

Isaiah 44:1 – 45:7

^{44:1} But now listen, O Jacob, My servant,
 And Israel, whom I have chosen:
² Thus says the LORD who made you
 And formed you from the womb, who will help you,
‘Do not fear, O Jacob My servant;
 And you Jeshurun whom I have chosen.
³ For I will pour out water on the thirsty land
 And streams on the dry ground;
I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring
 And My blessing on your descendants;
⁴ And they will spring up among the grass
 Like poplars by streams of water.’
⁵ This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’s’;
 And that one will call on the name of Jacob;
And another will write on his hand, ‘Belonging to the LORD,’
 And will name Israel’s name with honor.
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,
 And there is no God besides Me.
⁷ Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it;
 Yes, let him recount it to Me in order,
 From the time that I established the ancient nation.
And let them declare to them the things that are coming
 And the events that are going to take place.
⁸ Do not tremble and do not be afraid;
 Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it?
And you are My witnesses.
 Is there any God besides Me,
Or is there any other Rock?
 I know of none.’
⁹ Those who fashion a graven image are all of them futile,
 And their precious things are of no profit;
Even their own witnesses fail to see or know,
 So that they will be put to shame.
¹⁰ Who has fashioned a god
 Or cast an idol to no profit?
¹¹ Behold, all his companions will be put to shame,
 For the craftsmen themselves are mere men.
Let them all assemble themselves, let them stand up,
 Let them tremble, let them together be put to shame.
¹² The man shapes iron into a cutting tool
 And does his work over the coals,
Fashioning it with hammers
 And working it with his strong arm.
He also gets hungry and his strength fails;
 He drinks no water and becomes weary.
¹³ Another shapes wood, he extends a measuring line;
 He outlines it with red chalk.
He works it with planes
 And outlines it with a compass,
And makes it like the form of a man,
 Like the beauty of man, so that it may sit in a house.

Jacob: The biblical character Jacob was the father of twelve sons, who became the twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 25 – 35).

Jeshurun: Another nickname for Israel, used three times in Deuteronomy for the people (Dt.32:15; 33:26) or the land of Israel (Dt.33:5).

God Acts by Speaking: This is an unbroken pattern starting from creation. God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was. God only takes responsibility for what He said He would do, which He announced through ‘prophets.’ ‘Surely the LORD God *does nothing* unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets’ (Amos 3:7).

¹⁴ Surely he cuts cedars for himself,
 And takes a cypress or an oak
 And raises it for himself among the trees of the forest.
 He plants a fir, and the rain makes it grow.
¹⁵ Then it becomes something for a man to burn,
 So he takes one of them and warms himself;
 He also makes a fire to bake bread.
 He also makes a god and worships it;
 He makes it a graven image
 And falls down before it.
¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire;
 Over this half he eats meat
 As he roasts a roast
 And is satisfied.
 He also warms himself
 And says, 'Aha! I am warm, I have seen the fire.'
¹⁷ But the rest of it he makes into a god, his graven image.
 He falls down before it and worships;
 He also prays to it
 And says, 'Deliver me, for you are my god.'
¹⁸ They do not know,
 Nor do they understand,
 For He has smeared over their eyes so that they cannot see
 And their hearts so that they cannot comprehend.
¹⁹ No one recalls,
 Nor is there knowledge or understanding to say,
 'I have burned half of it in the fire
 And also have baked bread over its coals.
 I roast meat and eat it.
 Then I make the rest of it into an abomination,
 I fall down before a block of wood!'
²⁰ He feeds on ashes;
 A deceived heart has turned him aside.
 And he cannot deliver himself,
 Nor say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'
²¹ 'Remember these things, O Jacob,
 And Israel, for you are My servant;
 I have formed you, you are My servant,
 O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me.
²² I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud
 And your sins like a heavy mist.
 Return to Me,
 For I have redeemed you.'
²³ Shout for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done it!
 Shout joyfully, you lower parts of the earth;
 Break forth into a shout of joy, you mountains,
 O forest, and every tree in it;
 For the LORD has redeemed Jacob
 And in Israel He shows forth His glory.
²⁴ Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
 And the one who formed you from the womb,
 'I, the LORD, am the maker of all things,
 Stretching out the heavens by Myself
 And spreading out the earth all alone,
²⁵ Causing the omens of boasters to fail,
 Making fools out of diviners,

