EBS3 Isa 43-45

**Lesson 3: Isaiah 43-45**

**Title: The God Who Knows the Way and Sends a Deliverer**

**Objectives:**

1. The student will understand how Isaiah contrasts man-made idols with the active God of Israel.
2. The student will understand how Isaiah alternates sections of hope and reassurance with critiques of Israel’s lack of understanding.
3. The student will understand how many in exile did not respond to God.

**Preparation:**

1. Review these critical issues:
   1. Isaiah addresses three different time periods in his book.
      1. Isa 1-39 is addressed to 8th century Jerusalem.
      2. Isa 40-55 is addressed to the exiles.
      3. Isa 56-66 is written to post exilic Jerusalem.
   2. The exiles respond in these three ways:
      1. Despondence
      2. Assimilation
      3. Faith
   3. The alternation between trial scenes and salvation oracle in Isa 42-43.
   4. How to read Isaiah’s poetry.
2. Read the entry on Cyrus in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia. If such reliable sources are unavailable, consult http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrus\_the\_Great

**Theme:** The God of hope and history sends a servant.

1. This theme represents the main thrust of Isa 40-55
2. All the elements of this theme are found in Isa 41-42:
   1. In Isa 41:1-7, 21-29 Isaiah stresses how history verifies God’s power and existence.
   2. In Isa 41:8-20 Isaiah stresses how hope is found only in God.
   3. In Isa 42:1-9 God announces that he will send a servant.

**Background:**

1. The crucial issue in Isa 40-48 is God versus the idols of Babylon. The exiles, far away from home and in despair over their losses, look increasingly to the local gods for spiritual direction. In response, Isaiah does four things:
   1. Using the trial image, he makes a rational case for the superiority of the Israelite God. He announces events in advance because he makes them happen. He is God.
   2. Using wonderful language of hope and reassurance, Isaiah encourages the exiles toward faith in this God.
   3. Using the trial image, Isaiah exposes the lack of faith and insight. The people are not in exile because God was weak, they are in exile because God sent them there as punishment.
   4. Using a taunt, Isaiah makes fun of idol manufacturing, almost as if he were writing a spoof on a Saturday morning television show “Make your own idol.”
2. Isaiah returns to the same points as he mounts his case. It is helpful to see the overview of how he seeks to move the exiles from distrust to belief:
   1. 40:1-11—deliverance coming
   2. 40:12-31—God is better than idols
   3. 41:1-7—deliverance coming
   4. 41:8-20—Israel need not be afraid
   5. 41:21-29—God is better than idols
   6. 42:1-12—deliverance coming
   7. 42:13-17—deliverance coming
   8. 42:18-25—God addresses Israel’s sin
   9. 43:1-7—Israel need not be afraid
   10. 43:8-13—God is better than idols
   11. 43:14-21—deliverance coming
   12. 43:22-28—God addresses Israel’s sin
   13. 44:1-5—Israel need not be afraid
   14. 44:6-20—God is better than idols
   15. 44:21-23—deliverance coming
   16. 44:24-45:8—deliverance coming
   17. 45:9-19—God is better than idols
   18. 45:20-25—God is better than idols

