

SET FREE BY GOD'S POWER TO WORK THROUGH PEOPLE AND NATIONS: A LOOK AT THE EXTENT OF GOD'S EXTRAORDINARY POWER ISAIAH 45:01–25

Introduction

The lust for power is a strong craving within the human heart. Holding power is not wrong or evil. In fact, there must be leaders in positions of authority for society to function properly. But craving power for the purpose of dominating or enslaving others arises from an evil heart. Tragically, many rulers of the world down through history have sought power for the purpose of controlling the citizens of a nation and then revelling in the wealth and luxury of their top government positions.

But for most of us, the craving for power is far more limited. Most of us simply want the power to command people's attention, to and convince them of the worth of our opinions or our way of doing things. Having enough power to influence people to do what we desire or think seems to satisfy most people. But even this limited longing for power arises from hearts that are self-centred. No matter what position of authority we hold, we must always keep our motives pure. We must use whatever power or influence we have for the welfare of our neighbours, our community and for society as a whole.

God's enormous power is the subject of this Scripture. God uses His power for good at all times. He never uses it for evil. Down through history, He has always used His power to work all things out for good, both for the human race in general and for His people. This fact is clearly seen in the present Scripture. This is, *Set Free by God's Power to Work Through People and Nations: A Look at the Extent of God's Extraordinary Power*, Isaiah 45:1-25.

- I. God's power to use Cyrus to free Israel from captivity: a picture of Christ setting people free from sin and death (vv. 1-13).
- II. God's power to arouse the nations to submit and bow before Him: a picture of the Messiah's kingdom, 2:2-4; 18:7; 23:15-18 (vv. 14-17).
- III. God's power to save everyone within the nations who turn to Him (vv. 18-25).

I. Isaiah 45:01–13 The Sovereignty of God Working Through Nations

Isaiah predicts that God's power will work through Cyrus, the pagan king of Persia.

God's power will arouse King Cyrus to free Israel from the Babylonian captivity.

Remember, this prophecy is being given more than 150 years before the event. Isaiah not only pinpoints the nation that will free the Jews, but he gives the name of the ruler — and Cyrus has not even been born yet. His birth and rule still lie several generations in the future. Only because of God's eternal knowledge (omniscience) and infinite power

(omnipotence) could He have known these facts and revealed them to Isaiah. God is omniscient, knowing all things past, present and future. And God is *omnipotent*, possessing supreme, unlimited and unrestricted power. God rules and reigns over the entire universe. He oversees all affairs worldwide, working through both people and nations to accomplish His purpose of redemption. At the same time God gave free will to the human race. Sadly, the great majority of people down through the ages have chosen to defy or reject Him. Nevertheless, the Lord has determined to provide the way of salvation for all who will trust Him and repent of their sins. The Lord works all things out for good, orchestrating human events in order to save those who truly trust and follow Him. That is why God used His power to raise up Cyrus to free the true believers in Israel from their captivity. This event is a clear picture of Christ setting people free from sin and death. Note the Scripture and outline:

- a. God would anoint Cyrus to be His special agent (vv. 1-3). Surprisingly, the Lord called the pagan king *his anointed*. The term *anointed* was a term of honour usually reserved for righteous kings, prophets, priests, patriarchs and for the people of God themselves (1 Sam 12:3; Psa 2:2; 105:15; Dan 9:25; Hab 3:13). Even Christ Himself is called the *Anointed One* (Dan 9:25-26). In light of the traditional use of the term, the people must have been utterly shocked when Isaiah referred to Cyrus as God's *anointed*. But unknown to them, God was planning a marvellous thing for His people, those who truly believed and followed Him. He was going to rescue them from the Babylonian captivity. To perform this unusual feat, it was necessary to raise up a ruler through whom He could work and accomplish His purposes.
- b. God had a fivefold purpose for raising up Cyrus to be His agent. These purposes clearly show how God works through both people and nations to fulfil His will and accomplish His wonderful plan of salvation.
 - 1) First, God was going to use Cyrus to execute His justice upon the wicked nations of the earth. He would empower Cyrus to be a world conqueror and subdue nations with the Persian war machine. In some cases, Cyrus would defeat and strip kings of their armour and military power. In other cases, kings would tremble in so much fear that they would swing open their gates and surrender without a fight (v. 1). All over the known world of that time, the mountains would be levelled, the great cities and fortresses of the world would be conquered (v. 2). Through these conquests, the Lord would give Cyrus great wealth, the hidden treasures of nations (v. 3a).
 - 2) Second, God was going to stir up Cyrus to know that He is the Lord (Jehovah, Yahweh), the only true and living God (v. 3b). How could Cyrus know that God had appointed him to conquer the world and free the Israelites from captivity? How could he know that the Lord had called him by name generations before he was born? Most likely through the prophet Daniel, who would be an elderly prime minister in Cyrus's court. Daniel would undoubtedly have told the king about some of the great prophecies of Isaiah (Dan 6:28; 10:1). Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, actually said that it was Isaiah's prophecy that aroused Cyrus to free the Jews. He states:

