

Our God Saves: Believe

Our Powerful God

Isaiah 45

Mark Vroegop

“Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior. All of them are put to shame and confounded; the makers of idols go in confusion together. But Israel is saved by the LORD with everlasting salvation; you shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity. For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!): ‘I am the LORD, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in vain.’ I the LORD speak the truth; I declare what is right. ‘Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. ‘Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.’ ‘Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory’” (Isa. 45:15–25, ESV).

Her name was Anne Steele. She was born in England in 1717. Her father was a timber merchant, and he served faithfully as a lay pastor. However, Anne’s life was marked by tragedy. At age three, her mother died. At nineteen, she suffered a major injury to her hip, leaving her disabled.

Some historians record that her fiancé tragically died just before their wedding. Others recount that she rejected the overtures of another man and remained single the rest of her life. What we know for sure is that Anne’s injury caused her to be often confined to her room. She was physically weak and vulnerable.

But Anne had a gift: writing poetry and hymns.

In my experience, the best poets, artists, and writers are those who have deeply suffered. It seems to me that those who have the keenest manner of communicating often have the deepest wounds. Pain often yields poignancy.

That should encourage you if you are listening to this sermon today with a broken heart or overwhelming pain. You can take comfort that God is writing your story. Often the pen-strokes are traumatic. But there’s a beautiful narrative in the making.

Anne Steele was a prolific poet and hymn-writer. A Baptist hymnal in 1769 included sixty-two of her hymns.¹ One of them has become a recent favorite of mine. It was originally entitled “The Soul’s Only Refuge” but now it’s entitled “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul.” Meditate on these lyrics:

*Dear Refuge of my weary soul,
On Thee, when sorrows rise,
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll,
My fainting hope relies.*

*To Thee I tell each rising grief,
For Thou alone canst heal;
Thy Word can bring a sweet relief
For every pain I feel.*

*Hast Thou not bid me seek Thy face?
And shall I seek in vain?
And can the ear of sovereign grace
Be deaf when I complain?*

*No, still the ear of sovereign grace
Attends the mourner's prayer;
O may I ever find access,
To breathe my sorrows there!²*

Now, my favorite line in that hymn is “. . .when waves of trouble roll; my fainting hope relies.” It fits very well with the central message of Isaiah 45 today.

Here’s the question: where do you go when you’re in waves of trouble and when your hope is fainting?

This second section of Isaiah—chapters 40-55—is all about an invitation to believe in God’s control. Throughout these chapters, we are welcomed into a figurative courtroom (or boxing match) where the charges against God are brought and considered.

Isaiah looks to the future. He knows that Israel will struggle in their Babylonian exile. They’ll wonder if God has forgotten them. They’ll wrestle with the “waves of trouble.” They’ll start to doubt. Sound familiar?

Chapter 45 highlights three assurances about the power of God. Here they are: (1) God is working, (2) God is redemptive, and (3) God is trustworthy.

¹ https://hymnary.org/person/Steele_A

² https://hymnary.org/text/dear_refuge_of_my_weary_soul

1. God Is Working (vv. 1-13)

This first section is directly addressed to Cyrus, but it's meant to be a lesson for anyone who reads the book of Isaiah. Verses 1-13 illustrate how the Lord is behind the scenes of every event—including those on the global stage.

Take note of how Cyrus is described, and then I'll explain who he is.

- He's called "anointed" a term that is often associated with the Messiah. Cyrus isn't the spiritual messiah, but he is someone who has been appointed by God for a particular task.
- His right hand is "grasped," which means that God was helping and leading him
- He's victorious—subduing nations, loosening the belts of kings, and opening doors

Cyrus the Great was the ruler of the Persian Empire. He was a bold and ambitious ruler who conquered the Kingdom of Media. He then conquered Asia Minor. In 539 BC he made his move against Babylon which consolidated his power. The result was the largest empire in the known world.

If you are a student of government, you may have heard about the Cyrus Cylinder which was a piece of pottery with a message inscribed on it. The Cylinder was like a press release identifying not only that there was a new leader, but also new ideas related to a government that was tolerant of local customs and religions. It was "the first recognition that if you're going to run a society with different languages and different beliefs, you cannot impose by force one system."³ That philosophy became very influential on Western forms of government, many calling it the first bill of human rights.

Cyrus represents far more than a military leader. He was a powerful pagan king. He represents the most powerful, influential leader the world had ever seen.

That might explain why chapter 45 is filled with affirmations of God's blessing and control. It's apparent that Isaiah wanted the people of God to know that behind an extremely successful ruler was the power of God. In other words, Cyrus was powerful, but God was the one who was at work behind the scenes.

Look at all the references to God in verses 2-7. Over ten times, Isaiah references the power of God with some kind of "I" statement:

- "I will go before you" (v. 2)
- "I will give you the treasures of darkness" (v. 3)
- "I call you by your name...though you do not know me" (v. 4)

But look at verses 5-7 in particular. We see that Cyrus is simply a pawn in the hand of God.

"I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none

³ <https://asiasociety.org/northern-california/10-facts-about-cyrus-cylinder>

besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things” (Isa. 45:5–7).

Isaiah wants to make it very clear that behind everything—including this powerful leader who doesn’t even know that the true God exists—is the plan of God unfolding. Everything is in the control of the sovereign God: east to west, light and darkness, well-being, and calamity. Mark this down in your mind: there’s nothing outside of God’s good plan.

Do you know what that means? It means that, as Ray Ortlund says, “The very thing we perceive as a problem, God perceives as his glory. . .God owns the dark moments of life. He bends everything around for a saving purpose. . .Not even evil can frustrate him. . .His surprising strategies are our assurance.”⁴

That’s what we find in verse 8. God is ready to open the heavens to create a harvest of righteousness. That’s his plan. That’s his strategy. And throughout the history of the world and your own personal history, that’s what he does. He’s working. . .all the time.