*Heaven and Earth: The totality
of creation (Gen.1:1 – 2; Isa.1:2).*

Causing wise men to draw back
 And turning their knowledge into foolishness,
²⁶ Confirming the word of His servant
 And performing the purpose of His messengers.
 It is I who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited!'
 And of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built.'
 And I will raise up her ruins again.
²⁷ It is I who says to the depth of the sea, 'Be dried up!'
 And I will make your rivers dry.
²⁸ It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd!
 And he will perform all My desire.'
 And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,'
 And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'"
^{45:1} Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed,
 Whom I have taken by the right hand,
 To subdue nations before him
 And to loose the loins of kings;
 To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:
² I will go before you and make the rough places smooth;
 I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars.
³ I will give you the treasures of darkness
 And hidden wealth of secret places,
 So that you may know that it is I,
 The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.
⁴ For the sake of Jacob My servant,
 And Israel My chosen one,
 I have also called you by your name;
 I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me.
⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other;
 Besides Me there is no God.
 I will gird you,
 Though you have not known Me;
⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun
 That there is no one besides Me.
 I am the LORD,
 And there is no other,
⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness,
 Causing well-being and creating calamity;
 I am the LORD who does all these.

Cyrus: The personal name of the Persian Emperor (~600 – 530 BC). The Persian Empire followed the Babylonian. Tradition says that the Hebrew prophet Daniel, in the city of Babylon, read the scroll of Isaiah to Cyrus the Persian (Isa.44:28 – 45:25). Cyrus then permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem (2 Chr.36:20 – 23).

Causing well-being and calamity: Isa.45:7 has a specific and narrow context. The great Empires related to Mosaic Israel positively and negatively until the coming of Jesus. This dynamic was based on God placing Israel at a geopolitical crossroads between continents, and did not continue after Jesus. And throughout, God did not cause human choices per se. Note God's interaction with Cyrus the Persian.



The Cyrus Cylinder, currently in the British Museum in London. It is made of baked clay, and is about 8.9 inches long, 3.9 inches across. It was produced around 539 – 538 BC and discovered by a British expedition in 1879 in the ruins of Babylon. Written in Akkadian, it describes Cyrus the Great, and his policy to allow displaced peoples to return home to rebuild their homes and sanctuaries.

Questions

1. How would you divide up this passage?
 - a. Part 1 is 44:1 – 8 when God reminds Israel who He is, and who they are
 - b. Part 2 is 44:9 – 20 when God satirizes Israel's idol-worship
 - c. Part 3 is 44:21 – 27 when God announces He will redeem Israel from captivity and idolatry
 - d. Part 4 is 44:28 – 45:7 when God addresses Cyrus as the agent of Israel's release
2. Who is Israel to God? 'My servant, my chosen one' is repeated in 44:1, 2, 21 and 45:4

44:1 But now listen, O Jacob, My servant,
And Israel, whom I have chosen:
2b 'Do not fear, O Jacob My servant;
And you Jeshurun whom I have chosen.
45:4 For the sake of Jacob My servant,
And Israel My chosen one

3. Who is God to Israel? 'King of Israel' (and Israel is the servant) and 'Redeemer' (and Israel is the captive who needs redemption, who God chooses to redeem) in 44:6, 21 – 22

44:6 Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
44:21 'Remember these things, O Jacob,
And Israel, for you are My servant;
I have formed you, you are My servant,
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me.
22 I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud
And your sins like a heavy mist.
Return to Me,
For I have redeemed you.'

