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Sermon Notes

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The Temporary Empire of Cyrus Serves the Eternal Empire of Christ

Isaiah 45:1-25

Main Idea: God raises up Cyrus the Great of Persia and gives him an empire so that the Jews would return to the Promised Land and rebuild Jerusalem, so that the eternal salvation message of God in Jesus Christ may spread to the ends of the earth.

Empires come and empires go... they rise, they fall... emperors live only a very short time, barely the blink of an eye... they rise, they fall. If you have any taste at all for history, you know very well that history has been like a relay race of power, one kingdom or empire or nation handing off the baton of world domination to the next.

The amazing message of the Bible is that the God of the Jews, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the only God there is... He is the God of all the earth, whether those nations acknowledge Him or not...

Furthermore, the Bible teaches that God **ACTIVELY RULES** over **EVERY NATION** on the face of the earth, and God actively controls the rise and fall of every nation on earth, whether they acknowledge Him or not

God gives nations their power and God determines how far their borders will extend; God gives to Kings their wisdom and power and success on the battlefields of history... no King on earth ever rises to power apart from the direct intervention of God

Many chapters teach these truths; but Isaiah 45 goes into specific details about the rise of Cyrus the Great, King of the Medo-Persian Empire, that unfolds amazing aspects of God's sovereign control of human history

Simply put, God was every bit as active in giving Cyrus his empire as He was in rescuing the Jews from slavery in Egypt, and in the Red Sea crossing, and in Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land... it was God who did **ALL THESE THINGS**

How do we know this?

Acts 17:26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

Deuteronomy 2:20-22 Zamzummites. ²¹ They were a people strong and numerous, and as tall as the Anakites. The LORD destroyed them from before the Ammonites, who drove them out and settled in their place. ²² The LORD had done the same for the descendants of Esau, who lived in Seir, when he destroyed the Horites from before them. They drove them out and have lived in their place to this day.

Psalm 75:6-7 No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. ⁷ But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.

Here in this chapter, God speaks in ways that were very hard for the Jews to understand...

God says he is giving to Cyrus a Kingdom; he is going ahead of Cyrus to give him military success and blessings and riches... EVEN THOUGH HE DOES NOT ACKNOWLEDGE HIM! Cyrus was a pagan, and yet God speaks of him as His shepherd, His servant, even His ANOINTED ONE! This is language usually reserved for the descendants of King David... ultimately of the Messiah, the Christ!

Why? Why does God use Cyrus to build a kingdom even though Cyrus would not acknowledge or believe in him? Because God was ultimately building an ETERNAL KINGDOM for His true Servant, His true Shepherd, His true Anointed One, Jesus Christ!!

In this chapter, we are going to stand in awe at the far-reaching, sometimes confusing, ultimately glorious plans of God in orchestrating human history for the salvation of His elect

I. God Grants Cyrus an Empire for the Salvation of His Elect (vs. 1-8)

A. Who Was "Cyrus the Great"

1. For the second time, we have Cyrus the Great specifically identified by name... the first time mentioned in the last part of Isaiah 44, which we looked at last week:

Isaiah 44:28 [the Lord] 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."'

2. Who was Cyrus the Great?

- a. Born sometime around 600 B.C., maybe a CENTURY after Isaiah wrote this prophecy!
- b. According to Herodotus, the ancient historian, his grandfather was King Astyages, ruled of the Median Empire; he had a dream that his grandson, the baby Cyrus, would overthrow him as king; to avoid this, he ordered that the baby be killed; but the official delegated with this task gave the baby to a shepherd instead; it wasn't until Cyrus was ten years old that King Astyages discovered what had happened... but by then, Cyrus's amazing qualities were already becoming known and he was allowed to live in exile with his mother. In 554 BC, Cyrus led a revolt against his grandfather, Astyages and four years later marched into the capitol city Ecbatana and overthrew Astyages, ending the Median Empire
- c. Cyrus then consolidated the Persian and Median rulers into a joint empire and thus began the first world empire
- d. He moved out to try to control the Mediterranean Coastline; smaller kingdoms like Lydia (ruled by the fabulously wealthy Croesus) allied themselves to try to stop him, but they couldn't

On 12 October 539BC Cyrus annexed the Chaldaean empire of Babylonia - and on October 29 he entered Babylon, arrested Nabonidus and assumed the title of "King of Babylon, King of Sumer and Akkad, King of the four corners of the world".

