

The Sovereign Works and Ways of God

Isaiah 45:1-13

Isaiah 45:1-8 - *“Thus says the Lord to His anointed: to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held— to subdue nations before him and loose the armor of kings; to open before him the double doors so that the gates will not be shut:*

² ‘I will go before you and make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze and cut the bars of iron. ³ I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that I, the Lord, who call you by your name, am the God of Israel.

⁴ For Jacob My servant’s sake, and Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me. ⁵ I am the Lord, and there is no other. There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, ⁶ that they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is none besides Me.

I am the Lord, and there is no other. ⁷ I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create calamity. I, the Lord, do all these things.’

⁸ “Rain down, you heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness. Let the earth open, let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together. I, the Lord, have created it.”

Background Notes

At the end of Isaiah 44, an amazing prediction was made about the coming of Cyrus, the future Persian king. Isaiah wrote this prophecy **more than 150 years** before this Persian emperor came to power! Look back at Isaiah 44:28: *“Who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, “You shall be built,” and to the temple, “Your foundation shall be laid.””*

Think of the accuracy of this prophecy – actually predicting Cyrus *by name* more than 150 years before his time! No wonder critics of the Bible have a hard time with the evidence of fulfilled prophecy! Skeptics and critics even try to explain the fulfilled prophecies away by saying that they were written up later, or that certain so-called prophecies were inserted into the text at a later date *after* the events took place! However, evidence shows that such arguments are totally without merit.

The truth is that the supernatural prediction of future events - events that happened exactly as predicted, down to the last detail - is clear evidence that ***the Bible is the Word of God!***

The prophecy about Cyrus continued in the first few verses of chapter 45. Look at verse 1 again: *“Thus says the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held—to subdue nations before him and loose the armor of kings, to open before him the double doors so that the gates will not be shut...”*

Cyrus was described as “the Lord’s anointed” (45:1) and as “My shepherd” (44:28). Is that an indication that Cyrus was a true believer, or that he became a believer? No. Look at verses 4-5: *“I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me.”*

Cyrus was a polytheist, and we know that he died a polytheist. Cyrus was described as God’s shepherd and His anointed because he would be the means of sending God’s exiled people back to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon. The edict of Cyrus (in 539 BC) allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem, and to rebuild the Temple. God can even use pagan emperors to accomplish His purposes!

Doctrinal Points

1. Because God is sovereign, His works include all things.

Being **sovereign** means having complete and supreme power and authority and control of all things. The Bible teaches that **God is sovereign over everything**. Ephesians 1:11 says that God *“works out everything in conformance to the purpose of His will.”* Does that include **everything**? Yes! To put it in another way (one of my favorite ways!) – **“there are no maverick molecules in the universe!”**

Everything is under God’s control. Does that include the decisions and the military operations of a pagan Persian emperor? Of course it does! And that is precisely the point of these verses. Persia would conquer the nation of Lydia, and then it would overthrow Babylon (v1). The reference to the open “doors” and “gates” (v1-2) may be a reference to the Persian strategy for conquering Babylon. According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, the Persians secretly entered Babylon by diverting the waters of the Euphrates River that ran through the center of the city. Some of the Persian troops entered the city by sneaking under the walls in the empty riverbed, and then opened the gates from inside!

In His sovereignty, God would make Cyrus rich, but Cyrus would come to know that it was the God of Israel who was calling the shots (v3), and that all of these events were taking place because of God’s people (v4).

Verse 6 indicated that through God’s sovereign use of Cyrus and the Persians, all people worldwide would come to know the supremacy of the God of Israel: *“That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other.”*

How would “all people” come to know the supremacy of the God of Israel? All would come to know His supremacy through the miraculous preservation of Israel, and by the coming of the Messiah through preserved Israel. Israel’s Messiah would be for **all people, worldwide**.

Verse 7 emphasized God’s sovereignty over all things, including light and darkness. He is sovereign over peace and prosperity on the one hand, and He allows natural disaster and calamity on the other. The word translated “evil” in the King James Version was not the idea of moral evil, but of natural disaster or calamity, such as a flood or earthquake.

Verse 8 looked ahead for its complete fulfillment to the earthly millennial kingdom of Christ, when everyone will know the sovereign Lord. Verse 8: *“Rain down, you heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness; let the earth open, let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together. I, the Lord, have created it.”*

Because God is sovereign, His works include all things.

2. Because God is sovereign, His ways should not be questioned.

Isaiah 45:9-13 - *“Woe to him who strives with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherd of the earth! Shall the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ Or shall your handiwork say, ‘He has no hands’? ¹⁰ Woe to him who says to his father, ‘What are you begetting?’ Or to the woman, ‘What have you brought forth?’”*

¹¹ Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: “Ask Me of things to come concerning My sons and concerning the work of My hands, you command Me.

¹² I have made the earth, and created man on it. I—My hands—stretched out the heavens, and all their host I have commanded. ¹³ I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways. He shall build My city and let My exiles go free, not for price nor reward,” says the Lord of hosts.”

These verses used the word “**woe**” to strongly denounce anyone who dared to question the sovereign ways of God. How dare the clay question the potter? And how dare others question the genetics of parents starting a family (v10)? In the same way, how dare anyone question God about His sovereign ways with Israel? Verse 11: *“Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: “Ask Me of things to come concerning My sons; and concerning the work of My hands, you command Me.”*

Verses 9-10 sound a lot like Romans 9, don’t they? Romans 9:19-21: *“You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?”*

If God created the universe, He certainly has the sovereign right to control the universe and everything in it. He certainly had the sovereign right to raise up the pagan Persian emperor Cyrus, and have him issue an edict that would allow God's people to go free from Babylon, and to return home and rebuild Jerusalem. Verse 13: *"I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways. He shall build My city, and let My exiles go free, not for price nor reward," says the Lord of hosts.*"

Because God is sovereign, His ways should not be questioned. He can do whatever He wants, in line with His perfect character and His perfect plan. In Isaiah 55, we have those well-known verses: *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.*

Because God is sovereign, His ways should not be questioned.

Practical Application

Don't blame God for evil.

Even though the word *"evil"* was used in verse 7 in the King James Version, it is not to be understood as *moral* evil, but rather natural disaster or calamity (as we've mentioned). However, some folks still try to pin the blame on God for the existence of evil. They blame God because He created the beings that do what is evil - both humans and angels.

Maybe an illustration of parents and children would be helpful here. Imagine two perfect parents who decide to bring children into this world, even though they know full well that those children will not be perfect, and that those children may choose to do wrong. And if those children choose to do what is wrong, are the parents responsible? Are they morally culpable for their children's wrongdoing? No, of course not!

In the same way, God cannot be held accountable for His creatures' sin. God created human beings as free moral beings with the capacity for choice. He allows humans to choose to obey Him or disobey Him. He allows and permits His creatures to choose to sin. However, God is not responsible or morally culpable when people make the wrong choices.

So - don't blame God for evil!