4. In the world around Israel, people believed that wars on earth reflected wars in heaven. So if your tribe beat my tribe, it also means that your god beat my god, and that your god is now king over mine. What does it mean that God calls Himself the King of Israel, even though Israel gets conquered by other kings?
 - a. *Israel looked stubborn and in denial.* It made God's kingship over Israel something that other nations could laugh at. As if the Jews were just stubborn people who didn't want to admit defeat.
 - b. *But Israel had hope through faith.* But it also made God's kingship over Israel something that Israel could cling to as a hope. Because being defeated by other nations was something that God was allowing Israel to endure, even as
 - c. *Israel had to follow God's commandments, not the culture around them.* God used His own kingly authority to *interrupt* the authority of others over Israel. For example, He called the Israelites to still obey Him, and not worship the idols that other kings and emperors put before them. Then, He called Cyrus to obey Him with regards to setting the Israelites free. In a sense, Cyrus is like Jesus: Cyrus is a new human king who takes the place of the old human king, the King of Babylon. And he uses his authority to allow Israel to return and rebuild. Jesus is a new human king with a new humanity, who takes the place of the old human king, Adam, and the old spiritual enemy, Satan. He uses his authority to allow all of God's people to return and rebuild.
 - d. *King Jesus continues to interrupt other authorities.* So we follow him as king, not the culture around us. Jesus is the primary owner of our bodies and claims authority over us as he places his Spirit in us (1 Cor.6:18 – 20). Therefore, he uses his own kingly authority to *interrupt* the authority of others over us, *not reinforce it*. We need to seriously consider singleness instead of marriage, because giving someone else authority over our own bodies can be tricky (1 Cor.7:17 – 35, 39). We need to not become slaves of people (1 Cor.7:21 – 23) for the same reason. And we need to be abolitionists for that very reason. If Jesus is our authority, we need to proactively protect his authority in our lives, and in others' lives.
5. Let's look at God satirizing Israel's idol-worship. Why was Israel vulnerable to worshipping idols? Why are we? Probably a combination of the following reasons:

- a. *Jealousy, desire for power.* The people who were more powerful than they were, by appearances, worshiped idols. Like the Babylonians and the Persians. Is that why they were more powerful? Perhaps the Israelites believed that they could be more powerful by imitating what they did?
 - b. *Anxiety, desire for control.* If you wanted victory in war, make sacrifices to the gods of war. If you wanted better harvests, make sacrifices to the gods of the harvest and the weather. And so on.
 - c. *Lack of identity, desire for stability and anchors.* Israel was going to be taken into exile under foreign powers. They'd be leaving behind a homeland and a way of life with which they were familiar. They were probably losing some connections to each other. Especially when we go through changes like that, we look for stable things in our lives: like the food we know and the clothes we feel comfortable in; like good picture albums or organized hard drives or organized filing cabinets; like the routines we had.
 - d. Whatever the exact reasons, God looks at idol-worship as a failure to trust Him, and a willingness to believe lies.
 - e. Illus: In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel trades her voice and her mermaid tail to the villain for the chance to win Prince Eric's affection, not realizing that she's changing herself, giving away her connection to him, her ability to communicate, and how he would actually remember her. She's undermining herself and stabbing herself in the foot. She gives away what makes her truly her. And she didn't even ask her father, King Triton! In the end, he was able to transform her from mermaid to human! That's an important reminder to us. Worshiping anyone or anything else means we give away. (That's a good segue to the next question...)
6. How does God satirize idol-worship? How does He make fun of it?
- a. You're wasting your energy: it's 'to no profit' (44:9)
 - b. You're embarrassing yourself, because your gods will not deliver you: it's 'to your shame' (44:10, 11)
 - c. Are you the creator of gods or the creation of the one true God? (44:12 – 14) Figure that out and act accordingly.
 - d. You can destroy an idol, but then you ask it to deliver you (44:15 – 17)??? How does that make sense???
 - e. You're lying to yourself (44:18 – 20)!!
 - f. (optional) What does Isaiah mean when he seems to make God responsible for the lack of true spiritual sight and lack of responsive hearts in 44:18? Ultimately, it's that He hadn't sent Jesus yet. Some parts of Isaiah wouldn't be understood or accepted until Jesus came. But still, they knew enough to trust God in the immediate sense, even if they didn't know or understand everything God would do. So the apostle Paul would say much later that the Old Testament prophets and audiences did not know that God, through Jesus' new humanity for all humanity, would make the Gentiles full co-heirs with Israel of His blessings and promises, not second-class citizens (Eph.3:4 – 6).
 - g. Illus: I can illustrate this well out of my own life. At the end of my 10th grade year, my parents' arguing turned into a raging fight about divorce. I was stunned. I thought I was pretty independent from my parents, but this proved me wrong. I got involved in their fights. I came to school with little sleep. I felt like I had no security in life. Despite three faithful Christian friends, I refused to come to faith in Jesus Christ. Instead I stuck with my agenda for my own security. I relied a lot on my friends, tried twice as hard to keep my parents together, and became even more performance oriented than before. Within the next year I got involved with this girl. And I realized something. There was just something nice about being loved. There was something nice about having someone who you think you're safe with. And so again, rather than trust God for my security, I brought all my hopes for security that my family didn't meet, and I put my hope in her. And because I wanted her to be with me and need me, too, I became really manipulative. My reasoning, and there was a cold logic to this, was: 'How can I increase the chances that she would stay with me?' I was totally dismayed when I read Romans and found that God said that this would happen if I turned away from Him. Look at Romans 1:24: 'Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.'
 - h. Illus: Leader share a story about worshiping an idol instead of Jesus, and what that did to you.
 - i. N.T. Wright says, 'When human beings give up their heartfelt allegiance to and worship that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God. One of the primary laws of human life is that you become like what you worship; what's more, you reflect what you

