

Calvary Baptist Church
2015 WINTER CSI ▪ Small Group Studies

Session One – Getting Unstuck: Acknowledging an Impasse/Letting Go of the Past Tuesday & Wednesday, February 10 & 11

What God Says About God
Isaiah 44:6-8

The scene is a courtroom. The people of God have been summoned to appear in God's cosmic court of law. They have been charged with idolatry. Those who had been carried away to foreign lands in the Babylonian exile, and even those who yet resided in Judah had been introduced to the gods of Babylon. The Jews in exile were living as a minority in the shadows of the great Marduk temples and amidst the sound and excitement of the Babylonian religious festivals. These people were threatened by assimilation into the powerful pagan cults.

The problem is that you can't live in Babylon and not be exposed to its gods and perhaps even affected by its gods. The people of God do not live in some spiritual utopia. We are exposed to whatever is in the world. If we are not careful the gods of this world, that is to say, the world-views, the ethos, and indeed the mindset of a "sickly, secular culture" will permeate the membrane of our souls. And the worst part is that sometimes you are not even aware of how you've been impacted by the gods of the culture. The influence of culture is so subtle and insidious, that you can be shaped by it and not even know it. You can be a product of the times and not even realize it. No wonder Jesus said to his disciples "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees." Jesus calls the influence of the Pharisees "leaven". The mindset of the Pharisees had the potential to slowly but certainly infect the hearts of the disciples and Jesus warns them of this. No wonder Paul said "be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your

mind....” No wonder John said “love not this world, neither the things that are in the world.”

You can’t live in Babylon and not be exposed and influenced by its gods. The mindset of Babylon flows through the media. It flows through academic institutions. It flows through music. It flows through Hollywood. It flows through the social media. It flows through politics.

I use to love watching “cowboys and Indians” movies. I would hurry home from school to watch them in the afternoon. The cowboys, or in some cases the cavalry, were always the good guys and the Indians were always the bad guys who wanted to scalp the good, law abiding cowboys. The Indians were the savages standing in the way of the westward expansion of the cowboys who believed in “manifest destiny” or who were just greedy. The Navajo, Sioux or the Cherokee Indians were portrayed as villains who were out to get the cowboys. This medium of movies shaped my mind about Native Americans (that is until I learned better). The god of racism had shaped my thinking. This is how it works. You will look up and Babylon will have you confused about sexual identity. You will look up and Babylon will have you glorifying violence. You will look up and Babylon will have you blaming the poor for their plight. You will look up and Babylon will have you believing the church and church life is peripheral and not central in our living. You will look up and be so attached to technology that you feel like you can’t live without it. You can’t live in Babylon and not be exposed and shaped by its gods.

The Lord calls His people to the cosmic courtroom because of their idolatry. Once the people of God appear in court in this chapter, the Lord pleads his case by declaring that it doesn’t make sense to worship that which is not God. The affections of the people were

misplaced. They were giving themselves to that which could do nothing for them. The exiled people started serving these gods of wood, stone, and metal. Some of them tried to serve the God of Israel and these other idols at the same time. They thought they could “straddle the fence.” They thought the God of Israel would tolerate idols. They were trusting in that which was not trustworthy. God wants them to embrace the future God has for them, but they can’t do that if they are giving themselves to these false gods. They can’t even believe what God is saying about the “not yet” as long as they are giving “god-like” devotion to that which is not God.

But before the Lord explains to them the futility of serving idols, the Lord makes a case for himself. The Lord has come to court to make a case for himself by boldly exclaiming who he is. He does not come to bash Israel for its idolatrous ways. God figures that it is enough to simply say who he is. Before the Lord says what these idols “are not”, he says what “He is.” God is not like some political candidates running for office who can only criticize the opponent without articulating who they themselves are. The Lord commences this section by proclaiming who He is. The children of Israel are dealing with the harsh reality of exile. Their situation is hellish. But now God wants them to turn their attention from what they are going through to focusing on God. Adversity makes us forget about who God is. Sickness can make you forget about who God is. Financial pressure can make you forget about who God is. Family matters can make you forget about who God is. Every now and then we simply need to be reminded of who God is. There are times when I need to be reminded that “the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.” There are times when I need to be reminded that “God is our refuge and

strength...A present help in trouble.” There are times when I need to be reminded that God “will never leave me or forsake me.” Prolonged exile made them forget who God was. The gods around them seemed more real because those gods were either embodied or represented by physical images of wood, metal, and stone. There are times when our circumstances seem so much more real because we see them. God appears to be some remote deity up in the hills somewhere. The people need to be reminded of who God is. Sometimes your circumstances don’t look as perilous when you recognize who God is. There are times when it’s not enough to tell God how big your problems are; there are times when you need to tell your problems how big God is.

