

A Surprising Shepherd

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Date: 14 February 1999

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on 14th of February 1999.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled A Surprising Shepherd and is from Isaiah chapter 44 verse 24 through to chapter 45 verse 8.

Turn to page 588 in the Bibles to this passage from Isaiah chapters 44 and 45.

I'll tell you that Melbourne's weather is full of surprises. Thursday night the wise men, diviners and those with omens told us with great confidence that Friday would be fine and hot.

And all those like me who turned up to the MCG to watch the cricket believed them and they were wrong and we were wrong. Don't know why the newspaper the next day doesn't always carry a headline, we were wrong, the temperature was.

[1 : 15] But anyway, now Melbourne's weather, despite all the attention we give it and all the conversations we have about it, is I suppose in the end a bit trivial. God though is full of surprises.

And all the omens, diviners, the wise men, those who sought patterns in the world, like those weather forecasters on Thursday night, predicted a particular course of action.

The end of God's people, Judah, their death, demise in Babylon in exile and Jerusalem would remain unbuilt. And all the charts and all the charts and the handbooks and the star signs and the prognostications all pointed towards that.

An end to God's people in Babylon. And for many of the Jews in Babylon, the same sort of thinking. It's the end.

Despair. God's gone. Defeated. Abandoned us. Even for those Jews who had hope that they would return to Jerusalem and would see it rebuilt, believed that the one who'd bring that about would be himself a Jew, descended from David, a kingly figure.

[2 : 35] After all, there were indications even in the earlier chapters of Isaiah, if you can think back that far, to that sort of thing happening. Well, like Melbourne's weather, except in a much more serious way, God is a God of surprises.

And today's passage is one of the most surprising, perhaps in the Bible, as we shall see. God has been promising salvation. He has been promising a return to Jerusalem.

But now he speaks about the means by which he will accomplish that promise. And this is what is surprising. Now, God prepares the way for making that surprise by saying in verse 24 of chapter 44, the beginning of today's passage, that he is completely free to do what he wants.

So, verse 24 says, Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb, I am the Lord. Literally, I am Yahweh is the name for the Lord here.

And when this name, this same expression, was given to Moses back in the book of Exodus, before Moses was the agent of Israel's redemption from Egypt, the interpretation on the name is, I will be who I will be.

[3 : 56] I am who I am. I'm not controlled by any outside force. I am completely sovereign and free to do as I wish.

And that's the thrust of it here. Another promise of redemption coming up, just like with Moses hundreds of years before. But the basis on which God is going to act and bring his surprise is that he is a sovereign, free God.

He can do what he wants. He goes on in verse 24 to say, He is the God who made all things.

That's something we take for granted, surely, that God's the creator of all things. But the point of the argument here is this. If God's going to call his surprise from an unexpected source, it is based on the fact that he's the creator of all things.

That is all these unexpected sources are all under his domain and dominion. So what he's going to do is perfectly within his rights, perfectly within his sovereignty.

[5 : 03] He's not just a domestic deity of Israel, but he is the sovereign Lord of the world and the universe. And therefore, when he calls up a surprising source by which he's going to save his people, it's just part of his creation that he controls anyway.

I am the Lord who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth. He doesn't need a helper.

He hasn't used a helper. His power is not limited by the assistance of some other God or deity. He is sovereign and he is free.

He is absolute in his power. Babylon, which is where the people of God, the nation of Israel, was in exile, was a place notorious for its superstitions, its diviners, those who had charts and handbooks and omens to try and predict the future, not only to predict the weather for their next cricket match, but to predict the future destiny of the nation, of the king, of groups of peoples within the nation and so on.

Some of those have been found by archaeologists. They did every sort of practice that, the ancient equivalent of reading tea leaves and so on. A life full of superstitions thinking that some magical effect would come about if a particular course of action was followed.

[6 : 31] They were certainly keen on astrology and they believed in a fatalism that, in a sense, the universe has already got its destiny and it's our job to try and track it down, to try and find the clues to understand what the next step was.

Sound familiar? It's just like today, isn't it? Our world's full of people like that. Full of people who go hurrying after horoscopes to try and find out whether this is a good day to do a particular course of action or whether they should just stay inside.

