
Observations from Isaiah

LESSON XXXV : WITNESSES TO THE UNIQUENESS OF GOD — PART 2 (43:8-44:22)

General outline (from Oswalt's *Isaiah*):

- I. INTRODUCTION: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF GOD'S PEOPLE (1-5)
- II. A CALL TO SERVANTHOOD (6)
- III. BASIS FOR SERVANTHOOD: WHOM SHALL WE TRUST? (7-39)
- IV. THE VOCATION OF SERVANTHOOD (40-55)
 - A. MOTIVE FOR SERVANTHOOD: GRACE (40-48)
 - 1. The Servant's Lord (40)
 - 2. The Servant of the Lord (41-44)
 - a. God's Promises to His Servants (41:1-42:9)
 - b. Redeemed to be God's witnesses (42:10-44:22)
 - (1) The certainty of redemption (42:10-43:7)
 - (2) Witnesses for God's uniqueness (43:8-44:20)
 - (a) You are my witnesses (43:8-13)
 - (b) God delivers his witnesses (43:14-44:5)
 - (c) The folly of idolatry (44:6-20)
 - (3) Remember the Lord (44:21,22)

Witnesses for God's uniqueness: The folly of idolatry (44:6-20)

No Other Rock (44:6-8)

This is what the LORD says — Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come — yes, let him foretell what will come. Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one. (NIV)

Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God. And who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people? and the things that are coming, and shall come, let them shew unto them. Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any. (KJV)

Thus said Jehovah, king of Israel, And his Redeemer, Jehovah of Hosts: 'I [am] the first, and I the last, And besides Me there is no God. And who as I, doth call and declare it, And arrange it for Me, Since My placing the people of antiquity, And things that are coming, And those that do come, declare they to them? Fear not, nor be afraid, Have I not from that time caused thee to hear, and declared? And ye [are] My witnesses, Is there a God besides Me? yea, there is none, A Rock I have not known. (YLT)

In this entire subdivision the Lord has emphasized His intentions of delivering His people. “Central to all of this has been the uniqueness of God. *Because he alone controls history, what has happened to Israel was neither a surprise to him nor against his will. The people are in captivity for one reason alone: their broken covenant with God, and it was all foretold. By the same token, God’s uniqueness means that the gods of Israel’s enemies can do nothing to prevent him from delivering his people at the moment he chooses to do so.* The deliverance has also been told in advance. To all of this Israel is a witness, not only to what has already happened but to what will happen. Israel’s experience, past, present, and future, can be accounted for only by God’s uniqueness.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] What follows today finalizes the entire argument:

v6-8 summation of God’s absolute claim

v9-20 a detailed exposé of the foolishness of idolatry

THE LORD OUR GOD (v 6) — Typical of Isaiah, the titles for the Lord are stacked one upon another. *Isaiah uses three epithets in this instance: LORD, King and Redeemer, and LORD Almighty (lit. ‘Lord of Hosts, Lord Sabaōth’).* The intent here is to establish God as Israel’s King and therefore Israel will not be swallowed up in captivity. Instead He will be their Kinsman Redeemer to deliver them.

JESUS CHRIST WAS YAHWEH INCARNATE (v 6) — Isaiah continues by stating none can even be compared to our God: *‘I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.’ One commentator suggests the force of the Hebrew used here is that without the Lord the other gods cannot even exist. “That this language (first and last) is applied to Christ not once but four times in Revelation (1:17; 2:8; 21:6; 22:13) is some indication of the force of the early church’s conviction that Jesus Christ was Yahweh incarnate.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] *‘When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.... To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.... He said to me: It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.’* (Rev 1:17; 2:8; 21:6; 22:13 NIV)

FUNDAMENTAL PROOF OF THE DEITY OF ISRAEL’S GOD (v 7) — As Isaiah has been bringing out repeatedly in this section, *the proof offered here by the Lord that He is indeed Who He claims to be is the fact of His predicting what appears to be impossible and then bringing the prediction to pass as He declared!* “Because the creator is the same as the savior and judge, because the saving God is the same as the blessing God, because there is only one to praise and only one to complain to, because there is only one to trust, therefore there is a connection [among the events of history] If there are many gods, what is happening happens in the first place between the gods, between divine beings. If there is only one God, all that is happening takes place between this one God and his creation, including his people.” [Westermann, *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?*; q.v. Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