Almost immediately he then extended his control over the Arabian peninsula and the Levant also quickly submitted to Persian rule. Although Cyrus did not conquer Egypt, by 535BCE all the lands up to the Egyptian borders had acceded to Persian dominance.

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3. Cyrus's enlightened policies

- a. Cyrus was the first emperor to realize that it was in his own best interests to make his conquered people as happy as possible under his rule... to give them as much freedom as possible
- b. Part of this was his policy of allowing religious freedom for his conquered peoples
- c. This included allowing the Jews to return to Palestine, to Jerusalem, to rebuild the city and the Temple

2 Chronicles 36:22-23 *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: ²³ "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you - may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up."*

4. Cyrus's paganism

- a. The Cyrus cylinder was discovered in 1878 and is now in the British Museum
- b. It has been translated and shows how Cyrus seemed to believe in all the gods and goddesses; so while the Scripture does show Cyrus giving honor to the Jewish God, he seemed to do the same for every god

Cyrus Cylinder: The victorious Cyrus is portrayed as having been chosen by the chief Babylonian god Marduk to restore peace and order to the Babylonians. The text states that Cyrus was welcomed by the people of Babylon as their new ruler and entered the city in peace. It appeals to Marduk to protect and help Cyrus and his son Cambyses

He also says he repaired the ruined temples in the cities he conquered, restored their cults, and returned their sacred images as well as their former inhabitants which Nabonidus had taken to Babylon

- c. So, as Isaiah says plainly, Cyrus DID NOT ACKNOWLEDGE that Yahweh, the God of the Jews was the ONLY TRUE AND LIVING GOD

B. God Calls Cyrus His "Anointed" and Grants Him an Empire (vs. 1-3)

Isaiah 45:1-3 *"This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name.*

1. God calls Cyrus "his anointed"... AMAZING!!! His "Messiah"
2. He says He takes Cyrus by the right hand... to lead him and give him success
3. He will enable Cyrus to subdue nations and strip kings of their armor... in other words, TO WIN ALL THE BATTLES NECESSARY to build an Empire

4. He's going to go before Cyrus and lead him to victory... LIKE THE PILLAR OF CLOUD or FIRE leading the Jews... so God will lead Cyrus to victory
5. He will give Cyrus TREASURES HIDDEN IN DARKNESS... perhaps referring to the amazing gold reserves of one of the richest Kings in history, Croesus of Lydia

C. God Does This So That Cyrus, Israel, and All the Earth May Know Him (vs. 3-6)

Isaiah 45:3-6 I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, 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.

1. The goal: "So that YOU MAY KNOW that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who summons you BY NAME..."
2. We know from this that Cyrus did NOT initially know the Lord... but perhaps Daniel and other Jews told him of the amazing prophecy in Isaiah 44-45 about him BY NAME
3. Salvation is TO KNOW THE ONLY TRUE GOD... ultimately in Jesus Christ
4. God also does this so that Israel may know Him, and that all the ends of the earth may know Him... FROM THE RISING OF THE SUN TO THE PLACE OF ITS SETTING...
5. And notice it is plain... Cyrus the Great "has not acknowledged him"... so God orchestrates human history through unbelieving pagan kings who don't even know him at all... Julius Caesar, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Napoleon, Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao, etc. All these powerful empire builders did not love or serve the true God... but He gave them their power, if only for a short time

Isaiah 40:23-24 He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. ²⁴ No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

Daniel 4:34-35 His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. ³⁵ All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

D. God Alone Creates Success and Disaster (vs. 7)

Isaiah 45:7 I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

1. This is one of the most difficult concepts in the Christian religion... God actively rules over history, bringing light to one and darkness to the other, bringing prosperity to the one and disaster to the other... HE DOES ALL THESE THINGS!
2. Cyrus's Medo-Persian army destroyed every army that faced it... for his Medes and Persians, his victories were LIGHT and PROSPERITY; but for the Lydians and Chaldeans and Scythians and all the other slaughtered losers, it as DISASTER... but God does it all
3. This destroys the infantile view of God that he only brings prosperity to people... health and wealth and happiness and success! That is WRONG!
4. Understand, God never does EVIL... but He does kill people and take away their possessions and give them to others... from the EARTH perspective, this is "darkness"... but everything God does is GOOD according to His purposes
5. Read the verse again:

Isaiah 45:7 I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

^{ESV} Isaiah 45:7 I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

E. The Lord Rains Down Righteousness and Makes It Spring Up (vs. 8)

Isaiah 45:8 "You heavens above, rain down righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness grow with it; I, the LORD, have created it.

