

ISA 44:28-45:7—CYRUS, THE ELECTION, AND GOD’S KINGDOM

INTRO: We recently passed through one of the most momentous elections in American history. A lot of families and friends have a rule that “we should not talk about politics or religion.” Do any of you have families or friends where that is at least an unwritten rule? This is a church and I am preaching, so I think I have the “religion” part covered. As to the politics part, there is a saying—not in the Bible—that “fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” So, at the risk of playing the fool, let me try to bring both the Bible and the election together.

Many people are happy about the results of the election, many are depressed, many are apprehensive. Some people think we have finally come to our senses whereas others think that America has lost its mind. Some have hope and see a bright future while others see our nation as doomed. Personally, I’m glad I was in East Africa for 3 weeks and only got home shortly before the election, so I was largely spared the nonstop campaigning, polls, and election-related news.

This election—perhaps more than most—has brought to the surface a profound theological issue, namely, where is God in all this? Many people would say that God is neither a Republican nor a Democrat and he doesn’t really care who wins or loses elections. On the other hand, some think the outcome means that God really is for Trump.

I think both the “God doesn’t care” and the “God obviously supports Trump because he won” positions are too simplistic. While the Bible does not speak directly about the US or this election, there is a fascinating biblical example that in many ways is analogous to the situation we are now in. **Isa 44:28-45:7** is a prophecy about Cyrus, the king of Persia. And this passage points us, I believe, to what God is doing today and even gives a hint as to why he may be doing it.

READ Isa 44:28-45:7

PROP: God uses anyone he wants to accomplish his ends. Both the “anyone he wants” and the “his ends” parts of that equation are important. We will see that as we consider three important matters:

O/S: (1) God is sovereign over everything and everyone; (2) What is most important to God is not necessarily what is most important to us; and (3) We’ll see how this relates to the election and to us.

First a little background about Cyrus and a comparison with president-elect Trump. Cyrus was the leader of the Persian Empire. The Persian Empire was the largest empire in the world, stretching from Eastern Europe to India. Like the US, Persia was the most powerful empire in the world. Before Cyrus became the king, Israel had been destroyed by the Babylonian Empire and the people deported to Babylon. Then Cyrus defeated and took over Babylon. Today’s passage is largely God saying to Cyrus, “I raised you up primarily in order that you would issue a decree to permit my people Israel to leave their captivity in Babylon, return to Jerusalem, and rebuild the temple.”

Cyrus was not a Jew but worshipped the gods of the Persian Empire. As a pagan from Persia, Cyrus was, in many respects, the ultimate outsider. Nevertheless, in **Isa 44:28** God calls him “My Shepherd,” and in **45:1** Cyrus is called “God’s Anointed.” This makes him unique, because Cyrus is the only non-Jew called God’s Anointed in the Bible. The Hebrew word for “anointed” is *Meschiach*, which is usually translated “Messiah.”

No analogy is perfect. Donald Trump is not the messiah. But like Cyrus, so far as I know Trump is not a Christian or a Jew. As I mentioned, Cyrus was a unique figure in the Bible, but you may not realize how unique Trump is in our history. Trump is the only person to be elected president who never was a general or served in any public office or even run for public office. And when he began his campaign, virtually no one gave him any chance of even getting the nomination. And even the day of the election most pundits were predicting a landslide victory for Hillary. So what Trump has done is really unprecedented. Trump, like Cyrus, is an outsider.

With this background, let’s look at our passage and how it relates to our situation.

I. God is sovereign over everything and everyone

God repeatedly declares his sovereignty over everything throughout this passage: **44:28 [READ a, b]; 45:1 (“Thus says, I have taken”); 45:2-3 (“I will”); 45:7.** This passage is showing us that God is actively at work in our world, including being involved in, guiding and orchestrating even political, military, and economic events. God is not just limited to “religious” or “spiritual” matters—He is the God over all of life.

God is also sovereign over everyone. Notice **45:4-5 (“I have also called . . . not known Me”;** **“I will gird you, though you have not known Me”**). It doesn’t matter whether you are a Christian, an atheist, or

anything else: God exists and, as with Cyrus, he has a claim on your life whether you know him or not.

God's declarations of his sovereignty in this passage are not just bare words. We know this because Cyrus was the king of the Persia from 560-530BC. That's important because Isaiah lived and prophesied from about 740-680BC. IOW, Isaiah wrote today's prophecy more than 100 years before Cyrus was even born, more than 100 years before Israel was taken into exile in Babylon, and 150 years or so before Cyrus became king. In fact, the ancient historian Josephus in his book *The Antiquities of the Jews* reports that Cyrus read this prophecy, and it is that which stirred him up to issue his decree permitting the Jews to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. BTW, Cyrus's actual decree is set forth at the beginning of the book of Ezra.

