

Reassurance for God's People

Lesson Text: Isaiah 48:14-19, 21,22 **Background Scripture:** Isaiah 48 **Devotional Reading:** 1 Kings 8:33-40

Isaiah 48: 14-19

¹⁴ *"Come together, all of you, and listen: Which of the idols has foretold these things? The Lord's chosen ally will carry out his purpose against Babylon; his arm will be against the Babylonians. ¹⁵ I, even I, have spoken; yes, I have called him. I will bring him, and he will succeed in his mission. ¹⁶ "Come near me and listen to this: "From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there." And now the Sovereign Lord has sent me, endowed with his Spirit. ¹⁷ This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. ¹⁸ If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea. ¹⁹ Your descendants would have been like the sand, your children like its numberless grains; their name would never be blotted out nor destroyed from before me."*

Isaiah 48: 21-22

²¹ *They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split the rock and water gushed out. ²² "There is no peace," says the Lord, "for the wicked."*

LESSON AIMS: After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Show that our God is truly the One who is there for us, acting on our behalf.
2. Realize that our God gives us reassurance when we need it most.
3. Express a resolve to serve God in a specific manner in light of having been freed from spiritual captivity.

INTRODUCTION

What Might Have Been

Past failures can be paralyzing. Some who have made poor educational and career choices are now crushed under the weight of unfulfilling jobs. Some who rushed quickly into marriage struggle to maintain healthy relationships and keep promises. Others who neglected spending time with their children now regret the quality of the relationships that have resulted. Christians and non-Christians alike are plagued with regrets about the past. Sometimes we wish we could do it all over again. We wonder "what might have been" if only we had made better choices.

The Israelites found themselves in a similar situation. They had a bright future when God called them out of slavery in Egypt. With His promise to be with them and to prosper their every step, they were poised to flourish. Yet they violated their side of the covenant and traded success for failure.

It was tempting for them to give up altogether (see the book of Lamentations). But God would not allow them to do that. In today's Scripture, He both reminds the Israelites of what might have been and beckons them to the new future that still could be. In so doing, God also reminds us that our worst failures need not be the last word for our lives. Though we cannot change the past, God can guide our future.

LESSON BACKGROUND TIME: about 700-695 B.C. **PLACE:** Jerusalem

As we noted last week, the Babylonians had taken full control of the southern kingdom of the Israelites, called Judah, by 586 B.C. That was about 136 years after Assyria had done the same as the northern kingdom, called Israel. In 586 B.C., the temple was destroyed, its vessels were confiscated, and many people were deported to Babylon.

God had foretold that this would happen if the Israelites did not repent of their sin. Yet it was still difficult for the people to process what was happening to them. They were devastated. The book of Lamentations captures the sense of desperation that overcame God's people at this time.

Last week we saw God promise to vindicate Israel in the eyes of the nations. This week He encourages Israel not to dwell on her past failures. God is ready to move forward. Those who wish to go forward with Him had to get on board.

God's Love (Isaiah 48:14-16)

God now called Israel to *"Come together, all of you, and listen"* (Isa. 48:14). In the Old Testament, to *"listen"* usually carries the connotation of obedience. In this text, though, the emphasis was on listening to what God was saying to

them—something they had neglected to do in the past. The question “*Which of the idols have foretold these things?*” is a reference to idols. Israel had put their trust in idols, which could not foretell the future, as they were but imaginary deities. “Throughout the preceding chapter, this argument (the ability or inability to predict) was used to expose the unreality of the idol-gods and the true and only deity of the Lord” (Motyer, the Prophecy of Isaiah, InterVarsity).

Thus, the answer to the question which among them hath declared these things? is obvious: none of them (compare Jeremiah 10:5). Only God can declare the things we have just read in verse 13.

1. Who was called upon to “come together” and “listen” (Isaiah 48:14)?

“*The Lord’s chosen ally*” is Cyrus, since he is the Persian ruler who overthrows Babylon and sends the Jewish people home from exile to rebuild Jerusalem (compare Ezra 1:2–8). Though Cyrus is not mentioned by name in this passage, he is named specifically in Isaiah 44:28; 45:1. Cyrus is still in view here in 48:14.

We should not think that God “chosen/loves” Cyrus more than God loves the pagan kings of, say, Babylon or Greece. We learn in Daniel 7 and 8 that, from God’s perspective, the rulers of these nations (including Persia) are like beasts. Rather, the term love sometimes simply means that God has chosen for His purposes one particular person or nation rather than another one (compare Malachi 1:2, 3; Romans 9:13).

2. What is the identity of the one the Lord loved in verse 14?

This verse, using good Hebrew repetition, reinforces the point made above. Since God declares that He will use Cyrus, king of Persia, for His purposes, Israel can rest assured that this will happen. This is good news for Israel. Cyrus, who is not yet born as Isaiah prophesies, will have no special affection for Israel. He will not know that God is prospering him in order to judge Babylon and begin restoring Israel.

Cyrus merely will choose what he sees as a good foreign policy: he gains the loyalty of vassal nations by sending their leaders back home and supporting their rebuilding projects. Cyrus will be happy as long as these vassals pay him the tribute he requires.

When God is finished using Cyrus for His purposes, then God’s special favor will be lifted. Then He will use Greece to judge Persia, just as He used Persia to judge Babylon (Daniel 8). Israel is blessed, as well as we are today, in that God’s love for His chosen people does not come and go.

3. What did the Lord mean when He said, “I, even I, have spoken” (v. 15)?

God wraps up His summons by reminding the Israelites that He has been forthright about His purposes since the beginning. He predicts Israel’s fall to Babylon, and He predicts the rise of Cyrus and eventual fall of Babylon. God has kept Israel in the loop concerning His plans for the nations. The Israelites are therefore His witnesses. God reminds them of His past word in hopes that they will stand at attention and heed the new word that He has for them now.

We also read here about the prophet’s own commission. Cyrus is not the only one sent. The prophet himself is sent by God’s Spirit. With all the speaking God does throughout this book, Isaiah’s voice can be overlooked. We should not forget that the original audience does not hear God speak directly to them, but hears God speaking to them through the prophet by God’s Spirit.

4. What did the Lord mean when He said, “I have not spoken in secret” (v. 16)?

God’s Leading / Result of Disobeying His Commands (Isaiah 48:17-19)

God introduces himself here in a threefold manner that points back to His deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. First, He introduces himself as LORD, which all-capitalized means Yahweh; this is the personal name that God revealed to Moses on the mountain. Second, God introduces himself as Redeemer, the one who redeemed the people from slavery in Egypt. Third, He repeats that He is the Holy One of Israel, a phrase used 31 times in the Old Testament, 25 of which occur in Isaiah.

Furthermore, God is the one who gave His law through Moses to teach the people the right way to live. In God’s role as leader, He guided the Israelites through the wilderness and into the promised land. God reminds the people that He is the

God of the exodus from Egypt because He intends in their own day to launch a new exodus from Babylon, some nine centuries after the first one.

5. In what threefold manner did God introduce Himself? (v. 17)

But the Israelites of the Egyptian exodus did not obey God. In rejecting His commandments, they rejected the means God was using to show them abundant life and use them as a witness to the nations. If Israel had ordered her life according to God's law, the people would have experienced peace, they would have exemplified righteousness, and they would have provided the nations a glimpse of God's wonderful intentions. They would have been blessed by God and would have become a blessing to all nations.

6. If Israel had hearkened to God's commandments, what would have been the result? (v. 18)

God continues to enumerate the blessings He would have poured out on Israel. A blessing echoed here is the promise to the patriarchs that their descendants would be like the sands of the seashore (Genesis 22:17; 32:12).

Yet this promise has not come to fruition. What might have been is not reality. The Israelites reject the way of life God intends for them. Instead, they choose the ways of the nations around them. In refusing God's way, they have rejected God's strategy for blessing all nations. The nations are supposed to see God's wisdom manifested in Israel and be drawn to it (Deuteronomy 4:5–8).