BECAUSE GOD IS GOD, DO NOT FEAR (v 8) — As His people, God very practically encourages us to trust and place our faith in what He can do and Who He is: *‘Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago?’ “History is in God’s hand, as the Israelites’ own history should tell them. Their faith will not be shown to have been misguided; God will not abandon them; Babylon will not devour them; the ancient promises will not fall to the ground.... Before all the world Israel will be a living witness to the fact that God had*

predicted all of this far in advance, and that he had the power to make his promises come true. Just as God was predicting the devastation to a heedless people who trusted human pomp and might instead of their God (8:6-8), at the same time he was predicting an unheard-of return from that devastation for all those who would allow him to do so. One hundred and fifty years after Isaiah's death the people would be able to testify, 'Yes, God told us all of it, bane and blessing, long before any of it happened. He alone is God.'" [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] But more than an aloof Master of history, He is one where we can hide in the midst of storm. "It was not of the heathen deities that they were directed not to be afraid, as in Jer 10:5, but rather the great catastrophe coming upon the nations, of which Cyrus was the instrument. In the midst of this, when one nation after another would be overthrown, and its tutelar gods would prove to be worthless, Israel would have nothing to fear, since its God, who was no dumb idol, had foretold all this, and that indeed long ago, as they themselves must bear witness. Prophecies before the captivity had foretold the conquest of Babylon by Medes and Elamites, and the deliverance of Israel from the Babylonian bondage; and even these prophecies themselves were like a spirit's voice from the far distant past, consoling the people of the captivity beforehand, and serving to support their faith." [K&D, *Isaiah*]

Witnesses for God's uniqueness: The folly of idolatry (44:6-20)

Idolaters are Nothing (44:9-11)

<i>All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing? He and his kind will be put to shame; craftsmen are nothing but men. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and infamy. (NIV)</i>	<i>They that make a graven image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit; and they are their own witnesses; they see not, nor know; that they may be ashamed. Who hath formed a God, or molten a graven image that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his fellows shall be ashamed: and the workmen, they are of men: let them all be gathered together, let them stand up; yet they shall fear, and they shall be ashamed together. (KJV)</i>	<i>Framers of a graven image [are] all of them emptiness, And their desirable things do not profit, And their own witnesses they [are], They see not, nor know, that they may be ashamed. Who hath formed a god, And a molten image poured out — not profitable? Lo, all his companions are ashamed, As to artizans — they [are] of men, All of them gather together, they stand up, They fear, they are ashamed together. (YLT)</i>
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"In this entire section, beginning with 42:10, God has spoken of his determination and his ability to deliver his people from Babylonian captivity. In this context, he has pointed out to them that, far from being cast off, they are the living evidence, witnesses (43:10, 12; 44:8), to the world that he alone has the power and compassion to accomplish this purpose.... ***Now God turns to the idol-gods' witnesses (cf. also 43:9). What of them? What kind of evidence can they produce that their gods are supreme?*** ... In excruciating detail the prophet depicts how the idol worshipers go about constructing an idol. How, he asks, can something like this, made by humans from the stuff of creation, ever save anyone? In fact, he argues, those who bow down to the work of their own hands reduce themselves to nothing. They worship themselves and testify that nothing beyond themselves can save them.... ***Thus the Achilles' heel of all paganism is idol making. If it can be***

shown, as Isaiah does, that it is folly to believe that supreme power resides in a block of wood that was a tree until someone cut it down and with great effort made it into a god, then a deathblow has been struck at the root of paganism.” [Oswalt, Isaiah]

CHRISTIANITY IS A SUPERNATURAL RELIGION — *“Indeed, where better to attack paganism than at the point of its addiction to image making? It is at this point that the fundamental difference between the biblical and the nonbiblical religions is clearest. The Bible insists that the supreme power in the universe is utterly other than the universe. Thus he cannot be represented by any of the forms of the universe, and even more to the point, cannot be manipulated through any of those forms.” [Oswalt, Isaiah]*

THE ‘CHAOS’ OF PAGANISM (v 9) — Isaiah directly states his thesis: *the idols and idolaters themselves are nothing and worthless.* ‘Nothing’ is the Hebrew word *tōhû* which denotes ‘elemental chaos.’ It is the word used in Gen 1:2, *‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.’* (Gen 1:1,2 KJV) *Tōhû* is defined as “to lie waste; a desolation (of surface), i.e. desert; figuratively, a worthless thing; adverbially, in vain: — confusion, empty place, without form, nothing, (thing of) nought, vain, vanity, waste, wilderness.” [Strong’s Dictionary] *“Instead of the myths of gods making order out of chaos (tōhû), those who make gods turn God’s order (45:18,19) into chaos (41:29), with the result that they become tōhû themselves (40:17, 23; 44:9).” [Oswalt, Isaiah]* Everyone on earth is either part of the problem or part of the solution. The ‘political correct’ movement of today are those striving to bring in a new world order, a Utopia of their own making, ‘heaven on earth’ — *without God! But in denying the moral absolutes found in the word of God, they are actually destroying mankind rather than ‘lifting it out of the mire.’* ‘Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools’ (Rom 1:22 KJV) *‘For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.’* (1 Cor 1:18-25 NIV)