What does all this mean? This is a specific, historically fulfilled prophecy such as does not exist in any other religion or philosophy. It means, among other things, that God is real. We know that because he is able to declare what will happen in history in advance so that, as it says in **45:6**, "**Men will know that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.**" Further, God knows us. He created us. He has put us where we are, just like he knew, and created, and raised up Cyrus.

All of this raises some profound questions. Let me mention only two such questions which I only have time to lightly touch on: First, does God's sovereignty mean we are nothing but puppets or robots in his hand? Second, does this mean that God really does favor Donald Trump because he raised Trump up?

- As to the issue of whether we are nothing but puppets or robots, the answer to that is "No. We are not puppets or robots." Despite the absoluteness and comprehensiveness of God's sovereignty, God also respects people's integrity *as human beings*. He does not control us as if we were puppets or program us as if we were robots. People are able to think their own thoughts and make real choices. The Bible repeatedly presents a *dual explanation* for events: On the one hand, God is sovereign and has ordained all events; yet, on the other hand, that is compatible with and does not in any way diminish our responsibility for the choices we make and the things we do. IOW, in some way God works in and through His creatures to accomplish His plan.

There is a fascinating example of this earlier in the book of Isaiah, which deals with God raising up the nation of Assyria to accomplish his will. In Isaiah 10:5-7, 12-13 [READ]. What this is saying is that God raised up Assyria for a particular purpose. But the leaders of Assyria had a different motive for what they were doing—IOW, they were God's instruments but were able to think their own thoughts and were not just puppets or robots. They did not recognize the hand of God in raising them up, but were acting only out of their own pride and arrogance and greed. So God said, "When I am finished with you, then I will judge you for your motives and what you have done."

- As to the second question: Does this mean that God really does favor Trump? God has raised him up at this time for his own reasons. But Trump still has the ability to choose what to do and how to do it. Because humans are not puppets or robots, God will hold Trump accountable for the choices he makes and the actions he takes, just as he held the nation of Assyria and its leaders accountable for what they did.
- This may seem like a paradox, and admittedly there is an element of mystery to this interaction between God and human beings that defies our complete understanding. Nevertheless, given the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, God who has a plan for the world and is actualizing His plan, and given creatures who have the ability to make real choices and take real actions for which we are responsible, as I see it, the relationship between God and us that I have been discussing *could not be otherwise*. This leads us to the next important consideration, namely:

II. What is most important to God is not necessarily what is most important to us

In today's passage in Isaiah, we see this most clearly in **Isa 44:28** and **45:4 [READ]**. This is telling us that God raised up Cyrus not primarily for the military and administrative things he did, but primarily for advancing God's kingdom by having Cyrus issue a decree to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

In the OT, God used the nation of Israel as his vehicle for building his kingdom. But the NT repeatedly says that OT Israel and everything about it—Jerusalem, the temple, the priesthood, everything—were simply what are called "types" or "shadows." A type or shadow is a physical thing that in some important way points to Jesus Christ or to spiritual truths that are fulfilled in Christ. That's why Jesus himself said in **John 5**, "**If you believed Moses, you would believe in Me, for he wrote of Me.**" (**John 5:46**) Similarly, after his resurrection, **Luke 24** tells us that Jesus explained to two disciples "**the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures.**" (**Luke 24:25-27**) So, although Jesus is not named by name in the OT, he is present in typological form throughout the OT.

We see this typology in Cyrus himself. For example, God calls Cyrus "My Shepherd." This points to Jesus, since Jesus said of himself, "I am the Good Shepherd." Cyrus is also called "God's Anointed" or

“Messiah.” Jesus, of course, IS God’s Messiah. Just as Cyrus was instrumental in allowing God’s OT people to return to their land, so Jesus is the one who brings God’s people into the ultimate promised land. Just as Cyrus was instrumental in allowing God’s OT people to rebuild their temple, that also finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, since the NT reveals that Jesus is the *true* temple and the tells us that all people who are in Christ ARE the temple. Just as **Isa 45:2** says that God would go before Cyrus and “**make the rough places smooth,**” that also is typological and is a prophecy of Jesus. We know that because that phrase is repeated in **Luke 3:5** concerning John the Baptist and the coming of Jesus. And just as Cyrus was a gentile who acted with favor to the Jews, so Jesus was a Jew who acted with favor to the gentiles. As a result, God’s kingdom—by which I mean people in a loving relationship with Jesus Christ who are living out their new life in Christ by living lives of love with others—God’s kingdom now includes people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation in the entire world.

What this passage is showing us is that, although God is acting in the political, social, and economic realms, God is primarily interested in building *his* kingdom, not our kingdoms. God uses earthly things to bring his plan to fruition. God’s kingdom is infinitely more important than any earthly kingdom because all earthly kingdoms, programs, and policies are temporary and ultimately will fail. God’s rule, his kingdom, and the newness of life Christ brings last forever. Only Christ brings transformation from within, transformation that lasts. Only Christ brings forgiveness of sin. Only Christ gives eternal life. God is always looking to the heart—in Christ we receive new hearts. Only when we enter God’s kingdom through Jesus Christ will we begin to achieve the fulfillment and life we all crave in the deepest parts of our soul.

