

CHAPTER 46

God, by the prophet here, designing shortly to deliver them out of their captivity, prepared them for that deliverance by possessing them with a detestation of idols and with a believing confidence in God, even their own God.

I. Let them not be afraid of the idols of Babylon, as if they could in any way obstruct their deliverance, for they should be defaced (v. 1, 2); but let them trust in that God who had often delivered them to do it still, to do it now (v. 3, 4).

II. Let them not think to make idols of their own, images of the God of Israel, by them to worship him, as the Babylonians worship their gods (v. 5-7). Let them not be so sottish (v. 8), but have an eye to God in his word, not in an image; let them depend upon that, and upon the promises and predictions of it, and God's power to accomplish them all (v. 9-11). And let them know that the unbelief of man shall not make the word of God of no effect (v. 12, 13).

ISAIAH 46:1-4

THE FOLLY OF IDOLATRY

We are here told,

I. That the false gods will certainly fail their worshippers when they have most need of them, v. 1, 2. Bel and Nebo were two celebrated idols of Babylon. Some make Bel to be a contraction of Baal; others rather think not, but that it was Belus, one of their first kings, who after his death was deified. As Bel was a deified prince, so (some think) Nebo was a deified prophet, for so Nebo signifies; so that Bel and Nebo were their Jupiter and their Mercury or Apollo. Barnabas and Paul passed at Lystra for Jupiter and Mercury. The names of these idols were taken into the names of their princes, Bel into Belshazzar's, Nebo into Nebuchadnezzar's and Nebuzaradan's, etc. These gods they had long worshipped, and in their revels praised them for their successes (as appears, ~~2361~~ Daniel 5:4); and they insulted over Israel as if Bel and Nebo were too hard for Jehovah and

could detain them in captivity in defiance of their God. Now, that this might be no discouragement to the poor captives, God here tells them what shall become of these idols, which they threaten them with. When Cyrus takes Babylon, down go the idols. It was usual then with conquerors to destroy the gods of the places and people they conquered, and to put the gods of their own nation in the room of them, ²³⁷⁹ Isaiah 37:19. Cyrus will do so; and then Bel and Nebo, that were set up on high, and looked great, bold, and erect, shall *stoop and bow down* at the feet of the soldiers that plunder their temples. And because there is a great deal of gold and silver upon them, which was intended to adorn them, but serves to expose them, they carry them away with the rest of the spoil. The carriers' horses, or mules, are laden with them and their other idols, to be sent among other lumber (for so it seems they accounted them rather than treasure) into Persia. So far are they from being able to support their worshippers that they are themselves a heavy load in the wagons, and *a burden to the weary beast*. The idols cannot help one another (v. 2): *They stoop, they bow down together*. They are all alike, tottering things, and their day has come to fall. Their worshippers cannot help them: *They could not deliver the burden* out of the enemy's hand, *but themselves* (both the idols and the idolaters) *have gone into captivity*. Let not therefore God's people be afraid of either. When God's ark was taken prisoner by the Philistines it proved a burden, not to the beasts, but to the conquerors, who were forced to return it; but, when Bel and Nebo have gone into captivity, their worshippers may even give their good word with them: they will never recover themselves.

II. That the true God will never fail his worshippers: “You hear what has become of Bel and Nebo, now *hearken to me, O house of Jacob!* v. 3, 4. Am I such a god as these? No; though you are brought low, and the house of Israel is but a remnant, your God has been, is, and ever will be, your powerful and faithful protector.”

1. Let God's Israel do him the justice to own that he has hitherto been kind to them, careful of them, tender over them, and has all along done well for them. Let them own,

(1.) That he bore them at first: *I have made*. Out of what womb came they, but that of his mercy, and grace, and promise? He formed them into a people and gave them their constitution. Every good man is what God makes him.

