

Allan MacRae, Isaiah 40-56, Lecture 3

This is lecture 3 delivered by Dr. Allan MacRae at Biblical Theological Seminary on Isaiah 40-56.

I'd like to give the assignment for next week. Now would you please write down a few references that I'll give you. I want to give you the references to nine verses. These are: 41:8-9; 42:19; 43:10; 44:1-2; 44:21; 45:4; and 48:20. I would like you to look at each of these verses for next time, and I'd like you to give me a paper on Friday, by noon, in which you answer two questions about each of these verses. Number one, who is called the Lord's servant in the verse? Number two, state the reason for your conclusion. Now, in this particular assignment I would like the reasons and the conclusion to be based only upon the verse itself, not upon anything else in Isaiah, nor in the Bible, nor anywhere else. I would like this to be done from simply looking at the verses themselves. If after you have done that should you desire to look at evidence from other parts of the Bible, or other parts of Isaiah, or in any commentaries, or in any other source, that is entirely optional; I am not assigning it.

Now, at the end of the hour last time a question was asked: "Can we say that there is only one interpretation to a passage but many applications?" That is very evidently a statement that has risen as a reaction against the attitude that was taken during the Middle Ages. As early as the third century there were many who said every verse in the Scripture has three senses: a historical meaning, a moral meaning, and a spiritual meaning, and you need to look at all three interpretations. Later on in the Middle Ages, it was changed, the third of these was divided up into two, and it was said that every verse has four senses. For instance, Thomas Aquinas, the leading theologian of the Roman Catholic Church, in his commentary on Genesis, said that there were four senses and he used these constantly. Thus, he said where God said, "Let there be light," historically, this means an act of creation; allegorically, it means let Christ be love. Anagogically, it means may we be led of Christ to glory; and tropologically, it means may we be mentally illumined by Christ. It was customary during those years on the part of many commentators to find many

different interpretations in one verse. Later some even found seven or eight different interpretations.

One of the great advances of the Protestant Reformation was to say the verse has one meaning. I would prefer, instead of saying "one interpretation," to say "one meaning," because ten people may interpret the verse in different ways; only one of them is probably right, so the word "meaning," I think, would be better. A verse has one meaning.

Now, all of these can properly be used as an application that Thomas Aquinas used. We can apply it in all sorts of ways, but we should not say "that's what this verse means." We want to find what it means. The reason I prefer the word "meaning" instead of the word "interpretation" is because very often--at least in many cases,--we are not sure what the correct interpretation is, and there may be various interpretations. If it is absolutely clear what the meaning is, then, of course, there's only one valid interpretation, but in all languages there are various possibilities. Words have various possible meanings; the context often shows which of these possibilities is the correct one, and so different interpretations may be advanced, and we want to find which is the true one. So I would agree there's only one meaning to any passage, but, of course, that meaning may be wide, or it may be narrow. When God said "let there be light," he referred to one action in the material world, and that is the meaning of this statement. But we can use the words, and they are used elsewhere in the Scripture, very definitely to refer to God's putting light in our hearts when we are regenerated. Similarly, the word is used as being given light in our life as we go forward; there are various uses of the word "light" and you may have to know from context what the correct meaning is.

I assigned you today to look at chapters 41-44 just to notice what passages of rebuke there are in these. The book of Isaiah begins with very strong rebuke. Chapter one, the first verse of Isaiah is simply a title, but the second to the fourth verses read, "Hear, O heavens; listen, O earth, for the Lord has spoken. I reared children and brought them up but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. A simple

nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers." And you go on to verse 15, you read, "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong; learn to do right!" This is a very strong rebuke. God is rebuking people for sin. This is not merely a mention of sin, or a reference to sin, but a very strong rebuke for sin. A very great part of the prophetic books is made up with rebuking people for their sin and calling upon them to turn away from it.

The section that we are examining this year from chapter 40 on is very different from most other sections of Isaiah in that it includes comparatively little of direct rebuke. In chapter 40, for instance, we have a reference to sin in verse 2, but it is that "her hard service has been completed. Her sin has been paid for!" That's not rebuke. That is blessing, of course. It is a promise to be freed from the burden of sin. Later on in the chapter we have the folly of idolatry shown, but it is not given as rebuke; there's no specific word in it of rebuking people for worshipping idols, but rather it is reasoning with them, showing how unreasonable it is for anyone to worship idols because God is so great and powerful and he is the only God. So we have some very definite passages of rebuke in our present section, but it is not characteristic of the passages as a whole. Rebuke entails a comparatively small part.