III. How does this relate to our recent election and to us?

As to the election: Just as God raised up a pagan ruler named Cyrus, so he has raised up Donald Trump who, so far as I can tell, is not a Christian. Remember: God can work through anybody. When the president acts contrary to God’s will, God will hold him accountable, just as he held the Assyrians to account. And since we still have our rights and freedoms, we have the right to oppose any policies we disagree with, and in doing that we are not acting contrary to God.

Why did God—against all the odds—raise up Donald Trump to be president? It’s impossible to say specifically why. However, two possible reasons that were raised during the campaign which relate to the heart of God and to the church come to my mind, as well as one thing I know for certain.

- The first possible reason that goes to the heart of God is the issue of abortion. Since *Roe v. Wade* was decided almost 45 years ago, almost 60 million babies have been slaughtered on the altar of convenience. Hillary stated that “an unborn person doesn’t have constitutional rights”; she opposed efforts to defund Planned Parenthood and favored abortion on demand. On the other hand, Trump said, “Life is the most fundamental right.” He also said he is opposed to abortion except for rape, incest and life of the mother, he opposes the use of government funds to pay for abortions—and he has said he will appoint pro-life justices to the Supreme Court.

God knew and called Cyrus by name over 100 years before Cyrus was even conceived. The Bible says that God knits all human beings together in our mother’s womb and that every human being is made in God’s image. Since the president-elect may have the opportunity to appoint perhaps as many as 3 justices to the Supreme Court, it may be that, in God’s timing, he has raised up Trump to bring about a reversal of *Roe v. Wade* and end the holocaust of abortion in this country.

- A second possibility that relates to the church is that Trump has said he will work to end the Johnson Amendment. Trump is the only candidate I have ever heard who raised that issue. The Johnson Amendment was passed in 1954 and prohibits certain tax-exempt organizations, including churches, from endorsing or opposing political candidates on risk of losing their tax exempt status. Overturning the Johnson Amendment would restore to preachers and churches their full First Amendment rights. If that happens, God may be using it to refine his church.

What do I mean? If the Johnson Amendment is eliminated, many churches—whether mainstream, evangelical, or otherwise—would be tempted to become much more overtly political, either for liberal or conservative candidates. As a result, there could be division within local churches and between churches and denominations greater than exists today. Therefore, while there certainly are benefits to eliminating the Johnson Amendment, there are risks. If this comes about, God may be using it to reveal which churches are really his—IOW, who is really putting their primary stock in the political process as opposed to the gospel and building God’s kingdom.

Finally, there is the one thing I am certain of. That is, God is primarily interested in his kingdom, not the kingdoms of men. Clearly Trump has significant flaws; yet, against all the odds, God raised him up—so we need to pray for him that not only would God work *through* him, like he worked through Cyrus, but also that God would work *in* him, to draw him to himself and make him more like Jesus Christ.

This election should cause us to re-evaluate our priorities. What is most important to us? Are we focusing our lives primarily on politics, money, our relationships, our jobs, or on God and his kingdom? We should start looking at the world and the problems in the world more through God's eyes. If we are Christians, that means joining Christ in his mission; putting more of our money where our mouth is and reaching out to others in the name of Jesus rather than looking to government. Christ and his kingdom—as manifested in the church—are the only hope for people and for the world. We MUST become more missional as individuals and as a church.

If we are not Christians, we need to recognize that the example of Cyrus is clear evidence that God exists and who he is. It is a specific, fulfilled prophecy written over 100 years before the events it speaks of, even naming by name a man who was not even born at the time Isaiah prophesied. Just as God raised up Cyrus, so he raised up Jesus—only with Jesus, the ultimate “raising up” was when Jesus rose from the dead. In fact, when Jesus came to earth, he said in essence, “although I am a man, I am not only a man—I am God himself come to earth as a man—and I will prove it by doing something that a mere man cannot do, rise from the dead.” Jesus did that—which validates who he is and everything he said. This tells us there is, indeed, a God and we can know him.

CONCL: Whether your candidate lost or won the election, God is saying, “Don't ultimately put your hope in kings.” We may not understand all God is doing in the world or why he is doing it as he is. But we know where things are going—God is working to establish his kingdom. Therefore, if you are not yet Christ's, check him out, particularly the bottom line fact of Christ's resurrection from the dead, and join him. If you are his, we have got to put God's kingdom ahead of man's kingdom. Let us put our primary hope, thought, money, and effort in advancing the kingdom of the only one who can give us lasting answers, solutions, and transformation—that is Jesus Christ.