

Sermon for Sunday, July 17, 2011
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No Other God
Isaiah 44:24-45:13

As I was studying this passage, one of the things that hit me was the realization that this is a message for everyone. We all need to hear this. And it's not always like that. A lot of times specific Bible passages address specific situations, like grief, or money, or work, or friendship.

But as I've wrestled with this passage this week, I've realized that it really is a message for everyone. Why? Because it's about God, not about us. Specifically, this passage is about God's sovereignty, his uniqueness, and his control of everything that happens in the world. And that's something we all need to embrace. No matter what you are going through right now, you need to hear this. Some of you may be discouraged, or angry, or depressed, or heartbroken. You need to hear this message. Some of you may be facing circumstances that are overwhelming you and you're afraid, while others of you may have just received the best news of your life. It doesn't matter what you're going through right now, you need to hear this message. Let's read together Isaiah 44:24-45:13.

At its heart, this is a story about redemption. Specifically, it is a story about a group of people who just want to go home. The Israelites lived in Jerusalem, but the nation of Babylon came, destroyed their city and carried them away into physical bondage in a foreign land. They were exiles who just wanted to go home. And God is telling them here that He's going to do it. He's going to bring about the redemption that they yearn for. God is telling them, and us, that He's going to fix everything that's wrong with the world. He's going to set things right.

But here's the kicker: it doesn't mean we're necessarily going to like the way He goes about it. We may believe in God's redemption. We may even receive his redemption. But we won't rejoice in God's redemption, unless we surrender to His sovereignty. And that's the message of this text. It's very simple: rejoicing in God's redemption means surrendering to His sovereignty. Rejoicing in God's redemption means surrendering to his sovereignty. But what does that look like? There are three things this text shows us to which we must surrender if we are truly going to rejoice in His redemption. We need to surrender to His unnerving uniqueness, His scandalous salvation, and His calamitous comfort. First, we must:

Surrender to his unnerving uniqueness – Look at the beginning of this passage. “Thus says the Lord,” it begins, but then before we really hear what the Lord says, He spends five verses telling us who He is and what He does. And everything He tells us about Himself points to His utter uniqueness, autonomy, and independence. It's as though He's saying, “Thus says the Lord, you know, the One who... makes, who stretches, who spreads, who foils, who overthrows, who turns, who carries, who fulfills, who says, who says, who says...” and on and on it goes. And on top of that, we have this statement He keeps making like a hammer chorus throughout: I am the LORD, there is no other. Apart from me, there is no other God. If you read chapters 44 and 45 in full, you see Him making this statement over and over again. And the more you read this it begins to dawn on you: “Huh. I wonder if He's trying to make a point.”

And it would be funny if it weren't so unnerving. Remember, if you know the story, why were the Israelites in physical bondage in the first place? Well, because the Babylonians were mean people who destroyed their city and took them into captivity. Yes, but let's go another level deeper. Let's get beneath the exterior, visible circumstances and ask, "What are the inner, hidden reasons this happened?" Isaiah tells us throughout his book. To summarize in modern terms, the Israelites were very religious people. They went to church, tithed their money, and listened to Christian radio. And yet underneath this veneer of religiosity, they were just like the world around them. They worshiped the gods of wealth, status, comfort and pleasure. They oppressed the weaker members among them by failing to provide for them. And God had warned them that if they did that, he would send them into captivity. Long before they were in physical bondage, they were in spiritual bondage. Their physical bondage was simply the outer manifestation of their inner spiritual bondage to self. That's why God keeps saying, "There is no other God but me." Because at the end of the day, there are only two choices for the object of your worship: God or self. And understand that if you opt for the second choice, you're really opting for something that doesn't exist, apart from its utter dependence on the first choice.

You are not enough for life. Have you surrendered to that? You are not sufficient enough, competent enough, or equipped enough to master this world, much less your own life. There are things that will come at you in life for which you will never be enough. Have you surrendered to that, or if you have in the past, do you need to do it again? I'll tell you, I sure do.

Many of you know me, and you know my story. I was a drug addict and alcoholic for many years. And I need to tell you that the main reason it took me so many years to get sober was because I could not, would not humble my heart and acknowledge that I was not enough. I would not utter three little words: "I – need – help." But when I finally allowed even the notion to breathe in my heart – "Hmm. Maybe I do need help." – it was like a bell ringing in my soul, and all of a sudden I was like, "Oh my gosh. I need help! How could I have been so blind?" The prophet Jeremiah wrote that the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" I still struggle to understand my own heart. And even though I have been sober for many years, even though I am no longer in physical bondage to drugs and alcohol, I still struggle with the spiritual bondage that was at the heart of my using and drinking. Drugs and alcohol were just a symptom. My real problem was, and continues to be, my addiction to self. What are you addicted to? It doesn't have to be a substance like drugs or food, or a behavior like sex or gambling. That's just the stuff you see on the surface. You can be addicted to control, or worry, or anger, or power, or security. I'm addicted to approval. I want people to like me. I want to appear competent, and sufficient for everything.

