

Inner ring idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--a particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in."

Family idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--my children and/OR my parents are happy and happy with me."

Relationship idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if-- Mr. or Ms. 'Right' is in love with me."

Suffering idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--I am hurting, in a problem--only then do I feel noble or worthy of love or am able to deal with guilt."

Ideology idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if--my political or social cause or party is making progress and ascending in influence or power."

You can see that there are many good things that can become idols in our lives. They go wrong when they take center stage, take control and we go to them instead of life. When we are undone when we don't get them. Sex, looks, being well-liked, grades, attention, work, family, children, wealth – all of these are good things that can go terribly wrong.

Alan Jackson sings, "Everything I love is killing me. Cigarettes, Jack Daniels and caffeine. And that's the way you're turning out to be. Everything I love is killing me." That is true if they are idols. It's like the Glenn Close character in the movie "Fatal Attraction." When you spur a lover, you'd better watch out. Idols don't like to be shelved. They strike back and wish to destroy you if you stop giving them what they want. Paul Simon, in "Slip Sliding Away," sang: I know a man, he came from my hometown / He wore his passion for his woman like a thorny crown / He said Dolores, I live in fear / My love for you's so overpowering, I'm afraid that I will disappear. That is a good word.

Not only do we need to watch out for these idols, we must consider that we have a god who is not God. Instead of the God of the Bible, we might be in danger of serving the god of my cause [perhaps most tempting for liberals], the god of my understanding [perhaps most tempting for conservatives (and Reformed Christians)], and/or the god of my experience [perhaps most tempting for charismatics].¹¹ None of these is the full view of God, therefore none of them is God.

As we begin to look at an unmask our idols, we have to ask some diagnostic questions. Consider:

1. If you are angry. Ask, "is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am angry--because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?"
2. If you are fearful or badly worried. Ask, "is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so scared-- because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?"
3. If you are despondent or hating yourself: Ask, "is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so 'down' - -because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?"

You also might ask:

1. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?
2. What, if I failed or lost it, would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live? What keeps me going?
3. What do I rely on or comfort self with when things go bad or get difficult?
4. What do I think most easily about? What does my mind go to when I am free? What pre-occupies me?
5. What prayer, unanswered, would make me seriously think about turning away from God?
6. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of?
7. What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?

When you ask and answer the questions above and if you can see common themes, then you are on your way to unmasking your idols, of finding out what your "functional" masters are, what things tend to be too important to you.

Let's imagine that we've now identified the idols in our lives. We see that worshipping and serving these idols is like feeding on ashes, as Isaiah puts it. Feeding on ashes never fills you up. Only God can give you what you want.

What should we do?

We must remember that idols create a "delusional field" about them. We have deified them. We have created a cognitive and emotional inflation of them. Remember that we have magnified them in our eyes to be more wonderful and all-powerful than they are. Most of all, realize and remind yourself of what you are saying to God when you pine after idols (in your anger, fear, despondency). You are saying something like

¹¹ From David McCollugh's *The Trivivization of God*, chapter 2.

this: “Lord, it’s good to have you, but there’s this other thing that I must have, or life is not happy or meaningful. If I can’t have it, I will despair. You are not enough. I need this too as a requirement for being fulfilled. In fact, if you would take it from me, I’d turn my back on you, for you are negotiable but this is not! This is the real goal of my life--if you are not useful to me in achieving it, I might turn on you.”

It is important to see what you are really saying, and recognize both the unreasonableness of it, AND the cruelty of it. We need to see how ungrateful we are being to Jesus. And we need to see how, at bottom, this is another way of avoiding Jesus as Savior, and trying to be our own.

You must do it in two stages:

a. Hating the sin for itself. “Lord I see how repulsive this idol for what it is—an idol. Lord, the thing itself is not what is evil--it is what my heart has done to it-- elevating it--that makes it evil. I refuse to be controlled by it any longer. It wreaks havoc in my life. You justify me, not this. You are my master, not this. I will not be controlled by this. This is not my life (I don’t have to have it), but CHRIST is my life (I only have to have him.)”

b. Rejoicing in the grace and work of Jesus. “Lord, I have been trying to earn my own salvation and weave my own righteousness. But you are my salvation and righteousness. I am accepted in your Son! All my problems come because I am forgetting how loved, honored, beautiful, secure, rich, respected, embraced, free in Jesus. And all other ways of finding honor, etc. are vain. Let me be so ravished with your love of me that no other love can control me.

Meditate on this poem by John Donne. Make it a prayer--

Take me to you, imprison me.

For I, except you enthrall me, never shall be free,

Nor ever chaste, except YOU ravish me.

There are other approaches to deal with this and still avoid the gospel.

The “Moralizing” approach says: Your problem is that you are sinning here and here. Repent! This focuses on behavior--but doesn’t go deep enough. We must find out the *why* of behavior--what inordinate desires are working and the idols and false beliefs behind them. To simply tell an unhappy person to ‘repent and change behavior’ won’t help because the lack of self-control is coming from a belief that says, ‘even if you live up to moral standards, if don’t have this you are still a failure.’ You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all—your particular idolatry.