(2.) That he bore them up all along: You have been *borne by me from the belly*, and *carried from the womb*. God began betimes to do them good, as soon as ever they were formed into a nation, nay, when as yet they were very few, and strangers. God took them under a special protection, and *suffered no man to do them wrong*, ^{}Psalm 105:12-14. In the infancy of their state, when they were not only foolish and helpless, as children, but forward and peevish, God carried them in the arms of his power and love, bore them *as upon eagles' wings*, ^{<E>}Exodus 19:4; ^{<D>}Deuteronomy 32:11. Moses had not patience *to carry them as the nursing father does the sucking child* (^{<H>}Numbers 11:12), but God bore them, and *bore their manners*, ^{<A>}Acts 13:18. And as God began early to do them good (when *Israel was a child, then I loved him*), so he had constantly continued to do them good: he had carried them from the womb to this day. And we may all witness for God that he has been thus gracious to us. We have been borne by him from the belly, from the womb, else we should have died from the womb and given up the ghost when we came out of the belly. We have been the constant care of his kind providence, carried in the arms of his power and in the bosom of his love and pity. The new man is so; all that in us which is born of God is borne up by him, else it would soon fail. Our spiritual life is sustained by his grace as necessarily and constantly as our natural life by his providence. The saints have acknowledged that God has carried them from the womb, and have encouraged themselves with the consideration of it in their greatest straits, ^{<P>}Psalm 22:9, 10; 71:5, 6, 17.

2. He will then do them the kindness to promise that he will never leave them. He that was their first will be their last; he that was the author will be the finisher of their well-being (v. 4): “You have been *borne by me from the belly*, nursed when you were children; and *even to your old age I am he*, when, by reason of your decays and infirmities, you will need help as much as in your infancy.” Israel were now growing old, so was their covenant by which they were incorporated, ^{<S>}Hebrews 8:13. *Gray hairs were here and there upon them*, ^{<O>}Hosea 7:9. And they had hastened their old age, and the calamities of it, by their irregularities. But God will not cast them off now, will not fail them when their strength fails; he is still their God, will still carry them in the same everlasting arms that were laid under them in Moses's time, ^{<D>}Deuteronomy 33:27. He has made them and owns his interest in them, and therefore he will bear them, will bear with their infirmities, and bear them up under their afflictions: “Even *I will*

carry and will deliver them; I will now bear them upon eagles' wings out of Babylon, as in their infancy I bore them out of Egypt.” This promise to aged Israel is applicable to every aged Israelite. God has graciously engaged to support and comfort his faithful servants, even in their old age: “*Even to your old age, when you grow unfit for business, when you are compassed with infirmities, and perhaps your relations begin to grow weary of you, yet I am he — he that I am, he that I have been — the very same by whom you have been borne from the belly and carried from the womb. You change, but I am the same. I am he that I have promised to be, he that you have found me, and he that you would have me to be. I will carry you, I will bear, will bear you up and bear you out, and will carry you on in your way and carry you home at last.*”

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THE DIVINE PREROGATIVE ASSERTED

The deliverance of Israel by the destruction of Babylon (the general subject of all these chapters) is here insisted upon, and again promised, for the conviction both of idolaters who set up as rivals with God, and of oppressors who were enemies to the people of God.

I. For the conviction of those who made and worshipped idols, especially those of Israel who did so, who would have images of their God, as the Babylonians had of theirs,

1. He challenges them either to frame an image that should be thought a resemblance of him or to set up any being that should stand in competition with him (v. 5): *To whom will you liken me?* It is absurd to think of representing an infinite and eternal Spirit by the figure of any creature whatsoever. It is to change his truth into a lie and to turn his glory into shame. None ever saw any similitude of him, nor can see his face and live. *To whom then can we liken God?* 248 Isaiah 40:18, 25. It is likewise absurd to think of making any creature equal with the Creator, who is infinitely above the noblest creatures, yea, or to make any comparison between the creature and the Creator, since between infinite and finite there is no proportion.

2. He exposes the folly of those who made idols and then prayed to them, v. 6, 7.

(1.) They were at great charge upon their idols and spared no cost to fit them for their purpose: *They lavish gold out of the bag*; no little will serve, and they do not care how much goes, though they pinch their families and weaken their estates by it. How does the profuseness of idolaters shame the niggardliness of many who call themselves God's servants but are for a religion that will cost them nothing! Some *lavish gold out of the bag* to make an idol of it in the house, while others *hoard up gold in the bag* to make an idol of it in the heart; for *covetousness is idolatry*, as dangerous, though not as scandalous, as the other. *They weigh silver in the balance*, either to be the matter of their idol (for even those that were most sottish had so much sense as to think that God should be served with the best they had, the best they could possibly afford; those that represented him by a calf made it a golden one) or to pay the workmen's wages. The service of sin often proves very expensive.

