

The Mission of God **Isaiah 45:20-25**

Sometimes the world can be a perplexing place, can't it? Especially when it comes to the world of politics and power. And you watch as people of seemingly dubious character rise to positions of influence, and you think 'what is going on here?' But if you believe in a God who is sovereign over the affairs of men, you've got to add another question, which is 'God, what are you up to in all this?'

And it's precisely those kind of questions that form the context to what Isaiah writes here. You see, Isaiah begins this chapter by prophesying that God would raise up a man called Cyrus to deliver the people of Israel from captivity in Babylon. And 200 years later, that's exactly what did happen. The Medo-Persian empire, with Cyrus the Great at its head, overthrew the Babylon empire, and allowed the Jewish exiles to return home to Israel.

Well, so what, you might say? Well, the point Isaiah makes is that Cyrus does not acknowledge God, that he is as unbelieving as any Babylonian; as God says to Cyrus: 'For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by name, I name you, *though you do not know me*. I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, *though you do not know me*... I am the Lord who does all these things' (Is 45:4, 5, 7).

So here is a man, Cyrus, who was as pagan as they come, and yet God raises him up and uses him to achieve his purposes in the world. And Cyrus may not know God, but God knows Cyrus; and it is God, not Cyrus, who is in total control. And as you read on in Isaiah 45 the implications that it is God who is sovereign over everything keep coming, until they reach their crescendo in the passage we've just read.

Only One God

Now have you ever had to teach someone something, and you found yourself having to say the same thing over and over again? And maybe it's because they're not listening, or they just don't get it, but you find yourself repeating yourself – and 'no, once again, it's not like that, it's like this' and you say it again. Well, in this chapter there is one phrase that keeps on jumping out at you. And it's as if Isaiah's readers, all the way down to you and me, don't get something, and so the Lord keeps on repeating it until we do. And it's the phrase, 'there is no other'. Look how often he says it: v5, 'I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God.' Verse 6, 'There is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.' Verse 14, 'Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him.' Verse 18, 'I am the Lord, and there is no other.' Verse 21, 'There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is none besides me.' Verse 22, 'For I am God and there is no other.'

Now why the need for repetition? Well, in Isaiah's day people could fall into the trap of thinking gods were territorial: That there was a god for Israel and gods for Babylon and gods for Media and Persia. And so if Babylon conquered Israel, well, her gods must be greater; and if the Persians conquered Babylon then her gods must be greater than Babylon's *and* Israel's. So, if Cyrus is the one with the power, then maybe it's his gods that the people should be worshipping.

Now, today, you'd never admit to thinking like that. And yet often we do think *exactly* like that. You see, maybe you see the multiplicity of different religions around the world and you think, 'well maybe that's right – the Arab people can have their god, and the tribesmen of southern America their gods, and white Europeans their god, and we should live and let live. And Buddhists should be left to be Buddhists and Hindus, Hindus. And there's a god for them, and another for us, and that's ok.' Or, you watch events in the world and you begin to doubt whether the God of the Bible really does have all the power, or whether the forces of evil might not be as strong or stronger. Or you look much closer to home, to your own life and your own struggles and wonder whether there are some things too difficult for God – that he isn't the one with all authority: that maybe the gods of money or sex or power might be stronger or better or more fulfilling gods to worship.

But it's precisely that kind of thinking that God speaks to here. As the Lord says in v12, "I made the earth and created man on it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens and I commanded all their host." So far from there being multiple gods, far from there being a pantheon of powers to choose from, there is only one God, the God who created you, and no other.

But if you think about it, if that's true, it has major implications, doesn't it? Verse 20, 'Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save.' So anything else that we look to for significance or worship and give our lives to as a god, whether it is in organised religion or not, are simply empty idols. And ultimately it is of no more use to you than a bit of wood.

