

Notes on Isaiah 43:22 – 44:23

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The previous section (42:18-43:21) was about national redemption. This section is about redemption from sin. One is a return from Babylon; the other, a return from sin, is a “return to me”. Both sections open with the helplessness of Israel. For both needs, the Lord is the Redeemer who saves his people. If all the Lord did was overthrow human enemies, and not deliver from their sins, they would be free from Babylon but still kept from the presence of the Lord because of sin. God chose them, so he put himself in a position of self-imposed commitment to redeem them from all evil, so he could be their God forever keeping covenant with them. His salvation is complete, not merely political. One section ends with Israel as the Lord’s praise and the other as those who display his glory. All redemption reaches such a goal.

43:22-24 It seems when reading these verses that Israel failed to bring offerings to God. This is not what this text is saying. Many prophets spoke of temple activity and numerous offerings. There is another key to understanding this paragraph. Seven times the complaint is that the offerings were not *for me*. Offerings were required, but then rejected, because they were offered without repentance of sin. The heart of the Lord’s complaint is: You did it, but you did not do it for me. 1:10-17 shows God’s rejection of corrupt worship. Instead of serving God, Israel sought to have him do their will. Instead of pleasing God with their worship, they wearied him.

The Purpose of Sacrifices Our salvation is certain not only because an offering has been made, but because the one Jesus made for us has been accepted! Israel had not lavished on the Lord the fat of sacrifices (v.24). This means they had not satisfied him. Worship is not to help people; it is to please God and satisfy him with sincere recognition of him as God. For this we need the Holy Spirit. Worship with blood sacrifices was required to *satisfy* him in a different sense; God is offended at our sin and must be satisfied that he has done right in response to our sin. This is an aspect of worship all sinners are unable to meet unless they are sent to hell to suffer eternally on their own for their sins – the only way a sinner can atone for himself. In Israel, people did not offer sacrifices for themselves; the priests did this for them. They could not provide atonement in their own blood; it had to be the blood of an innocent substitute. God must be appeased by direct judgment on the sinner, or by a sacrifice which turns his wrath from sinners. For this we have a Mediator, Christ. He has acted and offered. He absorbed the wrath of God for us. The resurrection is God’s clear message that his never-to-be-repeated offering has satisfied him forever concerning our sin.

43:25 Isaiah moves from speaking of sin to blotting it out. He could have said that he would blot them out. The Lord does not merely say he will blot out sin; he describes himself as the forgiving God. “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression...?” (Micah 7:18; Mark 2:7). God forgives for his sake. This means the reason he forgives is not in the sinner. If forgiveness is deserved, it is not a gracious gift. When this verse speaks of God remembering sin no more, it is new covenant language as in Jeremiah 31:31-37. This is seen as well in the next paragraph when we read of the Lord pouring out his Spirit.

43:26 There can be no forgiveness unless there is some sin to forgive. There can be no accepting a pardon unless sin is recognized and admitted by the sinner. The Lord challenges Israel to defend any claim to innocence. Isaiah’s device is to state a challenge, and when it is not answered, that shows that there is no defence. This is like the case where idols do not reply to God’s question, as in 41:21-29. Silence, when God charges of sin, is the shameful stance of the guilty (Romans 3:19). In v.26, they cannot answer God.

43:27-28 So the Lord speaks to show they are and have been sinners throughout their history. Their first father is not named; it may well be Adam in whom all sinned (Romans 5:12). Their leaders ever since have also been sinners, even the religious leaders in God’s holy temple! The appropriate penalty for guilt is announced.

44:1,2 The word of forgiveness in 43:25 was sincere. They are now told to listen. Even though they are without any defence for their sin, the Lord has gospel for his undeserving people. He still considers Israel his servant and his chosen, because the Lord has not abandoned his plan. He looks past what is, to what he shall accomplish. He is determined to do them good (Jeremiah 29:11). He formed them and does not give up until he has finished his creative work (Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 2:13). Election precedes God's commitment to deliver on his own intention. Jeshurun means 'upright', an odd thing to call a sinful people, but God is confident of his ability to make Israel upright.

44:3-4 This is an Old Testament passage (see Ezekiel 36:24-32; Joel 2:28) which pictures the work of the Holy Spirit again using the metaphor of water. Life depends on water and so this is a very fitting analogy for the work of the Spirit. That the water is poured enforces the idea that it comes down from above. This fits the later description of Pentecost when the Lord Jesus returned to heaven and poured out his Spirit (Acts 2:33). Isaiah speaks of a future day when their descendents would come to spiritual life – life like a lush well-watered garden (58:11), the opposite of the parched garden of 1:30.

44:5 Earlier there was no response when called on to state their innocence (43:26). They could not. Now they speak, cheerfully and explicitly confessing the Lord as theirs. Gone is calling on false gods. Note that the confession is individual. Each of us is called upon to confess the Lord as ours in a clear profession of faith. When one calls himself by the name of Jacob, this shows that the joining is in two directions: it is to the Lord and also to his people. When the Spirit of God produces spiritual life, those who are merely Israelites by heritage and birth become Israelites in heart (John 1:47). Note that it will be their offspring, a word of encouragement concerning our children, and in the context of Isaiah 44, a prediction of future salvation with a huge response when the Spirit will be poured out at Pentecost.

