



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Equipped for God's Purpose

Isaiah 44.24-45.7

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### *Introduction*

1. According to the story, in the late 1800s, Dwight Moody hosted some European preachers at one of his Northfield Bible Conferences in Massachusetts. Following the European custom of the time, each guest put his shoes outside his room to be cleaned by the hall servants overnight. But, in America, there were no hall servants. Moody saw the shoes and determined not to embarrass his brothers; he would see they were cleaned. He mentioned the need to some ministry students and was met with silence and pious excuses. Moody went to the dorm, gathered the shoes, and, alone in his room, began to clean and shine them. Only the unexpected arrival of a friend while he worked revealed the secret. When the visitors opened their doors the next morning, they found their shoes clean and shined; they would never know by whom. Thanks to Moody's friend, a few others learned what had happened and volunteered to shine the shoes—in secret—for the rest of the conference.<sup>1</sup>
2. There is something appealing about genuine service. Many of us have doubtless experienced good feelings when we see or hear about it. We know that it is the way of Christ, not just what he taught, but what he showed throughout his life (see Mark 10.45).
3. Our good feelings and knowledge do not always translate into active service, however. For whatever the reason—maybe we're like the ministry students above—we find it necessary to remind one another about the importance of actively serving.
4. I'm not sure I can identify all the reasons; some may actually be excuses. But, I suspect in some sense they relate to having a cloudy vision of God and of ourselves.
  - a. In the details of active service, we can forget that it's about his glory and majesty.
  - b. As we grow tired—and remember how far short we fall—we can begin to believe that what we do does not matter, or that God could not possibly use *us* to make a difference.
5. Our text and some related New Testament passages, reminds us that this is not so.

### *Body*

- I. Cyrus, the Gentile Messiah (Isaiah 44.27-45.7).

<sup>1</sup> Gary Inrig, *A Call to Excellence*, 98. <https://bible.org/illustration/man-servant%E2%80%99s-heart>. Accessed November 2, 2018.

- A. As we consider the focus of our text in the context of Isaiah 40-48, we see a significant change in direction.
  1. Up to this point, Isaiah had been concerned to call the people to "behold [their] God" (see 40.9).
  2. That's still true in our text, but his focus turns to the human agent who would bring about the fall of Babylon and restoration of Israel.
- B. From what Isaiah said about Cyrus, we learn three principles.
  1. First, the main focus is on God who, despite appearances and Israel's resistance, is bringing about his purpose (44.24-28; see esp. 28).
    - a) Comprehensively and majestically, Isaiah continued to keep the focus on the power of God (notice all the things God is said to do in vv 24-28).
    - b) But, that power was now being concentrated in a particular person and his role in history: Cyrus, king of the Persians who wed their empire with the Medes and who would conquer Babylon without a fight (see 45.2-3).<sup>2</sup>
    - c) God declared it certain that Cyrus would deliver Jerusalem and the temple would be rebuilt.
  2. The choice of Cyrus shows that God can equip anyone (45.1, 4-5).
    - a) Some think that, as a Persian, Cyrus may have been influenced by Zoroaster who adopted a monotheistic view of God.<sup>3</sup>
      - (1) They postulate from this that he would have not approved the Babylonian pantheon and would have been inclined to be sympathetic toward the Jews.<sup>4</sup>
      - (2) But the permission Cyrus granted to the Jews to return to their homeland and re-establish their religion is more likely attributable to his general policy of granting more autonomy to subject peoples as a means of increasing loyalty to the empire (see Hill and Walton, 199, 365).
    - b) However considerate Cyrus may have been, the idea that God would work through a foreign king for the good of his people was hard for Israel to fathom (their resistance to God's ways is evident in 45.9-11).
    - c) It would have amazed them even more that Cyrus was called the Lord's "shepherd" (44.28) and his "anointed" (45.1), i.e., his messiah.
  3. But the text is plain that God was using Cyrus for this great task in spite of the fact that he did not know Yahweh (45.4-5).
    - a) Isaiah declared that God would equip Cyrus to realize his purpose in his breathtaking plan of restoration (45.1-7).
    - b) Given the imposing strength of Babylon, the declaration in 45.2-3 is stunning. Babylon would be leveled and its bronze doors and iron bars broken in pieces.