The “Psychologizing” approach says: Your problem is that you don’t see that God loves you as you are. This focuses on feelings--but doesn’t go deep enough. We must find out the reason a person doesn’t feel happy or loved--what inordinate desires are working and the idols and false beliefs behind them. To simply tell an unhappy person ‘God loves you’ won’t help, because the unhappiness is coming from a belief that says, ‘even if God loves you, but you don’t have this, you are still a failure.’ You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all--your particular idolatry.

In contrast to these two faulty, but oft-used approaches, the “Gospel application” approach says: Your problem is that you are looking to something besides Christ to be your happiness. This confronts a person with the real sin under the sins and behind the bad feelings. Repentance for rejecting Christ’s free grace and acceptance is a sorrowful YET joyful act. Paul tells us that the bondage of sin is broken when we come out from under the law. Every idol is the center of some system of works- righteousness by which we are seeking to “earn” our salvation by pleasing the idol. Every idol-system is a way to be “under the law”. Only when we realize we are righteous in Christ is the idol’s power over us broken. *Sin shall not be your master for you are not under law, but under grace.* (Rom.6:14) To live and think of yourself as “under grace” means that no created thing can now master or control you. You can enjoy them.

Derek Webb sings, “I have everything, but I have nothing without you.” Can you sing that?

Wow. We’ve taken a long look at the problems of our weak, pathetic worship and our absurd and soul-killing idolatry. What happens next? We’ll move faster here, and make sure we remember that there is more to come on this matter.

The remedy – God’s spiritual refreshment (44:1-5)

When we look at the first part of Isaiah 44, we see that refreshment comes by God’s Spirit alone. *44:1 “But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! 2 Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. 3 For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. 4 They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. 5 This one will say, ‘I am the Lord’s,’ another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, ‘The Lord’s,’ and name himself by the name of Israel.” Besides Me There Is No God*

It is rather amazing that nothing comes prior to this declaration. Instead of blotting *them* out, he blots out their sins. God himself is what saves us. “The parallel between Spirit and blessing indicates that it is by imparting himself that the Lord brings new life to his people.”¹²

The result of this remedy is an enthusiasm for God’s name alone. There is almost a competition to see who can be numbered as a person of God. People are lining up at the tattoo parlor to get “The Lord’s” name written on his or her body. “In verse 5, the renewing activity of the Lord’s Spirit becomes evident in individual response and the creation of a people bound together by a common confession.”¹³ In other words, when we remember the false worship at the end of chapter 43, we can see that the formal ‘visible church’ Israelites are becoming true Israelites.

The obvious question is, Is that true for you? Many, if not most of the students on campus are churched. They have grown up hearing the Bible, hearing about Jesus, singing the hymn, taking communion, repeating the Lord’s prayer. Yet there is an astonishing lack of enthusiasm for God, for Jesus, for the Holy Spirit, for the Word of God.

¹² Motyer, 276

¹³ Motyer 276

One of the men who taught me the Bible was Vern Steiner in Lincoln, Nebraska. He told me that the church he pastored before he moved was so taken by the Scriptures, they asked if they could lengthen the service so he could teach longer. Are you quenched of your thirst by the Bible? Do you have a hunger for the Word like that? Do you long for Christian fellowship? Would you sacrifice to go to prayer? Do you seek spiritual refreshment? When we see our sin finished and a new life imparted, we must see a personal response. Have you responded to the gospel today? Have you gone cold?

The reason – The exclusive reality of God (44:6-20)

The reason God does this comes out in the passage about the idols. God doesn't only discuss the folly of idolatry, but he establishes the case for himself and his people. "Since there is only one God, nothing can stand in the way of his purposes."¹⁴ "All this truth about God is related to his people's good: the only God is the King, etc. of Israel, and their Rock, the One in charge of the whole course of their history, past and future. In all of this he is unhindered by any challenger."

Through this passage, he reveals his nature as our glorious God in verses 6-8. He shows himself as King and Redeemer, a glorious combination that our Savior is sovereign. The Lord is, within himself, every potentiality and power. He is First and Last, meaning that he does not derive his life from anyone else (as opposed to the idols) and at the end he remains supreme and totally fulfilled. In him is the purposeful direction of history. He alone understands the totality of history from the beginning. He calls it. He lays it out. He masters and orders it. He presides over it. He shapes it and fulfills it. He is the one who issues the challenge to the idols in the first place. He says, "Have you established and cared for a people?" And finally, he knows and controls the future and because of that he can be relied on. He is the only Rock for your salvation. The import of this is to drive out fear and engender trust. Babylon will not devour them. God will not abandon his people. His silence is not absence.

The outcome – universal awakening (44:21-23)

The outcome of this exclusive salvation is both a personal and a universal awakening.

