

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for April 19: The Lord is at work

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Cyrus was a willing servant of God, without knowing it, and the instrument by which God's chosen people were liberated from Babylonian captivity and allowed to return to Israel where Jerusalem and the temple would be rebuilt (Isaiah 44:28; Ezra 5:6-6:12).

The fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy takes place because of Cyrus' military strength and benevolent rule as king of the world. Cyrus, the son of Cambyses, founded the Persian or Achaemenian Empire. After succeeding his father, through his able leadership and military might, he gained control of a vast empire westward from the Aegean Sea by the time he brought his forces against Babylon in 539 B.C. Following this conquest, Cyrus, then, considered himself "king of the world." His tomb is in Pasargadae, Iran.

He chose the role of a merciful liberator allowing the enslaved peoples to the east of the Tigris River to return to their homeland, including the repatriation of Israel. Cyrus was the ideal king and ruled like a father over his people.

Scripture states Cyrus did not acknowledge God as Lord but was an instrument of God benefiting from God's favor in order to bring Israel back to her original purpose (45:4).

This may seem absurd to many, but to people of faith, God has supreme governance over the universe, even non-believers. God uses atheists, evil circumstances and nations, traumatic events and puzzling situations to

gather again his people for the work of his kingdom.

With a sense of prophetic urgency and sublime poetry, the hopelessness of Israel was confronted with the promise of victory by the imminent coming of the Lord: “This is what the Lord says—Your Redeemer, the Holy one of Israel: ‘For your sake I will send to Babylon and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians, in the ships in which they took pride. I am the Lord, your Holy one, Israel’s Creator, your King’” (43:14-15; see 48:14).

God looked past the sins of Israel, forgave them and, through his redemptive relationship, put a new song in their heart (44:22-23). Cyrus, this great Persian king and warrior, is a kind of messianic human shepherd designated to “accomplish all that I (God) please” (44:28).

Acknowledge the Lord’s commission (Isaiah 45:1-2)

Identifying the chosen deliverer, God, the Creator, refers to Cyrus as “his anointed.” First, Cyrus is the “shepherd” and then called the “anointed” (see also Daniel 9:26). These references are strangely surprising. “Shepherd” (2 Samuel 5:2; Jeremiah 3:15, 23:1; Ezekiel 34:23; Micah 5:5) is to be taken more in the sense of a leader or friend, while “anointed” notes Cyrus as the one, though a foreign ruler, who was set aside (Leviticus 21:10; 1 Samuel 6:16; 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 23; 2 Samuel 1:4, 16; 19:22) for this essential task of service to God.

Though freeing Israel from the bondage of the Babylonians is accomplished through the unsuspecting Cyrus, God’s purpose and work are hidden in the agenda of this noble and royal leader. Cyrus was to “subdue nations,” “strip kings of their armor” and “open doors before him.” In doing this, God would hold his hand and go before him to “break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.” In this, God is saying that the military accomplishments of Cyrus (46:11) occurred because of the guidance and empowerment by his hand. Unwittingly, Cyrus is under a divine

commission.

God may not control everything that happens in his world, but he will see his purposes achieved. On the great stage of history, some people and nations are given the opportunity by the hand of God to bring about sacred intent and divine accomplishments.

Acknowledge the Lord's favor (Isaiah 45:3-5)

God favored Cyrus and blessed him in order to restore Israel, but also in order to help Cyrus discover that Jehovah was the "God of Israel" (45:3). Commissioned by God, Cyrus would receive divine help while awakening him to the realization that God knew him so well as to "called him by name" (v. 3). The power behind Cyrus was the power of God. Though there would come no acknowledgment of divine help, God would give him a "title of honor" (v. 4) for being a vital part of the rescue of Israel.

Cyrus, the "anointed," was assigned the human role of assisting God to break the alien power of Babylon to achieve his redemptive purpose through Israel. As God used both Assyria and Babylon to punish Israel, God appropriates the Persians to free Israel to her mission.

Acknowledge the Lord's pre-eminence (Isaiah 45:6-7)

Twice in these verses God says, "I am the Lord, and there is no other," adding "apart from me there is no God" (v. 5). Cyrus will help establish that throughout the world, from east to west, "men may know there is none besides me" (v. 6). The exaltation of Israel also would exalt the God of Israel who is forming the light and creating darkness, bringing prosperity and creating disaster (v. 7). The Living God refused to be placed on the level of man-made idols (vv. 9-20) while insisting that Cyrus recognize him as the one and only God but would strengthen him even without that acknowledgment (v. 5).

Acknowledging the Lord's sovereignty (Isaiah 45:9-13)

One can hear the scoffers disavow divine intention just as the soldiers scoffed at Jesus being the Son of God (Matthew 26:62-68; 27:22, 27-31, 41-44, 54). Isaiah is making a heroic and astounding affirmation of the power and sovereignty of God.

To the scoffers and doubters, comes a warning: "Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker" and "Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' or to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?'" Using logic and metaphor, the prophet illustrates the clay cannot question the potter's will nor the child question the natural results of his conception and birth. No one may contend with the Maker and Creator of the universe. Therefore, God chose to "raise up Cyrus in my righteousness ... he will rebuild my city and set my exiles free" (v. 13).

Conclusion

Who is in charge of this world? Does it run itself by chance or fate? Does God intervene in human events? If so, then why doesn't God do a better job? Many millions of people view God as their possession, and when things go wrong, they give God the blame. Often, when prayers go unanswered, believers question God's wisdom and concern. Are there limits to God's authority?

God's use of Cyrus introduces God's sovereignty over all the earth and his guidance of kings and kingdoms to achieve his purposes. When everything seems bleak and gloomy, God is at work bringing good things out of bad circumstances in order that his name might be glorified.

Whether from nature's curse or our inhumanity toward each other, God loves us and continues toward his ultimate purpose. God can and does move past all obstacles of his purpose, even using these obstacles to enhance his will.

The greatest and most successful of the Persian leaders became a formidable ally with the God, who created all things, by moving along the holy design of Israel's history toward the divine purpose of redemption through the Messiah, Jesus Christ. God, the Creator, determines destinies and defines the future. Without intention and without knowing, this good-hearted king opened the door for all mankind to experience salvation by grace through faith.

History lauds the successes of Cyrus, but people of faith know the rest of the story.