It is at the end of chapter 39 when Isaiah said, "The people will be taken off into exile to Babylon." And the people of Judah knew that the people of the Northern Kingdom, right in their lifetime, had been taken off into exile, and they had heard refugees tell of the terrible suffering of these people carried off hundreds of miles from their homes, as they were. They knew that Isaiah had predicted that their own people would be taken off to Babylon just as these others were taken to Assyria. The godly people would tend to give way to despair in the face of that situation. Then Isaiah speaks to these godly people to comfort them, and in so doing he not only comforts them, but he gives words that will have an even greater significance a hundred and fifty years later, when their people have already been taken into exile, have been in exile quite a while,

and God is assuring them that He is going to bring them back. And so we might call this whole section--chapter 40 to 56--Isaiah's "Book of Comfort." It is a book comforting people in the prospect of exile that God is going to deliver them from exile.

But there is suggested, in the beginning of chapter 40, the idea that they're not only going to return from exile, but that the larger matter of sin is going to be dealt with. Not only is their hard labor to come to an end, not only is their suffering to come to an end, but her sin is going to be paid for. This suggestion here is a very vital problem, which is only lightly touched upon in this chapter, but which grows in importance as you go through succeeding chapters. As we mentioned, chapter 40 can easily be interpreted, every bit of it, as addressed directly to people in exile telling them how God is going to bless them and bring them back. But you can see how it also fits with the greater promises of deliverance from sin which are to be fulfilled with Christ.

I personally have reached the conclusion that this chapter 40 is different from the rest of the section 40 to 56 in that it is like an overture to a symphony. It is something which sets, that gives the setting, which suggests the various themes that are to come, which presents the emotions that can fit with the whole development from chapter 41 on to 46; and, therefore, it can all be read as dealing with these themes as they apply in that immediate situation, but it also can apply to the great matter to which this section leads: the ultimate redemption from sin. And so it is not that there are two different meanings, but that there is an overture here, presenting emotions, not specific statements about persons or situations, but presenting emotions which were very vital to deliverance from exile that are also very vital to the deliverance from sin. Chapter 40, therefore, properly can be seen as being fulfilled in return from exile, and also as being fulfilled in the work of Christ. That's not an idea of double fulfillment. Double fulfillment, as I understand it, means two entirely different things considered as having been predicted in one statement. This, however, is a presentation of emotions that fit with these two different situations—return from exile and ultimate redemption.

As you go through chapter 40, the stress is on various themes through the chapter. As we noticed, the idea of comfort is in verse 1. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your

God." Well, there's nothing specific in that. That could be given to any minister.

"Comfort God's people." It is God's desire at all times that his representatives comfort his people, but in the context, it begins with applying it to God's people returning from the exile. So they are told not merely words of comfort, but they're going to be comforted because God is going to do wonderful things. He is going to deliver them. He is going to provide that their sin will be paid for.

Then we find that in verses 5 to 8 there is great stress on God's power. Now, the statements about God's power are true at all times. God's power is the Word of the Lord that will stand forever. God's power is supreme. These words are true at all times, but they apply particularly in both situations. We need to know of God's power. Then this is as if someone said, "Well, you talk about God's power, but what proof is there? What proof is there that God is so powerful, as you say?" And he touches on that in verse 5 a little bit, and in verse 8 much more, on the theme of God's power being proven by God's knowledge. The end of verse 5: "For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." It is God's word that we can trust and, of course, that applies at all times. In verse 8 he says, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

Again we have God's power stressed in verses 12, "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand," and in verse 15, "Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket" in comparison with him." In verse 17, "Before him the nations are as nothing." But God's knowledge is again stressed very definitely in verses 13 and 14: "Who has understood the Spirit of the Lord or instructed him as his counselor. Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way." God's knowledge is supreme, and it is evidence of his power. In verses 18 to 20 we have idolatry discussed, not as a subject of rebuke, but as a subject that he reasons about. He shows the folly of it. He shows how foolish it is to compare any idol to God or to trust in an idol. Then at the end of chapter 40, we have the overture coming to an end.

There are many times in the Bible the chapter divisions are in the wrong place. They were put in late; thousands of years after Isaiah was written. The divisions are late. They do not mean anything except that they are useful for finding places. But here is one

place where there is no doubt that a chapter division is properly placed, just as there is at the beginning of chapter 40. That is one the main divisions in the Scripture between chapter 39 and chapter 40. The historical section just before is followed by this great “Book of Comfort.” But at the end of chapter 40 the overture ends, and the main action begins. So up to there we have had emotions that can apply in relation to God’s work of comfort and deliverance for all times.