1. This is a verse of CELEBRATION of what God is doing
2. Everything God does... even forming light and creating darkness, even bring prosperity and creating disaster...
3. It is still RAINING DOWN RIGHTEOUSNESS from God's perspective...
4. God's ultimate end in bringing Cyrus the Great is SALVATION to the ends of the earth through Jesus Christ

II. God Rebukes Arrogant Human Questioning of His Plans (vs. 9-13)

A. Woe to Him Who Quarrels With His Maker! (vs. 9-10)

Isaiah 45:9-10 "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?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'? Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' or to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?'"

1. It wouldn't be surprising for Jews hearing God call Cyrus "His anointed" and to read that God is planning to give the Promised Land and all that region to a pagan king who doesn't acknowledge Him to be SHOCKED!!!!!! SHOCKED!!
2. And to question God's ways! To say, "I have a better idea, O Lord... instead of raising up Cyrus and giving him all that success, why don't you raise up a descendant of David and restore his throne in Jerusalem?"
3. They would QUESTION GOD... calling his plan wicked
4. So God challenges all who would challenge Him...

Romans 9:20 But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"

5. He says WOE TO YOU if you argue with God!
6. He calls us just potsherds among other potsherds on the ground... we are just broken pieces of pottery, ready to be swept up from the workshop
7. Which is greater... the pot or the potter? How can we say to God who shaped us, "He has no hands!"?

B. Woe to Him Questions God About His Plans (vs. 11,13)

Isaiah 45:11 "This is what the LORD says-- the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?"

Isaiah 45:13 I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty."

1. God's plans all focus on His elect, His children!!
2. No one can give Him orders about them! No one can question Him! God knows exactly what He's doing with each of them

3. The plans for Cyrus to come and build his pagan empire are eternally wise...and perfectly righteous
4. So he says again what he's going to do... in verse 13... Cyrus will rebuild "my city" (Jerusalem) and set His exiles free... BUT NOT FOR PRICE OR REWARD! Nothing comes back to Cyrus for all this... if Cyrus will not acknowledge the true and living God, he will be condemned in the end

C. God Created the Universe; He Knows What He's Doing! (vs. 12)

Isaiah 45:12 It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshaled their starry hosts.

III. God's Mysterious Plans for Gentile Salvation (vs. 14-17)

A. The Subdued Gentiles Will Enrich Israel (vs. 14)

Isaiah 45:14 This is what the LORD says: "The products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and those tall Sabeans-- they will come over to you and will be yours; they will trudge behind you, coming over to you in chains. They will bow down before you and plead with you, saying, 'Surely God is with you, and there is no other; there is no other god.'"

1. This section of the chapter I think speaks of God's ultimate purpose in all this
2. God wants people to the ends of the earth to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him
3. To that end, He is playing out a drama centered on the Chosen Nation of Israel
4. When enlightened Gentiles see what God is doing for Israel, they will yearn to be part of it
5. They will see that God is WITH YOU... God is with His people in a special way and will want to be a part of it

B. God is a God Who Hides Himself (vs. 15)

Isaiah 45:15 Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel.

1. God's ways are so mysterious... and God hides Himself in mystery... shrouded in infinite mystery
2. Ultimately, if God does not reveal Himself, we will NEVER KNOW HIM
3. Also, we may find God's providence extremely hard to follow... when God is forming darkness and creating light, when God is bringing prosperity and

creating disaster, it is EXTREMELY HARD to see what God is doing... He is a God who HIDES HIMSELF

4. Yet He reveals Himself as the SAVIOR OF ISRAEL in the end!!

C. God's Plan: Shame for Idolaters, Salvation for Israel (vs. 16-17)

Isaiah 45:16-17 All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced; they will go off into disgrace together. But Israel will be saved by the LORD with an everlasting salvation; you will never be put to shame or disgraced, to ages everlasting.

How magnificent are God's ultimate purposes!! God is working out all this complex history that the idolaters will be shamed and the believers in the true God saved with an everlasting salvation!

The shame and disgrace of exile and of their time on earth will not cling to them... but they will be vindicated to AGES EVERLASTING!

