

# **ISAIAH:** **THE GLORY OF GOD IN A WORLD OF CHAOS**

Part 9: “No Other God”

Isaiah 45:14-25

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## **Scripture Reading**

*Thus says the LORD: “The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours; they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will plead with you, saying: ‘Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him.’” Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior. All of them are put to shame and confounded; the makers of idols go in confusion together. But Israel is saved by the LORD with everlasting salvation; you shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity. For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!): “I am the LORD, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in vain.’ I the LORD speak the truth; I declare what is right. Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.’ Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.” (Isaiah 45:14–25, ESV)*

*This is God’s word. Thanks be to God.*

## **Introduction**

During this fall, we have been walking through a sermon series entitled *Isaiah: The Glory of God in a World of Chaos*. If I were to boil down Isaiah’s message into one big idea it would be this: *Isaiah giving us renewed vision of the power and glory of God at a time when God’s people are overwhelmed by the power and glory of the nations.*

In our own time of pandemic, economic turmoil, and racial division, all on top of an election year for the US, Isaiah's message reminds us of how easy it is for God's people to place their hope in kings and kingdoms of this world, rather than the kingdom of God.

Our passage today in Isaiah 45 opens with a description of some of the more impressive nations at the time of Isaiah's lifetime. Egypt and Cush and Sabea were nations that God's people wanted to be like. Comparatively speaking, the little nation of Judah was nothing in comparison to the ancient wealth and power of Egypt or the exotic legends of Cush. But Isaiah prophesies that there will be a day when people from these nations will bow before the God of Israel.

Look at verse 14: "*Thus says the LORD: 'The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours; they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will plead with you, saying: 'Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him'*" (Isa 45:14).

There will be a day when even the people of gentile nations will acknowledge there is no other God than the Lord, and they will voluntarily surrender to him.<sup>1</sup> There will be a day when people of gentile nations will join themselves to the people of God.

And if this is true, if this is where history is heading, how foolish would it be for the people of God to place their hope in the false idols of the nations? Isaiah is beckoning the people of God to behold *the reality of God* and *the unreality of idols* and to live in light of these truths.

Even in our secular age and culture, I want to argue that there is an entire pantheon of false idols that are vying for our worship. But, as we delve into Isaiah 45, we will see that there indeed is "*No Other God*" who is worthy of our praise and devotion.

As we take a closer look into our Scripture today, I will organize our discussion under three headings: 1.) *The Absurdity of Idols*, 2.) *The Awesomeness of God*, and 3.) *The Acknowledgement of Christ as Lord*.

## **Exposition**

### **1. The Absurdity of Idols**

In the culture of the ancient Near East, idol worship was almost universal. I'll give you a few examples. The vast majority of people at this time were farmers who depended upon good weather and rain for their crops. Understandably [show **Baal**], many people worshipped Baal, who was supposedly the god of the storm and rain. If they made sacrifices to Baal and performed his rituals of worship, they thought Baal would grant them a plentiful harvest, which in turn would grant them wealth and protection.

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<sup>1</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 215.

Another common idol of this time was Asherah [show 2Asherah]. Asherah was the mother goddess of fertility, who promised to grant her worshippers spouses and healthy children. Asherah was worshipped inside homes, under trees, and there was even an Asherah pole located inside the temple courts (2 Kings 21:7).

As I've mentioned in a previous sermon in this series, people of the ancient Near East also worshipped idols that represented the nation itself. For example [show 3Aššur], the god Aššur was considered to be the embodiment of the Assyrian Empire.<sup>2</sup> In fact, when the nation of Assyria would conquer a new kingdom, soldiers would take the idols out of the temple of the conquered nation's patron god, so that it could be placed in the temple of Aššur. This act represented Aššur's supposed supremacy over all other gods.<sup>3</sup>

And in a situation that was as chaotic as Isaiah's age, it would be tempting to start praying to or worshipping such idols who promised such protection and blessing and power.

But Isaiah doesn't mince words when it comes to what he thinks about worshipping idols (צִירִים): **"All of them are put to shame and confounded; the makers of idols go in confusion together"** (Isa 45:16).

Isaiah declares the makers of idols will be put to shame and confounded. For such idols are not the true God. Idols are powerless to give us what they promise. Idols cannot give us the satisfaction or significance or safety they promise because they are created things (see Isa 44:9-20).

