

Not by Our Own Devices

Lesson for January 15, 2023

Unit II: God's Promises

Scriptural Background: Isaiah 48:1-22

Printed Text: Isaiah 48:3-8a, 17

Key verse: *This is what the Lord says— your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: “I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.”*
(Isaiah 48:17, NIV)

An old sailor repeatedly got lost at sea, so his friends gave him a compass and urged him to use it. The next time he went out in his boat, he followed their advice and took the compass with him. But as usual he became hopelessly confused and was unable to find land.

Finally, he was rescued by his friends. Disgusted and impatient with him, they asked, "Why didn't you use that compass we gave you? You could have saved us a lot of trouble!" The sailor responded, "I didn't dare to! I wanted to go north, but as hard as I tried to make the needle aim in that direction, it just kept on pointing southeast." The old sailor was so certain he knew which was north that he stubbornly tried to force his own personal persuasion on his compass. Unable to do so, he tossed it aside as worthless and failed to benefit from the guidance it offered.

Source Unknown

This is the state of Israel's heart in this week's lesson.

Key Terms

1. **Directs** (verse 17) – Aims; guides; leads forth.
2. **Obstinate** (verse 4, KJV) – Stubbornly adhering to an opinion, purpose, or course in spite of reason, arguments, or persuasion.
3. **Stubborn** (verse 4, NIV) – Unreasonably or perversely unyielding; hardhearted; impudent.
4. **Teaches** (verse 17) – To instruct by precept, example, or experience; trains.

Lesson Background

This message is addressed to the “house of Jacob,” which includes both “Israel” and Judah.” The name Jacob essentially meaning “deceiver, cheater” – and said they only have the name of Israel, not the character of Israel, which means “governed by God.” Both are criticized for calling on God's name but refusing to live by His laws. “I have chosen” (tried), “thee in the furnace of affliction” refers to God's merciful judgment, which has burned away their scum. The LORD in Chapter 48 exhorts His unclean nation to take note of the prophecies carefully because they have been living in unbelief too long and need to renew their faith in and commitment to God's word. Furthermore, He reminds them how He continues to be patient with them for their benefit but

calls them to contemplate His sovereign acts. The Lord invited the Israelites to return to Him and keep their covenants. He promised scattered Israel that He had not forgotten them and that He would restore them to their covenant blessings and gather them back to their lands of inheritance through the efforts of His servants.

1. **Deliberate** (Isaiah 48:3-5)

The Lord declares events that have happened as He predicted them (Isaiah 41:2-4; 46:10), so the people would not attribute these events to other gods.

I have declared the former things from the beginning.... Suddenly I did them, and they came to pass: The LORD has shown Israel His power to declare the future in predictive prophecy. He did this **because I knew that you were obstinate**, knowing Israel's love of idolatry, He gave them irrefutable evidence.

thy neck is an iron sinew: They are stiff-necked. They think too highly of themselves. They are set in their ways and are unteachable.

brow of brass: Indicates they have their thinking covered over so thoroughly, they will not listen, or learn, anything new. This is another way to emphasize their obstinance.

Acts 7:51 *"Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye."*

2 Chronicles 30:8 *"Now be ye not stiff-necked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves unto the LORD, and enter into his sanctuary, which he hath sanctified forever: and serve the LORD your God, that the fierceness of his wrath may turn away from you."*

The implication for today's Christian is that a person, or a people who are stiff-necked, and have a brow of brass, cannot be taught of the Holy Spirit, or anyone else. They are closed off to learning.

I have even from the beginning declared it to thee; before it came to pass I showed it thee: lest thou shouldest say, Mine idol hath done them: This means that Judah was without excuse, because God told them from the beginning. They knew the greatness and power of God, yet they still lived with only a religious image, without a spiritual reality.

Lest you should say: He goes so far as to say they did not err because of the idols, but because of a hardened heart within themselves. The idols didn't make them do it. Their wickedness made them do it. A certain comedian in our time has a saying that the devil made him do it. No, the devil did not. His sinful nature made him do it.

2. **Divine** (Isaiah 48:6-8a, 17)

"Thou hast heard, see all this; and will not ye declare it?: It is incredulous that Israel was so disrespectful. It was as if the LORD was amazed that His people had seen all of His great power and glory, yet they still stood in stubborn rebellion against Him.

I have showed thee new things from this time, even hidden things, and thou didst not know them: God has tried to reveal Himself to them from the beginning. The secret things of God were not secret to them, but they would not open their hearts and receive the message He was trying to give them. The wonderful secrets of God were not important enough to them for them to receive.

New things: From this point onward, the prophecies of the Messiah's first and second coming and the restoration of Israel have a new distinctiveness.

They are created now, and not from the beginning; even before the day when thou heardest them not: This creation is speaking of the secrets of God. They have always been secret to the world. God has revealed them to His own. The natural man cannot know and understand the secrets of God. Even if they were given to him, he would not understand.

The secrets of God must be discerned in the spirit of man. The Holy Spirit of God is our teacher and our guide. Everything has a timetable with God. God reveals just as much as we can handle and understand at the moment.

Yea, thou heardest not; yea, thou knewest not; yea, from that time that thine ear was not opened: Even though this was all available to them, they did not open their ears of understanding and know what God was saying to them. They had ears to hear, but they did not hear.