In chapter 41 we have the beginning of a picture--a specific picture. And we have a definite development of thought from there on. So chapter 41 begins with a call of judgment. "Be silent before me you islands, let the nations renew their strength. Let them come forward and speak. Let us meet together at the place of judgment." Who are to meet together at the place of judgment here? Whom is he talking to? Is he talking to the people of these countries or to the countries as represented of the gods whom they worship? As we go on, we see that he is speaking directly to the gods. He is calling the imaginary gods of the heathen nations to judgment to show that they are worthless. And so in chapter 41, verse 2, he asks a specific question to show the superiority of God to them: "Who has stirred up one from the east calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him, and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow. He pursues them and moves on unscathed, by a path his feet have not traveled before."

Is this a description of Hitler’s army’s going into Russia? Is it a description of Napoleon’s armies with their great progress? We, of course, would be foolish to think that it is applying to either of those situations, though the words taken by themselves could apply perfectly well to those situations. But here Isaiah is referring to a specific situation. This thing has happened, and he says to the gods, “Who has produced this? Who has caused this to happen or brought about this specific event of this coming of this great conqueror who ‘goes on by a path his feet have not traveled before and who subdues nations and reduces them to dust before his sword?’”

Now, there are commentaries who say that this refers to Abraham because as you look back at the earlier parts of the Bible, the only one that you can find that would seem

to fit with it is Abraham pursuing the kings who had taken Sodom and Gomorrah and carried off Lot. But that certainly does not fit in this context at all. And so that statement about Abraham, which we find in some commentaries, is very definitely to be rejected. This goes far beyond anything in the nature of warlike conquests that Abraham ever conducted.

But if you look ahead for a moment in the passage, we will see a specific reference to this situation that will show us what is referred to. We will look at chapter 44 through 45. We find at the end of chapter 44 that there is a wonderful poem beginning in verse 24. This is what the Lord says: "I am the Lord who has done this." It is a wonderful poem running through many verses until in verse 28 it says, "Who says of Cyrus, 'he is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please.'" And 45:1 says, "This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue kings before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut." So we have this specific prediction about Cyrus the great Persian conqueror, who is specifically named 150 years before his time. We find this in chapters 44 to 45, and it is very obvious that in chapter 41, Isaiah is describing the situation where the nations are terrified as they see the great conquests of Cyrus, the Persian conqueror. As they see these conquests, God says to the idols that the people of all these nations are looking to for protection, "Who has stirred up one from the east calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him?" Can any of your idols claim to have done this? Can any false god claim to have done this? He says, "I predicted this 150 years ahead and even gave his name!" (As in chapter 44). I am the one who is behind Cyrus and giving him his power. I'm using him for my purposes.

But there is a situation then in chapter 41, verse 4, "Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, with the first of them and with the last. I am he." And then he describes what the nations do when they see Cyrus coming. Verse 5, "The islands have seen it and feared. The ends of the earth tremble. They approach and come forward, each helps the other and says to his brother, 'Be strong.'"

So here are the nations seeing Cyrus moving with his seemingly invincible army conquering nation after nation, and the nations are filled with terror. And they say, What shall we do in the face of this terrible onslaught? "The islands see it and fear, and each of them says to his brother, 'Be strong.' The craftsmen encourages the goldsmith, and he who smooths with a hammer spurs him on who strikes with an anvil. He says of the welding, 'It is good.' He nails down the idol so that it won't topple" (Isa 41:5-7). In the face of this terrible danger, they are looking to their making new idols as a means of protection. They are looking to their heathen gods as a means of deliverance. And they are filled with terror, and this is the way they are dealing with it.

But he says in chapter 41, verse 8, that Israel is different. You shouldn't be terrified of Cyrus. God predicted 150 years ahead that he would bring Cyrus, and he predicted that he would bring Cyrus as his means of delivering Israel from exile. Although I did not read over the verses at the end of chapter 44, where Isaiah specifically says Cyrus will cause the temple to be built, and he will cause the exiles to be allowed to return to Jerusalem. God is raising up Cyrus for God's purpose to deliver Israel. So he says in verse 8, "But you, O Israel my servant, and Jacob whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend." Now you wouldn't tell Abraham's descendants not to be frightened because Abraham was conquering the kings. It's quite obvious he's not talking about Abraham here; he's talking to the descendants of Abraham and telling them not to fear when they see this great conqueror coming in destroying. "Don't you be afraid," he says, "because you are my servant, O Israel."

