

“Turn to Me”

Isaiah 45:18-25

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We are reading tonight vv. 18-25, but it is easy to see that these verses belong to a larger unit. The chapter begins with the prophecy of Cyrus the Persian’s rise to power, the man who would, for reasons that had nothing to do with the honor of Yahweh or the blessing of the Jews, restore the exiles to the Promised Land in 538 B.C. All of this, of course, came to pass long after Isaiah’s death. What is asserted in this oracle or prophecy is, as so often in the prophets, God’s plan of salvation for the whole world, with Israel as central to that plan. That was precisely what seemed to be in doubt as the Jews diminished in number and importance during Isaiah’s time and, all the more as Isaiah contemplated the Babylonian captivity beforehand. But there is no God except Israel’s God. This world is absolutely subject to his rule. He is working his purposes out in the history of mankind and the day will come when the entire world will acknowledge that he alone is God - the maker of heaven and earth, and the savior and judge of all men! Notice how often in the earlier verses of chapter 45 you have the Lord asserting that Israel’s God *is the only God* and that there is no other. You find that in vv. 5, 6; again in v. 14, as you will find the same assertion in the verses we are about to read.

Text Comment

v.18 That this verse begins a new sub-section of the prophecy is indicated by the citation formula, “Thus says the Lord,” such as you have at v. 1 of the chapter and again in v. 14. Four verbs describe his work as the creator: he “created, formed (or fashioned), made, and established all things. The point is that only the one living and true God could do such things! We are reminded here how fundamental to everything we believe about God and to all our hopes of salvation is the fact that God is the creator of heaven and earth. Long ago Athanasius argued in his masterpiece *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* that if you tamper with or fail to get right the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ you must, in the nature of the case, get wrong the Bible’s doctrine of salvation. Well, in our time, a similar argument can be made. If you deny God as the creator and former and establisher of heaven and earth and everything in them, you will *perforce* go wrong about salvation and eternal life as well. No one who doubts that God created the heaven and the earth will have, can have a robust faith in God as the Savior of sinners.

That is the significance of the “For” with which v. 18 begins. Here is the reason the idolaters will be put to shame, but Israel will go on to everlasting salvation. [Young, II, 210-211]

v.19 The revelation of God has always been accessible to those who seek it and always reliable to those who trust it. Jesus would say a similar thing about his teaching in John 18:20.

- v.20 Now the Lord addresses the nations, the multitudes who have sought other gods, who are not gods at all and who cannot save. They carry about their idols in processions and the like which is proof enough of their powerlessness: they need to be carried from place to place. What kind of god is it who can only get from one place to another if he's being toted there by his worshippers? What is more, those who worship them are ignorant. False worship produces intellectual blindness.
- v.21 The point is: if you idolaters think you are right, then present your case, Put your heads together and fashion the best argument you can. But Yahweh alone has spoken the truth throughout the ages because he is the only one who knows it. What is more, only the Lord has the power to foretell the future as he has demonstrated many times. That too is proof that he alone is God.
- v.22 The Lord through the prophet is addressing anyone among the nations who, realizing the futility of idolatry, wants to find salvation. "Salvation is grounded in monotheism," as one commentator puts it. [Motyer, 366]
- v.23 The second half of this verse is taken up into the *Carmen Christi*, the hymn to Christ found in Philippians 2, often thought not to not have been original to the Apostle Paul but a hymn of the early church that Paul was quoting there. It is not, of course, a promise of universal salvation, but it is a promise that every creature shall acknowledge that the Lord is God and God alone, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. [Young, 217] In the context the great point is that it will not be the Jews only but the entire world of men that shall acknowledge God, again an expectation that is found often in the prophets.
- v.24 All those who maintain their idolatry and are offended by the claim that Yahweh alone is God – a large number of people in our time – shall reap shame.
- v.25 Here is an OT use of the term "Israel" to designate not only the Jews themselves, ethnic Israel, but all the people of God by faith, a use of the term carried over into the New Testament where it becomes in some places simply a synonym for the church, Jew and Gentile together. Think of Paul's reference to the church in Galatians 6 as "the Israel of God."

