Chapter 44: The First and the Last

Prologue

Where we are:

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When this takes place:

Chapter 44 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah’s immediate plight than with its future deliverance and the worldwide impact of the coming of Messiah.

B.C.  750  740  730  720  710  700  690  680

Isaiah’s Ministry
Uzziah (Azariah)
Jotham
Ahaz
Hezekiah

Key verse:

Isa. 44:6 – This is what the LORD, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the LORD of Hosts, says: I am the first and I am the last. There is no God but Me.

Quick summary:

God assures Israel that He has chosen the nation and will continue to bless it. He makes plans for His servants while they are yet in their mothers’ wombs. Isaiah declares God’s majesty and uniqueness, then contrasts it with an almost comical description of the man-made gods who depend completely on the people who worship them. He calls on Israel to return to the one true and living God, who will remain faithful to His promises. The chapter ends with an amazing prophecy in which the pagan king who will free the Jews from Babylonian captivity two centuries later is called by name.

Take note:

The Lord often refers to Himself as “The first and … the last” or in similar ways in Scripture, reminding us of His eternal nature, creative and sustaining powers, and sovereignty. Isaiah and

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the apostle John, in the Book of Revelation, record these words, used interchangeably by God the Father and His Son:

- “I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last – I am He” (Isa. 41:4)
- “… I am He. No god was formed before Me, and there will be none after Me” (Isa. 43:10).
- “Listen to Me, Jacob, and Israel, the one called by Me: I am He; I am the first, I am also the last” (Isa. 48:12).
- “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the One who is, who was, and who is coming, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8).
- “Don’t be afraid! I am the First and the Last, and the Living One. I was dead, but look – I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Rev. 1:17-18).
- “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Rev. 22:13).

**Spiritual Blessing (Isa. 44:1-5)**

Because God has chosen Israel – a fact mentioned twice in verses 1-2 – the people are not to fear. The Lord will deliver the nation physically and spiritually. Twice He calls Jacob “My servant” and promises to pour out “My Spirit” and “My blessings” on coming generations. Continuing a theme from the previous chapter, He reminds the people that He has formed them. Like all of God’s creative acts, it is for a divine purpose. Although judgment is imminent, the nation’s restoration and spiritual revival are guaranteed. In verse 2 Israel is called “Jeshurun,” a poetic synonym meaning “the upright one” and used elsewhere only in Deuteronomy (see Deut. 32:15; 33:5, 26).

In the days to come, the Lord will “pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground,” making it fruitful (v. 3). Even more important, He will pour out the Holy Spirit, resulting in an unprecedented return to the Lord of Israel. But when will this occur? Nationally, the Jews return to their homeland after the Babylonian captivity, and again in 1948 after nearly 2,000 years without a state following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The spiritual revival, however, is yet to come. “This outpouring of the Spirit will occur when the people have returned in belief to the land (cf. Ezek. 36:24, 27; Joel 2:25-29) just after the Messiah’s second coming to establish the Millennium. Redeemed Israel will prosper numerically like grass and poplar trees, and they will want to be known as righteous individuals ( Isa. 44:5), unashamed of Him and their nation” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1098).

**No God but Me (Isa. 44:6-23)**

The Lord reminds the Jews of several of His titles, thus punctuating His unique claim of sovereignty. He is “the Lord, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts … the first and … the last … Rock” (vv. 6, 8). He makes a simple and profound declaration: “There is no God but Me” (v. 6), and He argues for His uniqueness by challenging anyone to predict the
future (v. 7). Since His knowledge of things to come may be traced to His existence in eternity past, His chosen people have no reason to fear. In fact, they are witnesses of His mighty deeds (v. 8).

The God of Israel then exposes the futility of idol makers, whom he describes as “nothing” (v. 9) and whom He says have brought spiritual blindness upon themselves. Idolatry dominates the world in Isaiah’s day. Some idol makers are superstitious, viewing their creations of wood, metal and stone as deities, while others fashion these magnificent statues as physical representations of unseen gods. In any case, their efforts are futile and their proud professions will only result in shame. Idolatry in any form is a denial of the Creator and invites His wrath. The apostle Paul makes this point in Romans 1, arguing that idolatry is the natural consequence of rejecting the one true and living God, who has revealed Himself to all people (Rom. 1:18ff). As a result, Paul writes, they are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

In Isaiah, however, “the Lord’s scathing contempt for idolatry is expressed in mockery of the ‘wisdom’ of human beings who cut down a tree, burn some of it as fuel, make a few utensils for the home, fashion an idol from the leftovers, and then pray to that idol to deliver them. Only a God who lives, who is capable of action, and who cares, could possibly help anyone – then, or now” (Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Readers Companion*, electronic ed., S. 433). The people who craft these images for profit are mere humans, whom God will cause to “assemble and stand … be startled and put to shame” (v. 11). They labor feverishly over their iron and wood, denying themselves food and water for the sake of their craft until they grow weak. But their work is in vain and their muscular arms cannot overcome their dulled minds. They take cedar, cypress or oak, cut it down and use some of it to warm themselves, some of it to bake their bread and some of it to fashion idols. While they are in complete control of the wood in every stage of its use, they blindly choose to worship what their own hands have made. “Save me, for you are my god,” they cry (v. 17).