People who believe that just because they were born at a certain time or day, then that sealed their destiny as a person, as their personality and all those sorts of things. People who are full of superstitions.

People who are full of trying to find out the future in all sorts of mystical, magical, new age ways. Our modern world's surprisingly similar to ancient Babylon in that respect.

But God's word to those people is quite damning as it is today. God is the one in verse 25 who frustrates the omens of liars.

[7 : 46] Oh, maybe they'll predict something that's right occasionally, but that'll be a fluke. They are basically liars and God is sovereign and he'll frustrate them.

And he makes fools of diviners. They think they can predict the future and say what's going to happen. They can't and God will make a fool of them. He turns back the wise and makes their knowledge foolish.

All the so-called wise men of Babylon fools because God is sovereign. God is free. He can do what he likes.

He's not bound by particular patterns in the stars, in the weather or in society. Is that where we find God's will?

Of course not. If that's where you search for your destiny to find out whether today's a day you should go out or not, then repent of that.

[8 : 47] Stop it. Don't do it again. Tear up your horoscopes or your tarot cards or whatever it is. They are at best deceptive at worst evil and one day God will expose if it's you to your humiliation its folly.

But in contrast God's word the Bible scripture God speaking through his servants the prophets his messengers the prophets in times of old that is where we find out God's purpose the future.

It won't tell us whether to get up today or not God gives us a bit more responsibility than that but rather it will tell us about God and his purposes for this world.

So he says in verse 26 God is the one not only who frustrates all these diviners but the one who confirms the words of his servant the prophets that is.

Isn't it astonishing that God would confirm one of his servants' word? But you see the servant's word in the first place is God's word. It is God in a sense confirming his own words spoken through a servant through a prophet.

[10 : 04] Look back to the beginning of today's passage verse 24 Isaiah speaking says thus says the Lord that is it is Isaiah's word but it is more fundamentally God's word.

God's prophets you see speak God's word and do so reliably and that is where we're to turn. That is where we find God's purpose. That is where we find destiny for this world.

Not in any of the omens and prognostications of Babylon's wise fools. If we seek to find something about human destiny and God's purpose we need look no further than the Bible.

Now God makes clear here precisely the point of which he's talking about. The second line of verse 26 says and he fulfills the prediction of his messengers.

Again the prophets are being spoken about here. God speaks in advance of the event and then confirms what he's spoken by fulfilling the event and only a sovereign God can do that.

[11 : 14] If God were limited in any way then his predictions would eventually come unstuck. But it is only because God is sovereign over all things without exception that what God predicts will happen will happen.

now comes the statement of what God is predicting here. The end of verse 26 God will rebuild Jerusalem.

He'll re-inhabit it. The people will return to it. A great promise of salvation and certainly some years after these words were first spoken by Isaiah it came true.

But now comes the surprise because rebuilding Jerusalem is not that great a surprise but the surprise even the scandal of this prediction is in verse 28 who says of Cyrus he is my shepherd.

Cyrus was a Persian pagan. That's the scandal that God could call a Persian pagan his shepherd.

[12 : 24] A title usually reserved for the Davidic king a Jewish king is being applied here to a Persian pagan. Now we know that the hearers of these words of Isaiah took offense at this.

In the next chapter verse 9 onwards which we won't look at today they object to this course of action by God. How can God choose a Persian pagan to be his shepherd and even in verse 1 of the next chapter to be his anointed which literally means Messiah because the shepherd the Messiah that's been promised surely must be Davidic and Jewish.

God has prepared the way for this scandal you see. He's the creator of all things. He can do what he likes. That's the point of the argument leading up to verse 28.

It's not beyond the realms of God's dominion to even choose a pagan to fulfil his purpose and promise. Now there are some implications I think here for how we think about God.

The first is this. It is rare in the Bible to name the name of a person in advance of that person coming. Jesus is never named by the name Jesus though he is called Emmanuel in Isaiah 7.

[13 : 45] Apart from Josiah in 1 Kings 13 I think this is the only time when a name is given to a person well in advance of them actually coming on the stage of history.