**Learning Experiences:**

1. Lesson Plan
   1. Three chapters of Isaiah would be difficult to cover completely in any single class setting.
   2. One option would be to cover this material in two weeks. However, that makes it unlikely that all of Isa 40-66 can be surveyed in a quarter of 13 weeks.
   3. A second option is to note with the class that Isa 43:1-44:8 and 45:20-25 echo and intensify previous material and to focus on a threefold class presentation:
      1. Isa 44:9-20—Build your own idol
      2. Isa 44:21-45:8—The LORD has done it!
      3. Isa 45:9-19—Israel complains about God’s plans.
   4. Explanations and learning experiences are provided below for the entire section of Isa 43-45.
2. Isa 43:1-7—Reassurance in Stereo
   1. After the negative trial passage in Isa 42:18-25 in which God accused Israel of being blind and deaf because they did not understand the reason for exile or the intent God had to end exile, now God offers reassurance.
   2. This passage is another one of the 11 salvation oracles in Isaiah 40-55, passages which tell the people not to be afraid and assures them of salvation and redemption.
   3. This passage of hope appears in stereo (the scholarly term is chiasm) in which the major themes are echoed. Note how the first point is echoed in the last point, and the second point is echoed in the 8th point, and so on. The form is a way of stressing the central point: God loves Israel.
      1. God is creator—v 1a
      2. Israel is called by name—v 1b
      3. Fear not—v 1c
      4. God trades other nations for Israel—v 3
      5. God loves Israel—v 4a
      6. God trades other people for Israel—v 4b
      7. Fear not—v 5
      8. Everyone is called by name—v 7a
      9. God is creator—v 7b
   4. God does over 20 things for Israel in this passage. Make a list of them
   5. The vivid metaphors of v 2 could be general in nature or the waters could refer to the Red Sea and Jordan River crossings in the Exodus and the fire might refer back to Isa 42:25.
   6. There are clear references to the end of exile (Isa 43:3, 5-6).
   7. The passage contains the clearest expression of God’s love for Israel in this portion of Isaiah (cf. Deut 7:1-8).
   8. The passage contains great insight into God. List the attributes of God that are mentioned (there are at least 8).
3. Isa 43:8-15—You are my witnesses
   1. This trial is the third one in this portion of Isaiah (cf. Isa 41:1-5, 21-29) and the first of two in this chapter.
   2. The prophet again accuses Israel of being blind and deaf (cf. Isa 41:21-29) but calls them to the witness stand, for who can better testify to the work of God than Israel? The nations are in the courtroom to witness (v 9) and to offer testimony to their own gods which they appear not to do.
   3. This passage has one of the clearest statements of monotheism in the entire Bible. Find at least 8 different ways in which the passage comments on the uniqueness of God.
   4. Isa 43:14 states clearly that God is about to end the Babylonian captivity.
4. Isa 43:16-21—I am doing a new thing
   1. In this brief passage, Israel seems fixated on the “good old days” or the “former things,” no doubt the time before exile or the exodus out of Egypt or the years when they had a king, a nation, a temple and a land, but God calls them to witness the “new thing” which is God’s bringing them back from exile (v 19).
   2. Isa 43:17 seems to recall God’s power during the exodus while Isa 43:20 offers them protection from the wild beasts on their return through the wilderness, both expressions of God’s power.
5. Isa 43:22-28—You did not call upon me.
   1. After calling Israel twice in Isa 43:1, 7, God now reports than Israel never called on him (Isa 43:22).
   2. Twice in Isa 40-55 God opposes Israel: Isa 43:22-28; 50:1-3.
   3. Isa 43:23-24 imply that in Babylonian captivity Israel offered sacrifices, but not to their God. All Israel offered to God was their sin.
   4. The identities of the “first father” (Abraham and Jacob are often suggested), the “your mediator” (some suggest the priests or the writing prophets), and the “princes of the sanctuary” (some suggest the kings who received a negative verdict in 1 & 2 Kings) are not clear.
   5. Despite Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, God remains faithful to Israel.
6. Isa 44:1-8—Water on the thirsty land
   1. After the rebuke of Isa 43:22-28, Isaiah responds with assurance (just as the negative trial passage in Isa 42:18-25 is followed by the hope of 43:1-7). The “fear nots” and the promise of redemption make this another salvation oracle.
   2. Jeshurun occurs here and Deut 32:15; 33:5, 26 and is often taken as complimentary name for Israel meaning “upright.”
   3. God provides life in the dead desert just as he is the only living God among the non-living Babylonian pantheon. There is again a clear statement of monotheism.
   4. The passage anticipates that one day Israel will claim God and serve as his witnesses.
7. Isa 44:9-20—Build your own idol
   1. This section stands out in Isa 40-55 in several ways: It focuses on idols not God. It almost seems to be a taunt not the serious trial speeches or assurance oracles. Many translations set this as prose (NRSV) not as poetry (NIV). Even if it is taken as poetry, it does seem to tell a story. The rest of Isa 40-55 mentions God and the LORD frequently. There is no mention here of either.
   2. The passage centers in on the frailty of the idol maker and the inactivity of the idol.
   3. Some observe that while the trial scenes make a logical argument against idols (there is no evidence of what events the idols have predicted or caused) this passage makes fun of the process of idol making. The maker grows tired. The same wood used to make idols also serves as kindling.
   4. In short, God makes Israel. The Babylonians make gods.
   5. The last line of the section seems to be a proverb implying that idol makers and worshippers are like people who eat ashes. They are deluded in mind.
8. Isa 44:21-45:8—The LORD has done it!
   1. This passage contrasts with the previous passage. Idols and their makers mirror human weakness. God does amazing things no person could do.
   2. The word “who” appears nine times. Make a list of what God does. Note among them these remarkable deeds:
      1. Isa 44:26—God speaks and Jerusalem is repopulated and Judah rebuilt.
      2. Isa 44:28—God uses the Persian emperor for his own purposes.
      3. Isa 44:28—God speaks and the temple is rebuilt.
   3. God exerts control over Cyrus. There are at least 15 ways in which God guides Cyrus. Make a list.
   4. The “these things” in Isa 44:21 could be the idol worship taunt in Isa 44:9-20 but more likely refers back to Isa 44:6-8 where it refers to God’s past history with Israel.
   5. Isa 44:27 could refer to Gen 8 and the aftermath of the flood or to the crossing of the Red Sea in Ex 14.
   6. The word “anointed” in Isa 45:1 is the root from which we get Messiah. Ancient kings were anointed for service just as God anointed his son for service.
   7. Isa 45:7 refers back to Gen 1-2 but adds the striking line from God, “I make weal and create woe” which can be rendered that God makes good and evil. Rather than removing this line from its context and concluding that God is the author of all evil, it makes more sense to see this line as a reference to the exilic experience: God sent them into exile (woe) and will bring them home from exile (weal, the Hebrew word is shalom which means peace or completion).
9. Isa 45:9-19—Israel complains about God’s plans.
   1. According to Isa 45:9, Israel strives with its Maker over his plans, perhaps God’s decision to send them into exile (Isa 45:7) or his plan to use Cyrus (Isa 44:9-45:8 which is alluded to in Isa 45:13).
   2. The passage compares such complaints to two every day experiences:
      1. Israel’s complaints about God’s work is like a piece of clay complaining to the potter (perhaps an allusion to the wood and carpenter in the taunt against idols in Isa 44:9-20).
      2. Israel’s complaints about God’s work is like the child in the womb complaining to the father who conceived him.
   3. A creator God can do what he chooses.
   4. Cyrus does not work for money (Isa 45:13), but Israel will profit from the plans that they now complain about (Isa 45:14).
   5. The reference to God hiding himself (Isa 45:14) is a contrast with the idols. One can see the idols who do nothing. One cannot see the God who does everything. In fact, when God speaks, all hear (Isa 45:19) although ironically, Israel is often deaf to God’s words.
10. Isa 45:20-25—Every knee shall bow.
    1. After taunting the idol makers (Is 44:9-20) and then describing what God does (Isa 44:9-45:8) and dealing with Israel’s complaint about God’s activities (Isa 45:9-19), the passage at hand returns to the trial image which pits God against the idols.
    2. The passage again uses the historical argument calling on the idols to inform the court of the predictions which they have made about events to occur. During the trial it is revealed that all such predictions came from God. He did so that every knee would bow, all nations would know him, and that Israel would triumph.
    3. Paul cites Isa 45:23 in Rom 14:11 and Phil 2:10.
    4. The passage concludes with wonderful words of assurance that includes not only those people in captivity, but all those spiritual “offspring” that follow.

