

For Your Sake, For My Sake: A Sermon on Isaiah 43:14, 25¹

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Isaiah 43:14 Thus says the LORD. . . for your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, . . .

43:25 I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

In Isaiah 43, we are a couple of chapters deep into a court case. All the nations of the earth are assembled, and the Lord is challenging them to produce a god—a real one, a contender, a god with a divinity degree from one of the better seminaries.

By the way, these chapters in the 40s of Isaiah give us some of the most inspired humor in the Bible, and most of it at the expense of Babylon's sorry collection of idols. "Whoa!" says Isaiah. Have a look at these Babylonian gods. Divine Nebo, riveted to a wall so he won't fall on his divine nose! But keep the rivets a little loose, because when the enemy comes you have to pull Nebo off the wall, load him up in a buckboard, and hustle him out of town!

Where do these portable gods come from? Isaiah 44 uses a kind of cartoon to tell us. A man chops down a cedar tree for firewood, but he needs only half the trunk to bake his bread and roast his meat. When he's finished with his meal, he lights his pipe and thinks a little. *It's a nice piece of cedar I've got left, probably too nice for firewood.* So the man gets up, sharpens his chisel and goes to work. Why not whittle himself a god today? Hey, he hasn't made one in a while, and, besides, not that many gods have been coming out in cedar. The guy spots a chance to make at least a little fashion statement, and besides, it's all so thrifty. Half a tree to cook my meal and half a tree to make an abomination. Perfect!

Isaiah sends his mockery down the centuries to us, but the court case is deadly serious. The nations are there, right along with Israel, and the question before everybody is: Who's the *real* God? Who's the God who doesn't need our help?

One trouble with idols is that they don't reveal a whole lot about themselves. For instance, they can't help you much when it comes to naming them. They don't say much. So you've got to go to a website (www.divinenamemaker.com) to get ideas. Want to name your god for a flower or a mineral or a rock star or. . . ?

¹ I want to acknowledge the gracious help of my friend and former pastor John Timmer, who guided the construction of this sermon, and gave me several of its phrases.

Where's the God who calls *us* by name?

Another problem with an idol is that you've got to pack him up when trouble comes. You've got to carry your god, and gods are heavy when it comes to carrying them. Especially some of your more metallic gods.

But who carries *us*? Who carries us in infancy, and then when we're old and weak—who carries us all over again?

In Isaiah's inspired vision, all the people of the earth are assembled and waiting for a finding from the court. Who's the *real* God? Who has spread out the expanse of the heavens and dug the depths of lakes and seas? Who is terrifying in the reach of his majesty, but also tender—so tender as he takes blind people by the hand and leads them along roads they do not know?

The guy in the cartoon puffs away at his pipe after breakfast while he also creates his god. But who has created *us*? Who imagined all the peoples on earth and then breathed warmth and humor and wisdom into them? Who formed a particular people to be a witness among the nations, a light to them, an agent of justice for them?

Who's a God like *that*?

Israel is in court to answer this very question, but she's not in any shape to testify. Witnesses are supposed to have sharp eyes and keen ears. You want an eyewitness who can actually see God's justice and not get it mixed up with revenge. You want an ear witness who can actually hear the compassion in God's voice, and not get it mixed up with sentimentality.

Witnesses are supposed to be sharp. But Israel has blinded herself by her sin and deafened herself by her iniquity. That's how sin works, you know. It dulls everything in us. Turn your back on God often enough and pretty soon you are blind to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Crank up the megabass in your car stereo and blow the birds out of the trees, and pretty soon you can't hear the still small voice of one who speaks to you with the enthusiasm of a lover.

Israel's in no shape to testify on the biggest question of all. She's too deaf. She's too blind. She's too depressed! Here she is, trapped in Babylon. Back home her cities are ghost towns. Here in Babylon she's as homeless as Cain. She's camped out along the rivers of Babylon, weeping over her bondage, her homelessness, her terrible vulnerability to Babylonian guards who know how to taunt and hurt. "Hey, you with the harp, give us a tune! Hey, Jew, sing us one of your temple songs!"

Israel is supposed to testify for God, but she can't do it. She's too blind. She's too deaf. She's too depressed. And she's *way too defeated*. You can't have a prisoner claim that God has set her free. How credible is that? You can't have a plundered nation testify that she's God's precious gem. Who's going to believe *that* message?

Years ago, I heard of an airline passenger who had drunk too many of those little bottles of liquor they have up there. The guy got noisy and obnoxious, and

the flight attendant tried to get him to pipe down. She then pointed out that Billy Graham was sitting behind him, and that the man surely wouldn't want to make an ass of himself in front of such a prominent preacher. The passenger was astonished. He twisted around, and brayed: "Mr. Graham! I've always wanted to meet you! I went to your rally last year and it changed my life!"

Who's going to testify of God's saving power? Israel lacks credibility. She's blind and deaf and depressed. All of her people are "trapped in holes and hidden in prisons." The sorry truth is that it doesn't look like her God has all that much leverage when it comes to breaking her bondage.