We are all addicted to self. We are so absorbed with ourselves. And one of the problems is that we live in a culture that has enthroned self as the ultimate god. "I am the captain of my ship. I am the master of my soul." The very thing we see as being the hallmark of human dignity – our autonomy – is actually the very thing that keeps us enslaved and miserable. And if we are ever going to truly enter into all that God has for us, we need to abandon our autonomy and surrender to his unnerving uniqueness. It's called repentance, and we need to do it every day. But next, we need to:

Surrender to his scandalous salvation – Notice that God says He's going to raise up someone to save the Israelites and send them home. Not only is He going to send them home, He's going to rebuild their city and their temple. It's this fellow named Cyrus, and God calls him his "anointed". "Anointed" was a term

the Israelites used to describe someone who was commissioned and empowered by God for a special task. It was a term they used of their kings and their prophets.

Now, you would think that the Israelites would be very excited about this, but evidently they're not. In fact, God must have anticipated some very serious objections because you see Him in verses 9-11 going through this whole dialog with Israel: "Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' or to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?' This is what the LORD says: 'Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?'"

Why was Israel so upset? What were they complaining about? God was going to save them, and yet they were scandalized by it. Why? Simply put: because he was using a bad guy to do it. Cyrus was Gentile, not Jewish. He worshiped other gods, not YAHWEH. And he was king of Persia, not Israel. He was an outsider: a social, religious, and political outsider. They would have wanted another guy like Moses, a national hero. And God said, "I'm going to use *this guy* to save you." And they're like, "*Him?*" Imagine whatever national leader you hate the most. Or even better, imagine whatever international leader you hate the most. Now imagine God coming to you and saying, "I'm going to use *this person* as my agent of blessing and salvation in your life."

Do you know why we're so scandalized by that? Because grace is always scandalous. The gospel is scandalous. We look around at all the most vile, depraved, and wicked people in the world, and what do we say? "I would never do *that*," whatever *that* is. Use your imagination. You see what we do? We make it about ourselves. We look at other people's sin as a point of comparison by which we can justify our own relative righteousness. We say we believe in forgiveness, but it there is a limit, you see? "Of course, I'm not perfect. I have my faults, but surely I'm not as bad as *these* people." And God is saying, "There is no limit, and yes, you are just as bad. But I can work in anyone's heart, and I don't need their permission."

I didn't come to faith in Jesus until after more than a year of sobriety. And for years after that, I always used to think that my story would have been so much better if I had professed faith in Christ first, and then God saved me from drugs and alcohol. I thought it would have brought more glory to God to say, "I called on the name of the LORD, and then he saved me." But I am so glad things happened the way they did. Why? Because it's a picture of grace, not religion. Religion says, we act, and God responds. But the gospel says, God acts, and we respond. God didn't need my permission to get to work in my life. And yet, once I was confronted with that work, I was faced with the responsibility of either acknowledging it or ignoring it.

Which leads us to something really scandalizing, and kind of scary. Notice in verses 3-5 God gives three reasons for everything He does. They span out in concentric circles. The first is in verse 3. God says, to Cyrus, "I'm using you – why? – so that you will know I'm the LORD." It doesn't say anything about Cyrus professing faith in YAHWEH. In fact, as far as we know, he didn't. In Ezra 1, we see that Cyrus gave YAHWEH credit for what he did, but we also know he gave all the other gods credit, too.

The second reason we see is in verse 4: not only does God use Cyrus so that he will know that God is the LORD, but also for the sake of Jacob my servant, Israel my chosen. God's reasons may include the

salvation of His people, but they are not limited to that. And we see that in the third reason God acts. Verse 6: “so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.”

God’s purposes include the salvation of His people, but they are also broader than that. It’s not just His people’s salvation, but His self-revelation. The Bible is full of stories about people who see and experience God’s work in their lives, and yet they ultimately refuse to bend the knee, they refuse to surrender. Cain, King Saul, Judas Iscariot. God’s work stood as a testimony to them, and it stands as a testimony to us. Are we willing to surrender to His salvation, to His grace, to the scandal of His work in our life and in the lives of those around us even though it may not conform to the way we write the story?

