

Always Working, Never Failing, Ever Faithful

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[0 : 00] So we're looking again at Isaiah chapter 45. And you can go and put the first few verses on the screen if you can.

So when I was in, well, a couple of years ago I was going through all my email inbox. I went all the way back to the beginning. And I made it all the way to my freshman year of college.

And I was deleting email after email. And I saved one email from my freshman year of college because it meant so much to me. And it was an email where a member of the staff of the campus ministry that I was involved in wrote me and he apologized to me.

And he was so worried that some things that he had said to me were so off-putting that I was never going to come back to the ministry again. And I love that email because I remember what the conversation actually was and the reason that he had sent the email and what had happened and what had been happening over several meetings with this guy is that I had been telling him who I thought God was and how I thought God worked in this world.

And he kept bringing the Bible to me and showing me that my idea of who God was and who the Bible said God was weren't always the same thing.

[1 : 28] And that was an uncomfortable conversation to have because he was essentially saying, my view of God was based on my own opinions. And he said, he kept trying to point me to the God of scriptures.

And in the moment, that was kind of a tense conversation to tell someone your view of God is wrong. But I'm so thankful. I look back on that and I'm so thankful for it because I needed someone to tell me that God isn't who I say he is.

God is who the scriptures say he is. And whenever I'm reading through the Bible, and this is as true now as it was when I became a Christian, when my idea of God conflicts with the God I find in scripture, it's the God of scripture who is true, not my idea of God.

And that's, if you've been a Christian a long time, you know that experience of going back again and again to scripture and letting the scriptures tell you who God is. Even when it seems difficult to accept it first.

And I bring that story up because I think in the context of our passage this evening, God's people in the context of Isaiah 45 are wrestling with this question of who is God and how does he work in this world?

[2 : 39] Because they have an idea of who God is and how he has acted in the past. And yet their present circumstances, in their present circumstances, they cannot understand what God could possibly be doing because things are not going well.

And this is not just an academic question for these people. God's people are looking for a reason to hope. They're looking for a reason to hope and they can't find it anywhere. And this is really important for understanding why this passage is significant.

So I'm just going to give you just a few sentences of historical context. In the context of this passage, Israel as a nation has been destroyed hundreds of years before, Judah as a nation has been brought to its knees just a few years before, and Jerusalem, you know, the place where God dwells in his temple has been destroyed.

The temple of God has been destroyed. The walls of the city has been destroyed. And if none of that makes sense to you, I could summarize it like this. The people of God are finding themselves in the worst situation they could find themselves.

And to add insult to injury, anybody who is anybody in the people of God at this point in time had been dispersed over all these foreign empires who were ruling over God's people just like they were ruling over other nations.

[3 : 57] And the final really important piece to understanding this passage is the ruler of the empire that controls Israel and controls all of God's people is a man named Cyrus.

And Cyrus is the great leader of the Persian Empire. And you could say he is the bad guy, just like the Babylonians were the bad guys before the Persians and the Assyrians were the bad guys before the Babylonians.

Cyrus was holding God's people in captivity. So things are as bad as they could be. And then there's this question in all this suffering and pain, where is God?

Where could God possibly be? And where can hope be found? And what you find in Isaiah 45 in this obscure passage that you may have never thought about before, what you find in Isaiah 45 is God's answer to that question, where can hope be found?

And it was an answer that I think God's people probably could not have imagined. And to be honest, it was probably an answer they may have found offensive when they first heard it. They had an idea of who God was and of how God works in this world.

[5 : 06] And this passage very well may have conflicted with that idea and given them an identity crisis about who God was and how he works in this world. But this is God's answer.

And over the next few minutes, what I hope to show you is how what looks like a confusing response by God about what he could be doing in the midst of all this suffering is actually a great message of hope.

And not just hope for the people of Cyrus, but hope for us. Because what God is doing in this passage is he's telling us about his character. And he gives us tonight three things that we can anchor our hope into that are based on this passage, but that are always true because our God is eternal.

And those three things are this. That God is always working, that he is never failing, and that he is ever faithful. And that's what I want to look at tonight.

So the first thing that God teaches us in this passage is that he is always working. And that may have been the hardest thing to understand for these people who are living in oppression, homeless, their temple has been destroyed.

[6 : 10] And they're wondering, in the midst of all this suffering and chaos, how could God be possibly working? How can you say that he's doing something right now? And God's answer comes in verse one and he says, thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped.

So God's answer to these people who wonder, is he really working? He's saying, yes, I am working. And I have grasped the hand of a man named Cyrus.