The problem, however, is that we forget this—very easily. Even if we know it’s true, the pressures and frustrations of the moment can lead us into a grumbling, complaining, and unbelieving posture. That’s why Isaiah quickly turns to two examples:

- A clay pot that complains to the potter, “I have no handles” (v. 9). They are insecure.
- A child who says to his parents, “Why are you conceiving another child?” (v. 10). They are selfishly fearful.

Do you know what is happening here? It seems that Isaiah is predicting that the people of Israel will panic and fall into fear when they see the invasion of Cyrus. Historically, it happened fifty years after the deportation, and I’m sure there was a deep level of uncertainty. And they begin to question the goodness of God.

I’m sure you can relate. It doesn’t take a lot for us to begin to doubt, to fear, or to allow unbelief to take over our lives. What does that look like in your life? Maybe it sounds like this:

- “God, not again! I can’t handle this.”
- “Oh Lord, how is this going to work out?”
- “Jesus, do you see what is happening?”
- “God, this doesn’t make any sense.”

Yet God has a plan. Verse 12 tells us that God is stirring him up so that “he shall build my city and set my exiles free.” Cyrus was a puppet in the hand of a sovereign God. The rise of Cyrus was part of God’s strategy to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and set the exiles free.

⁴ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 299.

God is working! That's a sure promise in the Bible. It's a truth that you cling to. So when circumstances are painful or hard or confusing, remember that God is working. He's a refuge for the weary soul because he's at work.

2. God Is Redemptive (vv. 14-21)

The second reassurance takes a step back from the political situation that Israel will face in its exile. It focuses on the bigger plan that God has for redemption. Isaiah focuses on the long-term perspective regarding God's plan to rescue and redeem people. And this vision goes beyond Israel. God has a plan to redeem the nations.

You can see the conclusion of the argument in verses 20-21. Let's read this and then go back to the rest of the text.

"Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me" (Isa. 45:20–21).

What a vision this is! God's plan is to assemble a group of people to himself – a sea of humanity filled with former idolaters. His strategy is to rescue a people who need redemption.

In verse 14, we find a connection between redemption and justice. The nations that plundered Israel (Egypt, Cush, and the Sabeans) will see the light. They will say, "Surely God is in you, and there is no other god besides him." The people of God will fulfill their purpose on earth which is to make known the glory of God to the world around them.

Isaiah is reminding them about this divine purpose because it's easy to lose track of this priority. Let me put it more sharply: What if the suffering, hardship, and pain that you are experiencing results in God being glorified through you such that someone trusts in Christ? Would it be worth it?

One reason why we need texts like this is to remind us that the temporary pain and hardship is absolutely worth it. When your soul is weary, be sure that you remind yourself why you are living on the earth as a Christian.

Considering this leads Isaiah to break into five verses of praise (vv. 15-19).

- vv. 15-16 – God is far better than foolish idols and those who make them
- v. 17 – God is the savior of Israel, and he wins in the end
- v. 18 – God is the creator, and he has exclusive claims to deity
- v. 19 – God has revealed himself, and he speaks what is true and right

Notice that Isaiah is doing what the Bible does over and over for hurting people who feel defeated: he is giving the people a picture of who God is. Isaiah seeks to encourage God's people with a clear

description of what God is like. The book of Job shows us this. The writer of Hebrews says, “. . .run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus. . .consider him. . .so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Heb. 12:1-3).

In my reading with the New Thirty plan, I have loved how The Message paraphrases Matthew 11:28-29.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”⁵

It’s good to be reminded of what God is like. It’s one of the reasons why the book of Revelation is in the Bible. It’s there to remind us of where the story of redemption is headed.

“And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped” (Rev. 5:6–14).

This is still the plan of God! He’s working his plan of redemption.

3. God Is Trustworthy (vv. 22- 25)

We come now to the conclusion of the matter. If God is working and if he’s redeeming people for his glory, then what should our posture be?

Verse 22 makes the point, and the remaining verses provide support.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, [*The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*](#) (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), Mt 11:28–29.

God speaks a command: “Turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth.” It’s clear, isn’t it? God is inviting people to trust in him. He’s inviting everyone to look to him for what they need.

Why does he speak this way? Because there’s no one like him. There’s no one worthy of our trust like him.

- v. 22 – there is no other god
- v. 23 – he swears by himself, and it will come to pass
- v. 23 – victory belongs to him—every knee will bow. . .
- v. 24 – he alone possesses righteousness and strength
- v. 25 – Israel is reminded about its role “in the Lord”

If God is like this, then we can trust him—even if it’s scary. Don’t wait for your weariness to end, your doubts to be dispelled, or your fears to go away. Come to him.

Many of you may be familiar with the *Chronicles of Narnia*. The Lion, Aslan, was described in a previous book this way: “Of course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the king.”⁶

Ray Ortlund, in his commentary on this passage, cites a section in C.S. Lewis’ book *The Silver Chair*. A little girl named Jill sees a stream to quench her thirst. But she’s scared because a lion who is a picture of Christ is resting near the stream. Here’s their exchange:

“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.⁷

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/344456-aslan-is-a-lion--the-lion-the-great-lion-oooh>

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Collier Books, 1970 reprint), pp. 16, 17. Italics his.

Don't wait for your weariness to end, your doubts to be dispelled, or your fears to go away. Come to him.

*Dear Refuge of my weary soul,
On Thee, when sorrows rise,
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll,
My fainting hope relies.*

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