Witnesses for God’s uniqueness: The folly of idolatry (44:6-20)

Idolaters are Confused (44:12-17)

<i>The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a</i>	<i>The smith with the tongs both worketh in the coals, and fashioneth it with hammers, and worketh it with the strength of his arms: yea, he is hungry, and his strength faileth: he drinketh no water, and is faint. The carpenter stretcheth out his rule; he marketh it out with a</i>	<i>He hath wrought iron [with] an axe, And hath wrought with coals, And with hammers doth form it, And doth work it by his powerful arm, Yea, he is hungry, and there is no power, He doth not drink water, and he is wearied. He hath wrought [with] wood, He hath stretched out a</i>
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line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god." (NIV)

line; he fitteth it with planes, and he marketh it out with the compass, and maketh it after the figure of a man, according to the beauty of a man; that it may remain in the house. He heweth him down cedars, and taketh the cypress and the oak, which he strengtheneth for himself among the trees of the forest: he planteth an ash, and the rain doth nourish it. Then shall it be for a man to burn: for he will take thereof, and warm himself; yea, he kindleth it, and baketh bread; yea, he maketh a God, and worshippeth it; he maketh it a graven image, and falleth down thereto. He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: And the residue thereof he maketh a God, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my God. (KJV)

rule, He doth mark it out with a line, He maketh it with carving tools, And with a compass he marketh it out, And maketh it according to the form of a man, According to the beauty of a man, To remain in the house. Cutting down to himself cedars, He taketh also a cypress, and an oak, And he strengtheneth [it] for himself Among the trees of a forest, He hath planted an ash, and the shower doth nourish [it]. And it hath been for man to burn, And he taketh of them, and becometh warm, Yea, he kindleth [it], and hath baked bread, Yea, he maketh a god, and boweth himself, He hath made it a graven image, And he falleth down to it. Half of it he hath burnt in the fire, By [this] half of it he eateth flesh, He roasteth a roasting, and is satisfied, Yea, he is warm, and saith: 'Aha, I have become warm, I have enjoyed the light. And its remnant for a god he hath made — For his graven image, He falleth down to it, and worshippeth, And prayeth unto it, and he saith, 'Deliver me, for my god thou [art].' (YLT)

"The author now turns to an explicit discussion of the way in which an idol is constructed. Later (vv. 18-20) he will make explicit the implications of these actions, but that is not necessary. Without a word of explanation it is apparent to anyone that creation of the transcendent from the mundane is a contradiction in terms. *The poet's skill is in making painfully clear just how mundane the whole process is. He does so by taking us backward step-by-step from the end of the process to the beginning, showing in each stage how ludicrous it is for humans to make gods. We go from the final step of plating the wooden form with metal to the first step of planting seedlings from which the wood will be cut. The final irony is that the same log that supplies the god also supplies the fuel to heat the craftsman's food and warm his body.*" [Oswalt, Isaiah]

IDOLATRY IS HARD WORK (v 12) — *The detail and listing of each step in the making of the idol is given to illustrate the great efforts required to make the false god. This is further indicated by the idolater requiring food and water as he grows faint in the making of the idol*