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<sup>2</sup> Cyrus defeated the Medes in 550 BC and strengthened his position in the succeeding years. John Walton says, "Since numerous segments of the population [of Babylon] had good reason to be disgruntled with the policies and prospects of Nabonidus [the Babylonian king], Cyrus was reportedly welcomed into Babylon (October 16, 539 BC) as deliverer rather than having to resort to a long siege" (Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009], 199).

<sup>3</sup> Paul L. Redditt, "Zoroastrianism," in David Noel Freedman, ed. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), BibleWorks v. 10.

<sup>4</sup> "Cyrus," in A. R. Faussett, *Faussett Bible Dictionary* (1888) (n.p.: International Bible Translators, 1998), BibleWorks, v.10.

- c) Verse 6 adds that the glory would be God's; he would make the impossible occur and show that he, not Babylon, was the superior power (cf. Dan 5.22-31; Jer 50.38; 51.57).
- d) Verse 7 adds yet another layer to the picture, using figures (light and darkness, well being [*shalōm*] and calamity) that were meant to be inclusive, like saying "from A to Z" in creation and history.
- 4. "Yahweh is the one, the only one, who is responsible for what is, and that surely includes Cyrus, the fall of Babylon, and the emancipation of Israel."<sup>5</sup>

## II. The Messiah's People at Work Today.

### A. Involvement in service springs from staying focused on God.

- 1. Three texts in Ephesians, the epistle of the church, illustrate the point; all have in common an ultimate focus on God.
  - a) In 1.18-23, Paul stressed that the same power God used in raising Jesus from the dead is available to his body, the church, which serves to complete his fullness.
  - b) In 2.8-10, the grace that worked to bring us from death to life (see vv 1-7) makes us a new creation, God's "workmanship" or "handiwork" (NIV; cf. Rom 1.20 for the only other NT use of the word ποίημα, *poiēma*), able to do the good works God intends.
  - c) In 4.11-16, we learn that all parts of the body are capable of being equipped for doing these good works.
- 2. Matthew 5.16 states the thought in just one verse (cf. Isa 45:6-7).
  - a) Our good works are *secondary* to the glory of the Father.
  - b) We do not let our lights shine so people will see our good works, but so they will see God *through* our good works.
- 3. We are more likely to keep serving when we stay focused on God.

### B. New Testament writers taught that God can equip everyone for service.

- 1. The fact that Paul said all *should* be equipped (Eph 4.11-16) shows that he thought it possible that all *could* be equipped.
- 2. He had to stress this point in Corinth to counter two problems.
  - a) Some apparently thought themselves too insignificant to contribute to the body's work (1 Cor 12.14-20).
  - b) But some apparently thought others were too insignificant (12.21-26).
  - c) Paul's solution was to remind them that *God* does the equipping, putting each of us where we're needed (12.6-7, 28; cf. 3.5-6).

### C. God makes ways where we cannot make ways. His power enables our success.

## Conclusion

- 1. I like this story about Jimmy Durante, well known entertainer of a former generation. Asked to be part of a show for WWII veterans, Durante told them his schedule was busy and he could afford just a few minutes. If they would agree, he would be able to do a short monologue before moving on to his next appointment. But, when Jimmy got on stage, he

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion, 77

finished the short monologue and then stayed. And he kept staying, as the applause grew ever louder. Finally, after thirty minutes, he took his last bow and left the stage.

2. Backstage, someone asked him why he had stayed. Durante said, "I did have to go, but let me show you why I stayed. Look down on the front row." There sat two men, each of whom had lost an arm in the war. One had lost his right arm, the other his left. Together, they were able to clap and that's what they were doing, loudly and cheerfully. Together, they had inspired Jimmy Durante to stay.<sup>6</sup>
3. There is something that inspires us when everyone is involved in service.

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<sup>6</sup> "There's a Wonderful Story About Jimmy Durante," contributed by Lynn Malone. <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/22555/call-of-the-disciples-by-lynn-malone?ref=TextIllustrationSerps>. Accessed November 2, 2018.