(2.) They were in great care about their idols and took no little pains about them (v. 7): *They bear him upon their own shoulders*, and do not hire porters to do it; they *carry him, and set him in his place*, more like a dead corpse than a living God. They set him on a pedestal, *and he stands*. They take a great deal of pains to fasten him, and *from his place he shall not remove*, that they may know where to find him, though at the same time they know he can neither move a hand nor stir a step to do them any kindness.

(3.) After all, they paid great respect to their idols, though they were but the works of their own hands and the creatures of their own fancies. When the goldsmith has made it that which they please to call a god *they fall down, yea, they worship it*. If they magnified themselves too much in pretending to make a god, as if they would atone for that, they vilified themselves as much in prostrating themselves to a god that they knew the original of. And, if they were deceived by the custom of their country in making such gods as these, they did no less deceive themselves when they cried unto them, though they knew they could not answer them, could not understand what they said to them, nor so much as reply Yea, or No, much less could they *save them out of their trouble*. Now shall any that have some knowledge of, and interest in, the true and living God, thus make fools of themselves?

3. He puts it to themselves, and their own reason, let that judge in the case (v. 8): “*Remember this*, that has been often told you, what senseless helpless things idols are, *and show yourselves men* — men and not brutes, men and not babes. Act with reason; act with resolution; act for your own interest. Do a wise thing; do a brave thing; and scorn to disparage your own judgment as you do when you worship idols.” Note, Sinners would become saints if they would but show themselves men, if they would but support the dignity of their nature and use aright its powers and capacities. “Many things you have been reminded of; *bring them again to mind*, recall them into your memories, and revolve them there. *O! you transgressors, consider your ways; remember whence you have fallen, and repent*, and so recover yourselves.”

4. He again produces incontestable proofs that he is God, that he and none besides is so (v. 9): *I am God, and there is none like me*. This is that which we have need to be reminded of again and again; for proof of it he refers,

(1.) To the sacred history: “*Remember the former things of old*, what the God of Israel did for his people in their beginnings, whether he did not that for them which no one else could, and which the false gods did not, nor could do, for their worshippers. Remember those things, and you will own that *I am God and there is none else*.” This is a good reason why we should give glory to him as a nonsuch, and why we should not give that glory to any other which is due to him alone, ^{<251>}Exodus 15:11.

(2.) To the sacred prophecy. He is God alone, for it is he only that *declares the end from the beginning*, v. 10. From the beginning of time he declared the end of time, and end of all things. Enoch prophesied, *Behold, the Lord comes*. From the beginning of a nation he declares what the end of it will be. He told Israel what should befall them in *the latter days*, what *their end should be*, and wished they were so wise as to consider it, ^{<620>}Deuteronomy 32:20, 20. From the beginning of an event he declares what the end of it will be. *Known unto God are all his works*, and, when he pleases, he makes them known. Further than prophecy guides us it is impossible for us to *find out the work that God makes from the beginning to the end*, ^{<201>}Ecclesiastes 3:11. He *declares from ancient times the things that are not yet done*. Many scripture prophecies which were delivered long ago are not yet accomplished; but the accomplishment of some in the mean time is an earnest of the accomplishment of the rest in due time. By this it appears that he is *God, and none else*; it is he, and none besides, that can

