

Foundations: The Prophets 4
TRUST GOD
Isaiah 46:1-9b (AFBC 5/27/18)

This morning, we continue to turn to some foundational passages found in the writings of the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah wrote to people who were outwardly religious, but who showed no signs of actually “being on the same page” with God.

Sometimes, that’s us, friends. We didn’t have to go any further than the first chapter of Isaiah to see this. **“Come, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” (Isaiah 1:18)**

How many times have we all heard that verse preached and quoted and explained? Yet, it rarely gets put into the context of Isaiah chapter one where we find God chastising His people for not taking care of their nation’s poor—the widowed, orphaned, and homeless!

Today, we turn to Isaiah 46 which focuses on trusting God. That’s the central issue in this chapter. Listen for it as we read chapter 46, verses 1-9b.

¹Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low; their idols are borne by beasts of burden. The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary. ²They stoop and bow down together; unable to rescue the burden, they themselves go off into captivity.

³“Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain of the house of Israel, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth. ⁴Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

⁵“To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared? ⁶Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it. ⁷They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move.

Though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save him from his troubles. ⁸“Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. ⁹ Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. ¹⁰ I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

Anthem: I Must Tell Jesus/Blessed Assurance

I asked Addrian to have the choir sing this beautiful anthem because of the way it speaks directly to this matter of trust. It's a medley of two familiar old hymns or "Gospel songs," both of which convey a sense of trusting the Lord.

*I Must Tell Jesus...*all of my trials—but why would we do that? We do it because we trust Him! And taking life's challenges to Him and placing them on His strong shoulders helps.

It's also our trust in the Lord that enables us to sing, "*Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine*, oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!" That's the hope we have when we trust in the Lord! It truly is a "blessed assurance."

I got to thinking about this: I'm not sure it's possible to go through life without putting our trust in something, or... someone. There are those who attempt it; but even they must have a measure of trust in some philosophy of life that they adhere to—even if it's their belief that there's nothing that can be trusted!

In our text today, God is challenging His people to take a hard look at where they are placing their trust. He's telling them that their trust has become terribly misplaced--He wants them to know this, to understand that this is a big problem.

As we look at this passage, you and I need to determine if this word from the Lord to His people back then might apply to our lives today. Of course, that's our purpose whenever we turn to God's word. What is God saying to me, to us, today?

The question being raised by this passage today is: "Do we trust God?" If we answer "yes"—and most of us would—I think it then challenges us to think seriously about the nature of the God in

whom we trust. Do we trust God? And if so, just what kind of God is this in whom we're placing our trust?

Now, just a bit of necessary history. In 587 BC, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. The last stronghold of God's people—the Holy City--was destroyed. The Temple lay in ruins. All the key leaders, and anybody else strong enough to make the trip, were taken captive back to Babylon where they were enslaved.

This began the dark years of Israel's history called "the exile." It produced some of the saddest passages that we find in the Old Testament—the book of Lamentations, for example.

And passages like this one from **Psalm 137:4--"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"** Their lives were over, it seemed. There would never again be any occasion worthy of singing. Have you ever been there, or felt that way?

Isaiah 46 is one of many places in Scripture, though, where God reassures His people that even as bleak as life seems, it's not over. There's still hope. God hasn't forgotten them.

And, friends, this can be an important message for any of us, at any time. It may not be the message we feel we need to hear right now in this moment; but the day will likely come when it will be the very assurance that we most need in our lives!

Verse 11 of Isaiah 46 was a powerful word of hope for those captives in Babylon. It says: **"From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do" (Isaiah 46:11).**

The bird of prey is not an eagle—Isaiah does speak of eagles elsewhere--but this "bird of prey" was a man: a king named Cyrus. He was king of Persia. It was his armies that would later swoop down on the Babylonians and defeat them.

Once the Babylonians were defeated, King Cyrus allowed the Hebrew people to return to their beloved homeland and to rebuild their temple and the city of Jerusalem.

As Isaiah foretold the fall of Babylon, he compared the gods of Babylon with the God of Israel. The Babylonians were polytheistic—meaning they had many gods. The two mentioned in

our text, Bel and Nebo, were considered to be supreme among all their gods.

In case you didn't catch it, Isaiah was mocking the gods of the Babylonians. He describes how the people would bring gold and silver, and then hire a goldsmith to fashion for them... a god: **"Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it." (v.6)**

Bel and Nebo, you see, were huge golden statues--idols that were elaborately adorned with precious jewels. They would often be paraded about the city on carts that were drawn by oxen. Look at verse 1: **"Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low; their idols are borne by beasts of burden. The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary."**

Isaiah foresaw the day when the people of Babylon would be attempting to cart off those cumbersome idols with Cyrus and his armies in pursuit of them. Bel would bow down. Nebo would stoop. In other words, they would topple over and be carried off into captivity, right along with the same people who had foolishly put their trust in them.

Isaiah continues to ridicule these idols in v.7: **"They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save him from his troubles."**

Now, I don't think it's helpful to put down anyone else's religion. If Isaiah was around today, he would need some of sensitivity training—and don't hear me making light of that—lots of people need sensitivity training—and for a variety of reasons.

What Isaiah says here is harsh. I'm not suggesting that this approach today would in any way further the cause of Christ.

