



God Acts

The one true God is incomparable; He will complete His plan to save His people.

ISAIAH 46:3-13

Many of us will “plan our work, and work our plan” when seeking to accomplish a big task. Doing so may require a singular focus. We may even choose to participate only in activities that contribute to the plan’s success and abstain from involvement in anything that gets in the way of us working our plan. Isaiah 46 indicates God has a plan and is committed to it. His plan is to save His people, and nothing will keep Him from accomplishing this plan of salvation, not even the hardheartedness of the people He will save.

Share about a time you completed a task by following a specific plan. How important was following your plan in successfully completing that specific task?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ISAIAH 42:1–48:22

Isaiah 42 begins with the first of four “Servant Songs” in the Book of Isaiah that describe the person and work of the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah. Being the first of these songs, Isaiah 42:1-9 introduces the Servant of the Lord saying, “This is my servant ... this is my chosen one; I delight in him.” God chose Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing to every nation (Gen. 12:1-3). However, as a nation, the Lord rebuked Israel for failing to fulfill this purpose. Therefore, God would do with Israel what it failed to do. He would raise up one from the nation to fulfill His purpose to bless all the nations.

In chapters 42–44, Isaiah’s message revolved around four proclamations. The first was that God would intervene on behalf of His people, even though they are spiritually blind and deaf (42:13-17). The Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel would bring about a new exodus, bringing His people out of Babylonian exile (43:14-21). The second was an exhortation to listen to and obey God’s word because He was the one who would remove their sins (42:18-25; 43:22-28). Third, the Lord was their salvation (43:1-7; 44:1-5). The fourth proclamation was that the Lord is sovereign over all the nations and superior to all their false gods (43:8-13; 44:6-20). Isaiah declared that Israel needed to remember these things and turn back to Him because they were God’s chosen people and He would never forget them. God chose to glorify Himself through His people. While the nations formed their gods, Yahweh, Israel’s Redeemer, formed His people (44:21-24).

God promised Israel that He had chosen to use Cyrus to rescue the people and to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple (44:28–45:13). When the nations witnessed what God had done for Israel, they would recognize the futility of their gods and that the God of Israel is the one true God. The Lord’s call of salvation would go out to the nations (45:1-22). In chapters 46–47, Isaiah described God’s judgment on Babylon. God’s judgment on Babylon would be severe because of how harshly Babylon treated the people of God. God also recognized many of the people of Israel had an outward religion without true devotion to God, but God offered them a new beginning with their deliverance from Babylonian exile (Isa. 48).

As you read Isaiah 46:3-13, look for ways the one true God demonstrated that He is incomparable. How do these demonstrations instill trust in God?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

THE TRUE GOD (ISA. 46:3-7)

³ “Listen to me, house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been sustained from the womb, carried along since birth. ⁴ I will be the same until your old age, and I will bear you up when you turn gray. I have made you, and I will carry you; I will bear and rescue you. ⁵ “Who will you compare me or make me equal to? Who will you measure me with, so that we should be like each other? ⁶ Those who pour out their bags of gold and weigh out silver on scales— they hire a goldsmith and he makes it into a god. Then they kneel and bow down to it. ⁷ They lift it to their shoulder and bear it along; they set it in its place, and there it stands; it does not budge from its place. They cry out to it but it doesn’t answer; it saves no one from his trouble.

VERSE 3

In verses 1-2, we find the beginnings of a contrast between Bel and Nebo—two of the main Babylonian gods—with the Lord. Similar to the Canaanite title for their god, Baal, Bel means “lord,” and it was a title the Babylonians gave to their patron god, Marduk. They believed Marduk was the king or lord over all the other gods. Nebo is the Hebrew transliteration of Nabu, the son of Marduk. Nebo was especially popular among the Babylonian upper class, the nobility and intellectuals. He was the god of wisdom, writing, and divine interpretations. Nebo appears in the name of Nebuchadnezzar. Mount Nebo, the place where Moses scanned the promised land before he died, got its name from this god.

In verses 1-2, the Lord stated He would determine the future of Bel and Nebo. They would be defeated and carried away as spoils of war. These gods were a burden for weary animals to carry and were impotent and unable to rescue those who worshiped them.