And yet, strangely, remarkably, for some reason God only knows, God still wants Israel to take the stand. The Lord says:

"Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes; who are deaf, yet have ears!" *"You are my witnesses,"* says the Lord. I don't care if you have to be led to the stand. I don't care if every question has to be shouted into your ears. I don't care that you're in jail and that your testimony about my liberating power is going to sound like horse hockey. I signed a covenant with you. I'm stuck with you. You're all I've got. I am God. Take the stand and tell them so.

And then, to prime the pump, God turns to Israel, and gives her something good to say, something good to testify about. I'm the Lord! God says. Despite appearances, I *am* your redeemer. I saved you before, and I'm going to do it again. I once made a path for you through the sea; now I'm going to make a path for you through the desert. I once led you to a spring; now I'm going to make whole rivers flow for you. I once did an Exodus; now I'm going to do a bigger one. *For your sake, I will send to Babylon and break down all the prison bars.*

How? The answer is as exotic as anything in Scripture. For Israel's sake God is going to send King Cyrus, the Persian! Cyrus the anointed Gentile. Cyrus, a messiah to represent the nations. If Israel is a blessing to the nations, Cyrus is a blessing to Israel—and all because God is always out to save, always out to bless. Ever the master of irony, God anoints a savior who thinks God is a myth.

"For your sake, I will send to Babylon and break down the prison doors." For your sake. You've poked yourself in the eye, and now you're blind. You've listened to lies, and now you're deaf. You are so sick of me that even now, when you're trapped by your own sin, you haven't prayed to me. You haven't offered to me. You haven't honored me. You haven't satisfied me.

You haven't, you haven't, you haven't, *you have not.* And yet, for your sake, I will send Cyrus to break you out of jail.

For your sake.

You know, said Aristotle, we don't have compassion on people who have wrecked their own lives. They've made their own bed, they'll have to lie in it, and frankly we're not going to care.

How comforting to know that God skips around when reading Aristotle.

I'll do it for your sake, says the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, we know all about this, don't we? Love somebody enough, and it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that they've trapped themselves. Doesn't matter that their misery is owed to their sin. It doesn't even matter that they're sick and tired of you. You love them. You care about them. So, you do what you can. Maybe you look for professional help. Somebody like Cyrus. Somebody to set your beloved free.

For your sake I will do it says God.

That's who I am. I'm the one who blots out your transgressions. I blot out your sins so completely *I can't even remember them*. "I blot out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."

For your sake, but also "for my own sake."

Who wants to look at her child's sin all the time? If Israel gets depressed over her predicament, how do you think God feels? For my sake, says the Lord, I'm going to forgive it. Your sin stinks to high heaven, and I'm going to take it out. It's just good housekeeping. Once a week God takes out Israel's garbage.

I think we understand. Israel has suffered over her sin, and that's bad enough. Worse that God has had to endure it. As Abraham Heschel says, "Israel's suffering is God's grief." God had sentenced Israel to hard labor, and has been grieving about it, and now God just wants the exile to be over. "For my sake."

God is like the father of the prodigal son. Doesn't matter that his son trapped himself. Doesn't matter that his son was sick and tired of him. What matters is that he is headed home. His father will forgive anything if only he can have his boy in his arms again.

"For my sake. . . ." But maybe it's deeper even than *that*. God is out for glory, and it sounds, let us say, indelicate of him. "Forget about those cartoon gods," he says, "and look at me! I know I should let other lips praise me, but they're not, so, if you don't mind my saying so, I'm actually the greatest. I'm the best. No God like me."

Here's a place where you'd like to hear the prophet's own tone of voice as he pleads with Israel for God. "Listen to me, O Jacob. Listen to me, O Israel. I'm your last chance. I'm the only one who can save you, and I will not yield. I will not yield glory to others because they won't come through, and if they get glory and draw you to them it's going to be a cruel joke, and everybody is going to lose."

"You are my witness," says God. You have got to understand who I am, and what I do, and how I save. You are my witness to the nations. You have got to be an agent of justice, a model of justice, a witness to justice. There's no justice, no harmony, no delight, no shalom unless I break you out of Babylon as a witness to the nations that I will *never give up*. I will never give up till that day when the peoples of the earth stream through the twelve gates of the city—nations who had once battled, clans who had once feuded, tribes who had once grappled with each other in a nightmare of resentment that seemingly could not end.

One day, they will march together into the city of God. People from every tribe and language and nation, all marching by the light of God.

Brothers and sisters, God is always out to save. Israel's rebelliousness turns out to be a means of grace because God sticks with her, and saves her, and brings Cyrus in to do it. Israel's exile becomes a means for God to restore her credibility as a witness. Just as in Romans 9 through 11, Israel's no to God becomes God's yes to the world.

In Babylon, God suffers to save, joining with his people, getting into union with them, one day becoming one with them in a love so fierce, a commitment so enduring, that this very night our own flesh is in heaven.

Who is all this for? Is it for our sake? For God's sake? For Jesus' sake? Maybe for the sake of the whole wide world?

I think we know. I think we know.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.



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