No one has ever caused more scandal than Jesus. If Cyrus was an unexpected savior, then Jesus was the ultimate unexpected savior. Nobody ever upset more people’s sense of propriety and decorum than Jesus. We’re looking for a mighty king; he came as a peasant. We love power and wealth; he was homeless. We love status and prestige; he was born in a manger. We want him to hang out with us, but he spends all his time in warehouses and crack dens. Most tellingly, we want someone who’s going to smack our enemies, or at least rebuke them harshly. But he died for them, and for us. Why? “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.” Yet we were infinitely greater enemies to him than any of our so-called enemies are to us. Are we willing to surrender to the scandal of his salvation?

Surrender to his calamitous comfort – You would think that after all of this surrendering, things might be smooth sailing from there on out. And yet, after Cyrus sent them home, the Israelites continued to endure horrible oppression. Life didn’t get better. In fact, in many ways it was harder. Is this the work of a loving God? If we’re going to talk about God’s sovereignty, one of the first questions that always comes up is: “What about all the suffering and adversity in the world?” But you know one of the things I love about the Bible? There is no question we can ask that God hasn’t already thought of.

Look in verse 7. Right after verses 3-6, where He tells us that the reason He is doing all these things is so that people would know Him, God says this: “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.” And we love the part of the verse that says He brings prosperity. The Hebrew word there is shalom, and it means wholeness, full flourishing in every area of life. And we love that part. But we hate the second part where He says he creates disaster. Adversity, trial, suffering, calamity. And we’re like, “Lord, could we go back to the shalom? I like that part a lot better.”

But understand that He’s simply saying here something very similar to what He says in Revelation: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” This is more than mere hyperbole. This is a literary figure of speech in which the totality of something is referred to by its parts. So, for instance, in Genesis 1, it says “God created the heavens and the earth”: “heavens and earth” is a phrase that embraces the totality of the created order. It’s the same thing here. God mentions the uttermost extremes, the polar opposites of all creation in order to emphasize the fact that he embraces everything that lies between them.

What does this mean? It means that God is sovereign over human history, including yours. It means that He embraces the totality of human history and human experience within himself. Do you see? Surrendering to God's sovereignty means saying, "I am not enough for this world. I am not enough." But God is saying, "I am enough. I am big enough to embrace your prosperity, and I am big enough to embrace your calamities. And not only do I embrace it all, I absorb it all." How?

We were talking just a moment ago about all the ways that Jesus was the ultimate unexpected savior. But there's one we didn't mention. Cyrus was God's anointed, and he came as a conqueror, the greatest conqueror that world had seen to that point. And in that regard, he operated in the way we always expect power to enter the world. But when God sent the ultimate savior, the ultimate anointed one, the Christ, He sent him not as one who conquers, but as one who surrenders. And he didn't just surrender control and autonomy. He surrendered his life. His hands and feet were nailed to a cross. Talk about loss of control. And yet, at that very moment, he was accomplishing the ultimate victory, the ultimate conquest of sin and death and evil. He experienced the ultimate calamity so that you and I could have shalom forever.

We will never know every reason God does the things he does, and allows the things he allows. But he gives us glimpses. One of them is here in verse 6: "so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other." Why are there calamities in your life?

Have you ever looked into the sky on a clear day? The sun is shining and everything is beautiful? Let me ask you something. Can you see the light? Not the sun, but the light the sun produces? No, you can't. You can see everything else *by* the light, but you never really see the light itself, do you? It's just there, illuminating everything. But what happens when you bring some clouds into the sky, and then focus the sunlight through them? The sunrays shoot through the clouds and all of a sudden you can actually see the light itself, focused brilliantly on different parts of the earth. The clouds intensify and accentuate the light that's always there, but imperceptible to our eyes. The clouds focus the light, and make it more beautiful because they allow us to *see* it.

God is the light, and our calamities are the clouds. The clouds in your life allow you to see the light, but they allow others to see it as well. There are people in your life who may never see God except for the way he works in your life. Are you willing to surrender to God's uniqueness? Are you willing to surrender to the scandal of his salvation? And if so, are you willing to surrender to the calamities he sends so that others may also have an opportunity to surrender?

You can say no. The choice is yours. But understand that the shalom you seek can never be found within yourself, or anywhere other than Jesus Christ. There is no other God, and that includes yourself.

In the Chronicles of Narnia, CS Lewis writes of a lion who represents Jesus Christ. And in one of the books, a girl named Jill lands on a mountain, and she's incredibly thirsty. And she spies a delicious looking stream, but as she's about to go over and get a drink, she stands frozen with fear as she sees an enormous lion.

"Are you not thirsty?" said the Lion. "I'm dying of thirst," said Jill. "Then drink," said the Lion. "May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill. The Lion answered this only by a look and a

very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. "Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill. "I make no promise," said the Lion. Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. "Do you eat girls?" she said. "I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it. "I daren't come and drink," said Jill. "Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion. "Oh, dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then." "There is no other stream," said the Lion.

Let us pray.