This is why the prophet is sure to identify the speaker: “this is what the Lord says....” He wants them to know that their God is a speaking God. God is saying something. This God is alive enough to be speaking. This God is real enough to be speaking. The idol gods had mouths, but could not speak. The worshippers of idols have to speak in behalf of the idols. But the God of Israel speaks in behalf of the worshippers. “This is what the Lord says...”

The prophet further identifies the Lord. He says “in case you don’t know who He is....In case your trouble has muddled and masked your short term and long term memory...In case you have forgotten who He is, let me introduce the One who is about to speak to you.” It is as though Jehovah is the guest preacher and the prophet is on to introduce Him. The prophet says that the one who is about to speak is King, Redeemer, and the Lord of hosts. This God is King. This God is in charge. It may appear to them that God has been off the scene, but they are reminded that God is very much in charge. This is God is redeemer. God is the one who is involved in the making and remaking of God’s people. He will not allow them to stay in bondage. God is their kinsmen redeemer

who is rescuing them from exile. This God is the Lord of Hosts. This is the God who is the commander-in –chief of the heavenly armies. “Sooner than right now, and quicker than at once”, this God can dispatch His angels to act in our behalf.

After this pungent and pithy introduction, God speaks in behalf of God. God does not need to call anyone to the witness stand to speak for God at first. This is God talking about God. These people who were caught in tangled web of idol worship; these people who may have forgotten about the power and personality of God, needed to hear something about God. Who better to talk about God than God? There is a branch of study called “theology.” Literally, theology is logical talk about God. Since the days of the early church fathers, people have been doing theology. We’ve been engaging in logical talk about God. Classical European theology was popular for a while. From Bultmann to Barth, folks were talking about God. The feminists and womanists started talking about God. The 1960s and 70s saw the black theologians talking about God. The Liberation theologians of developing nations have done some “God-talk.” Everyone feels qualified to do “God-talk.” Grandmama may not have been schooled in systematic theology, but she did some God-talk. According to her God was “friend when you are friendless. A way out of no way....a bridge over troubled –water.” Everybody has had their say about God. We talk about what Jeremiah says about God; what Ezekiel says about God. We preach about what Paul says about God.

However, in this prophetic polemic situated in a cosmic courtroom, God steps to the podium and speaks for Himself. We brag on God. But now God is bragging on God. At this point, the Lord doesn’t need anyone speaking for God. God speaks for God. To people who were trying to worship God and gods, to people who allowed what they were going through make them forget about God, what does God have to say about God?

In everything that God says, he is declaring that there is none like Him. God has no rivals. God has no peers. No one was better at bragging on himself than Muhammad Ali. The late Howard Cosell would interview Ali and I can hear Ali declaring himself to be the greatest of all times. “I float like a butterfly and sting like a bee, that’s why they call me Muhammad Ali.” In this passage, God is pointing to God as being what no one else is! (the sports commentators are saying that if New England quarterback, Tom Brady, wins the Super Bowl today, he will be considered the best quarterback of all time without any rivals. Well, I’m not sure about that, but one thing for certain: God has no rivals). God says there is no one like Him.

To this ancient crowd, and to contemporary crowds God says there is no one like God IN HIS ABIDING PRESENCE. The first thing he says is “I am the first and I am the last.” This is a statement about God’s abiding, eternal presence. For God to be the first and the last is to say that everything is filled with who God is. God is the alpha point and the omega point. If the people of Israel were to look back, God is there. If they peer into the dim future, God is there. At the same time the Lord is first and last. God is behind them, God is in front of them.

The Psalmist was saying this in Psalm 139. The psalmist raised the interrogatives: “whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost part of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.” The Psalmist continues, “if I say, surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light around me...” The psalmist says “I can’t get away from God...” Everywhere you go, you run into God.

Jesus echoed these words in Revelation. The savior says to John, who is exiled himself on Patmos, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end...which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty. " Whether exiled on Patmos or exiled in Babylon, someone needs to know that the Lord is the first and the last. Whenever you find yourself in a place where you don't want to be, you need to know who is first and who is last.

