

GOD'S PEOPLE ARE SET FREE BY RETURNING TO THE LORD WITH TRUST AND HOPE

ISAIAH 44:21–28

Introduction

Freedom is one of the most prized possessions of the human race. People who live in a free nation are usually able to move around without restraints, exercise their initiatives, pursue their ambitions, choose their work, marry the person of their choice, and worship freely. But people who are not free are severely restricted, sometimes even persecuted or enslaved. In a restrictive, oppressive society, people often have to deal with prejudice, discrimination and favouritism. They are seldom allowed to travel freely, worship or choose the work they want to do. Personal ambition, goals and initiative are usually repressed, and people have to work at jobs determined by government officials, which includes forced labour.

Freedom is the subject of the present Scripture. The LORD clearly shows that He has a vital interest in people being set free from the bondages and enslavements of this life. Remember that Isaiah is predicting the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. But he also predicts that God will use human events in order to set His people free from their captivity. By His own power God will liberate and restore His people to the promised land. But more important, true liberty — an inner peace and freedom — can come only through the LORD, the only living and true God. He and He alone has the power to set people free from the enslavements of this life, including the terrifying bondages of sin and death. This is the subject of the present Scripture: *Set Free by the LORD, the Only Living and True God*, Isaiah 44:1-28.

- I. God's people are set free by His promise: He will help Israel (redeemed believers) (vv. 1-8).
- II. God's people are set free by knowing the folly of idolatry (vv. 9-20).
- III. God's people are set free by returning to the Lord and by renewing their great hope in the promised land (vv. 21-28).

Isaiah 44:21–28 God's People are Set Free by Returning to the Lord and Renewing Their Hope in the Promised Land

God's people are set free by returning to the LORD and renewing their hope in the promised land. Isaiah now draws a sharp contrast between idolaters and God's people. Remember that the prophet is looking ahead to the time when the Israelites will be a conquered people, deported and scattered all over the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians were an unbelieving, idolatrous people, as many of the Israelites themselves were. Only a few of the Jews were true believers in Isaiah's day, and the same would be

true during the Babylonian captivity. But God still loves His people, so He reaches out to them in compassion. Through His prophet Isaiah He issues a strong charge to His people and gives them a wonderful promise. Note the Scripture and outline:

1. God's strong charge to His people is threefold. First, they are to remember that they are God's servants; therefore, He will not forget them (vv. 21-22). Even when they are in captivity, suffering horribly, they will still be His servants, the people He has chosen to be His witnesses on earth. Although they will forget and forsake Him, He will not forget or forsake them. His offer of forgiveness will still stand. Their sins can still be blotted out, as though washed away by the rain of a cloud or the moisture from a morning mist.

Second, to be forgiven their sins, they must repent. They must turn away from their sins and turn back to the LORD. Once they have repented, the LORD will forgive and redeem them. Redemption looks ahead to the coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone has paid the ransom to set people free from the bondages of sin and death.

Third, His people must join all creation in praising Him (v. 23). Redemption and forgiveness of sins are the greatest of gifts, gifts that should arouse people everywhere to praise God's name. But even if every human being praised the LORD, their praise would not be enough. So all nature is summoned to burst into song and sing for joy. The heavens above and the earth beneath — including all its mountains, forests and trees — are to praise the LORD for His redemption.

2. God's wonderful promise to His people is that those who are truly redeemed will return to the promised land (vv. 24-28). Israel will be restored to its homeland; Jerusalem and other towns of Judah will be rebuilt. The Redeemer Himself will liberate the Jewish exiles from Babylon and return them to their homeland. And it is the Redeemer's power that will set them free. God will use His power in five ways to guarantee the restoration of Israel:

- a. Israel's restoration is guaranteed by God's power to create both the human race and the universe (v. 24). He formed each individual Israelite in the womb, as well as the nation of Israel. The same LORD who created them also created all things, both in the heavens and the earth. God's enormous creative power ensures the restoration of Israel. He who possesses such power can certainly free His people from any bondage or enslavement.
- b. Israel's restoration is guaranteed by God's power to expose the errors of false teachers. These include false prophets, diviners and the wise of the world (v. 25). When occult practices deceive and enslave people, the LORD has the power to set them free. Whereas false prophets teach lies and diviners use deception and double-talk to secure followers, the LORD speaks only the truth. Through revealing the truth about people's sinful nature, the LORD is able to arouse them to repent. And through

revealing the truth of redemption, He gives them a way to be forgiven of their sins and set free from the penalty of sin, which is death. In dealing with those who are considered wise in this world, the LORD has the power to refute their so-called wisdom and expose its foolishness. He is able to exercise the same power to free His people from all the bondages of this world.

- c. Israel's restoration is guaranteed by God's power to fulfil His Word and the predictions of His messengers (v. 26). A sharp contrast is being drawn between this verse and the previous one, between false teachers of the occult and the messengers of God. False teachers of the occult are involved in pseudoscience, whereas the messengers of God make predictions based upon God's Word. Consequently, the predictions of God's messengers come true. Two predictions in particular are mentioned:
 - => the prediction that Israel will return to the promised land
 - => the prediction that Jerusalem and the other cities of the nation will be rebuilt (58:12; 61:4; Jer 32:15). But note this fact: it is God's power that fulfils the predictions of His messengers. Because of God's power, the wonderful restoration of His people and the rebuilding of the nation will take place in the future.
3. Israel's restoration is guaranteed by God's power to work. Down through history, the LORD had performed miracle after miracle, spectacular events such as crossing the Red Sea and the Jordan River (see notes, Exo 14:1-21; Jos 3:1-17). If the LORD is strong enough to perform such great miracles as those, He is bound to be strong enough to deliver the Israelites from the bondage of any earthly power or nation.
4. Israel's restoration is guaranteed by God's power to raise up King Cyrus of Persia to set the Jewish exiles free (v. 28). He has the power to guarantee that they would rebuild Jerusalem and the temple (see notes, 2 Chr 36:22-23; Ezr 1:1-11; 6:1-22). As history shows, King Cyrus liberated Israel, and this prediction was fulfilled exactly as God foretold.

Thought 1. God gives the same strong charges and wonderful promises to believers today that He gave to believers in Isaiah's day. But remember, the LORD commands us to repent of our sins and acknowledge that redemption can be secured only through Him. He alone has paid the ransom to set us free from sin and death. The ransom price for our sins was the death of His Son. If we trust Christ to save us from the bondages of sin and death, God redeems us. He allows the death of His Son to count as the payment for our sin. Thus, through Christ and Christ alone we are set free from sin, counted righteous before God, and made acceptable to Him.

Once we have trusted Christ and been redeemed, God promises to give us the promised land of heaven. When we have spent our last moment on earth, more quickly than the eye can blink, God will transfer us into His presence. We will immediately move from this natural world into the spiritual world. There we will live eternally with the LORD.

(1) When we trust Christ, God forgives our sins and redeems us. Redemption is through the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Rom 3:23-24 *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.*

Gal 3:13 *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*

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

Col 1:14 *In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

Titus 2:13-14 *While we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*

Heb 9:12-14 *He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*

1 Pet 1:18-19 *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*

Rev 5:9 *And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."*

(2) Once we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Saviour, we are redeemed and forgiven of our sins. And God gives us the most wonderful assurance: we will inherit the promised land of heaven.

John 14:1-3 *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."*

2 Cor 5:1 *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.*

Phil 3:20-21 *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything*

under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Col 1:3 *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you. The faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel.*

Heb 11:8-10 *By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

Heb 11:13-16 *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

1 Pet 1:3-4 *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. 4 And into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade kept in heaven for you,*

Rev 21:23-27 *The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. ■*

ISRAEL SET FREE BY GOD'S POWER TO WORK THROUGH PEOPLE AND NATIONS

ISAIAH 45:01–13

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).

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, beast 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.” ■*