Now many sceptics and scholars who are sceptics think that obviously this is written after the event. I mean how could Isaiah predict Cyrus 150 years before him?

So somebody later on has put his name in and inserted it and so on. Now I think we need to beware that future because he is sovereign over all things.

So we shouldn't just dismiss the possibility that this is right. But more than that the actual argument of Isaiah depends upon this being Isaiah's word well before the event because he's saying God is qualitatively different from all the other gods precisely at the point that he can predict the future.

And so predicting the name of Cyrus 150 years before he came on is the evidence for God's sovereignty later on. So that the people when Cyrus does appear and they pick up their Isaiah and they say here hang on this was predicted 150 years before they're meant to see that God is sovereign and meant to turn back to him with faith.

[15 : 09] If it's after the event the argument just collapses in a heap. That's the first thing. Don't dismiss the power of God's prediction. He is sovereign.

He can even choose Cyrus by name before his life begins. But secondly and on a different tack sometimes in Christian counselling and psychology or even just in Christian encouragement.

Somebody may say something like unless you get that bit of your life right God can't use you. I've had a counsellor say that to me a few years ago and I've heard counsellors say it of others.

You've got to get this bit of your life right. Repent of this problem or sort out this confusion before God is able to take you on. That's wrong.

God is free to do what he wants. He's not thwarted by our sin or confusion or unwillingness. Moreover he's not even thwarted by a pagan who doesn't even acknowledge him to be God.

[16 : 21] You see he uses Cyrus here who doesn't even know him. Cyrus isn't a Christian or a Jew. He doesn't even come to Jewish faith in the Old Testament. But God still uses him.

You see God's sovereign is bigger than your own sin or my sin, your confusion, your unwillingness, your Christian immaturity. God can do what he likes. He's not bound by us.

If God is unable to act until we do something then he is not God. Third point. If God can use a pagan ruler, Cyrus, he surely can do so today.

Could it be that God has kept Saddam Hussein in power for a particular purpose of his, for the sake of the gospel?

Could it be that God has actually brought about the situation of Hong Kong being given over to China for the sake of the gospel so that there's a strong Hong Kong church that can be of mutual encouragement to mainland Chinese church?

[17 : 36] Could it be that God has orchestrated the sins and calamities of Bill Clinton precisely for his gospel purpose? Could it be that God has raised up pagan King Hussein to be a model of peace in the Middle East?

They're questions not asked this. I'm not saying that God merely brings good out of evil. I'm saying that God may use pagan rulers precisely to bring about his purpose.

That's often hard to detect. It's hard to detect why God keeps Saddam Hussein in power. But the point is this. Not the answers why but the point is that God's sovereign.

God's in control. God uses even pagan peoples and empires and kings and rulers for the sake of his own purpose. So this passage ought to encourage us as we look around the world and we see so much of it dominated and ruled by pagans who do not acknowledge God to have confidence in God.

He is sovereign. He is in control. We may not understand why this particular ruler does this or why this particular country does this. It may look to be harmful and evil but God is bringing about the fulfilment of his purposes in history even through pagan rulers and peoples.

[19 : 03] It ought to be an encouragement to us to pray for pagan rulers in the world that God will through them. But fourthly as well an implication of this just because God uses Cyrus does not mean he approves of him.

God disapproves of idolaters and Cyrus surely was one. Just because God uses any pagan or indeed any Christian does not mean that he condones their particular life at that point.

Cyrus won't be in heaven because he was used by God. If he's there which I doubt then he would be there because he had faith in the God of the Bible.

Now reading history is a tricky thing. I remember when I first was at school and started learning history which I loved because I loved names and facts and places and dates and things.

I remember being taught that the crusaders were great heroes back in the 1100s and 1200s but now I see them as an unmitigated disaster.

[20 : 24] The hostility of the Muslims to Christianity today stems from that time when those stupid crusaders thought that it was in God's purpose for them to reclaim Jerusalem from the Arabs.

Reading history is a tricky business. What's going on in history? Who are the heroes? Who are the baddies? All sorts of different points of views, all sorts of different interpretations.

What about Cyrus? Cyrus was a Persian as I've said. He was the king of Elam round about modern day Iran. In 550 BC he conquered Persia and the Medes.

11 years later 539 he conquered Babylon. Somewhat unexpectedly I think.

And the very next year issued a decree to allow the conquered peoples of the Babylonians to return to their homelands. Whether that's to go back to modern day Turkey or Egypt or Palestine or Jerusalem even didn't matter.

[21 : 32] that was his edict of the very next year and that was because it was a diplomatically wise thing to do in his eyes. You keep your conquered peoples happy by leaving them in their homeland and treating them benevolently and then they'll be loyal subjects to the empire.

that was his diplomacy. Last century a cylinder of stone was found inscribed with Cyrus' words about himself and his achievements.

If you can read ancient whatever it is you could read it for yourself in the British Museum. But because we haven't time to go over there now and translate and come back I'll read a book and book it is a book book and I well disposed entered Babylon I set up the seat of dominion in the royal palace amidst jubilation and rejoicing.

Marduk the great god caused the big hearted inhabitants of Babylon to honor me. And then he goes on to say that to the cities and he lists various cities of this empire all sorts of places most of which I've never heard of.

And then finishes by saying, to the cities beyond the Tigris whose sanctuaries had been in ruins over a long period, the gods whose abode is in the midst of them, I returned to their places and housed them in lasting abodes.

[23 : 35] I gathered together all their inhabitants and restored to them their dwellings. May all the gods whom I have placed within their sanctuaries address a daily prayer in my favour, that my days may be long.

Cyrus there is boasting about his achievements, conquering Babylon and allowing the gods of the different nations to go back to their sanctuaries and the peoples to go back to those sanctuaries as well.

He's boasting about his own diplomacy, skill and military prowess. And certainly it happened in the book of Ezra Ezra chapter 1, we read Cyrus' decree and the people return.

How do we interpret King Cyrus? How do we interpret those events? Is it the triumph of the god Marduk? Is it the skill, power and ingenuity of King Cyrus of Persia?

Well, as we've seen 150 years before Cyrus came on the scene, Isaiah predicted him. 200 years nearly before he came on the scene.

[24 : 51] And in verse 28 of the end of chapter 44, God says of Cyrus, Cyrus was boasting that he carried out his own purpose, his own victory, his own skill.

God says otherwise. Part of that purpose is to rebuild Jerusalem, the end of verse 28 says. And certainly Cyrus allowed the Jews to return there with their temple vessels and to rebuild the temple.

But God is saying that's his purpose, not Cyrus'. Cyrus was doing it because it seemed a diplomatically wise thing to do. God is saying Cyrus did it because it's what God wanted to happen.

In verse 1 we're told that God held Cyrus by his right hand. That is an arm of power and might in order that he might subdue nations and strip kings of their robes.

Certainly Cyrus had conquered various nations and kings including great Babylon. Cyrus boasted it was his strength. God says otherwise.

[26 : 06] It was God's right hand. At the end of verse 1 God says that it was his power to open doors before Cyrus and the gates shall not be closed.

Cyrus thought it was his own ability to storm these towns and cities. God says otherwise. God says in verse 2 that it was he who went before Cyrus and levelled the mountains and made it easy for Cyrus to win.

It was he who broke in pieces the famous Babylonian doors of bronze of which there are reputed to be a hundred guarding the city. Cyrus thought he'd done it. God says otherwise.

It's God who gave Cyrus the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places. That is in the treasury vaults of the Babylonian temples where all the gods and idols of the conquered nations has been gathered into a treasury including the temple vessels from Jerusalem.

It's God who gave them to Cyrus. Not Cyrus who took them for himself. Those verses say I, I, I do this.

[27 : 10] God speaking. I have done this. It is God at the end of verse 3 who calls Cyrus by name. It is God at the end of verse 4 who gives him a surname.

That is a title. The title of the anointed one. The Messiah or the shepherd. It's God's title. It's God's power. Cyrus is merely God's pawn.

So what then is the truth of what's happening here with Cyrus? Why does God act this way in such a scandalous and surprising way to bring about his purpose?