And if we think the issue of idol worship no longer applies to people as enlightened as we are, we must think again. As the protestant reformer John Calvin once wrote, **"...man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols."**<sup>4</sup>

*We may not make animal sacrifices before the altar of Baal. But how many people in our culture, even professed Christians, are willing to sacrifice their families for the sake of a career, professional achievement, and wealth? We may not bow down before Asherah poles, but how many of us are tempted to idolize marriage or family with a devotion that is functionally more passionate than our worship for God? We may not worship in the temple of Aššur of the Assyrians, but how many of us might be willing to sacrifice our Christian principles because of the messianic expectations we place on power and politics?*

You see, that is the dangerous thing about idols. They blind us to their presence (cf. Ps 115:4-8). Idols don't have to be bad and evil in and of themselves. They can be good things that we make into ultimate things. They can be gifts from God that we elevate to the status of a functional deities.

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Radner, *Ancient Assyria: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion & 2*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 108.

In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Timothy Keller writes: *“What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought...An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’”*<sup>5</sup>

I think we would do well to ask the hard heart-questions, what idols am I most tempted to worship instead of God? And how do I need to retrain my heart to place its hope in God and God alone?

Our idols will never fail to fail us. They cannot give us what they promise. They are powerless to deliver us.

As Isaiah says, *“Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save”* (Isa 45:20).

You can work as hard as you can. You sacrifice your relationships and your health for success. But your job will not justify you.

You can pour all of your passion and devotion into finding the perfect romance or creating the perfect family. But no matter how wonderful your marriage and family could ever be, they will not redeem you.

You can sacrifice all of your time, energy, and thought-life to the god of American politics, but politics will not save you.

The gods of the nations are worthless idols. But the Lord our God alone is mighty to save.

## **2. The Awesomeness of God**

Against the absurdity of idols, Isaiah proclaims the awesomeness of God. And when I use the word “awesome,” I mean it in the fullest extent of the word.

Unfortunately, the word “awesome” is often robbed of its meaning because it is misapplied to things that may be good but not awesome. The word awesome literally means that which inspires awe or a holy sense of fear, respect, and wonder.

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty, Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*. (New York: Dutton, 2009), xviii.

Awesome is not a very good piece of pizza. Awesome is not a new iPhone. Awesome is not a funny video on YouTube.

Awesome is sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon. Awesome is looking through a high-powered telescope into a galaxy of billions of stars. And, more than anything else, awesome is the infinite power and wisdom and glory of our God.

We are creatures. The idols that we make are creations of creatures. But God alone is the Creator who stands outside of the bounds of space and time. He is the author of the cosmos and the author of all life: *“For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!): “I am the LORD, and there is no other” (Isa 45:18).*

But someone might say, “Well, if God really is the Creator who is above and beyond us, he would be unknowable. For how could we, as finite creatures, arrive at a knowledge of such an infinite God?”

This is valid question. It is indeed true that our limited human minds could never come to a true knowledge of God through mere rationality or scientific observation. However, we can know God, if (and only if) he graciously chooses to reveal himself to us. And this is exactly what our God has done: *“I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in vain.’ I the LORD speak the truth; I declare what is right” (Isa 45:19).*

God has revealed his truth through his laws, through the history of his people Israel, through the words of his prophets, and, most profoundly, through his son Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 1:1-3). In Jesus Christ, the awesome reality of the infinite and eternal God took on human flesh (cf. Jn 1:14). He entered into creation. His life, death, and resurrection validate and confirm all of the revelation of Holy Scripture and left an impact-crater so large that it split human history into two pieces.

The gods of the nations are deaf and dumb idols that cannot speak and they cannot tell what is to come in the future (Isa 41:21-24). But the Lord is a God who speak and who foretells what is to come because he is the sovereign author of history. Even more, he is the judge who stands at the end of history before whom all nations will bow:

*“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance” (Isa 45:22–23).*

Why on earth would we cower before the nations of this world or flirt with idols that are powerless to save, when we can know and worship such a truly awesome God?

### **3. The Acknowledgement of Christ as Lord**

Now, admittedly Isaiah 45 is probably not one of the most familiar passages for most Christians. However, verse 45:23 (particularly the second half of verse 23) will end up becoming one of the most important verses of for the Apostle Paul: *“To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance”* (Isa 45:23b).

This verse captured Paul’s imagination so much that he quoted it twice in his New Testament letters. The first instance is in Romans 14.