There are some passages in the Bible that have been fixed in the collective memory of the saints because of the way in which the Holy Spirit used that passage at some particularly important moment in the history of salvation. No well-read Christian can read the last verse of Romans 13 – "...put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires" – without immediately being called away in his or her imagination to that garden in Milan in August of 386 at the moment when Augustine became a Christian, his eyes falling on that very verse and, as he put it, "all the darkness of doubt vanished away."

Or think of Isaiah 52:2-3, the text upon which in the spring of 1782 William Carey preached the sermon that would herald a new age of Christian missionary work throughout the world, the ripe fruit of which work is in our time the great harvest of souls in Asia, Africa, and South America. Carey's congregation on that occasion was a Baptist Pastors' conference in Nottingham. It was a

call to action, an urgent appeal to take the gospel to a lost and dying world. In that sermon Carey famously summarized Isaiah's exhortation as "Attempt great things for God; expect great things from God."

In the same way when many Christians read Isaiah 45:22 – "Turn to me and be saved...for I am God and there is no other" – they cannot help but think of Charles Spurgeon. It is probably safe to say that Spurgeon was the greatest and most influential preacher in the history of the English-speaking church. In the 19th century his sermons, first preached to more than 6,000 people at his Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, were printed by the millions and read by people all over the world every day, something that never happened to Billy Graham's sermons, influential as he was. The printing of Spurgeon's sermons went on for half a century, sermons still being printed, mailed, and read long after the great preacher's death. Alexander Whyte was a Scottish Presbyterian, but he was a devoted disciple of Charles Spurgeon. Helmut Thielicke was a German theologian, pastor, and preacher – sometimes known as the Billy Graham of post-war Germany. But, though Thielicke's theology differed from Spurgeon's in many ways, his book *Encounter with Spurgeon* bore witness to the influence an English preacher with little formal education had on that highly educated German university professor. As Thielicke reminded his readers: "This bush from old London still burns and shows no signs of being consumed."

So why Spurgeon and Isaiah 45:22? Spurgeon was raised in a Christian home by pious parents, and by equally pious and affectionate grandparents. He was taught the gospel as a child and had it exemplified in the life of his family. His grandfather and father were soul-winning preachers and young Charles often sat under that preaching. He was, even as a child, a voracious reader and learned Christian theology by reading it. He became familiar with the writings and teachings of the English puritans even as a boy. But young Spurgeon, though wanting to be a Christian did not think that he was. He asked questions of ministers, pondered and prayed, but the light would not come on; or, at least, so he believed. He knew he needed a deeper religious conviction and experience but didn't have it and couldn't find it. As he put it,

"I had heard of the plan of salvation by the sacrifice of Jesus from my youth up; but I did not know any more about it in my innermost soul than if I had been born and bred a Hottentot. The light was there, but I was blind..." [*Autobiography*, II, 80]

Then one snowy Sunday morning when he was sixteen the light dawned. He provided the famous account of what happened in his *Autobiography*. The date was January 6, 1850. Unable to go with his father that Sunday morning because of the snow, young Charles made his way to a Primitive Methodist chapel. According to his recollection, the church's minister did not make it to church that morning and so the responsibility for delivering a sermon fell to an unlearned layman. His text was Isaiah 45:22: "Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God and there is no other." Here is what happened in Spurgeon's own words:

"The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. Now, it is well that preachers should be instructed, but this man was really stupid. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." He

did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: ‘My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, ‘Look.’ Now lookin’ don’t take a deal of pain. It ain’t liftin’ your foot or your finger; it is just, ‘Look.’ Well, a man needn’t go to College to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn’t be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, ‘Look unto *Me*.’ ‘Ay!’ said he, in broad Essex, ‘many [of you] are lookin’ to yourselves, but it’s no use lookin’ there. You’ll never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the Father. No, look to Him by-and-by. Jesus Christ says, ‘Look unto *Me*.’ [By the way, whether or not he understood this at the time he preached it, that man understood the reference to Jesus Christ in Isaiah 45:22. Paul likewise applied this text directly to the Lord Jesus Christ in Philippians 2.] Some [of you] say, ‘We must wait for the Spirit’s workin’.’ You have no business with that just now. Look to *Christ*. The text says, ‘Look unto *Me*.’