say, and make his words good, “*My counsel shall stand*, and all the powers of hell and earth cannot control or disannul it nor all their policies correct or countermine it.” As God's operations are all according to his counsels, so his counsels shall all be fulfilled in his operations, and none of his measures shall be broken, none of his designs shall miscarry. This yields abundant satisfaction to those who have bound up all their comforts in God's counsels, that his counsel shall undoubtedly stand; and, if we are brought to this, that whatever pleases God pleases us, nothing can contribute more to make us easy than to be assured of this, that *God will do all his pleasure*, ^{<135>}Psalm 135:6. The accomplishment of this particular prophecy, which relates to the elevation of Cyrus and his agency in the deliverance of God's people out of their captivity, is mentioned for the confirmation of this truth, that the Lord is God and there is none else; and this is a thing which shall shortly come to pass, v. 11. God by his counsel *calls a ravenous bird from the east*, a bird of prey, *Cyrus*, who (they say) had a nose like the beak of a hawk or eagle, to which some think this alludes, or (as others say) to the eagle which was his standard, as it was afterwards that of the Romans, to which there is supposed to be a reference, ^{<24>}Matthew 24:28. Cyrus came from the east at God's call: for God is Lord of hosts and of those that have hosts at command. And, if God give him a call, he will give him success. He is the man that shall *execute God's counsel*, though he comes *from a far country* and knows nothing of the matter. Note, Even those that know not, and mind not, God's revealed will, are made use of to fulfil the counsels of his secret will, which shall all be punctually accomplished in their season by what hand he pleases. That which is here added, to ratify this particular prediction, may abundantly show to the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel: “*I have spoken of it by my servants the prophets, and what I have spoken is just the same with what I have purposed.*” For, though God has many things in his purposes which are not in his prophecies, he has nothing in his prophecies but what are in his purposes. And he *will do it*, for he will never change his mind; he *will bring it to pass*, for it is not in the power of any creature to control him. Observe with what majesty he says it, as one having authority: *I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass. Dictum, factum — no sooner said than done. I have purposed it*, and he does not say, “I will take care it shall be done,” but, “*I will do it.*” Heaven and earth shall pass away sooner than one tittle of the word of God.

II. For the conviction of those that daringly opposed the counsels of God assurance is here given not only that they shall be accomplished, but that they shall be accomplished very shortly, v. 12, 13.

1. This is addressed to the *stout-hearted*, that is, either,

(1.) The proud and obstinate Babylonians, *that are far from righteousness*, far from doing justice or showing mercy to those they have power over, that say they will never let the oppressed go free, but will still detain them in spite of their petitions or God's predictions, that are far from any thing of clemency or compassion to the miserable. Or,

(2.) The unhumiliated Jews, that have been long under the hammer, long in the furnace, but are not broken are not melted, that, like the unbelieving murmuring Israelites in the wilderness, think themselves far from God's righteousness (that is, from the performance of his promise, and his appearing to judge for them), and by their distrusts set themselves at a yet further distance from it, and keep good things from themselves, as their fathers, who could not enter into the land of promise because of unbelief. This is applicable to the Jewish nation when they rejected the gospel of Christ; though they *followed after the law of righteousness*, they *attained not to righteousness, because they sought it not by faith*, ^{<508>}Romans 9:31, 32. They perished far from righteousness; and it was because they were *stout-hearted*, ^{<508>}Romans 10:3.

2. Now to them God says that, whatever they think, the one in presumption, the other in despair,

(1.) Salvation shall be certainly wrought for God's people. If men will not do them justice, God will, and his righteousness shall effect that for them which men's righteousness would not reach to. He *will place salvation in Zion*, that is, he will make Jerusalem a place of safety and defence to all those who will plant themselves there; thence shall salvation go forth *for Israel his glory*. God glories in his Israel; and he will be glorified in the salvation he designs to work out for them; it shall redound greatly to his honour. This salvation shall be in Zion; for thence the gospel shall take rise (^{<218>}Isaiah 2:3), thither the Redeemer comes (^{<250>}Isaiah 59:20, ^{<512>}Romans 11:26), and it is Zion's King that has salvation, ^{<300>}Zechariah 9:9.

(2.) It shall be very shortly wrought. This is especially insisted on with those who thought it at a distance: “*I bring near my righteousness, nearer than you think of; perhaps it is nearest of all when your straits are greatest and your enemies most injurious; it shall not be far off when there is occasion for it,* ^{<888>} Psalm 85:9. *Behold, the Judge stands before the door. My salvation shall not tarry any longer than till it is ripe and you are ready for it; and therefore, though it tarry, wait for it; wait patiently, for he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.*”