When Cyrus read this [Isaiah's prophecy], and admired the divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfil what was so written. So he called for the most imminent Jews that were in Babylon and said to them, that he gave them leave to go back to their own country, and to rebuild their city Jerusalem, and the temple of God, for that he would be their assistant, and that he would write to the rulers and governors that were in their neighbourhood of their country of Judea, that they should contribute to them gold and silver for the building of the temple, and, besides that, best for their sacrifices. (Josephus. Complete Works. Antiquities of the Jews. Book 11, Ch. 1, Para. 2, p. 228)

The source from which Josephus got his information is not known. But since Daniel was Cyrus's prime minister, it is likely that he showed Isaiah's prophecy to the king. And as a strong witness for the LORD, Daniel almost certainly did all he could to lead the king to acknowledge the only true and living God. Although we cannot know if Cyrus ever truly turned to the Lord, Scripture does say that the Lord Himself raised up Cyrus so that he might know that the Lord is the God of Israel, the only living and true God.

- 3) Third, God was going to raise up Cyrus to free the Israelites from captivity and allow them to return to the promised land of Judah (vv. 4-5). Although the Lord honoured Cyrus by appointing him to be His agent, God's purpose was not focused upon the king. His purpose was to fulfil His promises to Israel, to set the exiles free from captivity and return them to their homeland. When God called King Cyrus His *shepherd* (40:11; 44:28) and His *anointed* (45:1), He bestowed a great honour on the Persian king. However, Cyrus was not honoured because of any personal merit or righteousness. Scripture clearly says that Cyrus did not acknowledge or know the LORD during the days when God was preparing him to help Israel. God *chose* to use Cyrus to free His people from captivity.
- 4) Fourth, God was going to raise up Cyrus to prove to the world and His people that He alone is God (vv. 6-7). From the rising to the setting of the sun, from one end of the earth to the other, all people were to know that there is no God but the LORD Himself (Jehovah, Yahweh). He alone is the Creator, for He alone has created both light and darkness. And He alone is sovereign, controlling both good and evil, peace and calamity. God's prediction and use of Cyrus — and even naming the as yet unborn king — would arouse the attention of all who were truly objective and honest. It would also prove beyond any reasonable doubt that the LORD alone is God.
- 5) Fifth, God was going to raise up Cyrus to bring heaven's righteousness and salvation to the world (v. 8). By releasing His people from captivity, God would prove His righteousness, prove that He always does the right thing by fulfilling His Word and promises. And He would prove His salvation by delivering His people from their captivity. God would pour the righteousness and salvation of heaven, of God Himself, upon His people.

- c. God now issues a strong warning to those who question His will and the way He works with people (vv. 9-13). Naturally, some people in Isaiah's day opposed God's will. A number of unbelievers opposed God's choice of Israel as His people. Others opposed His use of a pagan king to free His people. They believed that a pagan such as King Cyrus was not worthy to be used for God's great purposes. In their minds, Cyrus was far too evil, immoral and corrupt for God to anoint him for any service, much less to free His people from captivity.