(v12). “The contrast with God’s statements to Israel both before and after this is evident. Because Israel has not formed God, but he has formed them, they need not be wearied (40:28-31); because they do not carry him, but he them (45:20; 46:3); they need not hunger and thirst (43:19,20). ***There is also the suggestion of compulsion here. These activities must be completed even to the point of exhaustion. After all, a god is being made here; the craftsman is driven in order to prepare a body for the god.***” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] “The meaning therefore is, *The smith has sharpened, or sharpens the ma’atsâd*, possibly the chisel, to cut the iron upon the anvil; and works with red-hot coals, making the iron red-hot by blowing the fire. The piece of iron which he cuts off is the future idol, and this he shapes with hammers. And what of the carpenter? He stretches the line upon the block of wood, to measure the length and breadth of the idol; he marks it upon the wood with red-stone, and works it with planes, and with the compasses he draws the outline of it, that is to say, in order that the different parts of the body may be in right proportion; and he constructs it in such a manner that it acquires the shape of a man, the beautiful appearance of a man, to be set up like a human inmate in either a temple or private house.” [K&D, *Isaiah*] “Isaiah’s imaginative gift is pressed into the service of his inspired satire.... Whether the medium be iron (v. 12) or wood (v. 13), the enterprise deserves nothing but ridicule. God-given strength and skill are being misused, and sin has deprived the idolater of any sense of what is fitting. He uses a tree that is dependent on God’s rain for its growth and uses it for two purposes — to make a fire for warmth and a god for worship! Here is the *reductio ad absurdum* of idolatry for sin has blinded the mind (vv. 18-20). ***Right from his call (6:9-10), Isaiah was aware of the blinding effects of sin.***” [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

HUMANISM IS THE FOUNDATION OF ALL IDOLATRY (v 13) — with great skill the craftsman creates an idol out of wood and metal. “What is the result? Humanity in its fullest flower. The kind of humanity that needs a house in which to live, a roof over its head to keep out the rain, and four walls to keep out marauders.... Again Isaiah demonstrates how incisively he understands the nature of paganism. Above all else, ***it is an attempt to cast eternal reality into the shape of humanity. We have not progressed beyond that today. The doctrine called humanism is only an abstract form of this age-old effort. We will be God, and God will be us.***” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

MAN TURNS GOD’S BLESSINGS INTO A CURSE (v 15-17) — “The tragedy of the whole picture is established in the first words of v15: ‘*it shall be for people to burn.*’ ‘*Shall be for*’ expresses the idea of possession. ***The wood is given to humans for blessing, to be used. But instead of allowing that gift to turn their eyes ingratitudes to the transcendent Creator who cannot be manipulated, they use the gift to make God in their own image in an attempt to make certain that the gifts will not be cut off in the future (cf. Rom 1:18-23). Instead of freedom of trust and grace, they (and we) constantly choose the bondage of manipulation and coercion.***” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

ISAIAH NOT ALONE IN HIS RIDICULE — according to Oswalt, the following passage from Horace’s satire have been quoted by just about every commentator on Isaiah 44 since Calvin because the content is so similar to Isaiah’s comments: “Once I was the trunk of a wild fig, a useless log, when a carpenter, uncertain whether to make me a stool or a Priapus, decided to make me a god. So now I am god, a major terror to birds and thieves.” [Horace, *Satires 1.8 — Priapus and the Witches*; q.v. Oswalt, *Isaiah*] Keil and Delitzsch’s commentary also cites another sample of this type of ridicule: “Diagoras of Melos, a pupil of Democritus, once threw a wooden standing figure of Hercules into the fire, and said jocularly, ‘Come now, Hercules, perform thy thirteenth labour, and help me to cook the turnips.’” [K&D, *Isaiah*]

Witnesses for God's uniqueness: The folly of idolatry (44:6-20)

Idolaters are Blind (44:18-20)

<i>They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?" He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"</i>	<i>They have not known nor understood: for he hath shut their eyes, that they cannot see; and their hearts, that they cannot understand. And none considereth in his heart, neither is there knowledge nor understanding to say, I have burned part of it in the fire; yea, also I have baked bread upon the coals thereof; I have roasted flesh, and eaten it: and shall I make the residue thereof an abomination? shall I fall down to the stock of a tree? He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?</i>	<i>They have not known, nor do they understand, For He hath daubed their eyes from seeing, Their heart from acting wisely. And none doth turn [it] back unto his heart, Nor hath knowledge nor understanding to say, 'Half of it I have burned in the fire, Yea, also, I have baked bread over its coals, I roast flesh and I eat, And its remnant for an abomination I make, To the stock of a tree I fall down.'</i> (YLT)
(NIV)	(KJV)	

Although totally unnecessary Isaiah concludes by stating the obvious, not wishing anyone to mistake his teaching at this point. Calvin says that like a mother bird, the prophet is breaking the food into small pieces, and even chewing it up, before feeding it to the idolaters. "He has argues at length that the reason God can deliver his people is that he was not created by them, is not an extension of them, and does not exist to serve them — in short, that he is not one of the gods. Here he cannot allow the chance to go by to drive his point home by stressing the opposite. The only one who can deliver, being truly holy, is One who is not one of these." [Oswalt, Isaiah]

IDOLATERS BLIND BY CHOICE — *"To Isaiah it is evident that the only reason why a person would not see the obvious contradictions in the picture he has just drawn is that, for some reason, they cannot. In the normal course of human intelligence, the implications would surely be plain. So what has happened? Why do they not know? The answer is familiar to him: They have become blind and insensitive.... [T]his covering over was not arbitrary, but in response to the freely chosen acts of the idolaters. In this, Calvin and all the rest of us are following the lines laid out by Paul in Romans 1. Humans could have done differently, but we did not want to. We did not, and do not, want a sovereign God to whom we owe grateful and total obedience. We want a universe in our own image, whose limits and benefits are dictated by us. That end, according to Isaiah and the other biblical writers, demands intellectual suicide, since this is so obviously not the case, but the end has always seemed worth it to us. So God visits on the pagan mind the gathering darkness it has freely chosen." [Oswalt, Isaiah] "God is just and never punishes anyone without just cause, and does not blind a man unless he deserves it and voluntarily shuts his eyes." [Calvin, Isaiah] "So irrational is idolatry; but yet, through self-hardening, they have fallen under the judgment of hardness of heart (Isa 6:9-10; 19:3; 29:10), and have been given up to a reprobate mind (Rom*

1:28).” [K&D, *Isaiah*] Last week (Thursday, August 2, 2001) we buried my mother. Her heart had stopped while in the hospital recovering from a surgery. Although they started her heart again she was deprived of oxygen for an unknown period of time and her upper brain had severe damage. She died a week later. This depravity of human nature was clearly evidenced during one of the conferences with a neuro-surgeon who was called in to evaluate my mother. This doctor specializes in the most complex organ known to man yet made a comment about the ‘modern’ part of the brain as compared with animals (evolution). ***How could this doctor, without doubt a brilliant and well-studied man, after years of studying the brain, believe it happened by accident?!?*** The only answer which might be given is the blindness of the unbelieving heart.

MAN’S ADAMIC NATURE — “We agree with [our forefathers] that man naturally is devoid of love to God and that every faculty is weakened, disordered, and corrupted by the selfish bent of his will. They held to original sin. The selfish bent of the will of man can be traced back to the apostasy of our first parents and, on account of that, departure of the race from God all men are by nature children of wrath.... ***The theory of Adam’s Natural Headship regards humanity at large as the outgrowth of one germ. Though the leaves of a tree appear as disconnected units when we look down upon them from above, a view from beneath will discern the common connection with the twigs, branches, trunk, and will finally trace their life to the root and to the seed from which it originally sprang. The race of man is one because it sprang from one head. Its members are not to be regarded atomistically, as segregated individuals; the deeper truth is the truth of organic unity.... God has not created any new tree nature since he created the first tree nor has he created any new human nature since he created the first man. I am but a branch and outgrowth of the tree of humanity.***” [Strong, *Systematic Theology*]

‘TOTAL DEPRAVITY’ — a thorough and clear definition is found in A. H. Strong’s *Systematic Theology*; therefore his section is reproduced here: ***“By [total depravity] we mean, on the one hand, the lack of original righteousness or of holy affection toward God and, on the other hand, the corruption of the moral nature or bias toward evil....*** Depravity is both negative (absence of love and of moral likeness to God) and positive (presence of manifold tendencies to evil.) ... The Scriptures represent human nature as totally depraved. The phrase ‘total depravity,’ however, is liable to misinterpretation and should not be used without explanation. By the total depravity of universal humanity we mean:

A. Negatively — not that every sinner is

(a) destitute of conscience for the existence of strong impulses to right, and of remorse for wrongdoing show that conscience is often keen

John 8:9 — *“And they, when they heard it, went out one by one, beginning from the eldest, even unto the last.”* The muscles of a dead frog’s leg will contract when a current of electricity is sent into them. So the dead soul will thrill at the touch of the divine law. Natural conscience, combined with the principle of self-love, may even prompt choice of the good, though no love for God is in the choice. Bengel: “We have lost our likeness to God but there remains notwithstanding an indelible nobility which we ought to revere both in ourselves and in others. We still have remained men, to be conformed to that likeness, through the divine blessing to which the will of man should subscribe. This they forget who speak evil of human nature. Absalom fell out of his father’s favor but the people, for all that, recognized in him the son of the king.”

(b) devoid of all qualities pleasing to men and useful when judged by a human standard for the existence of such qualities is recognized by Christ.

Mark 10:21 — “*And Jesus looking upon him loved him.*” These very qualities, however, may show that their possessors are sinning against great light and are the guiltier; cf.