We read:

Remember – look back. Remember your need for redemption, God's pledge of forgiveness, and the certainty of his promises that God is the only God. God's people should ponder the truth that they know.

Return – "Coming back in repentance is not a good deed rewarded by redemption; the redemption has already taken place, opening the door for a return, making it both possible and effective, but which has been made for them."¹⁵

Sing – "the picture of those who enter, with responsive joy, into a salvation to which they have made no contribution."¹⁶

Christianity is God to the rescue, He is the one who turns things around, who delivers us. As Alec Motyer points out in his excellent commentary on Isaiah, "the idolater has been busy fashioning his idol but Israel has been fashioned by the Lord; the idolater is bound to his idol but Israel is the Lord's bondman; the idolater prayed pathetically, save me but to Israel the Lord says, I have redeemed you; the idolater bowed to a block of wood, a piece of a tree but now every tree is summoned to rejoice in the Lord." We come to God just as we are with our sin and our unbelief, and he gives us riches beyond compare and throws a gospel party for us!

Notice that :

- The call to Repentance comes after the Lord's salvation already imparted to us. It is so important to see that our repentance is not what saves us. It is a response to the Lord delivering us from our blindness and our bondage to our idolatry. It says return to me *because* I have redeemed you. God's forgiveness of you is not dependent on your asking for it. Instead, your asking for it is dependent on Him setting you free.

- There is reason for great joy. Is it any wonder that there is a call for great joy? God has done all the work, He gets all the glory. God will glorify Himself through His people. We must beware of any formation of the gospel that gives some of the glory to man. God will not share His glory with you.

Is that not incredible? Doesn't that make you sing with wonder at the goodness of God. Doesn't that make you want to return to him? In fact, you don't want to completely forget your sins, because you want to glory in God's forgiveness in them. To forget about them completely means you cannot remember and therefore glory in God's forgiveness of you. This is our testimony, not only our testimony of how we came to Christ, but of each and every day of his goodness.

Let me close with these few thoughts. We have two things on trial here. The first are the idol themselves. There they are. We've looked at them. They cannot deliver true happiness or joy, as much as we want them to.

God seals the deal on this by putting forth the proof in his own pudding. He says that there will be a man named Cyrus who will be the deliverer of his people. Cyrus will shepherd them, will fulfill his purpose, will be God's anointed, will open doors before him. And, over 100 years later, that is exactly what happened. You can read about it in several Old Testament books, most notably at the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra. This really happened. God really did it. He is mighty to save, even able to use a pagan Persian king to accomplish his purposes, lest anyone doubt in his sovereignty. That backdrop of the book is essential in understanding the veracity of the rest of God's claims. This prophecy will ultimately fulfill the conditions stated in 41

¹⁴ Motyer, 276

¹⁵ Motyer, 281

¹⁶ Motyer, 281

that we mentioned at the beginning of this study.¹⁷ God can predict the future, and the implication is that he can do because he controls it. That's how amazing he is. The other idols are just pretenders. Even Simon Crowell has to admit there is only one winner. The others are all losers.

But we've also been on trial. The idols are exposed as false, but we're the ones who were worshipping them. What now for us?¹⁸

One answer is to wallow in our sins, but then feel temporarily transformed by a saying like, "God accepts you just as you are." However, this is not the Biblical gospel. The gospel is better than unconditional love. God has *contraconditional* love for you. Contraconditional love says, "God accepts you just as Christ is accepted." Christ is fully pleasing to the Father, and he gives you his own perfect goodness. God never accepts me as-I-am; he accepts me as-I-am-in-Christ. The center of gravity is different. The true gospel does not allow God's love to be sucked into the vortex of my soul's idolatrous systems. This psychological just-as-you-are approach soothes the unhappy soul without getting to the source of the pain.

In a moralizing approach, Christ's forgiveness is applied simply to behavioral sins. The solution is typically construed in all-or-nothing terms like "Let go and let God", or "repent for these behaviors" or "total yieldedness" as an attempt to deal with the motive problems with a single act of housecleaning. There is little sense of patient process of inner renewal...daily dying to the false gods we fabricate.¹⁹

The gospel is better than either of these, and it is available to you. Why? Because, *Even though you did not call upon me, O Christian, even though you have been weary of me, O Believer, even though you have not honored me or satisfied me, even though, in fact, if we're honest here, you have burdened me with your sins and you have wearied me with your iniquities. – despite all that, God says, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Because you are my servant, whom I have chosen, and I am the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb - because of this I will help you.*

At the end of the 40s and the beginning of the 50s in Isaiah, he calls over and over to his people. Listen! Awake! Watch! Hear!

Will you respond?

¹⁷ This is one reason that the prophecy is essential to be made ahead of time by Isaiah. That is one of the forces of the book. If it were taken away by a DeuteroIsaiah writing after the fact, this argument of chapter 41 would make no sense.

¹⁸ Slightly adapted from Keller

¹⁹ from David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair"