

I Am Your Redeemer

Lesson Text: Isaiah 44:21-26 **Background Scripture:** Isaiah 44:1-28 **Devotional Reading:** Galatians 4:1-7

Isaiah 44:21–26

²¹ “Remember these things, Jacob, for you, Israel, are my servant. I have made you; you are my servant; Israel, I will not forget you. ²² I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.” ²³ Sing for joy, you heavens, for the Lord has done this; shout aloud, you earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the Lord has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel. ²⁴ “This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord, the Maker of all things, who stretches out the heavens, who spreads out the earth by myself, ²⁵ who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, ²⁶ who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be inhabited,’ of the towns of Judah, ‘They shall be rebuilt,’ and of their ruins, ‘I will restore them,’

LESSON AIMS

- **Facts:** to show the actions of a loving Redeemer-God to an erring, sinful people.
- **Principle:** to see that when we sin, the Redeemer does all He can to get us back.
- **Application:** to demonstrate that when the Redeemer draws us back to Him, we are to gratefully respond to His efforts and His call.

INTRODUCTION

I’ve Been Forgotten

A common, nagging fear is that we have forgotten something important. We use pocket calendars, computer schedulers, and cell phone beeps to tell us what our next appointment or event will be. Even with all this technology, we still forget things. We distrust our memories. Did I turn the stove off? Have I mailed that bill? When is my friend coming to visit? What was the name of that new person I met at church?

Perhaps a deeper fear, though, is that we ourselves will be forgotten. What a depressing feeling! We want to be remembered and remembered well. Yet our world is increasingly impersonal and fragmented. We remember the names of celebrities, but forget the names of our nieces and nephews. Families often are separated, with members living in different cities. Travel is difficult. Time is scarce. To remember each other takes effort.

A wonderful characteristic of God is that He does not forget us. It is beyond our comprehension how God manages this, with billions of people populating the earth. How can He remember each one? But He does, and He spreads His blessings to each of us from the inexhaustible source of His love.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: about 700 B.C. **Place:** Jerusalem

A unique feature of the religion of ancient Israel was their belief in a singular God; this outlook is called monotheism. While this orientation is found throughout the Old Testament, Isaiah’s writings are among the clearest and most uncompromising in this regard. Isaiah demands that the people of Israel understand that their God, the Lord, is also the God who controls the destiny of their enemies. It is erroneous to think that international conflicts are paralleled by heavenly conflicts between rival deities. This is not the case. There is only one God over all the nations.

Even so, most people in the ancient world understood the heavenly realm to be populated by a multitude of gods. There was a god or goddess in control of each of the important natural processes of the world. These included a weather god, an ocean god, a sun god, a moon god, and many others. Ancient myths told the stories of the conflicts between these gods and how such fights affected the realm of humans. These people were correct in their intuition that there was a reality beyond the perception of human senses, but incorrect in supposing a division of labor and power in the supernatural world. They were especially wrong in believing that each nation had its own set of gods that was loyal to that nation alone.

By contrast, several times in Isaiah we find something like a census of deities in Heaven that always tallies up to exactly one. Isaiah pictures God standing in Heaven alone, unique and unchallenged in His supremacy. The census count is fixed at one eternally. The Lord alone is uncreated, and all the other inhabitants of Heaven and earth are created by Him. God says, "There is none like me" (Isaiah 46:9). He is the "God of the whole earth" (54:5).

This one-God orientation is important as we try to understand Isaiah's prophecies about the restoration of Jerusalem. The prophet speaks of Cyrus, who is a future (from Isaiah's perspective) monarch of the Persians. He will allow the people of Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. History calls him Cyrus the Great in recognition of his military and political skills. Yet even this person, undoubtedly the most powerful man on earth in his day, was subject to the plans and control of the Lord God of Israel. The Lord is the only God, so it could be no other way.

ISRAEL'S REDEMPTION (Isaiah 44:21-23)

Having detailed both the illogic and the ridiculousness of worshiping idols, God turned His attention once again to His chosen people. Although the Gentiles had been duped by the lure of idolatry, Israel was called upon to remember these things.

Obviously, they had forgotten them. Both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah would face God's judgment and removal from their land because of idolatry. To us, it seems strange that the very nation that was rescued from the gods of Egypt would fall prey to such deception throughout her history.

God's warning to Israel should serve as a warning to us as well. John wrote to early believers, "*Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*" (1 John 5:21). To be sure, the idolatry faced by ancient Israel and by early Christians is not what deceives us - but what about making family, work, sports, and other things false gods to which we devote time and energy?

As mentioned in a previous lesson, "Jacob" and "Israel" were the names of one man but were used interchangeably for the nation in her subsequent history.

1. What things did the Israelites need to remember (Isaiah 44:21)?

Not only was Israel God's chosen people; they were also His chosen servant! Apparently the people wanted to receive God's blessings because of their special relationship but were then unwilling to return service to the Lord who had blessed them.

As modern believers, we must be on guard against a similar attitude. Much preaching today emphasizes the blessings and benefits we receive by following Christ. Of course there are blessings and benefits, but we are also called upon to deny self, take up our cross, and follow Christ (Mark 8:34-38). Since Israel had forsaken the Lord through idolatrous worship, some may have concluded that God would cast her off forever; He would not. As Paul wrote later, "*Did God reject his people? By no means!*" (Romans 11:1).

"Israel in her role as 'servant' of the Lord has a high honor and should heed all things that contribute to her successful fulfillment of this role. The Lord is beginning again to set forth how different a God he is. His people 'will not be forgotten' by him: He remembers them even when they have forgotten him. The idols, when appealed to, cannot remember, cannot, in fact, do anything at any time. There is a wealth of comforting assurance in words like these. They reveal God's heart" (Leupold, Exposition of Isaiah. Baker).

2. Why did Israel need to be told, "You are my servant"? (v. 21)

In spite of the fact that Israel had sinned, their transgressions had been blotted out by the Lord. This, of course, was not due to any inherent goodness within the nation. It was the result of God's grace "and goodness toward them (c.f. Romans 2:4).

The word "transgressions" could be translated "rebellious acts," as it depicts the willful sins of disobedience so frequent among the Jews throughout their history. In other words, their sins were not merely missteps, mistakes, or errors in judgment. Unlike sheep, who unconsciously wander away (Luke 15:4), Israel was more like the prodigal son, who deliberately decided to journey to a far country and waste his substance with riotous living (vs. 11-13).

3. What shows that Israel's sins were not just mistakes or lapses? (v. 22)

That Israel's sins were to be blotted out like a thick cloud is an apt illustration. "Even as the morning mists are dissipated by the heat of rising sun, and are dispersed so effectively as to be no more" (Leupold), so it is with God's forgiveness. As He promised in the new covenant, *"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."* (Jer. 31:34).

Isaiah describes this as being drenched by a heavy fog, like a descending cloud that covers everything with God's mercy and forgiveness.

Israel deserves no credit for this restoration. It is not as if Isaiah is saying, "God has considered your offer and agrees to your terms." This is a unilateral restoration, I have redeemed, says the Lord. All is ready for them to return.

4. What picture are we given of God's forgiveness? (v. 22)

This promised restoration is the cause of universal elation. There is rejoicing above the earth (the heavens) and below the earth (the lower parts). In between are the colossal geographical features of the earth: the mountains and the forest. Thus this is cosmic celebration. We are reminded that creation itself is affected by the grace and mercy of God. Jesus says during His triumphal entry that if the crowds be silenced, then the rocks themselves will shout out (Luke 19:40). Similarly, Paul pictured an expectant creation, waiting for the consummation of God's plans (Rom. 8:19).

The cause of this singing is much more than the fate of a small nation. It is the recognition that God glorifies himself in the redemption of Israel. God shows His power, love, and commitment to redeeming His people. This does not serve to bring glory and acclaim to Israel, but to the Lord.

Another reason creation rejoices in Israel's redemption is that nature has been subjected to futility because of the Fall (Rom. 8:18-22). While there is still great beauty in our world, it certainly cannot compare to what was enjoyed by Adam and Eve in Eden. Because of Christ, however, paradise will be restored. Hence, we long for "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1), where there will be no death, sorrow, or pain (v. 4).

"In the Bible, creation and redemption are part of the same 'package' of truth. Since the Redeemer is the Creator, the work of redemption has creational consequences" (Motyer).

Not only will Israel enjoy the benefits of redemption once they repent and are restored to their former position, but God will also be glorified through it all.

5. What was the significance of the heavens and earth breaking forth into praise? (v. 23)

ISRAEL'S RESTORATION (Isaiah 44:24-26)

Once again, God reminded His people that He was their Redeemer. The creation of the nation of Israel was a work of God. That He formed them from the womb was a reminder of their redemption out of Egyptian bondage and their subsequent formation as a nation. Prior to the Exodus, they could not, properly speaking, have been called a nation.

They were, of course, formed in the womb centuries earlier when God promised the patriarchs their eventual birth as a nation. As the Lord said to Abram: *"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing"* (Gen. 12:2).

That had come to pass, but Israel was throwing it all away by forsaking the Lord. God was simply asking the people to remember who they were and where they had come from. Just as God had created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 19:1), so He created Israel to bring glory to His name.

"When he added from the womb, it was in order that the people might acknowledge that all the benefits which they had received from God were undeserved; for he anticipated them by his compassion, before they could even call upon him" (Calvin).

6. How was Israel formed in the womb? (v. 24)

The "tokens of the liars" refers to supposed signs spoken of by false prophets who were trying to deceive people. Among the ancient Hebrews, there were two kinds of false prophets to contend with. First, there were those who tried to lead Israel into the worship of false gods (Deut. 13:1-5; 18:20-22). Second, there were false prophets who claimed to speak in the name of the Lord but were really making up messages to suit their own desires. Those in this latter category told the king or the people what they wanted to hear (Isa. 30:9-10; Jer. 14:14). The New Testament warns, *"But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you."* (2 Peter 2:1).

"Jehovah demonstrates His omnipotence and omniscience over and over again by frustrating the alleged 'signs' ['tokens'] of the liars (Heb. baddim, feigners, fakers, false prophets). The Lord may expose the prophet immediately or He may take a long time to do so, but eventually the false prophet is exposed and the Lord's Word is vindicated. Isaiah was one of those prophets of the Lord whose word was confirmed publicly (c.f. Isa. 36-38). Jeremiah was another" (Jer. 28:5-17) (Butler, Isaiah, Vol. /II, College Press).

7. Who were the "false prophets" (v. 25)? In what ways did they lie?

"Diviners" (Isa. 44:25) refers to those who attempted to ascertain the future through a variety of methods. These included such things as interpreting dreams, consulting the dead, examining the movements of heavenly bodies, and inspecting the internal organs (especially the liver) of sacrificial animals. While ancient peoples placed great confidence in such supposed powers of divination (and some still do so today), God promised to make them "mad"; that is, they would be proved to be fools.

Likewise, the knowledge of the supposedly learned would be declared foolish by the Lord. This was not a disparagement of education but a warning concerning the limitations of man's knowledge. "It would be foolish to claim that such wisdom is always nonsense, but in this context Isaiah has in mind people's attempts to probe and give meaning to the future and the meaning of history" (Motyer). Scripture declares, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7). Of course, it was through the "foolishness of preaching" (1 Cor. 1:21) that we came to know the "wisdom of God" (v. 24).

8. How was divination practiced in the ancient world? (v. 25)

As mentioned in previous lessons, Isaiah foretold not only Judah's downfall and their deportation to Babylon but also their eventual return to the land once they repented. This, in fact, would serve as a confirmation of the words of Isaiah and other prophets of the Lord, here called servants and messengers (c.f. Jer. 7:25,26).

If God decreed that Jerusalem and Judah would once again be inhabited, it would come to pass, for it was God's word. We may, in fact, view prophecy as history in advance, for God knows "the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10). Hence, Peter could speak of the "completely reliable" word of prophecy" (2 Pet. 1:19) in reference to Jesus' coming. *"For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."* (v. 21).

Not only did Isaiah prophesy that the Jews would return to their land: he actually named the man who would permit them to do so. Cyrus, the Persian king, would be God's instrument to accomplish this (Isa. 44:28-45:1; Ezra 1:1-8).

9. What promise was made concerning Judah and Jerusalem? (v. 26)

Just as Jews in Isaiah's day needed to learn to trust in God and His Word, so we need to put our confidence in "Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). Just like those in Isaiah's day, God pursues us with His love. He created us, and when we sin He does not rest until He wins us back and fellowship is fully restored.

God loves us, forgives us, and then buys us back because there is no end to His love for us. We can be encouraged to return to God if we are in sin, for God has provided the way. We can hold on to the hope that is offered by God, who promises to never forget His people.

10. What applications can Isaiah 44 have for today's Christian?

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Secure is the child of God who remembers that the Lord will not forget him (Isaiah 44:21).

2. As our Redeemer, God has not only forgiven our sins but also taken them away (v. 22).
3. Joy is always a proper response to God's glory revealed in His people (v. 23).
4. Look about you and see the awesome omnipotence of your Creator and Redeemer (v. 24).
5. True wisdom begins with and finds culmination in God alone (v. 25).
6. We can trust fully a God who needs only to declare something and it is done (v. 26).

CONCLUSION

New Jerusalem

Jerusalem may have more recorded history attached to it than any city on earth. We encounter the city initially in the Bible through its mysterious priest-king Melchizedek. He is the “king of Salem,” a reference to the city’s earliest name (Genesis 14:18). It was conquered by King David to become his capital around 1000 B.C. It was the site of the temple of the Lord, built by Solomon in the tenth century B.C.

This temple was rebuilt by Zerubbabel in the sixth century B.C. and lavishly expanded by Herod the Great. Jerusalem was where the Lord Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised from the dead. The temple was destroyed by the Romans in ad 70, and the city itself was destroyed by the Romans during the Bar Kochba Revolt in A.D. 135. At this time, the Roman Emperor Hadrian placed a ban on Jews entering the city. This ban was in effect until the fourth century. Modern Jerusalem continues to be a focal point of regional unrest.

As important as Jerusalem’s history is, the New Testament authors look beyond the earthly city of Jerusalem to a new and greater city for the future. Jerusalem’s spiritual role had been as the city of the temple. The temple was the house of the Lord. It was seen as the place where God and people met, “the connecting place” if you will.

The book of Revelation pictures a new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2). It comes down from Heaven fully built, without need for restoration. It is glorious, to be sure, but its architectural wonder is a minor feature compared with the new reality it represents. By coming down, it obliterates the separation between Heaven and earth. “The tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them” (Revelation 21:3).

This is not simply a vision of the distant future. Paul pictures the people of God collectively as a temple fit together to be God’s dwelling place (Ephesians 2:21,22). God dwells among us now. He is not far away (Acts 17:27). As He restored ancient Jerusalem, He is able to restore our broken and desolate lives. God’s pattern of restoring in the history of ancient Israel is repeated daily and individually among those who trust in Him. He will never forget us. He will never abandon us. He has redeemed us through the blood of His Son, and He will make us whole.

PRAYER

God, our restorer, may You bring healing to our lives as we trust in You. May You bring us assurance that You have not forgotten us and that You will never desert us. May we be like the mountains and the forest that sing Your praises as You restore us to Yourself. We pray these things in the name of Your Son, Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God continually renews us.