And remember when I said just a few moments ago, that this passage could possibly have been offensive when the people of God heard it for the first time. This is why, because God looks at this pagan ruler and he says, this one is going to be my anointed one.

This is the one, Cyrus, that I'm going to lift up and use him for my purposes. And if that doesn't sound odd to you, it may sound a little more odd if you know what the Hebrew word here is.

And you might not know a lot of Hebrew, but you probably know this Hebrew word. The word for anointed in verse one is the word Messiah.

[7 : 15] So God is literally saying in verse one, thus says the Lord to his, thus says the Lord to his Messiah, to Cyrus.

Now of course in the Old Testament, the word Messiah didn't mean everything that it came to mean when you find Jesus Christ in the New Testament. So God isn't saying, you know, Cyrus turns out he was actually the son of God.

What Messiah means in the Old Testament is one who is set apart by God for a purpose. So priests in the Old Testament were sometimes called Messiahs and kings in the Old Testament were sometimes called Messiahs.

And if you remember, there's a funny story, well it's not a funny story, but there is a story in the book of 1 Samuel, whenever Saul, King Saul is chasing David all around through the kingdom trying to kill him.

And by some crazy turn of events, David has the chance to turn around and kill Saul. And David refuses to kill Saul. And the reason that he gives for not killing Saul is this.

[8 : 15] He says, I will not strike. I dare not strike the Lord's anointed. I dare not strike the Lord's Messiah. So you find the word Messiah over and over again throughout the Old Testament.

And it's men that have been set aside by God for a purpose. But even so, it happens 38 times throughout the Old Testament. Even so, this one instance is unique because this is the only time in all of Scripture's and all of God's Word where God looks at someone who doesn't know him. Someone who is not a believer, who is not a true Jew, and says, this one will be my chosen one. This one will be my Messiah. And I hope that helps you understand why this must have gone against everything the Jews would have thought about, what God was willing and able to do for them during this time period.

If you had asked a God fearing Jew during this time period, what do you want God to do for you right now? Or what do you expect God to do for your people who are in so much suffering? And they might say and legitimately say, what we want God to do for us is to do what he used to do. We want him to raise up a judge. We need a Samson or we need a Gideon or even better, what we could really use as someone like an Ehood who can sneak into Cyrus' chambers and assassinate Cyrus.

[9 : 31] And yet here comes God saying, I'm not going to kill Cyrus. I'm actually going to lift him up and use him as my tool. I'm going to make him my chosen one, my Messiah for this season.

And as hard as that may have been to accept in the moment that God is, he's not raising up one of his own people. He's raising up someone that doesn't even know him. As confusing as that may have been, the purpose of it was to say, even when you can't understand how and even when it doesn't look like it, God is working here.

And that's a message that we need just as much as they needed in 539 BC, that even when our life is in chaos and we can't point to every aspect of our lives and say, well, here's what God's doing here and here's what God's doing here.

We at least have this biblical hope that God says, even when you can't see it, I'm always working, that I work all things to the good of those who love me.

I have a, Carly and I have some really close friends, a couple whose child was born several years ago with a fairly serious spinal injury and they didn't know if the child would ever be able to walk.

[10 : 47] And it happened that they found a surgeon, a pediatric spinal surgeon all the way on the other side of the country who thought that he could operate on the child and that the child would be able to walk.

And which was great news, but you can imagine in the weeks and months leading up to that, that was a terrifying prospect to think that your child is going to be operated on and there's, you know, the spine is always serious, right?

And so the parents were naturally afraid as any parent would be. And someone came up to that couple and tried to encourage them.

And what they said was, they said, you know, God would not let you, God would not have brought you this far for this surgery to be unsuccessful.

This is before the surgery. They said, God would not have brought you this far only to allow this surgery not to be successful. Now those are kind words and those were words that were well-meaning and they were said in love, but that's not our hope as Christians.

[11 : 56] Our hope is not that the surgery will always be successful. And that's not the hope of Isaiah 45. The hope of Isaiah 45 is even when the surgery is not successful and even when your life is in chaos and even when Cyrus is on the throne and you can't see what God could possibly be doing in all of this, we still have this still small voice of God telling us, I know it's hard, but I'm working in this.

Whether it's, think about all the things that these people in Israel had gone through. They had lost their home. They'd lost their financial stability. They'd lost their reputation. They were the laughing stock of the ancient Near East.

They can't worship God like they used to. Many of them have probably lost their loved ones in very painful ways. And this message that God is always working isn't God saying, cheer up, it's not as bad as you think it is.

It's God saying, take heart because I am still in this and I'm still working. And I think there's a warning and a hope for us in this. And the warning is we've got to be careful not to tell God how to do his job.