worship not only back to the object itself but also outward to the world around. Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers rather than as human beings. Those who worship sex define themselves in terms of it (their preferences, their practices, their past histories) and increasingly treat other people as actual or potential sexual objects. Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors, or pawns. These and many other forms of idolatry combine in a thousand ways, all of them damaging to the image-bearing quality of the people concerned and of those whose lives they touch.¹

7. Is it surprising for God to address Cyrus the Persian? To work with him?
 - a. Yes in the sense that God speaks to someone who is not an Israelite, and who was yet future!
 - b. No in the sense that God also spoke to Pharaoh in Egypt during the days of Moses, and told him to let Israel go. The return of Israel from Babylon and Persia was described as another Exodus event. God delivered them from captivity and brought them home.
 - c. God ultimately shows that He is not like the idols. How?
 - i. They are mute. Who is God? He speaks
 - ii. They know nothing. God knows people and knows the future.
 - iii. They are local. God knows no boundaries and speaks to anyone, even the most powerful king at the time.
 - d. God shows that He pursues BOTH Israel and the Gentiles, to deliver us from the greatest Enemy! This story is a good example of that fact: ‘It’s 3 PM and I’m out to coffee with the devil. He’s sitting across from me, his hand on the shoulder of a heroin dealer named Trent. A few months ago Trent confessed to me that he had sold Fury his last bag of heroin, and during his last conversation with Fury he had convinced him to overdose. It was a confession without guilt. He is proud of his ability to manipulate others and considers himself blameless in Fury’s suicide. Nevertheless, Trent has been coming regularly to a weekly discussion of the Scriptures that I have been facilitating, and today we are following up on last week’s discussion over a cup of coffee. As Trent shares his thoughts and feelings with me they are a dizzying blend of truth and lies. At every turn in the conversation I am never quite sure who I am talking to: Trent or his tempter. At times I feel great sympathy for Trent; when I see the broken and needy kid who never grew up, but moments later he is a vicious liar, full of grandiose statements about his spiritual power. Yet he knows that he’s not well and he’s quick to remind me of this. He tells me that he knows he’s living on the edge, and I’m reminded of an afternoon many months earlier where Fury had told me similar things a few days before he ended his life. Trent is an example of the complicated nature of a life troubled with the awful triad of addiction, mental illness, and spiritual oppression. Like a predator hunting a group of sheep, the devil waits for kids like Trent who become disconnected from the flock. Then, when they are most vulnerable, he attacks. Kids who have been kicked out of their homes, who have become addicted to a drug, who have found themselves homeless for any number of reasons become an easy target. Without a community to support and encourage them, they fall easily. Reintroducing these lost sheep to the protection of a spiritual community is a critical aspect of our work on the streets. Solutions to Trent’s situation do not come easy. Kids like Trent often deeply distrust offers of help, too many previous offers have ended in hurt and disappointment. I have offered to walk with him through the process of recovery, an offer he is not yet ready to accept. I have prayed over him many times, hoping for the miracle which has not yet come. As my conversation with him comes to a close, Trent looks up at me with conflict in his eyes and says, “I need prayer. Please pray for me.” We spend a few minutes in prayer and then we leave the cafe. As we part ways for the afternoon I am left uncertain of where Trent’s future will take him, but I am also left knowing that his story is not yet over. The shepherd God of love still pursues him.’ (source unknown – unfortunately I forgot to write down the book and author)
8. (optional) Does God cause evil? Calamity?
 - a. God is not the author of evil in a categorical sense. He is not the author of evil from creation, for example. That is important because IF GOD WERE partly good and partly evil, then the distinction between good and evil isn’t ultimately real. And whatever we call ‘evil’ is something

¹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), p.182

we would be stuck with forever, for all eternity. Because the 'evil' would be right there at the source of all things.

- b. The Hebrew word for 'calamity' is the same word used to translate into English as 'evil.' It is the Hebrew word *ra*.
- c. God was only speaking in a very specific context: His relationship with Israel before Jesus came. So ultimately, we have to have some explanation for why God had an Israel to begin with. Why not just send Jesus right away, right after the fall?
 - i. My very full exploration is found here on this webpage: <http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/resources.who.is.god.israel.htm>. It is a paper called 'Why Choose a Chosen People? Why Not Just Jump Right to Jesus?' Warning: It's long. Below is the short answer:
 - ii. God is love (by His very nature, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and honors human partnership because that's how He made us. Partnership is God's nature, and everything God does with us involves partnership.
 - iii. God had to attempt to undo the damage of the fall. Because He loves us, He couldn't simply destroy us and start over. Because He loves us, He also didn't want us to automatically immortalize our sin by eating from the tree of life. So God had to exile humanity from the garden of Eden. Life would have its challenges. And it would take some time because human beings:
 - 1. Are/were so violent without remorse, at different periods (Gen.6:9 – 12). Jesus coming and dying would have no impact on a people who felt no remorse for violence.
 - 2. Are also very blame-shifty and evasive (think Adam blaming Eve and God – 'this woman You gave me...'). We could totally blame our internalized evil on external circumstances, other people, or God Himself.
 - iv. So we needed to have a full diagnosis of the problem with human nature, a fully documented historical record of how much we need the cure of Jesus' new humanity. So, God needed a focus group. He needed to develop their literary skill and tradition.
 - 1. God gave Israel a garden land so they couldn't blame their circumstances.
 - 2. God also gave Israel His Law so they couldn't blame bad laws.
 - 3. God also framed His relationship with Israel as a covenant, where God would discipline Israel with exile (like He sent Adam and Eve into exile, to prevent them from becoming an immortal evil right away).
 - 4. Israel was supposed to grow in compassion for the whole world, because they had to learn and take to heart that they had the same human nature problem everyone else had: human nature had been corrupted by sin, and our personal choices can make it worse.
 - v. If God did not position Israel in a major crossroads, like He did between Africa, Asia, and Europe, then Israel and God would be unknown and ineffective. The world would not be well-prepared.
 - vi. If God did not chastise and discipline Israel from within and without, corrupt leaders and faithless people would just take over. Israel's basic purpose would be unraveled.
 - 1. Jesus would not have a family of faith to be born into, which was important because Jesus was really human and began life as a human and had to be taught to be a faithful human being, trusting the Father by the Spirit.
 - 2. Jesus would not have partners in his mission which he could send into the world. No one would sign up.
- d. So GOD ABSOLUTELY NEEDED TO SEND JESUS. Therefore, GOD ABSOLUTELY NEEDED TO HAVE AN ISRAEL, TOO. AND HE NEEDED TO ACT THE WAY HE DID TOWARDS ISRAEL, allowing them to be vulnerable to the empires around them. Only IN THIS CONTEXT, and FOR THIS PURPOSE, does God say and mean this:

⁶ I am the LORD,

And there is no other,

⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness,

Causing well-being and creating calamity;

I am the LORD who does all these.

- e. So if you're wondering whether God is causing calamity in your life, the answer is NO, HE IS NOT. Calamity is something that happens because of human evil, and God is undoing human evil through Jesus and the Spirit of Jesus. He is reaching out to you in and through His Son and His Spirit.