There is a true statement: God raised Israel up not as his pet but as his servant. He raised them up for His purpose. He raised them up to accomplish something in the world and so he calls Israel "My Servant". He says, "Israel," and you see this is one of the verses in the assignment for next time, "O Israel, My Servant, Jacob whom I have chosen." Very definitely here the Servant of the Lord is Israel. Israel is raised up in order to accomplish a purpose. He goes on in the next two verses and says, "But you, O Israel, whom I have chosen," and verse 9, "I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you, I said, 'You are my servant.'" And again he uses the term, "I

have chosen you and not rejected you.” Israel is not to fear, not because Israel is a particular pet of God, not because they are people whom God is more anxious to protect than anybody else because of any goodness in them. No, they are his servant chosen by him for a purpose. Through them he is going to accomplish something. There is a great reason for God’s calling Israel in the first place and for His blessings on them.

“And so,” he says, “I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners. I called you, I said you are my servant. I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear for I am with you.” Do you see how different this is from rebuke? This is comfort. This is assurance. “Do not fear for I am with you! Do not be dismayed for I am your God! I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced” (Isa 41:10-11).

How different from the situations for the Heathen nations who are vainly seeking for protection from their idols. Israel can be assured that Cyrus is not a terror to them, a great subject of fear, for God has brought him for a purpose. In chapter 41, verse 12, and following he says, “Though you search for your enemies you will not find them. Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all, for I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, ‘Do not fear, I will help you. Do not be afraid old worm Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you,’ declares the Lord.”

Now, in a number of your papers it was said that this statement “old worm Jacob” is a rebuke. Now the word “worm” could very easily be used in a context in which it would be a term of rebuke. But, when you take the parallel, it is “Old worm Jacob, O little Israel, don’t be afraid”. You’re not rebuking someone when you tell them not to be afraid; you’re comforting them. So, the word “worm” here is a figure of speech, but it is not a figure for something evil; it is a figure for something small. In comparison with the power of the great conquering armies of Cyrus, you’re just like a little worm. You are weak, there’s nothing you can do in your own strength against him; all you can do is wait and see what’s going to happen in this great conflict of the nations. And God said, “I am bringing my purposes to pass in this; I am bringing Cyrus, and you don’t need to fear like the other nations, even though you are like a little worm in front of his great army.” So

this is not rebuke; rather this is blessing here, though the word “worm” could be used in either context.

“For I myself will help you,” declares the Lord, “your redeemer, the Holy one of Israel” (Isa. 41:14). He goes on with that to the end of verse 16, “You will rejoice in the Lord and glory in the Holy one of Israel.”

Then there’s a general statement, “The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the Lord will answer them” (Isa 41:17). The people are suffering in exile; they are in misery there, but God is going to bring them deliverance. They may indeed have had difficulty in getting sufficient water, but it is more likely here that this is properly to be taken as a figure of speech as representing their difficulties in general, their misery, their need of help. They search for water, but everything is dry. It could be a specific statement; it could be a figure of speech. Of course, that is one thing in interpreting Scripture: to know what is figurative and what is literal. I’ve heard people say that they take every word of the Bible literally. That, of course, is utter nonsense! You couldn’t possibly take every word of the Bible literally.

There is a wonderful statement in the Psalms, “As the deer pants for water, so my soul pants for thee, O God.” And the longing for water is used as a figure for the need of mankind for something spiritual, which he has in his heart, even if he doesn’t know it, and which those who know it, realize more fully. But in this passage in Isaiah, I would rather doubt if the image of writer applied spiritually here because the whole context is of deliverance from exile. So I would think here that water is more a figure of material lack in this particular case. Water is used for different things in the Scripture, but I would think that probably in this particular case it refers to their material need rather than specifically to their spiritual need.

He says in chapter 41, verse 17 and following, “I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water and parched grounds into springs.” Now here he may be looking way to the distant future. He’s going to deliver

them from exile, but way in the distant future--there is no way they can tell how soon--there is something definitely coming that is pictured by this. There are blessings going way beyond the mere deliverance from the miseries of the exile, and he says that, "I will make rivers flow on barren heights," and then, of course, there will be material blessings as well as spiritual blessings.

