

In our chapter today we are reminded that idolatry has failed us as well as everyone else who places their faith in created things rather than the Creator. Idols cannot carry you through a difficulty or help you in times of calamity, but God can. He will not only see us through our old age, but will provide the righteousness we need to enter eternity.

¹ Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts. Isaiah 46:1 Bel was the city god of Babylon. When Hammurabi made Babylon the capital of Babylonia, Bel increased in importance until he took the place of other gods in Babylonian mythology and became the main god or lord. That is the meaning of Bel. His name is Marduk, or sometimes Merodach. The Babylonians believed he controlled the destiny of nations.

Nebo, also called Nabu, was another city god, the god of vegetation. In an earlier time, Nebo was considered to be of greater importance than Marduk. Later on, he was thought to be Bel's son.

Every new year these two idols of gold and silver were carried in procession through the streets of Babylon, as if to proclaim the New Year would be good because the god that directs nations and the god of vegetation were with them. But Isaiah sees the obvious, what idolaters cannot see because God has shut their eyes (Isaiah 44:18). He sees the fact that they have to be carried by beasts that are about to collapse under the weight of their load. He sees there is no life in these idols to carry the Babylonians or anyone else. R. Ortlund Jr. commented on this passage, "If a god has to be carried, how can it carry you? If a god can't help itself, how can it help you? If a god needs your strength, how can it strengthen you?" ²

I had to explain who these gods were thought to be because no one remembers them. While they have faded into obscurity only to be learned of in historical works, the cross of Jesus is setting people free in every part of the world (Matthew 24:14). The church may be on decline and under attack in the USA because of the public's increasing love of idols, but in most of the world His truth is marching on.

² They stoop; they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity. Isaiah 46:2 If the animal can't save the idol, how can the idol save anyone? The idol was thought to hold the destiny of nations, but those who carry it are

going into captivity. What does that tell you about futility of trusting in it (Jeremiah 48:7)?

Let me remind you of something we looked at last week. Silver and gold are not immoral. It is what man does with them that can be immoral. How appropriate in this day when we are bombarded with "What's in your safe?" If you think it can save you, you've forgotten that God the Father and God the Son are called "the Savior" (Isaiah 44:18).

Why is Isaiah lingering over this issue of idolatry? It was the downfall of Israel and Judah, and now it is about to be the downfall of Babylon. God wants the Jews, and everyone else, to once and for all get the point. The achievements of man aren't meant to be crushed, but idolatry makes it inevitable. When our hopes are placed in what cannot save or endure, when our bondage to any created thing causes us to place our hope in what cannot save, we have destined ourselves to failure and ultimate destruction. **We become captive to things we idolize by thinking just a little more will fulfil or satisfy (Ephesians 4:19).** Just a little more and we will be secure. It's always a little more, but the end is destruction. If we insist on clinging to a false hope, is it any surprise that we will end up in captivity to that which we hope in (Romans 6:17)?

³ *"Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; Isaiah 46:3* The idol can't carry you, it has to be carried. By contrast, God has carried you and me from before our birth, even in our mother's womb. Yes life begins at conception. The idolatry of personal freedom to do whatever we want without the constraint of moral boundaries has resulted in a culture of death. Our nation is hurtling towards its own destruction in the name of tolerance and diversity. But that tolerance and diversity only applies to those who hold to the progressive agenda. They won't tolerate or allow the diversity of those who hold a different view, especially one with moral judgments of right and wrong.

Blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness sake, for great is your reward in heaven (Matthew 5:10-12). Jesus said that if the world hates you, remember it hated Him first (John 15:18). Peter and John rejoiced in the privilege of suffering shame for the name of Jesus. If you are willing to speak the truth that life begins at conception, then you don't have to stand in front of an abortion clinic to be persecuted. All you have to do is hold that conviction dear to you and be truthful when asked. The same goes for the sacred nature of marriage.

As our culture is pushed further down the road of liberalism, the now familiar words of Chicago's Cardinal Francis George come to mind. *"I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. His successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the*

church has done so often in human history. "But few know that he went on to say something even more closely relating to our passage today about God sustaining us. *"...only one person has overcome and rescued history: Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of the Virgin Mary, savior of the world and head of his body, the church. Those who gather at his cross and by his empty tomb, no matter their nationality, are on the right side of history. Those who lie about him and persecute or harass his followers in any age might imagine they are bringing something new to history, but they inevitably end up ringing the changes on the old human story of sin and oppression. There is nothing "progressive" about sin, even when it is promoted as "enlightened."*"¹

Because the legalists love to nit pick, I have to clarify that I'm not endorsing Catholic theology, I'm simply saying this Cardinal got it right in these remarks. It is a correct historical analysis. You can try to distort history if you want, but you can't change it. Don't be afraid to speak the truth in love. There is such thing as right and wrong. Redefining things does not change the substance. Every human deserves dignity and respect but that does not change the fact that we are all sinners (Romans 3:23).

⁴ even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save. Isaiah 46:4 What a beautiful verse to assure us as we age! Not only has God carried us from the womb, but He will carry us to our old age. Though we age and change, He is the I am, the eternal unchanging God (Malachi 3:6). His love will never fail (1 Corinthians 13:8a). The *Footsteps* poem tells us he carries us through the difficult times. But God is telling us through Isaiah that He carries us all the way through this life.