But note God's response to those who second-guess or criticize the way He chooses to work. He pronounces the certain doom of all who argue with their Creator (v. 9). People who challenge the LORD expose their true hearts. They show that their hearts are hard and stubborn against God. Consider a potter and his clay. A clay pot does not argue with its maker. It does not question what the potter is making or the way he is doing it. Think about newborn babies. While they are being born, babies do not ask why their parents are bringing them into the world or question the way they are being delivered into it.

- d. God's answer to those who question their Creator is very straightforward (vv. 11-13). They must think about what they are really doing. In questioning the Lord about His children and about the way He works, they are actually issuing orders to the Lord, telling Him what they think should be done and the way it should be done. Simply stated, they are seeking to *play God*. Those who question and argue with God must remember two facts:

- => The Lord is the Creator of the heavens and earth and of all mankind. For this reason, He has the right to do as He chooses (v. 12).
- => The Lord will raise up Cyrus to fulfil His righteous purpose. His purpose is to rebuild the holy city of Jerusalem and to set Israel free from its captivity.

Thought 1. Cyrus is a clear picture of Christ in that the king was the anointed of God, appointed to set God's people free from their captivity so they could return to the promised land. Jesus Christ was also anointed by God, appointed to set the human race free from the bondages of sin and death. Through Christ, all believers can live eternally with God. Unfortunately, when Cyrus issued the great proclamation of freedom to the Jews, only a few chooses to return to the promised land. So, it is today with the great proclamation of the gospel: only a few choose to follow the LORD and place their hope in the promised land of heaven. Jesus Christ has provided the way for us to be set free from sin and death. But we must believe Him. To lay claim to the freedom Christ offers, listen to what God's Holy Word says about Him:

Rom 3:23-25 *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.*

Eph 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.

2 Tim 1:10 But it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Heb 2:14-15 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

II. Isaiah 45:14–17 Power of God to Subdue Nations Before Him

God has the power to arouse nations to submit and bow before Him, the God of Israel. This is a clear picture of what will happen in the future kingdom of the Messiah. The Lord Jesus Christ will return to establish God's kingdom on earth (2:2-4; 18:7; 23:15-18; 60:5-14). This period of history is known as the Millennium, an era that includes the return of Christ and His reign on earth. In that day, nations will willingly come to Israel to surrender their worship and wealth to the LORD (v. 14). Coming *in chains* simply means they come willingly, voluntarily as prisoners of the Lord. The nations will also bow before Israel's God and make two confessions:

=> That the LORD is the only true and living God.

=> That the God of Israel is the true Saviour, a God who works in mysterious ways.

This means that the only citizens of the Messiah's kingdom will be those who believe in the Saviour of Israel, who is the LORD Himself. Only the Jews and Gentiles who truly trust the LORD Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour will be left on earth.

When the nations submit themselves to the LORD, all idol makers will be put out of business. And they will be shamed and disgraced because of their horrible profession. This is a clear reference to God's coming judgment on all idolaters who reject Him and turn to false gods. Their fate will be sealed — they are doomed to shame and disgrace under the hand of God's judgment. However, all the redeemed of Israel will be eternally saved by the LORD (v. 17). They will never be ashamed or disgraced.

Thought 1. In the Messiah's kingdom, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is the true Lord of the universe. Therefore, it is far better to bow before Christ now, while we live on earth, than to be forced to bow and confess Christ in the future and face the terrifying judgment of God. If we humble ourselves and acknowledge Christ as Saviour, we will be saved. God will rescue us from sin, death and the condemnation to come. Therefore, God strongly appeals to us today, encouraging us to surrender to Christ. Listen to what God's Holy Word says about confessing and denying Christ:

Mat 10:32-33 *“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.”*

Mark 8:38 *“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.”*

Rom 10:9-10 *That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*

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

2 Tim 2:12 *If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us.*

Titus 1:16 *They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.*

2 Pet 2:1 *But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them — bringing swift destruction on themselves.*

1 John 2:22-23 *Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist — he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.*