Now, one of the things that medical or nursing students often get a session on, is what it's like to be in a wheelchair. And you pair up and one of you goes in the chair and the other pushes. And the one who pushes discovers just how hard work it can be to get your friend around a city; whilst the one in the wheelchair learns how frustrating and humbling it can be as they discover all the things they can't do: buttons they can't reach, steps they can't climb, doorways they can't enter. As you discover what it is to be powerless and need others to do it for you. And these idols, Isaiah says, need to be carried. At least the person in the wheelchair *is* someone and there are many things they *can* do, but not an idol. It can't do anything for itself.

And yet, it's not that it just has no power to help itself, it has absolutely no power to help you either. So whilst people in traditional religions might pray to other gods, and sincerely believe in them; whilst people might sacrifice life and marriage and family at the altars of 21st idols of money, sex and power, ultimately they cannot save you. They cannot give you what you are looking for. Because whilst idols offer you the world, they always, ultimately, let you down. Only God, v21, is 'a righteous God and a Saviour.'

But in the face of people worshipping false gods, and refusing to acknowledge the one true God, you might expect that what comes next is a divine promise to blast and destroy all these foreigners for their idolatry. And yet, what does come next is very different, isn't it?

Inviting the World

Now, have you ever faced the dilemma of who to invite to a party? And you only have so many places round the table, and there are only so many seats in the car, so which friends make the cut and who gets left out? Well, look at v22, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!"

So far from God vowing to destroy those who worship other gods, the Lord invites them to turn to him and discover in him everything they've been seeking elsewhere. And who gets on the invitation list? 'All the ends of the earth.' Everyone, everywhere. Because it's not just the people of Israel that he wants to bring out to freedom, it's not just the people of Jerusalem he's gathering to himself, but a people from every city and every nation.

And did you notice how God puts it, or rather doesn't put it? It's not, turn to me and save yourself, is it? It's 'turn to me and *be saved*' let me, out of my love and grace for you, save you. You simply have to turn to me, I will do the rest.'

You see, imagine that for medical reasons you need evacuating from some country somewhere. And you keep phoning this telephone number you have, hoping that it's an air rescue company that will come and get you. But there is only one company who can do this, and that's not their number. But you keep on phoning it, and no one answers, because the company doesn't exist, because there's no one there to pick up the phone. And people who know tell you, 'look, you've got the wrong number, you just need to phone this number and they'll come and rescue you. And what's more, they'll do it free of charge'; and you say, 'no I want these people to come and get me; in fact I have this list of other numbers I'm going to try; and they're all different from yours, and if this one doesn't work I'll try the next; and I don't want anything for free, I want to pay them to come and get me; I want this to cost me something, I have to do my part'; 'yes, but they don't exist! But this one does, it's the only one that does, *and* its totally free of charge.'

So it doesn't matter what god or idol someone is worshipping now; it doesn't matter in what corner of the world, what city, or what village they are in. It doesn't matter what high-rise apartment block, or shanty-town shack they live in; it doesn't matter the colour of their skin or their people group. The offer and the call is for everyone – all the ends of the earth – to turn to the one true God and be saved. Verse 23, as the Lord says, "By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance."

But the tragedy is that whilst the invitation is for everyone, whilst it is free and full, whilst one day everyone will bow the knee to the Lord, not everyone will accept the invitation. Look what he says in v24-25, 'to him [to the Lord] shall

come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.'

So, it doesn't matter where you're from, or what your racial background is, whoever from wherever turns to the Lord will be counted as the offspring of Israel – a member of God's family, and they will be justified and declared not guilty and they'll know the joy of the Lord's glory. But not everyone will. Others won't like what they hear, they'll be angry, incensed at him. But they too will bow the knee to God, only they won't know the joy of being declared not guilty before God, instead they'll experience shame, Isaiah says.

But just think for a minute, isn't shame what we all deserve? That if the person you and I really are was projected on a screen, if what God knows about me were known by everyone, wouldn't we all be ashamed? Or maybe you look at your past, or even your present, and you already feel deep shame. So how can God take people like us, from across the globe, and be both righteous and our saviour? How can people who know shame, be justified and be declared not guilty? How can people like us, who by all rights have no right to stand in a righteous God's presence, be declared his son or his daughter, members of his family?