My hairs are turning gray and I can say He is still carrying me through each and every day. He made you. If you will put your life in His hands He will bear you, carry you, and save you. No thing or person can do that. Only God is big enough. Are you being carried? **We carry the heavy burden of idols or we are carried by God.** We bow down under the crushing load of an idol or we rest in the arms of Jesus.

In our times, many are fearful of old age. We are living longer and many people worry that they will end up in a home and being cared for by people they don't know. I watched my mother go through that and God carried her right to the end. In my role as a pastor I've witnessed God's faithfulness to a number of elderly right up to their passing. He will carry everyone who trusts Him (Psalm 71:18). It may not be easy, but you'll be in His arms, and that changes everything (Isaiah 40:11).

⁵ "To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike?"⁶ Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship!⁷ They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble. Isaiah

46:5-7 Okay! It's god competition time. My God has all knowledge, all power, and is present everywhere. He made everything. He loves us enough to die for us (Romans 5:8). He is just, but He is also merciful. His lovingkindness endures forever (Psalm 42:8). He carries me through life.

The idolaters turn. What? Your god can't talk, makes no promises he can fulfill, and can't satisfy your heart's longings (Psalm 65:4)? Does he have any power? Does he know the future? Can he fill your heart with peace no matter what circumstances you face? No? Then I have a much greater God for you to consider!

⁸ "Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, ⁹ remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, ¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' Isaiah 46:8-10 To whom is God speaking? I believe this is to the Jews in captivity. They could recall their transgressions into idolatry and consider the historical results of the failure of idols to help them. Then they could compare how God had done unprecedented things like bringing them out of slavery in Egypt, parting the sea, and on and on. No god of any nation had done anything like the God of Israel. That is because He is the only real God. Even the imaginary ones don't compare.

Nations can look back on the prosperity and goodness they experienced when their trust was in the Lord. They can compare that with the failure of this world's philosophies to bring anything good. While we experience the decline of our own culture many are unwilling to associate the decline with our rejection of God and embracing idolatry.

God again reminded them that He is telling them of the future so that when it comes to pass they will have faith to trust Him. Reading these detailed prophecies and knowing of their fulfillment should have the same effect on us. God does as He pleases. What He decides is what happens. To oppose Him is insanity. He is the glorious, eternal God of all.

And what is His purpose that will stand? It is that you and I be transformed into the image of Christ that we might become His bride (Romans 8:29). It is that He receive glory and praise forever for the great things He has done for us. Do you believe He can do it? If I didn't, I would despair. Knowing He will change everything. It makes the present trials fade in insignificance. It puts a smile on my face when situations would tell me to fear. He's carrying us. What more could we ask?

God follows His declaration of knowing all things with another prediction; this time it's of where Cyrus will originate. *¹¹ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed,*

and I will do it. Isaiah 46:11 God is anointing Cyrus for the task of conquering Babylon and setting the Jews free. He will come from the east. God was going to bring it to pass a hundred years later, which, we'll see in the next verses is a short time to God. To those reading it in captivity, it would come to pass in their lifetime.

God sets up kings and takes them down (Daniel 2:21). Why He lets some despots reign we may never understand in this life, but I'm sure when we get there we will see why. He has His own purposes. Sometimes the storm causes us to seek shelter in the Lord. Persecution draws us together. The church thrives under persecution. We put down our petty divisions and come into unity in Christ and love for one another. Satan has not learned that lesson that persecution purifies and strengthens us. Perhaps he just can't stop himself from his lust for destruction (John 10:10).

¹² "Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness: ¹³ I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory." Isaiah 46:12-13 He told us He'd carry us from the womb to old age, but now He calls us transgressors and stubborn of heart. How can that be? Well, it is because He loves us stubborn-hearted transgressors. He understands our frames are but dust (Psalm 103:14). He knows we have to deal with the flesh. Our best help in this battle is to listen to Him.

And when we listen what does He tell us? For those in captivity it was that salvation was on its way. Righteousness was near. God would deliver them from the Babylonians, send them back to Jerusalem, and finance the re-building of the Temple and the walls.

But once again these prophecies have a secondary meaning. God was going to place His righteousness on the restored streets of Jerusalem in the form of Jesus Christ (Isaiah 53:11; 28:16; 1Peter 2:6). He was drawing near to us. Immanuel, God with us. Salvation in the flesh would walk the streets of Zion for Israel, His glory.

We've seen before that Israel is the people of faith (Romans 2:28-29). They are the bride of Christ. They are His glory, for they shine with His attributes of love and mercy, justice and truth. And when the work in us is complete, we will be like Him for we will see Him as He is. That is to be glorious (1John 3:2).

In the middle of this tough message to Israel in captivity, comes this message of hope that is so great and gracious that no one could possibly have comprehended the full greatness it. But now we know. We can stoop under the burden as we carry this world's idols, or we can experience the Lord of all creation carrying us through this life. What a gracious invitation! Are you bent under the load of some idol or resting in His everlasting arms?

Questions

1 What are the Bel and Nebo of today?

Commented [P1]: Isaiah 28:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ therefore thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste.'

Commented [P2]: 1 Peter 2:6 (ESV)

⁶ For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

- 2 Why does Isaiah mock the idols being carried?
- 3 Why does God keep addressing idolatry?
- 4 When did God begin to carry you?
- 5 Review Cardinal George quotes.
- 6 Why is there no need to fear aging?
- 7 Why is our God incomparable?
- 8 What is God's purpose?
- 9 How does persecution help the church?
- 10 What did God put in Zion?