The people needed to know and we need to know that God is behind us and God is ahead of us. The presence of God is not limited to what is right now. God is ahead of us in our not yet. The presence of God was already where he was taking his people. He had a not yet for them, and God was already in it. God is the first and the last. Everything God's people were going through, was in between God. Everything we go through happens within the context and confines who God is. As out of control as life seemed for God's people at this moment, they needed to know that God had ultimate control! Someone needs to know that today!

God is an abiding presence. Kings would come and go. The people would see Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon fall. The people would see Cyrus and Persia come and go. But God is first and last, therefore there would be no rising and falling of God. Presidents come and go. Congress-people come and go. But God is in office forever! God is still on the throne.

What does God say about God? God says "no one is like me in my abiding presence." And then God says "no one is like me in MY ACCURATE PREDICTIONS." "Who then is like me?" queries the Almighty. "Come out from hiding!" God is searching for his rivals. God challenges His rivals to preach like he preaches. Let the idols come out and say it like I can say it. The aspect of God's "preaching" or "prophecy" which God highlights is

the accuracy of his prophecies and promises. Can anyone say what I am saying and the word actually come to pass? God is declaring how true God is to God's word. God is faithful to God's word. The songwriter said "Great is thy faithfulness...Morning by morning new mercies I see." God's word comes to pass even when it doesn't seem as though it will. God's word comes to pass even though it is taking a long time.

The Lord says to His people "even what you are going through now should not be a surprise." He tells them don't be afraid of what you are going through. I declared that this would happen. God through the prophets declared that exile was coming. If God declared it there is no reason to fear it. If God declared it, God has knowledge of it. If God has knowledge of it, God knows control of it. If God has control of it, then there's only so much exile can do to them. There was only so much that the devil could do to Job, because God was aware of everything the enemy was doing. If God is aware of it, God has ultimate control of it. If God has control of it, God will only allow the enemy to do so much!

God not only declared their exile, but God had declared their deliverance. God already factored in their deliverance before they even needed it. God knew where they were headed, so God made a provision for them before they even go into it. What a mighty God we serve! Rev. 13:8 says that the Lamb was slain before the foundations of the world. God had already planned our redemption before our fall. "It was not a haphazard event, nor a secondary scheme. But it was the plan of the Lord to redeem."

What does God say about God? God says "there is no one like me in my abiding presence; there is no one like me in my accurate predictions; and there is no one like me IN MY AFFIRMING PROTECTION." Through the prophet, the Lord says "there is no

other rock; I know not one.” In this autobiographical statement, the Lord refers to himself as a rock. This is how God refers to God. This is not strange language nor a foreign concept. The psalmist declared “for in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion: in the secret of his pavilion shall he hide me; he shall set me upon a rock.” The psalmist said to the Lord “when my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

“Rock” refers to a fortress to take refuge in and place to build upon. At this time, the people of God needed a place to hide in. God would be that place. As a rock, God is our fortress. God surrounds us, and protects us from the hand of the enemy. God is not only a rock for us to hide in, God is also a rock for us to stand on. God is declaring himself to be the only firm foundation. Anything else you stand on, anyone else you stand on runs the risk of shifting on you. But God is not shifting sand; God is a solid rock. And “in times like these, you need a Savior; in times like these you need an anchor...be very sure, be very sure, you anchor holds an grips the solid rock....This rock is Jesus

After God says what God says about God, He then requests some witnesses to take the stand. God has already declared His own uniqueness. Now God calls for some others to witness to what God has declared. God has made it plain that no one is like God in His abiding presence, accurate predictions and affirming protection. Now the Lord calls for some witnesses. If God needed a witness to his abiding presence, he could call forth Jonah. Jonah thought he could get away from God by fleeing to Tarshish. He thought he could get on a ship and abandon the presence of the Almighty. But he found out that as he was running from God, he ran into God. If God needed a witness to his accurate predictions, he could call on Abraham and Sarah. God promised them a son and innumerable descendants. It took a while, but the promise came to pass. If God needed

a witness to his affirming presence, he could call on Daniel. In the presence of lions, the Lord watched over him all night long!

Maybe we don't need to go back that far. We have some witnesses right here. Someone can say "I searched all over couldn't find nobody. Searched high and low...nobody greater than you..."