Dying to Save

I read a great story the other day by one of the Queen's plain-clothes police bodyguards. And one day he was walking with the Queen, just the two of them, in the lanes around one of her country castles. And they met two American tourists, who were hoping to catch sight of the Queen. But she was wearing one of her headscarfs and her old rain mac and so they didn't recognise her. Instead they asked her, 'we hoped we'd get a glimpse of the queen, but obviously that's not going to happen. But hey, have you ever met her?' To which the Queen said, 'no. I haven't.' But then pointing to her bodyguard she said, 'but he has.' So there they are, standing in a country lane, talking to the Queen herself, and they don't recognise her, because she's not what they were expecting.

Well, the apostle Paul takes the words that Isaiah says of God here in v23 and he applies them to Jesus: 'So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Phil 2:10-11). In other words, the one and only God, who sends out this world-wide invitation to turn to him and be saved, the King before whom every knee shall bow and every tongue swear allegiance has come in Christ, and people didn't recognise him.

Because the King before whom everyone will one day humble themselves, first humbled himself. And he came not as a king forcing submission, but as a servant. And, Paul says, 'he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross' (Phil 2:8).

So the way of the world is 'make something of yourself' but the One who is everything, who made everything, came and made himself nothing. The One who one day will have everyone bow the knee to him, fell to his knees in the garden

under the weight of our sins, and in the road under the weight of our cross. The One who one day will receive the praises of every nation, endured the scorn and the spitting of his own. And he did it all to save us. And it's there, at the cross, where he took our place, and bore the punishment and the alienation from God that we deserve, that God is both righteous and a saviour, both just and the justifier. It's there, as he endured the shame of the cross, that he takes away your shame, as he takes it upon himself. And he was stripped naked that you might be clothed. And he was abandoned by God, that you might be welcomed into his family.

And it's all because of Jesus that this world-wide invitation to turn and be saved can and must go out into all the world. As the apostle Peter preached, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). As Paul wrote, 'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all' (1 Tim 2:5-6). You see, every other religion either forces you to submit, or tells you 'you must save yourself'. It is only in Christ that God comes and submits himself to what we deserve, and does everything we need to save us, and that makes it possible for everyone, everywhere to be saved, if only we will turn.

But if all this is true, the implications are huge, aren't they?

What will you do?

Well, briefly, I want to give you four ways you can respond to God's world-wide mission.

Firstly, if you're not yet a Christian, accept the invitation yourself. Consider how the Lord Jesus came and died in your place, so that you might live, and rather than trying hard to save yourself, which will never work, put your trust in him and come and take your place at the table of his family.

Secondly, if you are a Christian, go. Jesus said to his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..." or, in Isaiah's words, every knee will bow to him, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:18-19). So, go into the world and invite people to come. That might mean planning a short-term missions trip as a family, it might planning your retirement so you can give time to missions. It might mean joining the Walk ministry and reaching out to the women on the street, or joining with Joel's team and working with refugees – the world that has come to you. Or maybe for you, 'going' might simply be being prepared to go across the office, or the hallway in your apartment block, and befriending your neighbour, or ladies, inviting your friend to the outreach event in June.

As Paul says in Romans 10, 'How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?' (Rom 10:14). And maybe, just maybe, it's through you that they'll hear.

Thirdly, send others. You see the next thing Paul says is, 'how are they to preach unless they are sent?' (Rom 10:15) And you can be a sender of others by giving sacrificially to missions and church planting because you know that Christ has given sacrificially for you. So you can go yourself, but you can also enable others to go. And when it comes to God's mission, this investment has zero risk of failure. As the Lord says in v23, "By myself I have sworn... "To me every knee shall bow." So all you financial guys, this is one investment you never need to worry about. You have the Lord's word on it. Your giving will never be in vain.

But finally, you can pray. Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful..." there are millions around the world who have never heard, "but the labourers are few. Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Luke 10:2). So the outcome is certain, and yet God calls us to be a part of it by praying for it. And if you want a great way to ease yourself into that, come and join our Open Doors prayer meeting once a month and let's pray together for God's world-wide mission through his world-wide church, for the glory of his Son.