To reject God's way is thus to reject God's mission. God cannot accept this, so He destroys the Israelites' sinful ways. He cuts the nation down to size in order to begin anew, to remake the Israelites into a people willing to carry out His plan.

7. What other promise did Israel miss out on? (v. 19)

What Do You Think? What lessons has God taught you from your experiences of disobedience?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Blessings that were lost
- Ministry opportunities gained
- Changed attitude toward others who stumble God's intention has not changed.

God sends Jesus to instruct people, to atone for our sins, and to send us out with Holy Spirit power in order to carry out our mission. God uses Christians to show the world what He intends for all. The church is called to be a sign, foretaste, and herald of God's kingdom. As Jesus teaches us, if we are not salty salt and bright light, we become useless for God's purposes (Matthew 5:13–16) and will relive the rejection that Israel experienced.

God's Hope for Israel (Isaiah 48:21,22)

After being reminded of what could have been, the Israelites can fall into deep depression. There is a danger of merely wallowing in self-pity. But God doesn't rub our noses in our failure only to increase our misery. Nor does He pretend the past never happened. Rather, He meets us where we are now and helps us begin anew, while accepting the reality of what has gone before.

For Israel, a new beginning will mean a new exodus. God will send the Israelites forth singing from Babylon (v. 20). As Moses and Miriam sang of God's great deliverance from Egypt (Exodus 15). He frees them from bondage so they may proclaim to the end of the earth that God is their Redeemer.

Though the captive Israelites will certainly welcome God's deliverance from Babylon, they will also entertain doubts. How will they be able to survive their homeward journey of 1,000 miles? How will they be able to rebuild after arriving? Yes, there will be many unknowns of the journey home for Israel.

Yet the God who created the heavens and earth has plenty of resources to provide for His people (Isa. 48:21). So He reminds them again of their ancestors who left Egypt. God provided not only water as this verse notes (Exodus 17:6), but also manna (Exodus 16:14,15) and quail (Numbers 11:31). God has unlimited resources, and He desires to meet His people's every need.

8. How did God encourage Israel (v. 21)?

Wicked rebellion is always a breath away. So, God reminds the Israelites that His offer of a new start is not for the wicked; it is only for those who accept His grace in faith. The Israelites have a choice to make. Though God offers them new life, Israel may still choose death.

For those who obey God's commandments (Isa. 48:18), there is peace ("shalom"), namely, a state of well-being. In contrast to the obedient are "the wicked" (v. 22). For them, however, "there is no peace." True peace can come only as we surrender to the Redeemer and respond to His leading. As Paul put it, *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,"* (Rom. 5:1).

9. Why did God say that the wicked have no peace (v. 22)?

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Our sovereign God can accomplish His purposes however and through whomever He chooses (Isa. 48:14,15).
2. You can trust a God who has openly foretold the future without one failure (v. 16).
3. Our holy God seeks to lead His people into what is best for them and His glory (v.17).
4. Obedience leads to God's fullest blessing (v. 21).
5. There will never be lasting peace for those who reject God and His word (v. 22).

CONCLUSION

WHAT WILL BE

Past failures were not the final word for the Israelites. After the Babylonian captivity, many returned to Jerusalem to rebuild. Life was not easy. It took several Persian emperors and Jewish leaders plus 10 decades of time before Jerusalem, its temple, and the walls were rebuilt.

Indeed, the mills of God grind slowly from an earthly perspective. So, it is tempting to lose hope. Christians continue to suffer—sometimes because of personal unfaithfulness, sometimes because of the unfaithfulness of others.

Yet we are to keep focused on the hope that is before us (Philippians 3:13,14). Sometimes God delivers us from the trials that befall us, sometimes He delivers us through them. May Christians always be those who push forward to that which will most certainly be, not being held back by what might have been.

PRAYER

Gracious God, we thank You for new starts. Though our failures overwhelm us, Your creative power bursts through. Increase our faith so we may see Your power for what it is and draw on that power to move forward. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Embrace what now may be (Philippians 3:13,14).