**Continuities:**

1. Pick out (or ask the class to choose) 4-5 lines from this section of Isaiah that offer hope and reassurance. Ask students to identify their favorite ones. Why do these lines offer such hope? What is Isaiah trying to do with these lines of hope? Why do people of all circumstances need hope? Consider people in hopeless situations near to the church building. How could the congregation provide them with words of hope? How might they respond?
2. Consider the taunt against idol makers and idols in Isa 44. How would a craftsman who had made an idol or how would an idol owner respond to this taunt? Speculate about what strategy Isaiah had in mind in writing this section. Did idol worshippers really believe that their god was in the idol? What are examples of idol worship today?
3. Isaiah repeats the same themes and forms in this section. He alternates between the courtroom scenes in which God wins the case over idols or God wins the case against Israel and the words of comfort in the salvation oracles. What is his strategy? Why the repetition? How is repetition used in our culture (consider that we repeatedly listen to the same songs, sing the same hymns, expect the preacher to have an invitation each Sunday, watch reruns of movies and songs, parents repeat the same warnings/lectures to their children, etc.)? Compare our use of repetition with Isaiah’s.

**Assignment:** Read Isa 46-47.

**Additional Study:**

1. Compare the inscription on the Cyrus Cylinder (<http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/article_index/c/cyrus_cylinder_-_translation.aspx>) with Isa 45:1-8. What parallels are there? How are the two passages different?
2. Using the list of hymns below, consider how they function in the unfolding of Isa 40-55:
   1. 40:10-13
   2. 44:23
   3. 45:24-25
   4. 48:20-21
   5. 49:13
   6. 52:9-10
   7. 55:12-13