“Then the good man followed up his text in this way: ‘Look unto Me; I am sweatin’ great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin’ on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto me; I ascend to heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin’ at the Father’s right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!’

“When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I daresay, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, ‘Young man, you look very miserable.’ Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, ‘and you always will be miserable – miserable in life and miserable in death – if you don’t obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.’ Then, lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could do, ‘Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothin’ to do but to look and live. “I saw at once the way of salvation.”’

That church in Colchester has had something of a checkered history since 1850 but it is still an evangelical church today. And a marble tablet adorns the wall near the seat where the young Spurgeon was sitting that snowy Sunday morning. On the wall of the church is found the text of the layman’s sermon that morning: Isaiah 45:22.

I don’t know how many Christians sitting in church pews and chairs today would know that Isaiah 45:22 was the text that made Charles Spurgeon a convinced and joyful Christian, but there are hosts of Christian ministers who never read that text without remembering the role it played in the great preacher’s life. Spurgeon himself often referred both to the event and to the role of that text in his preaching through the years. In a sermon six years later, preached out of doors to some 12,000 people he gave what we would nowadays call his *testimony*.

“[I stepped] into a place of worship and saw a tall thin man step into the pulpit – I have never seen him from that day and probably never shall, till we meet in Heaven. The man opened his Bible and read with a feeble voice, ‘Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the

ends of the earth. For I am God and beside Him there is none else.’ ‘Ah,’ Spurgeon continued, ‘I am one of the ends of the earth.’ And then, turning round and fixing his gaze on me, as if he knew me, the minister said, ‘Look, look, look.’ Why, I thought I had a great deal to DO, but I found it was only to LOOK.” [T. Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth*, 37-39]

Sometimes readers of the Bible can be confused by the way in which the prophets refer to the false gods of the ancient near east. Did they really think that such gods existed? For example, taken by itself, a text like Exodus 22:20 could suggest that they did exist as some kind of lesser and evil spirits.

“Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the Lord alone, shall be devoted to destruction.”

Or even such a text as Deuteronomy 10:17: “For the Lord your God is God of gods...” or Psalm 95:3, “The Lord is a great king above all gods...” Does that mean that he is simply a far greater God than the other gods?

But as a matter of fact, Israel was taught from the beginning and should always have known that the so-called gods of the ancient near eastern pantheon were figments of the human imagination – Jeremiah calls them “delusions” – projections of human characteristics by human beings wanting, by making their own gods, to secure some measure of control over their world. We know this for at least three reasons.

1. First, we read often enough in the Word of God that these gods are not gods at all; that they are, in fact, *nothing* at all. As the Lord said to Moses in criticism of Israel’s unbelief: “They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me with their idols.” And as David said in his prayer of thanksgiving to God, “For there is none like you, and there is no God besides you...” [2 Sam. 7:22]

2. Second, there is a significant tradition of open mockery of the idols preserved in Holy Scripture. Indeed, you have an example of that open contempt across the page in Isaiah 46:5-7:

“To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from place to place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble.”

There are many such texts that make fun of these so-called gods who cannot hear, cannot speak, and cannot act and that mock the people who make them and then worship what they have made.