So since there are spiritual blessings involved in the figure, in 18, it's possible that the suggestion has more to it than I realized, that the first part could be more properly brought in parallel with Psalm 1, though I think it is principally material that Isaiah is thinking of in that verse, but the spiritual may also be included in it.

"I will make rivers flow on barren heights and springs within the valleys. I will turn desert into pools of water and parched grounds into springs. I will put in the desert, the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle and the olive, pines in the wasteland, the fir and cypress together." This passage may refer to spiritual blessings to come, but the language seems to refer to great material blessings that God is going to bring at sometime in the future, not necessarily immediately now.

He says in chapter 41, verse 20, "So that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it." And now Isaiah very specifically turns his attention to those whom he has called to judgment at the beginning of the chapter. He turns to these idols specifically, and He says, "'Present your case' says the Lord. 'Set forth your arguments,' says Jacob's king. 'Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Or declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds so we may know that you are god's.'"

God is here giving an evidence to his people of his reality and of his strength. He promises to bring them back from exile. Well you say, "How can he do that? We are here subject to the terrible power of the Babylonian army. We have been led away hundreds of miles from our homeland; we have been here for decades."

The people later in exile read it with that in mind, but the people at the time Isaiah spoke imagine themselves in that situation. They were in Judah and God says, "I am

going to deliver you.” Well how do we know that He will deliver us? Well, look at God’s tremendous power. Of course he can deliver you. Yes, but what’s the proof of the power of God? We see the heathen idols carried in procession through the streets. We see the Babylonian soldiers saying that Nabu and Marduk have given us power and have led us in our great conquest. To the Judean exiles they say, “What does your god amount to? You don’t even have a statue of him. You have no idea what he looks like. Your temple’s been destroyed. What does your God amount to?”

Well, here’s an evidence, the evidence of fulfilled prophecy. God predicted 150 years in advance that a conqueror would come and deliver us from the Babylonian conquerors. He even predicted his name, Cyrus. The name is even given to us twice, at the end of chapter 44 and the beginning of chapter 45.

So in this situation, God turns to the idols. He says in verse 22, “Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds so we may know that you are gods. Do anything, whether good or bad, so that we may be dismayed and filled with fear. But you are less than nothing, and your works are utterly worthless. He who chooses you is detestable. But I...” He shows the difference between the idols, which are unable to protect their people from Cyrus, and God who says “...I have stirred up one from the north and he comes.”

Cyrus led his armies from Persia to the West and then went up to the north into Asia Minor. He conquered the great kingdom of Croesus, the kingdom of Lydia, and conquered all of Asia Minor. Then he returned southward and attacked Babylon. And God says, “I have stirred up one from the north, and he comes. One from the rising sun who calls on my name.” Cyrus had come from the east and from the north, a very specific prediction 150 years in advance of the coming of Cyrus.

In chapter 41, verse 25 and following, “He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay. Who told of this from the beginning so that we could know, or beforehand, so we could say he was right? No one told us of this; no one foretold it; no one heard any words from you.”

The idols cannot predict the future. It is interesting that, if you read the Quran, you find in it many specific laws for the people of Islam. You find certain predictions about the end of the age, about the time of judgment, when in Jerusalem from the wall over a certain distance there is to be a rope, stretched, and those who follow Muhammad will be given power to walk across this rope and those who haven't followed him will fall off down into eternal destruction. Muhammad gives certain statements like this about the end of the world, but as to what's to happen between his time and the end of the world, he never ventured to try to make any specific predictions. God did not speak through Muhammad. But in the Bible, God gives specific predictions of many things in the future: predictions that often could not be exactly understood in advance of their fulfillment; but when their fulfillment came, then it was seen how specific the predictions were and how exactly they were fulfilled. There are hundreds of these predictions in the Scripture. And so that is one of the great evidences given here in this chapter, to people in Babylon, suffering under Babylonian control. God says, "'Look how strong I am. Don't be terrified by these idols, by these Babylonian troops and all this.' You say, 'How do we know You exist? How do we know you have this power?' Well I've predicted what's going to happen. I've predicted the coming of Cyrus, and I am predicting things still in the future."

Well, it is a little difficult to know exactly how to take that in terms of Cyrus's beliefs. There are some who think that Cyrus was a Zoroastrian. That is not certain. Zoroastrians recognized that there is a great power of good. But they also believe in a great power of evil. That hardly would be consonant with the God of the Bible. Perhaps when Cyrus gave his edict to allow the Jews to leave Babylon, in which he declared they were to go and worship their God in Jerusalem he called on God's name. That Cyrus actually was a believer in the true God, however, we have no evidence.