Accordingly, these false gods themselves would be carried into captivity alongside their worshipers. The irony is that the climax of the Babylonian festival for the New Year was a processional where they carried their idols to a temple accompanied by the religious leaders and the king. In contrast to these weak and conquered gods, the Lord had shown Himself strong for His people. He exhorted them to listen to Him as He reminded them that even before their existence as a nation, He had sustained Israel or “put them on His back” and *carried* them. By necessity, beasts of burden carried the Babylonian gods, whereas the Lord Himself carried His people through the entire course of their existence. The gods of Babylon did not compare to the God of Jacob.

VERSE 4

There comes a point when parents can no longer carry their children. However, the Lord promised that His tender loving care for His children not only began before they were born but that it would also continue through their infancy, their childhood, their adulthood, on through their old age when their hair turns gray. They would never become a burden to Him. His arms would never tire. He *made* them. He would *carry* them as His load, lift them up, *bear* them, and in doing so *rescue* them from the Babylonian captivity in which they would find themselves. The Babylonian gods would be unable to come to the rescue of those who worshiped them much less save them from going into captivity. However, the Lord would faithfully care for His people and save them.

How might we describe the difference between idols that are carried and God carrying His people? How does God carry His people today?

VERSES 5-7

In verses 5-7, the Lord mocked the idols of Babylon along with the craftsmen who made them. In verse 5, He began with rhetorical questions asking who can compare to Him. In verses 6-7, He derisively concluded that certainly those who hired skilled workers to make the idols, the artisans who actually crafted the idols, and the idols themselves did not compare.

The Lord's four rhetorical questions in verse 5 served as declarations: "No one compares to Me," "No one is My equal," "No one measures up to Me," and "No one is like Me." In Hebrew, normally a three-fold repetition of the same idea is the way to express superlative emphases, the most or utmost. The use of four statements was the Lord's way of saying His incomparability is even beyond that. Just as it is impossible for people to comprehend the idea of thinking of something greater than the greatest thing they are capable of imagining, it is impossible to compare anything to the incomparable eternal God.

In verses 6-7 the Lord mockingly proposed three possible contenders who could have compared to Him. The first candidates are those who poured out their gold and silver to have idols made. Surely, they had to pay the craftsmen for their labors, but the gold and silver here refers to the large amount of these costly metals needed to produce impressive and exquisite graven images. The Babylonians constructed their idols with a hard wood center plated with gold and silver and clothed in expensive robes with gold and silver spangles or sequins. Their craftsmen used precious jewels to represent the eyes and ears of the idols. These idols were extremely costly, and after a dedication ceremony, they represented a manifestation of the god whose images they bore. As the worshipers knelt and bowed down before these gods, they believed they were in the actual presence of the god. They worshiped the thing that they just paid an enormous amount of money to have made.

Verse 7 points out these lifeless idols could not move, so their devotees had to lift them on their shoulders and carry them. Otherwise, an idol just stood in its appointed place in its temple doing nothing. Its powerlessness to move on its own shows its inability to do anything for anyone. These realities stood in strong contrast to Yahweh. While He chose to make His manifest presence known at the temple in Jerusalem, He is everywhere. In Isaiah 40:22, the prophet said, "God is enthroned above the circle of the earth; its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like thin cloth and spreads them out like a tent to live in."

What promises are offered by the man-made gods of today? How do these man-made gods compare to the one true God?

BIBLE SKILL: Memorize Scripture.

Seek to memorize Isaiah 46:4. Review each phrase, identifying ways you have seen this true in your life and the lives of others. Reflect on the impact this passage may have on believers as they contemplate God's faithful care and salvation.

THE TRUSTWORTHY ONE (ISA. 46:8-11)

⁸ “Remember this and be brave; take it to heart, you transgressors!
⁹ Remember what happened long ago, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and no one is like me. ¹⁰ I declare the end from the beginning, and from long ago what is not yet done, saying: my plan will take place, and I will do all my will. ¹¹ I call a bird of prey from the east, a man for my purpose from a far country. Yes, I have spoken; so I will also bring it about. I have planned it; I will also do it.

VERSES 8-9

The Lord told His audience to *remember this*. To what does *this* refer? It refers to *what happened long ago*, all the magnificent things God had done for them. If they would listen to this command, they would know that Yahweh was the only One who was trustworthy. If the people would just think about the impotence of the idols and remember what God had done for Israel even before its existence, it would strengthen their faith and give them a proper perspective.

