

# ***Isaiah Part 26: Cyrus, the Lord's Shepherd...***

## **Isaiah 44**

### ***Introduction***

*Cyrus the Great (c. 600 to 530 BC) figures in the Bible as the patron and deliverer of the Jews. Cyrus, the King of Persia, was the monarch under whom the Babylonian captivity ended. In the first year of his reign he was prompted by God to decree that the Temple in Jerusalem should be rebuilt, and that such Jews as cared to might return to their land for this purpose. Moreover, he showed his interest in the project by sending back with them the sacred vessels which had been taken from the First Temple, and a considerable sum of money with which to buy building materials... (Source: Wikipedia).*

On 12 October 539 BC, Cyrus' general captured Babylon without a battle. According to Herodotus, the Persians diverted the River Euphrates into a canal up-river so that the water level dropped 'to the height of the middle of a man's thigh,' which thus rendered the flood defences useless, and enabled the invaders to march through the river bed and enter the city by night.

According to Josephus (Antiquities, XI, 1, 2), when Cyrus made his grand entrance, the prophet Daniel presented him with an ancient scroll of Isaiah, which contained a personal letter addressing him by name – and Isaiah had died 150 years before Cyrus was born! The closing verses of this chapter state: "I am the LORD, the Maker of all things... who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid.""

Cyrus was duly impressed. He freed the captives and returned the vessels that had been plundered from the Temple 70 years earlier. He even gave the Jews incentives to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple (see 2 Chronicles 36 v 22, 23; Ezra 1 v 1 to 4). Only about 50,000 Jews responded to this royal proclamation and returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel...

### ***Israel the chosen (Isaiah 44 v 1 to 5)***

- What gift does God have in store for his redeemed people, and what blessings will this bring? See John 7 v 37 to 39.

"He who made you" (v 2) – this reminds us that God is still active in and responsible for creation; there is a sense in which God has made each one of us, so we each have a personal obligation to him as our Creator. 'Jeshurun' means 'the upright one' – it is used in contrast to the name 'Jacob' (= trickster), just as 'Israel' is sometimes used as a contrast to Jacob.

"I will pour water on the thirsty land... I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring" (v 3) – this is a glorious promise to a humble, repentant Israel. God will not simply *give* them his Spirit: he will *pour out* his Spirit upon them. Who receives this gift? "I will pour water on the thirsty land" – when we are thirsty for the outpouring of the Spirit, we can ask and receive the Holy Spirit in expectant faith. "And my blessing on your descendants" – God wants to pour his blessing on us and on our descendants.

"They will spring up like grass in a meadow" (v 4) – one effect of the poured-out Spirit is life that springs up and grows. "Some will say, 'I belong to the Lord'" (v 5) – another effect is that the Spirit identifies us as belonging to the Lord. "Still others will write on their hand, 'The Lord's,' and will take the name Israel" – when the Holy Spirit is poured out on us, we will want to take the name of the Lord: we will want everyone to know we belong to God, and that he belongs to us.

***[MORE OVER...]***

## ***The LORD, not idols (Isaiah 44 v 6 to 23)***

*Adam Clarke writes of this passage: “The sacred writers are generally large and eloquent upon the subject of idolatry; they treat it with great severity, and set forth the absurdity of it in the strongest light. But this passage of Isaiah far exceeds anything that ever was written upon the subject, in force of argument, energy of expression, and elegance of composition...”*

“I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God” (v 6) – God has already taken this unique title in Isaiah 41 v 4, in the same context of proclaiming his glory against false gods. An idol can never be ‘first’, because an idol needs someone to make it; an idol can never be ‘last’, because it will wear out and break. But the God of Israel is both the first and the last. Jesus takes the same title in Revelation 1 v 17 and 22 v 13.

“Who then is like me?” (v 7) – because God is the first and the last, he lives outside our time-domain, watching and directing human and cosmic history as it makes its course down his appointed path. “Do not tremble, do not be afraid” (v 8) – knowing these truths about God should erase all our fears. “There is no other Rock” – since God is the only God, he is the only solid ground on which to build our lives.

- Have you realised the amazing privilege of knowing the true God (v 6 to 8)?
- According to this passage, what is the effect of idolatry on the mind of the ‘worshipper’ (v 18 to 20)?

“All who make idols are nothing” (v 9) – Isaiah will brilliantly show the foolishness of idol makers. A simple look at how idols are made shows how silly it is to regard them as gods, so the idol makers themselves are their own witnesses against themselves. “Such craftsmen are only human beings” (v 11) – Isaiah looks at the people who make idols, and notices that they themselves are only weak, frail men. The blacksmith becomes hungry, and his strength fails. The craftsman works hard with wood, but it is only wood. Half of the tree is made into an object of worship and trust, and the other half is burned for a warm fire and cooking.

“They know nothing, they understand nothing... their minds closed so they cannot understand” (v 18) – how could the idol makers fail to see the stupidity of idolatry? God had shut their eyes and their hearts. Is this unjust of God? Is he condemning man for something that he is responsible for? Absolutely not. They first loved the darkness and chose their blindness, then God gave them what they wanted. Isaiah points to this when he writes, “A deluded heart misleads him” (v 20). “Such a person feeds on ashes” (v 20) – the wooden idol from the craftsman’s shop is just a warm fire away from being ashes. Worshipping and serving an idol, or any false god, is as ‘wise and satisfying’ as eating ashes! We can only satisfy our soul in God.

“Remember these things, Jacob” (v 21) – as Israel remembers the foolishness of making and worshipping idols, it should inspire greater trust and confidence in God. If the foolishness of the alternative wasn’t enough, God gives his people more reasons to trust and love him: “I have made you... I will not forget you... I have redeemed you” (v 21, 22). Any one of these would be reason enough, but combined, they are overwhelming! “Sing for joy, you heavens, for the LORD has done this” (v 23) – this is the only logical reaction to seeing who God is. And if God’s people won’t do it, then creation itself will (earth, mountains, forests, trees). Creation rejoices when God saves and glorifies himself in his people (Romans 8 v 19 to 22).

## ***Jerusalem to be inhabited (Isaiah 44 v 24 to 28)***

God makes remarkable claims through this whole passage: he claims to be their Redeemer, the Creator of each person, Creator of all things, wiser and greater than anyone; who upholds his own, who resurrects dead cities, and who has authority over all creation...

*Prayer – Lord, we marvel and wonder when we think of your glory and power, your authority over all people and nations, and over all of creation. Help us never to worship idols, but to remember that you are the first and the last, and that apart from you there is no God – that you must be ‘number one on a list of one’. Help us in every situation not to be afraid, for you are with us always. We praise you in Jesus’ name, Amen.*