I would say that to the godly people in the time of Isaiah, the prophecy about Cyrus had great significance. The godly people in the time of Isaiah would have seen the Assyrian conquests. They would have seen the people from the Northern Kingdom taken into exile. They would have seen how close Sennacherib came to conquering Jerusalem and taking their people into exile. And they would know how terrible exile was, and they

would know what the sin of the nation was, which Isaiah rebukes so strongly. They would know that exile was certain, and they would tend to give way to despair, and because of that, therefore Isaiah is now turning his attention away from the great sinful nation as a whole and addressing the godly and comforting them as they look forward to exile. He is doing it in such a way that his words will have an even clearer significance 150 years later when people read what Isaiah wrote back then and say, “Well, that’s exactly what’s happening now, here comes Cyrus that Isaiah predicted a 150 years ago. This brought comfort to our ancestors as they looked forward to the misery of exile. To us it brings comfort as we see the actual thing just as that Isaiah predicted.”

The great nation that Cyrus conquered in the north in Asia Minor, which is modern Turkey was the nation of Lydia. Its king was Croesus. The name of Croesus has become a symbol for great wealth because he was, perhaps, the wealthiest person of his time. There are those who think he was the first person ever to coin silver and gold into actual coins. Before that they simply weighed out the certain amount of it. When Cyrus came with his great army, Croesus did not know whether he should march out and attack Cyrus, or whether he would be wise to stay behind the walls and try to protect himself against the battering rams and the great attack of Cyrus. He sent a messenger to the Delphic oracle in Greece that claimed to be able to predict the future. The Greek records tell us how when the messenger came from Croesus and asked the Delphic oracle, “What shall I do? This great attack is being made on me. Shall I march out and attack him?” The answer given was, “If you march out and attack Cyrus, a great empire will be destroyed”. So Croesus thought, “How wonderful! The great empire of Cyrus will be destroyed!” So he marched out to attack him. But the battle was held and Croesus was completely defeated and taken prisoner. A great empire was destroyed, but it was the empire of Croesus, not of Cyrus.

Most of the alleged predictions of the future are like that, that are outside of the Bible. They are predictions that would be true no matter what happens. It’s good to examine the scriptural predictions of the future with that in mind. They may not tell us just what is going to happen, but are they such that if it had happened differently than it

did, we wouldn't say they were fulfilled. So there is much in Greek history about Croesus' great empire of Lydia, which was most of Asia Minor at that time. Cyrus conquered Lydia first, and then he came southward and attacked Babylon. The people of Babylon and all those regions, of course, were terrified as they saw Cyrus going north of them and coming back. Then after he conquered Babylon then he led his armies east again, and he was almost to India when he was killed in battle and his son carried it on even conquering the northern part of India, which the Persians held for the next 200 years. This was by far the greatest empire the world had seen up to that time.

Why did he do it? Well, why did Hitler? Why did Napoleon? But I think this is worth noting that Cyrus was the king of the small group known as the Persians in an area which was generally controlled by a much larger group called the Medes. The Persians could be considered part of the Medes as a related group. But Cyrus declared his independence of the Median overlords, and then he succeeded in overcoming them and getting control of all that they had. Having gotten started with this great career of conquest, there might be an impulse to go on and conquer more and more and, eventually of course, he conquered Lydia and then Babylon, and then went east quite a distance. His son Cambyses carried on and conquered northern India, and then went and conquered Egypt. So that it was that sort of thing: when you get it started, it seems to go on and on. Hitler started with attacking Poland; and then he attacked Russia, and then he attacked France. Once he got going, he would have gone on forever if somebody hadn't stop him.

"Yes," the Lord says, "I was the first to tell Zion, 'Look, here they are,' [meaning Cyrus] I gave Jerusalem a message of good tidings." God through Isaiah here is, giving the message that Jerusalem is going to be taken into exile as predicted back in chapter 39. But here are the good tidings: they were going to be brought back; they're going to be delivered.

Verse 28 goes on with the theme of idols. "There is no one to give counsel, no one to give answer when I asked them." He is referring to the idols that are all false. He is referring to all the idols. He is giving Jerusalem the message of good tidings. But I think he's here referring to the nations around who are trying to hold the Israelites in subjection

God declares their idols are nothing and warns the Israelites against trusting these idols.

Well, we'll pick up there next time.

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