It's easy sometimes to think that we need to give God ultimatums and say, God, if you really loved me, you would do this. Or we say, God, if you really exist, I know that you'll do this for me.

[13:17] But if you love me, if you love me, you will put an end to this trial that I'm going through, this physical pain that I'm dealing with. Or if you're real, will you fix this relationship?

And those are all good things to pray for. The trouble is when we say, God, you must do this for me. This proves to me that you're real. Because God could easily respond to us and say, if you knew me and if you trusted me, you would know that no matter what happens to you, I am working. I think of Paul and how Paul opened up in one of his letters and he said, I prayed three times for God to remove this thorn in my flesh.

And God never did. He never removed the thorn. But he gave me a message and the message was, my grace is sufficient for you.

So God didn't heal Paul, even though Paul prayed for it. But Paul walked away from that, knowing that even so, God was working in that.

[14:23] So to trust in this claim that God is always working isn't to say we know how God is always working. And sometimes it's hard and trials happen in our lives and we say, I don't know how good could possibly come from this.

And for me, this is especially during the pandemic where so many plans have been canceled and people have struggled with illnesses and people are lonely and are living in isolation.

And we can't sing like we want to for over a year. And part of me, my human earthly eyes, look at all these things that have happened in light of the pandemic and say, want to say, nothing good could come from this based on everything that I have to go on.

But what God tells me is that he may be working when I don't see it and he may be doing good. Many things that I can't see, even in the midst of pain and suffering.

And just as a side note, this is probably obvious to a lot of you, but it's not always obvious to me. I make mistakes. But sometimes when someone is going through a dark trial, it can be tempting to pull a truth like this out and just swing it around as if it will be the cure all to pain and suffering.

[15:31] Don't worry, God's working through this. So it's just not that bad. When the truth is that our neighbors often don't need this truth swung around and what they need is a hug and a meal and a note and for us to just sit with them in silence.

And so when I think about this truth and I think about who needs to hear it the most, the first person I think of is not my neighbor, it's myself. And I have to keep asking myself, when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, do I really believe that God is working?

Before I give this truth to someone else, do I believe it for myself? So that's the first thing that God teaches us is that God is always working. And the next thing we see is that God is never failing.

And what I mean by that is when God decides to use Cyrus, there is nothing that will get in his way to accomplish what he wants to accomplish through Cyrus. And you can see God's confidence in the sheer number of times that he uses the word I in this passage.

Thus says the Lord who is anointed, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him. Verse two, I will go before you in level of the exalted places. I will break in pieces the doors of bronze.

[16:42] Verse three, I will give you treasures in darkness and the hordes in secret places. It's I the Lord who name you. Verse four, I call you by name, I name you. I am the Lord God and there is no other.

Over and over again, it's I, I, I, I, I. And this is really significant when you think about it because here is Cyrus and this is a historical fact.

Cyrus is the greatest leader up to that point that the world had ever known. If I'm not mistaken, at least in the recent, in the past century, Iran has still put Cyrus on their coins.

He's, this may not mean as much to a British audience, but I've heard him called the George Washington of Iran. He's kind of this founding father who united all these nations.

And Cyrus probably thought he was a big deal and he probably thought he was a big deal for good reason because he had done what no man could do. But here in this passage, we find a whole other interpretation of history, which is that behind all of these geopolitical events and behind Cyrus' own gifted abilities as a warrior and as a leader, there's this fact that Cyrus is only there because God is using him as a tool.

[17:57] And Cyrus will only be there as long as God needs to use him. In 1879, there were some archaeologists that were digging in modern day Iran and by chance they found this object about this big, the size of a rugby ball.

I think that's how big a rugby ball is. And it had text written all over it. And what it came to be known as is the Cyrus cylinder. And it was actually from the time period when Cyrus was reigning and it was a message from Cyrus to the rest of his empire telling the world about himself.

And I want to read just a little clip of what Cyrus, who's in Isaiah 45, said about himself on this Cyrus cylinder. And this is actually at the British Museum if you ever want to go see it.

These are the actual words of Cyrus. I am Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king, the powerful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four corners of the world, the son of Cambyses, the great king.

The archaeologist that I heard explain that went on to say, now that's some great PR. And it is a good PR, but the crazy thing is it's almost true. I mean he almost did rule the whole world, the four corners of the world.

[19 : 18] But you can see that Cyrus knew his greatness. He knew that there had been no man like him before. And he probably had his own intentions, his own intentions and his own ambitions. And his plans had nothing to do with the God of Israel.