44:6-20 Another section on God vs. idols In chapters 40 & 41 God declares his glory and the idols cannot compare; they are not like him. With a detailed look at idols, the Lord is shown to be not like them. The real God made man; men can make only false gods. It helps us think of God correctly to say he is the *incomparable* God. This section is located between statements about removing sin. It is the Lord alone who brings to spiritual life. Idols make men to be like themselves, lifeless and ignorant. The effects of delusion and lack of understanding are emphasized in vv.18-20, whereas the Spirit brings men to exclaim with joy that they belong to the true and living God, identified by his Name 'LORD'. Vv.6-8 will show God's initiative in his people, while vv.9-20 display human initiative in making false gods.

44:6-8 Here the Lord reveals himself by descriptive names: King, Redeemer, Lord Almighty. This is the first use of LORD Almighty in the major section of Isaiah 38-55, a name emphasizing his power. It could be translated 'LORD of armies'. These verses show he is the Lord of all their history.

"I am the first and the last" shows God is unlike idols. He does not derive his existence from others. He is self-sufficient; he always has been and always will be. When history is over, he will still be God; what he says he will do. He alone prevails as Lord over all. It is very fitting that the Lord Jesus reveals himself this way in Revelation 1:8,17,18 & 2:8. When Christ alone can open seals (Revelation 5,6), it shows that he alone has control of the design and events of history. If any idol is a living god, he must be able to declare an event into reality (v.7). Since idols cannot, they must not be feared. They must be rejected. There is no Rock but God, the stable, trustworthy Shelter. (Note in 1 Corinthians 10:4 Christ is called that Rock.)

Idols have been challenged before to reply to some specific challenge. In v.8 the Lord refers to what he proclaims and they cannot, but it does not say exactly what he proclaims. From the preceding context we conclude that it is the blotting out of sin (43:25) and the life the Spirit will give (vv.3-5). Later words speak of the removal of sin (v.22). In short, the Lord is boasting of what he does in salvation to change those who are his. The alternative is tragic – those who worship false gods become slaves of falsehood (vv.20). God takes "things that are not", and makes something of them, so they boast in the Lord

(1 Corinthians 1:26-31). Idols can neither proclaim benefits to their worshippers, nor make their word come true.

44:9-20 This section opens and closes with the ignorance of idol worshippers (vv.9 & 18-20). The idol is worthless and those who worship them become like them (Psalm 135:18). There is no profit in them (v.10). They are a human production (vv. 9-14), made of physical things (vv. 14-17). It takes human strength to make them, yet such strength fades (v.12).

Making our own gods The idol looks like a man (v.13); man can never create anything beyond his limited understanding. Idolatry is not limited to things men manufacture; it is also what the image makers imagine God to be, or wish him to be. Every false thought and view of God is thus a sin, and we are commanded to keep ourselves from idols (1 John 5:21) including ones we make. To know the true God we must suppress our suppositions about him and humbly accept what he tells us in his Word. (The easiest way to break the first commandment is to violate the second!) God's revelation is all we can know; we are forbidden even to guess beyond that, because that puts us back into the mode of an idolater. He is not like us, and we must not seek to recast him (idolatrously) into our image.

It appears to be ridicule, but Isaiah just reports the facts of how an idol is made with detail on how the wood is used. From the same tree some is used for heating and cooking, and another piece to make a god to whom the maker bows and says, "Save me!" He may use leftover wood that chances to be available. God forms his people by sovereign intent and choice (v.2).

44:18-20 Idol makers do not grasp how foolish it is to make idols. Everyone needs a god; without the real One, men can do nothing else but devise a substitute to replace the One rejected in their hearts. A false god does not need to be physical; in modern society it may not be. Human reason is corrupted when the truth of God is suppressed (Romans 1:18). Men's minds are then closed to truth, so they wilfully exchange the glory of God for whatever images they prefer (Romans 1:23). The delusion of a false god is an enslaving domination, just like any other sin (Romans 6:15-23). The deluded heart of v.20 misleads so effectively that men cannot break out of bondage to error. The natural man cannot (is unable to) understand (1 Corinthians 2:14). Salvation can come only by the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit in a man (44:3-5), God acting to save (44:21-23).

44:21-23 In Isaiah 43:14-21 the return home is from Babylon; here it is a return to the Lord. The idolater fashions his idol; the Lord has fashioned his people (v.21). The idolater is a slave to his idol; Jacob is God's servant (v. 21). The idolater prays in desperation (v.17); God announces his people are already redeemed (v.22). He has acted before they call. The idolater makes an idol from a tree; now the trees of the forest praise the Lord (Psalm 96:12).

44:21-22 As in Psalm 78, and so often in Deuteronomy, Israel is called to remember a call from the Lord who never forgets them. One must first know in order to remember. God informs that he has removed their sin, using the same verb as in 43:25. God's grace has not waited for their repentance, rather his grace causes it. The redemption is a fact already, just as gospel preaching points back to a finished atonement for sin (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

44:23 The earth is the Lord's, so his salvation reaches beyond humans to all the universe – all heaven and earth. The old creation benefits from the new, especially as God will display his glory in Israel. In this context, this has to include that God's glory (Ephesians 1:14) is a glory of saving undeserving sinners, whose sins are blotted out, when neither they nor their ancestors could make a case for their innocence. This is worth all the shouting and singing.