In verses 8b through 16 (not recorded in this lesson) God tells Israel His foreknowledge allowed Him to know from the beginning how treacherous and sinful they were. The nation Israel had no merit to prompt God's favor toward them (verse 8). They deserved wrath and death, but His mercy toward them originates in His desire to be glorified and His desire to display the integrity of His own name.

Israel had lived in sin. They had been unfaithful by worshipping idols. They had ears to hear God and would not listen. They had eyes to see, and yet would not come out of the darkness of sin to see the Light of God. They deserved to die. They were disobedient to God in every way. They were God's children, however. They were called by His name. As bad as they were, they were still His. God loved them but hated their ways. The only thing left to do was to forgive them and start again.

God forgave them for Himself, as well as for them. For His name's sake, He forgave them. God is like a loving parent, who will take His children back and forgive all their sins.

Since Isaiah's time, Israel's testing's have included the Babylonian captivity and their present worldwide dispersion from their land; unlike silver purged in the furnace, the purging of Israel is not complete, and they are not refined. But God keeps up the afflictions until they are, so His name is not defamed through the destruction of Israel.

The nation will be purged (Zechariah 13:1). God's plan is such that He alone, not man or man-made idols, will receive credit for Israel's salvation (42:8; Romans 11:25-27, 33-36). The adversaries of God are never to be given legitimate reasons for ridiculing God and His work.

Their captivity and affliction had come to make them seek God. Silver is symbolic of redemption, so possibly that is why that is mentioned here. God brings redemption, not man. They had been in the furnace of affliction to refine them and make them search for God.

These were God's chosen people. He would not choose another nation. He would just refine the nation He had chosen. They were known as God's people. To do away with them and start with a new nation would appear that God had made a mistake. God would put the heat on His nation and make them into what He wants them to be. To answer any resentment among His people, God reminded them why He allowed things for His glory and to further His praise. He can do it because of who He is – the only True God, the God of all glory, the God of all eternity, the God of all Creation.

Though the LORD is the God of all glory and power, He is motivated by love for His people. It is the LORD's love for us that makes Him want us to obey and praise Him. Love desires that things work according to their design and purpose. We were designed and purposed to obey and praise our Creator. God can call us to submit to Him, and honor Him, for our good, not to satisfy some need in God.

So, just as much as it is the love of the LORD for His people that shall do His pleasure on Babylon – punishing this nation that set itself against His people – so it is the love of the LORD that allows the refining fires to touch His people.

In verse 16 God says, "Come near to Me and listen to this.... now the Sovereign LORD and His Spirit have sent Me: This is the Servant of the LORD, the Messiah Himself speaking. Only He was from the beginning. The Messiah is pleading with His people.

Isaiah is a prophet of God who is bringing the message God has given him for these people. God had sent messengers from the very beginning to warn His people. God has not kept secrets from them. He has desired to fellowship with His people.

The Lord God and His Spirit has sent Isaiah with this message to these people. He has also sent Cyrus to help them. God's message is presented to the people in verse 17.

Thus saith the LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the LORD thy God which teacheth thee to profit, which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go: In this section the prophet quotes the Word of the LORD directly. It begins with His self-disclosure and His claims for Israel's allegiance—He shows what He does for them. "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you by the way that you should go. Only God can redeem these people from the terrible situation they have gotten themselves in. God is the only help for any of us when all around us fails. God made a path for each of us to follow. He lights that path with the Light of the world (Jesus Christ).

We do not need to grope around in life. We must just keep our eye on the goal before us and follow Him. We cannot fail with God as our help. The Holy Spirit of God is the teacher and our guide. Depend heavily on those teachings. The answer for the people then and the answers for us now, are found in God's Word.

Lesson Summary

Sometimes people just don't seem to have ears to hear. That was certainly the case for God's people during the time of Isaiah. In Chapter 48, the LORD clearly sees the hard hearts of His people and declares to them they have no excuse for their hard-heartedness.

God has a serious complaint against his people. Although they use His name, they do not use it in righteousness. Additionally, Israel claims that they are a holy people belonging to the LORD of Hosts, yet they do not testify of Him. Jesus said that if you are ashamed of Him, He will be ashamed of you (Luke 9:26). Despite all of the works and the prophecies that God has performed in the eyes of His people, they refuse to acknowledge Him. They give Him lip service only by saying that they belong to God but then fail to perform the things which a faithful servant of God would actually do – to proclaim the wondrous works of God.

From the beginning, God has shown through prophecy that He knows the future and therefore that it is Him who is bringing things to pass and not some other god, yet these people are too stubborn to give Him praise. We must be very careful to serve God in spirit and in truth, giving Him praise and honor when it is due Him. Otherwise, we may find ourselves outwardly serving God with one's lips, but inwardly being full of dead men's bones (Matthew 23:27).

Finally, God pleads for His people to hear Him, this time on the basis that He holds all knowledge. Through Him, one can gain wisdom in righteousness. God, through the prophet Isaiah is calling Israel to:

1. Pay attention to what God says
2. Understand why God does what He does – He often delays His wrath to glorify His name
3. Respect Who God is – His Sovereignty
4. Obey His Commands