

Cyrus—The Heathen King God Chose • Isaiah 44:28-45:1

Do God’s purposes for a nation depend on having Christian politicians leading that nation? Suppose you had a choice between two candidates, one a Christian and the other an atheist. Who would get your vote?

During the early years of the United States many of the most famous political leaders were “deists”. Deists believed in the existence of God but rejected formal religions and denied supernatural involvement in human events. They thought that God started the world but abandoned it shortly thereafter. Deists were not Christians—far from it. Counted among the most famous deists were Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

Many Americans believe that God used those early politicians to accomplish wonderful Christian values in this country even though they themselves were not believers. If this is true, it would not have been the first time.

One of the greatest politicians in human history was a heathen through and through. Yet it is amazing what God called him and how God used him. But first, let me tell you about the plight of God’s people at that time.

It was the 6th century BC. The Hebrew people had been chosen by God and blessed by God but they turned their backs on him. God had told them to have no other gods and they imported religions and idols by the caseload. God told them to take off a Sabbath day every week and they worked around the calendar. God told them never to intermarry with unbelievers and they intermarried with hundreds of thousands of them.

God sent prophets. God gave warnings. God waited patiently for years and years. God finally said that their sin and rebellion had to stop. And God took a “tough love” stand that included military defeat, destruction of their capital and the end of their government.

God’s instrument for discipline was the na-

tion of Babylon under the rule of a king named Nebuchadnezzar. In 587 BC the Babylonian army captured Jerusalem, slaughtered thousands of people, destroyed the temple, stole the treasury and deported most of the population over 500 miles to Babylon (what today we call Iraq). It was a dark and desperate time for the Hebrew people. They lost everything. They were impoverished and enslaved. There appeared to be little or no hope.

Why did this happen? Who was responsible? You could say that the Babylonians were responsible because they did it. You could say the Hebrew people were responsible because they brought it on themselves. You could say that God was responsible because he arranged for it to happen. And all three answers would be correct. The account of this is recorded in II Chronicles 36:15-20:

The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed

their young men with a sword in the sanctuary, and spared neither young man nor young woman, old man or aged. God handed all of them over to Nebuchadnezzar. He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of

God, both large and small, and the treasures of the Lord’s temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. They set fire to God’s temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there.

God continually calls leaders to be good and to do good. He wants us to vote and behave righteously and responsibly.

He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power.

God gave them an amazing promise to get them through the years of captivity in Babylon. It is one of the most stunning statements in the Bible. You can read it for yourself in Isaiah 44:28. (But first understand that Isaiah lived in the 7th and 8th centuries BC. He died in 680 BC under the rule of King Manasseh of Judea. That means that the latest date for what we are going to read is 680 BC. That was nearly 100 years before the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. Yet Isaiah 44:28 says,) “. . . Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid.” ’ ”

Cyrus? Who is Cyrus? He was not born for another hundred years! Yet God’s prophet calls him by name and says he will be the one whom God sends to repatriate the Hebrew people out of Iraq and back to Jerusalem. Truly amazing! But it gets more amazing!

Cyrus was never a Jew and never a Christian. He was probably a Zoroastrian who worshipped the god Ahura-Mazda (although ancient documents also report his following of the Babylonian god Marduk). Yet Isaiah 45:5 predicts that God will strengthen Cyrus even though Cyrus will never acknowledge the true God.

God predicted that Cyrus would come and promised that Cyrus would order the return of the Jews and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

It goes even further. Isaiah 45:1 quotes God saying, “This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of” God calls Cyrus his “anointed”. The Hebrew word for anointed is “messiah” and the Greek word is “christ”. This is not to say that the heathen king Cyrus was on a par with Jesus. But it does say that Cyrus was chosen to fulfill God’s plans just as surely as Jesus was chosen to fulfill God’s other plans.

Did Cyrus ever know about this? We’re not sure but there are some hints that maybe he

was aware of this Jewish prophecy and knew that he was named in the Bible before he was born.

But what actually happened? Cyrus was born to a royal Persian family and became the king of a comparatively small kingdom. He began conquests that continually expanded his domain. One of the most significant was the addition of the Median Empire in 550 BC.

He was unlike other ancient conquerors. He was amazingly respectful to those whom he conquered. In the case of the Medes he added them to his kingdom and it became known as the kingdom of the “Medes and Persians”.

He kept conquering. To the north and the west he penetrated Asia Minor (what is now the country of Turkey) and started collecting Greek cities. To the east he expanded his kingdom all the way to India. He was the first non-Semitic emperor of the Middle East. His conquests lasted for hundreds of years until the advances of Alexander the Great.

One of the greatest of all his achievements was the conquest of Babylon. His army marched on the city and took it without bloodshed. He presented himself to the people as a liberator and they cheered for him.

Here’s what Cyrus said about himself:

“I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, legitimate king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four rims (of the earth), son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, of a family (which) always (exercised) kingship.”

That sounds rather arrogant and egotistical, except it was pretty much true. He established one of the largest empires in history and it lasted for generations after him. He instituted massive reforms, improved irrigation and agriculture, established provincial governments, set slaves free and largely won the hearts and loyalty of all his subjects.

Unlike other kingdoms that removed the conquered from their homelands, Cyrus kept them there or returned them again. Usually he allowed the people to take back their old idols and re-establish their old religions.

When he conquered Babylon in 539 BC

he took control over the Hebrew people and the former land of Israel. Almost immediately he issued orders to rebuild Jerusalem, ordered that the thousands of gold and silver vessels taken from the temple be returned and arranged financing for all the rebuilding he authorized.

There are actually a number of records of what happened, both in the Bible and in Persian histories. One of those biblical records is found in Ezra 1:1-4:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

“ ‘ The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’ ”

So what is the significance of all this information? If you’re a history buff, it may be interesting. If you don’t like history, it’s probably boring. Either way you may think it is totally irrelevant. But the truth is that this is very relevant to today and to the direction of every one of our personal lives.

Let’s look at elections first. Romans 13:1 says, “. . . there is no authority except that which

God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” In other words, God has the ultimate political control and all politicians and all government actions are under his final authority.

That raises a thousand questions. Does that mean that it makes no difference who is elected? Does God approve of everything the government does? Were the Nazi death camps and the ethnic cleansings in Bosnia ordered by God?

The answers are not simple or easy.

The truth is that God gives us liberty to do good or to do evil. That liberty allows us to elect good governments and bad. That liberty allows leaders to be righteous or wicked. God, however, places limits and God retains ultimate authority. God also uses even evil leaders, unfair laws and wicked people to accomplish his greater purposes and good.

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God does this over a period of time that often does not fit our liking or our schedule. It must have seemed eternally long for those who were captured and carried off to Babylon — and then Cyrus didn’t show up until the next generation.

God continually calls leaders to be good and to do good.

He wants us to vote and behave righteously and responsibly.

Just never let us forget that God is in charge. He can and will accomplish his purposes. He has a plan that is laid out hundreds of years in advance.

Practically that means that prayer is far more important than politics. It means that our final faith must always be in God. It means that God can use any party, any politician or any person to get good done, even if the people involved don’t realize what God is doing.

The same is true for our personal lives.

Wherever the issues of life center — at school, on the job, in the marriage, with parents or friends or neighbors. God has the final authority. God knows what is going on. God has a plan. God is more important to the outcome of our lives than the person we marry, the boss who hires and fires, the teacher who grades, the doctor who diagnoses or the judge who passes a verdict or sentence.

As Christians we are convinced that all of those things are in the hands of God. As Christians we do not lay our plans, assume we have the final responsibility and then ask God to come along as some sort of “good luck” charm to help us out with a little extra push. God is God! He is a thousand times more important than any one or anything else in our lives.

Faith is the belief that all of this is reality. Faith is the conviction that God knows best. Faith is the conviction that God knows everything. Faith is the conviction that God does what is right. Faith is the belief that we can trust God with absolutely anything.

Ultimately, it comes down to me personally—and to you. Can I believe all of this about God? Can you believe God? If the answer is yes, what is most important for you to entrust to him today? Is it the outcome of political elections? Is it the health of your baby? Is it the behavior of your children? Is it a very important project at work? Is it a report from the doctor? Is it the forgiveness of your sins? Is it the direction of your life?

I invite you to trust God with everything. Trust God that he can use even the bad guys for good and even the worst of situations to accomplish his best. Trust him — and you will not be disappointed!

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