Their failure to see the futility of their deeds is due first of all to their rejection of God and second to God’s response, which is to grant them what they desire – spiritual blindness. The word “detestable” in verse 19 is a strong Hebrew word (*siqqus*) that links idolatry to immoral practices. Isaiah makes the point that religious sins, which involve direct rebellion against God, are especially grievous and invite the wrath of the Almighty. In the end, the idolater “feeds on ashes” (v. 20), or delights in what is vain. This verse also might refer to the wood being used. The idol maker has reduced much of it to ashes to warm himself and prepare his food; it would have been better if the rest of the tree had been reduced to ashes as well.

Finally in this section, the Lord calls Judah to “remember these things” (v. 21). Jacob is God’s “servant,” whom he has formed, and He will not forget His people. He has swept away their sins, called them to return, and redeemed them. Now at last, He calls upon heaven and earth – even the elements that idol makers have reduced to graven images – to rejoice because the Lord “glorifies Himself through Israel” (v. 23).
**Cyrus, the Lord’s Shepherd ( Isa. 44:24-28)**

The Lord’s repeated claim to control the course of human history, with special regard to Israel, is renewed in the closing verses of this chapter as He makes specific promises about the people, the temple and Jerusalem. After the Babylonian captivity, Jerusalem will be repopulated. The cities of Judah will be rebuilt. The temple will be restored. And, in dramatic fashion, the Lord names the Persian king whose edict makes it all possible – Cyrus, “My shepherd,” who would not even be born for another 150 years (see Ezra 1:1-4). If the Jews have any doubts about God’s command of time and events, He clears them up in this passage. Lawrence Richards notes: “Some commentators, who deny the possibility of such detailed predictive prophecy, have insisted the mention of Cyrus is evidence of postexilic authorship of the second part of Isa. But in the context the naming of Cyrus is evidence of something far different. It is proof of the power of Israel’s living God and a guarantee that history itself moves toward His intended end” (*The Bible Readers Companion*, S. 433).

But why is a pagan king called the Lord’s “shepherd,” a name normally reserved for the Messiah or the nation of Israel? It appears this title is given to show the citizens of Judah that God uses even unbelievers like Cyrus to accomplish His purposes and that no one, no matter how powerful, operates independently of the One who created all things. “A man’s heart plans his way, but the Lord determines his steps…. Many plans are in a man’s heart, but the Lord’s decree will prevail” (Prov. 16:9, 19:21).

**Closing Thought**

John Walvoord and Roy Zuck describe the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “In 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar and his forces broke through Jerusalem’s walls, burned the houses and the temple, and carried many captives into exile. Cyrus, founder of the Persian Empire, first came to the throne of Anshan in Eastern Elam in 559. In 549 he conquered the Medes and became the ruler of the combined Persian and Median Empire. In 539 he conquered Babylon (Dan. 5:30) and the very next year issued a decree that the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). In doing this Cyrus was serving God’s purposes as if he were God’s shepherd. Those returnees built the temple, completing it in 515 B.C., and years later (in 444 B.C.) Nehemiah went to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls” (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1099).
The First and the Last
Isaiah 44

When it comes to deities, there can be only one first and one last. God is both.
Everyone should know there is one true and living God because of the ways He reveals Himself as the first and the last.

1. By His names

By what names does God call Himself?

Verse 6 _________________________________________________________________

Verse 8b _______________________________________________________________

What do the following Scripture passages tell us about the “first and the last?”

Isa. 41:4 ________________________________________________________________

Isa. 48:12 _______________________________________________________________

Rev. 1:17-18 _____________________________________________________________

Rev. 2:8 ________________________________________________________________

Rev. 22:12-13 ____________________________________________________________

Who does the name “Rock” designate in these verses, and how is He described?

Gen. 49:24-25 ____________________________________________________________

Deut. 32:4 ______________________________________________________________

2 Sam. 22:32-33 __________________________________________________________

Hab. 1:12 ______________________________________________________________

Matt. 16:18 _____________________________________________________________

1 Cor. 10:1-4 ____________________________________________________________

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2. By His knowledge

How does the Lord compare His knowledge to the knowledge of idols in verse 7?

________________________________________________________________________

How does God depict the knowledge of the idol makers in verse 9?

________________________________________________________________________

The Lord describes the labor of the idol maker in verses 12-17. What is the result of the idol maker’s strenuous efforts (verses 18-20)?

________________________________________________________________________

The Lord identifies the Persian king Cyrus in verse 28 as the one who will deliver Judah from Babylonian captivity. But Cyrus is not yet born and the Medo-Persian Empire has not yet risen to power. What does this prophecy say about the Lord’s knowledge?

________________________________________________________________________

3. By His power

What has God done for Israel that no idol can do (vv. 21-28)?

________________________________________________________________________

What has God done for us that no one else can do?

Rom. 5:8 ________________________________________________________________

1 Cor. 15:3-4 ____________________________________________________________

1 Peter 2:21-24 __________________________________________________________

1 Peter 3:18 _____________________________________________________________

1 John 4:14 _____________________________________________________________

What do Rom. 1:16 and 1 Cor. 1:18 tell us about God’s power in relation to the Gospel?

________________________________________________________________________

What does 1 Peter 1:5 tell us about God’s power and our salvation?