Israel and Judah to him were just a flea on the side of his great empire. He hardly knew who they even were. And yet here comes this message from God saying, even if you don't know me, you're just a tool to me and I'm only using you for my purposes and purposes that you can't even imagine. It's in verse five that he says it. He says, I am the Lord, I equip you though you do not know me. And as far as we know, there are passages in scripture where Cyrus seems to acknowledge the God of Israel.

But as far as we know, he was never actually converted and he never actually thought much of the God of Israel. But it doesn't matter. God is using him for a purpose. And it reminds me of the story of Joseph.

You remember whenever Joseph, he goes on to be the ruler, one of the rulers in Egypt and his brothers who have done so much evil come before him. And Joseph offers them an interpretation of history and interpretation of all the evils they've done before.

[20 : 35] And Joseph says, you meant evil against me, brothers. But God meant it for good to bring it about that many people could be kept alive. And you know, the same thing could be said of Cyrus.

Whatever Cyrus' intentions were, he may have meant evil. And we know he was proud. But God says, I will use your evil for good and I will lift you up for purposes that you can't even imagine.

And I don't want to push the meaning of this passage too far. But just one takeaway that I think of here when I think about Cyrus and how God never failed in his purposes with Cyrus.

And one thought that I have is if God is so willing, if God is so able to do these things with Cyrus and never fail, if he can take a man and set him on literally on top of the world to rule a whole empire, all this for a man who doesn't even know him so that God can achieve other purposes, can we not at least say that in our battles, in our battles with sin and in the struggles that we have in our life, can we not say that God is more with us than he was with Cyrus?

Which may on the face of it sound like an extraordinary claim because Cyrus one by one ticked off and beat every empire in the world. And it sounds like this extraordinary feat.

[22 : 02] But can we not say that in our battles with sin, which from our perspective sometimes seem impossible, that we have a God who has made promises to us and if he made good on his promises with Cyrus, will he not make good on his promises with us?

Our story is not Cyrus' story and God does not promise to set us on top of the world to be the king of the Persian empire. Cyrus is different than us, but the God is the same and it's a God who when he sets out to do something never fails.

So if God has promised us that he will forgive us of our sins and he will make us new, will he not make good on that promise? All right, so God is always working.

He's never failing. And the last one is this. He is ever faithful. And this is important and this is adding something new because what is at stake here in this passage is not just this question of is God still working and is God never failing.

The Jews are also asking this question, not just is God here, but is he for me? Not just is God powerful and strong, but does he still care about me? Will he still be faithful to the promises that he has made me?

[23 : 20] And it's a question that's not just an intellectual question for these people because they've watched their whole nation torn apart and they think of all these promises that God has made to them. The promises that he made to Abraham and to Jacob and to Isaac and it all now seems in

tatters.

You know, the very place where they went to worship God is a building that now sits in ruins and you can understand at least why they would say, is God still faithful to us?

Does he still care about us or has he shifted his allegiance to Cyrus or someone like Cyrus? And the answer that God gives to that comes in verse four when suddenly God tells them why he is doing all these things that he's done with Cyrus.

In verse four he says, why does God lift Cyrus up? For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen. That's why I call you by your name Cyrus.

God says everything that I am doing, all of these geopolitical events that are on such a massive scale, it's all for this small group of people known as the Israelites, for God's chosen ones.

[24 : 29] That's why God is doing it. And again, this looks like it's written to Cyrus, but we don't know if Cyrus ever actually solved this prophecy.

This is a prophecy that's meant for God's people to know that even in the great halls of power God is working on their behalf for them through men like Cyrus.

And it's this promise that even when it looks like God might not be present and that he might not be making good on the promises that he's made to us, he is, even if you can't see it.

You may think I'm the only person that's ever preached on Isaiah 45, but John Calvin did too. And John Calvin has this message, he summarizes the message for Christians really well in this passage, and I want to read just a few lines of it.

So this is John Calvin speaking. He says, we, we Christians are indeed blind and stupid. Now, those are Calvin's words, not mine. I would never say something like that.

[25 : 36] But Calvin says, we are indeed blind and stupid as to the works of God, yet we ought firmly to believe that even when everything appears to be driven about at random and be tossed up and down, God never forgets his church whose salvation, on the contrary, he promotes by hidden methods so that in the end we see that he really is her guardian and defender.

The truth is we don't always get what the Israelites got in this passage, and that is the chance to pull back the curtain and see what exactly God is doing in this moment.