3. Third, and most important, there are the many texts like the one we have read this evening that make a point of asserting that Yahweh alone is God, the maker of heaven and earth; that he not only has no equal, he has no rival. There are no other gods except him, and he is the furthest thing from the imaginary deities of the ancient world. He is the God who made everything, who rules over all that he has made, and who will judge every human being. It is this power, this authority, this sovereignty, this omnipresence and omnipotence, and, supremely, it is this holiness and justice and love *that make him God* and make him worthy of the name. He is what God is and, therefore, no one apart from him could possibly be a god; any god of any kind. *The Bible from beginning to end is the relentless assertion of monotheism and every part and parcel of its teaching assumes the existence of but one living and true God whose divine nature has been and is revealed in what he has said and done.*

The entire tenor of this text and of the entire Bible for that matter is that no one has any excuse for not recognizing the existence and the nature of God, the Creator of heaven and earth. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it in *Aurora Leigh*:

“Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God: but only he who sees takes off his shoes.”

The western world in which you and I live is, in many of the most important ways, *defined by the absence of God*. To whatever extent people may realize this, God is unrecognized and unknown. People do not reckon with him, whether or not they may believe that he exists. They treat him as an idol, a god – small “g” – that they can serve or ignore at their whim. They do not make decisions small or great with a view to what would please him. They do not honor him in their words and deeds. Even many church-goers live their lives day by day as if God did not exist, did not know what they were thinking or doing, or did not care. They do not fear God or his judgment. The hope of his salvation and of the eternal life he offers to those who trust in him do not sustain them and buoy them and set their hearts at peace. They do not love God as a person who is, far more than any other person, immensely important to their own welfare and the welfare of those they love. They do not look at the world as the theater of God’s glory or as subject to his sovereign rule. They are not trusting him to bring his holy purposes to pass in the affairs of mankind or in their affairs of their own lives.

The idolatries of the world – whether images of stone or wood or metal such as filled the ancient world – or the modern forms of man’s self-made gods (pleasure, money, power, fame, personal peace, and so on) are put in the place of God in human hearts by an act of the will. The idols didn’t appear by accident; they didn’t get there themselves. It is the inescapable tendency of man in sin to create substitutes for God. As Calvin put it, the human heart is an idol factory. Their preference for idols over the living God is, as we read throughout the Bible and as we observe in human life, *an act of defiance*, men and women refusing to acknowledge the reality of God *because they both fear and despise the implications of that reality*: that they belong to him as creatures to their creator, that they are to be judged by him according to his standards and not theirs, that they must order their lives according to his will or suffer the consequences, and that the true fulfillment they long for can be found *only* in willing and heartfelt submission to him.

That is the brute fact of human life in this world. This is what explains what we see with our own eyes and read in our newspapers or online. Idolatry, a false and futile effort to escape the presence of the God who is, is the daily thought and life of vast portions of the human race. But try as they might, they cannot give their idols sight or sense or power any more than could Isaiah's contemporaries. Whatever their gods, they are not gods, and they can do nothing for them. The idolater knows better, down deep he realizes what he is doing, but he cannot and will not admit that to himself or to anyone else! This is the suppression of the truth of which the Apostle Paul makes reference in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans: man's willful determination to worship the creature rather than the creator and, supremely, himself rather than God.

This is the presupposition, this is the logic – and it is inescapable – that lies behind and beneath Isaiah 45:22: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” What is remarkable; what is astonishing about that statement is not that it is true. Everyone knows that at some level. What is wonderful about that statement, about that invitation is that God issues it at all. That he remains willing to receive, to welcome, and to grant eternal life to people who have made a life of ignoring, despising, and defying him, of preferring idols – silly and indefensible as that preference is – to him. He wants the selfish to find love; he wants the fools to become wise; he wants the wicked to become good, he wants all men to be saved. “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!” *You and I, like Charles Spurgeon, are the ends of the earth!* Tacoma is a very long way from the Holy Land!

And for us who have turned to the living God it is ours to live in the consciousness of his presence and in the conviction of his nature as the Creator and Savior of the world. It is our duty, but it is also our pleasure, our peace, our hope, our joy, and our love to do so. We are, you and I, every day to live looking to the Lord, for he alone is God; there is no other!