1 John 4:15 *If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.*

III. Isaiah 45:18–25 God's Power to Save All who Turn to Him

God has the power to save all people, no matter where they are from. There is only one requirement: they must turn to the Lord. In discussing His power to save people, the Lord first declares that salvation is sure. He then makes an appeal to the people of all nations. Finally, He issues a strong warning to everyone. Note the Scripture and outline:

- a. God wants everyone to know and be confident in His power to save all people. No matter who they are — Gentile or Jew, idolater or true worshipper — the LORD can save all those who genuinely trust Him. God gives three assurances to prove He has the power to save even the most stubborn and defiant of the earth:

- 1) God's enormous power to create the universe proves that He has unlimited power. Any power strong enough to create the universe can save anyone.
- 2) God created the earth for a very specific purpose — so that it might be fruitful and inhabited by the human race. The earth is not supposed to be empty or desolate. Given that, God will not destroy all the people of earth. He will save those who turn to the Saviour for redemption (v. 15).
- 3) God's Word gives the assurance of salvation, for God speaks only the truth. Longing for people to be saved, the LORD does not speak in a whisper or in a dark corner where people can barely hear. He does not encourage people to seek Him in vain; nor does He deceive people and leave them empty because they cannot understand what He is saying. Rather, the Lord *speaks* the truth and encourages people to *seek* the truth.
- b. God longs for people to be saved and to escape the coming judgment (vv. 20-22). Therefore, He makes a threefold appeal to the people of all nations.
 - 1) God appeals to people to turn from their idols, because they are only material objects that cannot save them. Worshipping idols only exposes people's ignorance. Idols have no life, so of course they are powerless to help those who pray to them and cry out for their help.
 - 2) God appeals to people to acknowledge that He alone is God (v. 21). He has proven His claim by foretelling the judgment of Babylon and the release of His people from captivity (v. 21). Predicting these two phenomenal events and fulfilling them in every detail are unquestionable proof that He alone is God, the righteous LORD and Saviour of the world. There is no other God.
 - 3) God appealed to the people to look to Him in order to be saved (v. 22). He alone is God. There is no other person or so-called god who can save people from all the ends of the earth; people are to look to Him for salvation.
- c. In closing His discussion of salvation, God issues a strong warning to the people of all nations (vv. 23-25). The warning must be heeded, especially because it is issued under a threefold oath. The Lord swears that three events will take place:
 - 1) Every knee will bow and every tongue confess to Him. This means that the entire world will bow before Christ:

Rom. 14:11-12 *It is written: "‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee shall bow before me; every tongue will confess to God’" So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

Phil 2:9-11 *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

- 2) Every individual who opposes the LORD and lives an unrighteous life will face God's judgment (v. 24).
- 3) Every descendant of Israel (all true believers) will be declared righteous by the LORD and will enter glory with Him (v. 25).

Thought 1. God has the power to save not just everyone but anyone. No matter how sinful, wicked or corrupt a person may be, the LORD can save that person. Christ did not come to save the righteous, those who already know and love the LORD but the unrighteous. The person who lives in a cesspool of immorality can be saved. The person who has worshipped idols and false gods can be saved. The person who has stolen, lied, deceived, burned with hostility or hatred, abused or assaulted others, maimed or murdered, or committed any other sinful behaviour can be saved. No matter what wrong we have done, we can be saved.

But salvation is conditional. We must believe in the LORD Jesus Christ and repent of our sins. To repent means to turn away from sin and follow Christ, to live obediently and righteously by obeying God's holy commandments. All who heed God's warning — who sincerely turn away from their sins, repent and follow Christ — will be saved. Salvation is open to all, regardless of social class, wealth, ethnicity or past behaviour. Listen to God's Holy Word:

Luke 19:10 *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”*

John 3:16-17 *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*

Acts 2:21 *And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*

Acts 5:31 *God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.*

Rom 10:9-10, 13 *That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.... For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

1 Tim 1:15 *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst.*

Titus 2:11-12 *For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.*

Heb 7:25 *Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

2 Pet 3:9 *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

Isa 1:18 *“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”*

Isa 55:1 *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” ■*