To give you some context for Romans 14, the Roman church is a multicultural church composed of people from both Jewish and gentile backgrounds. Because they are a multicultural church, they are having conflict related to cultural differences. For example, Jewish Christians want to observe the Sabbath on a Saturday. Gentile Christians want to observe the Sabbath on Sunday. Jewish Christians feel bound by conscience to observe a kosher diet. Gentile Christians feel that it is appropriate to practice Christian liberty when it comes to matters of food.<sup>6</sup>

Apparently, these issues were causing significant conflict in the churches of Rome. So, Paul addresses the situation. But he doesn’t say this faction is right and this one is wrong. Instead he quotes and applies Isa 45:23 to their situation. Look at Romans 14: *“For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us will give an account of himself to God”* (Rom 14:7–12).

Paul is saying Christians will, at times, disagree on important issues. Yet, Paul does not require conformity or uniformity on all issues for Christians. He will not determine whether or not someone is a Christian by the day they choose to worship or the diet they choose to practice. He simply commands Christians to be motivated by a sincere love for neighbor and a faith-formed conscience that seeks to please Christ, who is our only judge.

Because Christ is our judge, we must not cast judgment on fellow Christians regarding issues that are not of salvational importance.

The resurrection of Jesus has revealed that Jesus is Lord. And if Jesus the Lord has been appointed to be the judge of the living and the dead, to cast judgment upon a fellow believer is to usurp a divine prerogative. As Calvin writes, *“As then it would be absurd among men for a criminal, who ought to occupy a humble place in the court, to ascend*

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<sup>6</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2012), 510.



*the tribunal of the judge; so it is absurd for a Christian to take to himself the liberty of judging the conscience of his brother.*"<sup>7</sup>

Today, Christians might not be arguing as much about the day of the week we worship or the diet we observe. However, many Christians are divided – sometimes viciously so – over matters that are not central to salvation.

The obvious issue before us in this season is that of politics. Christians, it is important for you to know that there are people in this church and people who you will share eternity with that will vote differently than you do in the upcoming election.

I humbly encourage you: vote in a way that lines up with a conscience that is formed by the gospel. Vote in a way that you would believe pleases Christ, who is your Lord and judge. Then, refuse to shame, judge, or demonize a fellow believer that votes differently than you do.

But could republicans, democrats, and third-party voters actually follow Jesus together? Absolutely. Do you want to know why I know that? Because there was political diversity even among the twelve disciples. Matthew was a tax-collector who worked to support and fund the Roman Empire. Simon was a Zealot who wanted to stir up a revolution that would overthrow the Roman Empire. Yet, Jesus called them both to be his disciples.

Our allegiance to Christ must outweigh our allegiance to any political party or kingdom of man. For when we acknowledge Christ for who he is we will be united in humility before him.

And that leads us to the second time Paul references Isa 45. This is found in Philippians 2. Much like Romans 14, it is an appeal to Christian unity: *"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others"* (Phil 2:1-4).

And why are Christians to do this? How will Christians be empowered to do this? Paul answers the question in the following verses:

*"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in*

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 501.

*heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:5–11).*

The one who Isaiah calls Lord in Isaiah 45, Paul calls Christ Jesus in Philippians 2.

The key to overcoming the seductive power of idols and the relentless temptation to division among Christians is to consider the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ.

Against the false promises of idols, the cross of Jesus Christ is true power. Against the alluring enchantment of the kings and kingdoms of this world, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is true glory.

So, in light of this truth, Redeemer Christian Church, may see our idols for what they are, may we see our God for who he is, and may we acknowledge Christ as our Lord!

AMEN.

### **Discussion starters for Gospel Community**

- 1.) *Read Isa 45:14-25. How would you summarize this passage in your own words? Are there any repeated phrases or themes in this passage that can show you the big idea of this passage?*
- 2.) *In this passage, Isaiah addresses the absurdity of idol worship (Isa 45:16,20). Isaiah 44:9-20 also includes an extended critique of idols. What are the idols of modern American culture? How can God's people today guard against the temptations of idols?*
- 3.) *Isaiah reminds the people of God that against the weakness of idols, the Lord alone is the sovereign creator, the savior, and the judge who stands at the end of history (Isa 45:18-23). Why is it so important for Christians to regularly remember these truths about God? What spiritual disciplines help you remember the reality of God's glory in your daily life?*
- 4.) *Isa 45:23 was a theologically formative verse for the Apostle Paul. Paul quotes this verse twice in the New Testament: Rom 14:1-12 and Phil 2:1-11. Read these passages and discuss how they apply to the church today. According to Paul, what should the church look like if it takes Isa 45:23 seriously?*