The Scriptures clearly teach the importance of the people of God remembering what He has said and done. For example, Moses told the Israelites to remember how God led them and provided for them for forty years in the wilderness (Deut. 8:2). God instructed the Israelites to set up memorial stones to remind the people of His faithfulness (Josh. 4:21-22). The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a memorial of what God did to save Israel from bondage in Egypt (Ex. 13:1-8), just as the Lord's Supper is a memorial of what Jesus did to save us from our bondage to sin (1 Cor. 11:23-25).

God commanded these *transgressors* to *take it to heart*. He called them *transgressors* because they deliberately disobeyed

God and were willfully unfaithful to Yahweh by worshiping idols. *Take it to heart* means the people needed to seriously consider all that God had done. God commanded them to do what David did, remembering God's works and reflecting on them. (See Ps. 77:11-15.)

If only the people in Isaiah's day would have listened and done what David did! God told them that if they truly remembered what He had done for them in the past, then like David, they would have recognized what the Lord emphatically stated. Certainly, He is God, there is no other, and no one is like Him.

***God is not figuring things out as He goes,
and He does not act on a whim.***

VERSES 10-11

These verses describe what the incomparable God is able to do. First, He foretells events before they happen. It is evidence of His omniscience. He knows what is going to happen ahead of time, and the Lord revealed the future through His prophets. Second, the Lord accomplishes what He plans to do. The past, present, and future all proceed according to God's purposes. The Lord has a plan, and He will carry out all of it down to its finest detail. God is not figuring things out as He goes, and He does not act on a whim. God is sovereign. He will do whatever is His pleasure, and no one can thwart Him.

In verse 11, God provided evidence of His sovereignty and part of His plan to use King Cyrus of Persia. God would cause Cyrus to come and conquer the Babylonians. He would be God's instrument of judgment and carry out what Yahweh intended, His *purpose*. Cyrus would swiftly fly in like a *bird of prey* and defeat his enemies. The Lord concluded this verse with two parallel statements for emphasis: *I have spoken* and *I have planned it*. Both statements confirmed God's established will, and the statements *I will also bring it about* and *I will also do it* were emphatic ways of saying "You can count on Me to do it!"

How should God's omniscience and sovereignty over all of history be a source of strength and hope for believers today?

THE JUST ONE (ISA. 46:12-13)

¹² Listen to me, you **hardhearted**, far removed from justice: ¹³ I am bringing my justice near; it is not far away, and my salvation will not delay. I will put salvation in Zion, my splendor in Israel.”

VERSES 12-13

The Lord called them *hardhearted* and commanded them to *listen* to Him. To call them *hardhearted* was to say they were callous, resistant, stubborn, and unreceptive to God’s word. To be *far removed from justice* means they were unrighteous, that is, unbelievers. Those who are far from justice or righteousness are those who are far from being justified or righteous before God. Nevertheless, God demonstrated His mercy by calling them to listen and by communicating His word to them. The kindness God showed these sinners by even speaking to them one more time is incomprehensible.

God then promised to bring His *justice* near to them, declaring that it was *not far away* and His *salvation* would come quickly. Salvation would come at God’s initiative, by His mercy and grace. The people would not do anything to deserve it. It would be the Lord’s righteousness and the Lord’s work of salvation, and it would be for His *splendor in Israel*. These words to Israel are similar to words the apostle Paul spoke to the Romans as he reminded them that salvation was near and was available to those who confessed and believed in Jesus. (See Rom. 10:8-9.)

How should the mercy and grace God shows hardhearted rebels against Him affect how believers relate to God, other believers, and unbelievers?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation*

Faith is the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Savior (Eph. 2:8-10).

APPLY THE TEXT

- The one true God is able to save His people.
- The one true God continues to demonstrate His power and trustworthiness.
- The one true God provides His eternal plan of salvation for His people.

Discuss as a group ways of sharing the truths found in this passage to help people understand their need for Jesus. With whom can you share the truth about idols and any item that gets in the way of worshiping God? How can you use the truths from this passage to help them understand the need for trusting Jesus alone for salvation?

In what areas of your life are you in need of God's assurance? How does this passage give you assurance in those areas? Thank God for being faithful to His plans.

Examine your life, looking for places where you are hardhearted and unwilling to trust God. What actions do you need to take as expressions of faith in God?

PRAYER NEEDS