The New Testament standard (ours) is to "speak the truth... in love." But the prophets spoke the truth irrespective of who was listening--and let the chips fall where they may!

So Isaiah fearlessly points to the uselessness of their idols: they don't answer prayers; they don't save from troubles; they can't

even move from the spot where they're placed. It's absurd, he says, to worship the likes of these. It accomplishes nothing.

All we can say in response to that is: "Thank goodness we don't have any idols today." Or, at the very least, the idols we have are all *good ones*—they're... *American Idols*... and they can sing!

Isaiah was warning against idols made of gold and silver. Folks like us would never allow anything like that—you know, material stuff--to become THAT important in our lives.

We would never fashion graven images out of gold and silver. We would never be so foolish as to create our own gods—would we?

While we're at it, let's clarify this too. We would never make gods of our careers, or our pleasures, our vices or hobbies. We would never place that much importance in anything that could get in the way of our trust in God--right?

But... could it be... just possibly, you know... that this is something that does relate to us? Are you not at least wondering, as I am, if this is not what we, in fact, sometimes do?!?

Still... idolatry? I mean, isn't that just an Old Testament problem? Or maybe something that might occur in some remote regions of our world where Christian missionaries have yet to reach?

Consider this: if we've ever pursued anything with a passion, if we've ever dedicated all our thoughts and energies to chasing after something that we were convinced would make life just about perfect for us...

... only to discover, after obtaining whatever it was, that it didn't work, or it didn't last, it didn't lead to the kind of utopia we were expecting--if we've ever had anything resembling that kind of experience...then, friends, we have a better understanding of what idolatry is than we want to admit.

I was in my second year of seminary when a guest speaker in chapel, Dr. John Claypool, hit me right between the eyes with this. He was speaking about something that he had learned the hard way--from his own life experiences--and it's possible that it applies to us. He called it the "Cotton Candy Syndrome."

Dr. Claypool confessed that, in his own life, his very first obsession was success in school—the drive to always make “A’s,” to always be at the top of his class and make his parents proud!

This then became an obsession with the academic degrees he pursued: his BA, his Masters next, and finally his Doctorate. How upsetting to obtain a terminal degree—there were no others!

So... it became the churches he served—always looking for something bigger and better. Then it was books he was working on—an overwhelming drive to write another one... a better one!

He said he finally realized that these obsessions were something like cotton candy. You know how it is with Cotton Candy--that burst of wonderful sweetness when you put that little ball of fluff in your mouth. But then, just an instant later, it’s gone. It’s so sweet at first; but then, poof, it’s gone. It doesn’t last.

Well, friends, that’s a picture of misplaced trust--putting our trust in something that will never fully satisfy. We just want more. We get addicted to the sugar. For Claypool, it was the next grade, the next degree, the next church, the next book.

What is it for us? Obsessions can take so many different forms: the next purchase, the next relationship, the next promotion.... anything that we keep chasing because we know it will taste so sweet—and it does--but only for a moment. And then we have to start all over, going after whatever it is we think will be even better, or sweeter... next time.

We have so many gods in our world today that are just as impotent as Bel and Nebo. They don’t help us. They can’t. They can only make our lives more complicated... and burdensome.

Idolatry is simply misplaced trust—that’s all. Jesus talked about it. Remember the wealthy farmer in His parable?

He hadn’t fashioned a golden god for himself. Instead, bumper crops and bulging barns were his idols. He worshipped them until God finally said, “You fool. It’s time for you to turn in your soul.”

Then there was the rich young ruler—a very religious fellow, if you recall. But Jesus could see right through him. He knew that money was his real God. When confronted with what it would require of him to be a follower of Jesus, he declined the invitation.

Let me try to put what Isaiah is saying here as simply as I know how. It can be stated something like this: "Whatever it is that we worship, whatever we love the most--if we have to carry it, it's not God; because God... carries us."

Do you follow that? If we have to, in any way, carry it—buy it, protect it, insure it, earn it, whatever—then we dare not put our trust in it, because its benefits are short-lived, and we will always end up disappointed. Given time, the sweetness will go away.

"Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain of the house of Israel; you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth" (Is. 46:3).

This wonderful verse reminds us that the gods we create for ourselves, we end up carrying--and eventually, they become a burden. On the other hand, the Eternal God sustains us, and strengthens us, and saves us. In other words, God carries us.

And this never changes: **"Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."** (Isaiah 46:4)

The God who gave us life, and through the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, made our lives abundant, will never be a burden to us. We can trust Him. Our faith may falter, but He remains faithful. We may fail Him, but His care and concern for us are unfailing.

Now hear this: the same God that Isaiah knew back then has revealed Himself even more fully through the One who now invites us: **"Come unto me all that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."**

He is the One who promises us that **"My grace is sufficient for you for my strength is made perfect in your times of greatest weakness."**

Jesus Christ did an amazing thing, friends. He took the full weight of my sin and yours, and carried that terrible burden to the cross. We trust Him to lift that load for us and to carry us by His grace and strength until He comes to carry us home.

I invite you to trust Him. Put your full faith in Christ Jesus. Receive Him as your Savior. Follow Him always as your Lord.