

*Isaiah 45:1-4 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: <sup>2</sup> "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, <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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.*

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Ask a historian to list the great empires of the world and several are sure to be mentioned: the Ottoman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Babylonian Empire. Each of these is spoken of in history books in nearly mythical ways. And while many of these empires are spoken of in the bible, the empire Babylon receives more attention than any of the other empires. In fact, the actual name Babylon is mentioned over 280 times in the scriptures.

Babylon was viewed in its day as indestructible. After all, it was an empire which began by throwing off the oppressive yoke of another empire of mention, the Assyrian Empire. Babylon built its lore by defeating the threats and armies of nearby nations and capturing many people, including many Israelites, as their slaves. It hoarded the treasures of the nations and kept them for itself in the great city of city of Babylon. This city, the capital of the empire, is still mentioned by historians as one of the most splendid cities of the ancient world. It is said that the city was surrounded by a wall covered nearly inch to inch by brass gates. It was in every sense a fortress considered to be impenetrable.

And yet when Cyrus the great, the leader of the Persians Empire, came to seize Babylon, history records no great battle. And it wasn't that Cyrus left because of the bronze gates and iron bars of the city. No, instead, when Cyrus came to Babylon, history records that he conquered it completely with a real fight. It seems that the gates were simply put down, and

Cyrus walked in. In fact, the greatest effort Cyrus and his armies exerted that day seems to have been in gathering up the treasures of Babylon to take back to Cyrus' palace.

How could someone conquer so great a city, so great an empire as Babylon so seemingly easily? What is Cyrus' military might? No, our Old Testament lesson for today gives us the real answer. In our text, God prophesied about Cyrus' conquests long before he was even born. He said to Cyrus prophetically, "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." Yes, these words spoken centuries before their occurring explain what happened when Cyrus got to Babylon that day. God happened. God had taken this pagan king by the hand and led him to easy victory. It was God who broke down the gates and allowed Cyrus to walk in without a battle. Yes Cyrus, the great Persian King, was the Lord's anointed one to destroy Babylon. It was God who gave him the treasure of Babylon as a witness to him and all nations that the God of Israel was the only God that existed.

Yes Cyrus the Lord's anointed, did the impossible. He broke into an impenetrable fortress with great ease and in so doing announced victory over the mighty enemy. He left the conquest with treasure immeasurable. All of this was accomplished because the Lord God's zeal for his people.

Yes, before Cyrus came a calling, Babylon was indeed legendary as an unshakeable, undefeatable enemy both in secular history books and the biblical story. But it should be said that while the scriptures speak powerfully about Babylon, they speak more powerfully about

one other enemy or empire. That empire is what might be deemed the empire of death. This enemy indeed beats everyone it faces, rendering the opposing person completely lifeless.

Yes, every since an apple's skin was pierced by the teeth of a woman named Eve, the empire of death's dominion has been universal. It has ruled over all, for all have sinned. The bronze gates of death and the iron bars of the grave have formed an impenetrable fortress standing against the hopes of all people.

That was, of course, until Jesus came a calling. You see on a Friday some two thousands years ago, Jesus entered into death very easily as he was lifted upon the cross. Oh, the enemy thought it had won the battle. When Jesus took his last breath, the enemy thought they had Jesus just where they wanted him, trapped inside its bronze gates and iron bars. After all, no one had ever able to break these bonds. But three days later, the rejoicing of the enemy was quelled as God broke down the bronze gates and sawed through the iron bars that had held all of humanity since that first sin in Eden. And with the gates down, all that was left for Jesus to do was gather up all of the treasures that the empire of death had stolen from God's people. He left the grave Easter morning with his hands full of forgiveness and eternal life. Yes, those very gifts that the one who held the power of death had taken from God's people long ago in Eden would now be returned to them by God's grace.

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Yes, Cyrus was chosen to defeat the great empire of Babylon in order that God's people, Israel might be freed. But Jesus was chosen to defeat the great enemy death in order that God's people might be freed from the fear of death that had bound them their whole life long.

The effects of Cyrus' victory over Babylon the Israelites enjoyed for a time. Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and provided both the authority and materials to rebuild the temple.

But the effects of Jesus' victory over death we, the people of God, enjoy daily in our life. We enjoy them because Jesus did not take the treasures he won on Good Friday and store them somewhere for himself, but rather he passes out the treasures he won by destroying the dominion death had over all humanity to us through his Word. The treasures of forgiveness and eternal life that filled his hands Easter morning are given to us at the font, the altar the chancel, and the pulpit.

Yes, God anointed Cyrus for a specific time and purpose. But our Lord Jesus he has anointed for all eternity to be savior of his people.

When we really think about our text, it may seem odd that God used a pagan, non-believing king to free his people Israel from Babylon. But that is not odd at all compared to the idea of God sacrificing his only Son in order to save sinful humanity. Nothing compared to the idea of defeating death by dieing. Nothing compared to handing out eternal treasures in simple means like water, word, bread, and wine.

Yes God's way are odd, but wonderfully so. For in his oddities we find our salvation. As God says elsewhere in the prophecy given to Isaiah, "my thoughts are not your thoughts,

neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Yes, humanity could put together all of its best minds and yet could not break the bond of death that shackled us. But with a tree and a rolled stone, Jesus has defeated our enemy death. As we sang, so we confess, “Jesus lives! The victory's won! Death no longer can appal me; Jesus lives! Death's reign is done! From the grave Christ will recall me. Brighter scenes will then commence; This shall be my confidence.” Amen.