He does it for three reasons. Firstly in verse 3 so that you may know that Cyrus may know that I am the Lord. Not so much a statement that Cyrus would come to faith although that would be a corollary of it but rather that Cyrus would see that it is God's hand at work in the world.

That he ever did that is hard to see. But that was one of God's purposes for choosing Cyrus. Cyrus' own benefit. Certainly Cyrus didn't have faith in God.

[28 : 19] The end of verse 4 and verse 5 it says though you do not know me you don't have a relationship with me you're not one of my people. Cyrus continued to ignore that this was God's hand.

The second purpose is in verse 4 beginning for the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen. That is for God's people's sake God has chosen Cyrus.

Now I think here two things not just for the sake of his people so that they could go to Jerusalem but he's saying the reason for choosing Cyrus as the means of doing this is also for my people's sake.

That is God could have done it another way that wasn't quite so surprising or scandalous but God has chosen a surprising way so that they will see that it's God at work. They will see the sovereignty of God at work.

All that accumulation of power and nations that Cyrus had done over the recent years all of it was for the sake of Israel. when Cyrus probably in his deathbed reflected back on a long life and the power that he'd led interviewed by whatever his name is Mike Munro or whatever of the current affair what's your most significant achievement in life King Cyrus?

[29 : 32] He'd probably say something like defeating Babylon but ask God what is his most significant achievement it's probably one that Cyrus would not even really know about allowing the Jews to go to Jerusalem.

Cyrus had allowed all the nations to go back and Jerusalem and Palestine was just inconsequential. He may not even have known about them much but that's the most significant thing for the sake of God's people.

But there's even a bigger purpose at mind as well. Verse 6 So that purpose they the world may know. God is acting through Cyrus for the benefit of his people but for the sake of the whole world that they will see that it is God who is sovereign over this world.

Cyrus boasted pomp and show is really nothing. It is God's glory that has brought this about. The man marveled at by the ancient world is just a pawn in God's purposes.

Without even knowing it Cyrus fulfilled this 150 year prediction. Such a surprising prediction such a surprising fulfilment all of it pointing to the fact that God is absolutely sovereign.

[30 : 56] He controls history for his own purposes his own good purposes and for the sake of his people even if they can't detect it at the time. This is the sovereign Lord at work.

The one who verse 7 says forms light and creates darkness makes will and creates woe. Not just the one who brings good out of woe but the one who creates it all who makes it all who orchestrates it all who is sovereign over all.

I the Lord do all these things. These words of chapter 45 look to be addressed to Cyrus verse 1 but it's actually really addressed for the benefit of Israel.

It's surprising it's shocking but it's also comforting because the God who has promised them salvation is the God who is sovereign over everything without fail.

If he was only their domestic deity the promise of salvation is not worth placing hope in because there will be a bigger God somewhere else.

[32 : 05] If the God who has promised you forgiveness of sins and you an eternal future in the glorious and perfect heaven is only just one amongst many gods then his promise is worth nothing.

But it is precisely because God is sovereign over everything that his promise of salvation and forgiveness and an eternal destiny in heaven is worth counting your life upon.

It's sure. It's certain. Because God is sovereign over every single thing. The exile in Babylon was only half of Israel's problem.

Cyrus was only going to solve the exile problem. The other problem as we've seen in recent weeks is that Israel still remained a sinful people. And a bit later on as we'll see in a few weeks another servant is called forth by God.

A greater servant than even Cyrus. One whose prediction took 750 years to fulfil not just 150. One who was anointed as well.

[33 : 18] The anointed one. The Messiah. The Christ. For that's what that word means. And he was a servant no less scandalous than Cyrus.

But we'll see more about him in a few weeks' time. Let's pray. Our God we thank you that you are sovereign over all things in this world today.

It's so easy to look around and think you're absent inactive and yet though we do not understand why things happen always we have confidence that you are in control bringing about your good purposes for your people and for the sake of your glory in this world.

Our Father we pray that you'll strengthen our faith in your sovereign power. Help us to pray for and work in this world for your good purposes for the bringing of everything together under Christ the head and to his praise and glory.

Amen.