IV. God's Gospel Call to the Ends of the Earth: Turn to Christ! (vs. 18-25)

A. God's Purposes Will Be Fulfilled: An Earth Filled with Worshipers (vs. 18-19)

Isaiah 45:18-19 For this is what the LORD says-- he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited-- he says: "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain.' I, the LORD, speak the truth; I declare what is right.

1. This section points to God's original intentions... He did not create the universe to be empty!! He intended that it be fully inhabited by people who will worship Him truly and give Him all the glory!
2. So, God HAS SPOKEN... not off in secret, but in the open, through His servants the prophets...
3. The Bible has recorded God's words; these amazing prophecies are in plain view for all to read
4. God has SPOKEN THE TRUTH... and He has not called on anyone to seek Him in vain
5. If we seek Him we will find Him, and be saved

Deuteronomy 4:27-29 The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the LORD will drive you.²⁸ There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or

hear or eat or smell. ²⁹ But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.

Jeremiah 29:13 *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*

B. God's Clear Challenge to Idolaters: God Alone Predicted These Things (vs. 20-21)

Isaiah 45:20-21 *"Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations. Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot save. Declare what is to be, present it-- let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.*

1. Again God challenges the idols to do what He alone can do... PREDICT THE FUTURE!!!
2. God has in Isaiah 44-45 plainly laid out the name of the deliverer from the Babylonian Exile—Cyrus; he has made it plain that Cyrus will win an empire by God's direct power, but that he will not know Him or acknowledge Him; however, Cyrus WILL allow the exiles to go back to Judah and Jerusalem and rebuild both the city and the temple...
3. God has thrown down the PROPHETIC GAUNTLET and challenged these idols to a duel... Baal, Ashtoreth, Chemosh, the Queen of Heaven, Marduk, Bel, Nebo... all the false gods and goddesses of the pagans who were so alluring to the Jews... 100 years before Cyrus was born, 160 years before he conquered Babylon, God predicted the future plainly
4. There... I've done it; okay, you idols, what can you do????
5. So... THERE IS NONE BUT ME!!
6. God is a RIGHTEOUS SAVIOR and there is NO OTHER
7. Ultimately, the Savior is God's TRUE ANNOINTED, Jesus Christ... and He is the only Savior of the world:

Acts 4:12 *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*

C. God's Gospel Call to the Ends of the Earth: Turn to Christ and Be Saved! (vs. 22-25)

Isaiah 45:22-25 *"Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone are righteousness and strength.'" All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame.*

But in the LORD all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult.

1. This is the altar call, the climax of this amazing chapter! TURN TO ME AND BE SAVED, ALL THE ENDS OF THE EARTH!!!
2. “Turn” = repent of all your sins, your idolatries
3. “saved” = saved from the wrath and judgment of God for all your idolatries, all your sins
4. God swears that every knee will bow to Him and every tongue will swear by Him
5. They will say that in the Lord alone are RIGHTEOUSNESS and STRENGTH!!!
6. All God’s enemies will fall before Him in shame and disgrace
7. But all God’s elect children will be found righteous in Him and will EXULT in His salvation forever
8. These words are spoken of the only true God in Isaiah 45—but the Apostle Paul ascribes them to JESUS!!!!

Philippians 2:5-11 Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

V. Applications

1. Look Unto Christ and Be Saved!!!

- a. Charles Spurgeon’s conversion text... Isaiah 45:22 in KJV

^{KJV} Isaiah 45:22 Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.

- b. Primitive Methodist lay preacher spoke directly to his heart and called on him to LOOK UNTO CHRIST hanging on the cross
 - c. Hebrew really is “turn” not so much “look”, but why not combine them... turn away from your idols and LOOK TO CHRIST for salvation

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

d. BOW THE KNEE TO CHRIST

2. Stand in awe of this PREDICTIVE PROPHECY... for it was God who determined that it would happen years before it did
3. Understand and rest in God's sovereign power over the rise and fall of the nations
4. Resist the temptation to ARGUE WITH GOD when His mysterious plan runs contrary to what you think is best
5. Understand that God brings BOTH prosperity and disaster... but that everything He does is perfectly righteous
6. Meditate on the hiddenness of God AND that no one who seeks Him does so in vain... seek the Lord with all your heart and you will surely find Him!

Isaiah 45:15 Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel.

Isaiah 45:19 have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain.'

Deuteronomy 4:29 if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.