

“Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: “I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Perhaps you are familiar with the proverb, “Behind every great man is a great woman”. While this saying predates the feminist movement of the 1960s and the following years, it did become popular during that time. In the ensuing years, the way in which it was often presented suggests that the women, who were the real influence that led to a man’s success, will now take centre stage, and bring about that success in their own right.

There is a much greater truth brought out in the words of our text today. Behind all that happens in human history is the God who works all things according to His perfect plan and purpose. That may be hard to remember, especially when we see the evil that seeks to replace morality and good in our world today. We a world sliding further and further into unbelief. We see the people of God persecuted by the world around us, and for many that persecution truly is a life and death matter. We may feel what David expressed in one of his psalms: *“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?”* (Psalm 13:1-2, ESV)

Thankfully, as God speaks to His people through the prophet Isaiah, we see this glorious truth: God is in charge. He works in all things, bending even the evil intentions of men to accomplish His purpose and holy will, working to bring about His saving purpose for our days now, even as He works to bring us the fulness of salvation in Jesus Christ. All the powers of darkness and evil are still no match for the True God, who will do all that needs to be done—yes, even making evil bow to His divine purpose, to bring about His righteousness and His saving grace.

Isaiah is a wonderful book. God speaks through His prophet, prophesying events that cover 200 years of Old Testament history, not including the wonderful prophecies that look even further into the wonderful work of God’s true Messiah, Jesus Christ. Some of the greatest and most comforting promises of the coming Christ are from this book, which has been referred to as *the fifth Gospel*.

Isaiah is sent to preach to Judah, to a people of whom God says: *“Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.”* (Isaiah 1:4, ESV) The idolatry, unbelief and wicked practices of the nation have gone on year after year, century after century. God has been patient, sending prophets like Isaiah to warn the people and to call them to repent; pleading with them to turn back to the One who alone is God, the One who has blessed them and who delivers them. Yet the people continue to worship other gods and do evil things in the name of those gods. Now God makes it clear that the day is coming when His patience will end. There will be a day of reckoning and judgement. The people will be carried into exile in Babylon. They will spend 70 years removed from their home and from the freedom they enjoyed—and abused.

But God would not leave them there forever. And so He spoke to Isaiah ahead of time, telling them about a king who would let them go home again. What is so astounding is that even before there was a Persian empire; even before this man was born, God calls him by name: Cyrus of Persia.

From our perspective, Cyrus would be a strange choice. After all, Cyrus was not a believer. Yet in our text, God declares: *For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. I*

am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me. God also calls Cyrus *his anointed*. That word anointed is the same word used as the title for Jesus Christ. It is the word, “messiah”. Don’t misunderstand: Cyrus is no saviour. He is simply God’s instrument. Even though Cyrus does not recognize it, God says: ***“I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.*** It was the Lord who subdued the nations before Cyrus. It was God who enabled him to conquer foreign powers—even mighty Babylon—almost as if the gates of walled cities would just swing open for his army to march in. And Cyrus would collect the plunder, the wealth of all his enemies. As Isaiah prophesied, so it happened. History actually records that the Medo-Persian Empire conquered lands with unprecedented speed and ease. Even Babylon fell almost without a fight.

But why would God want to give success to an unbeliever? Why does God let some of the things happen that we see in our world? Job asked those questions when his life was turned upside down and his family and wealth were taken from him. The Pharisees ask that question as they try to trick Jesus with the question of paying taxes to Caesar. For them, it was clear. God can’t use Caesar for anything good, so why does He allow the evil rule of the Romans? We wonder why God lets COVID-19 have the devastating effects it has on our society, on our lives, and yes, even on our worship life. It begs the question, “who’s in charge?” We have often heard the unbelieving world simply say that God can’t be all powerful; that God can’t control all that is happening. If He is, then He must be a vindictive God, who really doesn’t care about the things that are happening.

But this is why God’s words through Isaiah are so important. Even though God’s ways may be hidden from us; even though all the powers of darkness and the devil are marshalled against God’s plans and against God’s people, God is still in charge. He says: ***“I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things.”***

God works in all of history. God is in charge. God has a plan, and all the powers of darkness cannot overcome it. Oh, the devil and all his evil followers, including the sinful world and our own sinful hearts try to lead us to forsake God or to believe that He is no longer in control. Yet all things happen under His watchful care. How unique and inspiring it is to know that God spoke so clearly, so precisely about the work of Cyrus before Cyrus was even born! Even though the captivity has not yet begun, God declares that the day is coming when it will also end, and God uses Cyrus to defeat Israel’s enemy and among his very early decrees is the news that the Jews can go home.

In all of this and in so much more we see that God has a plan and purpose. We have spoken before about God’s alien work—the judgement that comes under the law. God doesn’t want anyone to perish, but He does punish sin and unbelief. He uses the Law to lead people to repentance. He uses the pains, the uncertainty and the struggles of our lives to show our need and His power, His grace and His mercy. I know it is hard to believe that God has any good purpose when our bodies are weak and suffering; when disease causes us pain; when the struggles of life seem so overwhelming to us. Yet God can use all these things to lead us to what really matters—to the comfort of His grace and mercy in Jesus Christ.

If God can use an evil man like Cyrus to bring about good, how much more can and does He do that in His perfect Messiah, Jesus Christ. Cyrus was a tool whom God used. The greater anointed one comes into history to do what His Father desired. In the book of Hebrews we are assured: ***“Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”*** (Hebrews 10:5-7, ESV) We know that at the baptism of Jesus and again at His transfiguration, the Father declared: ***“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”*** (Matthew 3:17, ESV)

Cyrus had success as he carried out God’s plan. It looked as if Christ had only sorrow, defeat and suffering. He was betrayed by one of his followers. His own people turned against him. How many believe that Jesus was just a poor, unfortunate individual who ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time? Yet God was in control. The eternal Son, who gave Himself to His Father’s will was always in control. Isaiah said: ***“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”*** (Isaiah 53:4-5, ESV) Christ suffered, died and was buried for you and for me. He submitted to the evil of this world, but only to overcome that evil. In rising from the dead, He was victorious over all His enemies and brings us home—not to an earthly home, but to the glorious

beauty, joy and glory of His eternal Kingdom.

We may wonder at times what God is doing. We may feel frustrated that evil seems to carry the day. Yet, dear people, loved by God, know that your Creator, your Saviour and Redeemer, your Helper and Sanctifier is still in charge. Evil can raise its ugly head, but it cannot change what God has accomplished for you!

In our Collect of the Day we prayed: O God, the protector of all who trust in You, have mercy on us that with You as our ruler and guide we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal. We rest secure and peaceful in His promises, knowing the truth of what Paul said: ***“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** (Romans 8:38–39, ESV)