This is a mercy that the Israelites received, that God for a moment pulled back the curtain of history and said, just, just so you know, this is what I'm doing. I'm lifting up men like Cyrus all to, all for you. I'm doing all this for you. And we don't always get to see what God is doing behind the curtains of history in front of us. But God gives us these stories that happen over and over again through the Old Testament and the New Testament that teach us over and over again, if God was faithful then, will he not be faithful now?

These are the kinds of things that he does in history for his people. And this would have made more sense after the fact.

[27 : 03] It would have made perfect sense after the fact, because if you know anything about Cyrus, you may know this one thing, that shortly after he came to power, he issued an edict that all of the Jews in his empire could go home.

Not only could they go home, he gave them permission and he encouraged them to go home and to build their temple and to worship their God. And there's this beautiful irony because so many Jews must have been wondering, why don't we have a king?

Where is the king of Israel that we need right now? And yet God, if I can use the word manipulates, he uses Cyrus in such a way that Cyrus actually does a lot of the things that you would hope a true king of Israel would do, which is to tell the people to go back to Jerusalem, to worship their God, to rebuild the temple.

And when they look back, they can see, oh, that's what God was doing with Cyrus. But it's not always easy to see. Whenever... So we have a daughter named Charlie, she's five, whenever she was born, shortly after she was born, we put her in nursery.

And because my wife went to work really early in the mornings, I would be the one that would drop her off. And you can imagine those first few days were pretty miserable because I go in and I set her down and she is just screaming and she is wailing.

[28 : 26] And there's nothing that I can do to calm her down. And all I can do is just leave while she's still crying. And of course, what I wish I could do to her is to tell her, well, let me put it like this.

She couldn't speak English. She didn't know any words because she's only six months. But if I had to imagine what she was thinking, it would be something like this. My father, who I love so much,

you're leaving me with these people that I don't know.

And I don't know if you're coming back. And there's no way that I can explain to her that just a few more hours and I'll come back and I'll pick you up.

And the way that I have to teach her is in the afternoon, I do come pick her up. The next morning I drop her off. She cries a little bit less. And day after day, as we repeat that pattern, she begins to see.

She begins to realize, if just instinctively, my dad comes back for me. And if you're a parent, you know, she has no idea the links to which her parents would go for her.

[29 : 29] And I think that's something like God teaches us in passages like this, which is that even if we can't see God, He always comes for us.

And He does more than that. Even if we can't see Him, He is always with us by our side so that we can honestly say, my whole life I've never been alone.

I want to close with this thought. It's great to look at a passage like Isaiah 45 and see the promises that God made to Cyrus and say, we can put our hope in a God like that, in a God who raises up a Messiah like that.

And Cyrus was the last Messiah of the Old Testament. But he wasn't the last Messiah, was he? In fact, as you look back on the Old Testament, you see that all of these, if I can call them Messiahs with a little M, we're all pointing forward to one who we could call a Messiah in every true sense of the word, one who God raises up for a perfect purpose and a Messiah who performs perfectly.

And Cyrus, if you think about what Cyrus did, he merely permitted the people of God to return to Jerusalem and to worship whoever their God was.

[30 : 48] But in Jesus Christ, we have a Messiah who doesn't just say, you can go back home. We have a Messiah who promises to bring us to His heavenly home, and He's willing to do it at the cost of His own life.

He does it at the cost of His own life. And this last Messiah, if you think about it, it's Jesus Christ. He rescues us from a fate far worse than the ones that the people of God were dealing with back in this time period.

And I can almost imagine Saul, who knew his Jewish history, wanting to say, if you think the people during Cyrus' time period were in trouble, let me tell you about where you are before you met Christ. Because Paul says, you were dead in your sins and your transgressions. And any person who truly understood our situation would have looked at that and would have said, there is no way out of this. Our situation is impossible. Cyrus can't fix this. And what God does is, He doesn't just send a Messiah for us. He becomes our Messiah.

[31 : 49] And He humbles Himself. And He dives on a cross so that He can rescue us, and He can do what Cyrus could never do, which is to bring us to a home that is eternal, where we can see God face to face.

That's good news. So we look at this passage, and as foreign as it may be to us, God is teaching us about His character, that He is always working, that He is never failing, and that He is ever faithful. And that's our hope tonight. Let's pray. God, we need You in our lives. And we know that these mortal eyes can't see everything that is true in this world.

And we know that it is true that You are always with us. And we pray that Your Holy Spirit would teach us to lean on You, and that as we read more of Your Word and learn more about You, that we would constantly, that You would be conforming our hearts to love You as You really are, and to see how great You are.

We thank You tonight for Your Word, for Isaiah 45, and for the God who has never left us. And we ask all this in Your Son's name. Amen.