Malachi 1:6 — “*A son honoreth his father and a servant his master: if then I am a father, where is mine honor? and if I am a master where is my fear?*” ... A ruined temple may have beautiful fragments of fluted columns, but it is no proper habitation for the god for whose worship it was built.

(c) A sinner is prone to every form of sin, for certain forms of sin exclude certain others

Matthew 23:23 — “*ye tithe mint and anise and cumin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy, and faith: but these ye ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone*”; Romans 2:14 — “*when Gentiles that have not the law do by nature the things of the law, these, not having the law, are the law unto themselves; in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness therewith.*” The Sin of miserliness may exclude the sin of luxury; the sin of pride may exclude the sin of sensuality.

(d) intense as he can be in his selfishness and opposition to God, he becomes worse every day.

Gen. 15:16 — “*the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full*”; 2 Timothy 3:13 — “*evil men and impostors shall wax worse and worse.*” ***Depravity is not simply being deprived of good.***

Depravation is more than deprivation. Left to himself, man tends downward and his sin increases day by day. But there is a divine influence within which quickens conscience and kindles aspiration for better things. The immanent Christ is “*the light which lighteth every man*” (John 1:9). Prof. Wm. Adams Brown: “In so far as God’s Spirit is at work among men and they receive ‘the Light which lighteth every man,’ we must qualify our statement of total depravity. ***Depravity is not so much a state as a tendency.*** With growing complexity of life, sin becomes more complex. Adam’s sin was not the worst. ‘*It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee*’ (Matthew 11:24).” Men are not yet in the condition of demons. Only here and there have they attained to “a disinterested love of evil.” Such men are few, and they were not born so. There are degrees in depravity.... ***The phrase “total depravity” has respect only to relations to God and it means incapability of doing anything which, in the sight of God, is a good act.*** No act is perfectly good that does not proceed from a true heart and constitute an expression of that heart. Yet we have no right to say that every act of an unregenerate man is displeasing to God. Right acts from right motives are good, whether performed by a Christian or by one who is not renewed in heart. Such acts, however, are always prompted by God, and thanks for them and due to God and not to him who performed them.

B. Positively — that every sinner is

(a) totally destitute of that love to God, which constitutes the fundamental and all-inclusive demand of the law.

John 5:42 — “*But I knew you, that ye have not the love of God in yourselves.*”

(b) He is chargeable with elevating some lower affection or desire above regard for God and his law

2 Timothy 3:4 — *“lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God”*; cf. Malachi 1:6 — *“A son honoreth his father and a servant his master: if then I am a father, where is mine honor? and if I am a master, where is my fear?”*

(c) he is supremely determined, in his whole inward and outward life, by a preference of self to God.

2 Timothy 3:2 — *“lovers of self”*

(d) Every sinner is possessed of an aversion to God which, though sometimes latent, becomes active enmity, so soon as God’s will comes into manifest conflict with his own

Romans 8:7 — *“the mind of the flesh is enmity against God.”*

(e) he is disordered and corrupted in every faculty, through this substitution of selfishness for supreme affection toward God.

Ephesians 4:18 — *“darkened in their understanding...hardening of their heart”*; Titus 1:15 — *“both their mind and their conscience are defiled”*; 2 Corinthians 7:1 — *“defilement of flesh and spirit”*; Hebrews 3:12 — *“an evil heart of unbelief”*

(f) The sinner is credited with no thought, emotion or act that divine holiness can fully approve

Romans 3:9 — *“they are all under sin”*; 7:18 — *“in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing.”*

(g) is he subject to a law of constant progress in depravity, which he has no recuperative energy to enable him successfully to resist.

Romans 7:18 — *“to will is present with me, but to do that which is good is not”*; 23 — *“law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members.”*

Every sinner would prefer a milder law and a different administration. But whoever does not love God’s law does not truly love God. The sinner seeks to secure his own interests rather than God’s. Even so called religious acts he performs with preference of his own good to God’s glory. He disobeys, and always has disobeyed, the fundamental law of love. He is like a railway train on a downgrade and God must apply the brakes or destruction is sure. There are latent passions in every heart which if let loose would curse the world.... Denney, Studies in Theology, 83 — *“The depravity which sin has produced in human nature extends to the whole of it. There is no part of man’s nature which is unaffected by it. Man’s nature is all of a piece, and what affects it at all affects it altogether. When the conscience is violated by disobedience to the will of God, the moral understanding is darkened and the will is enfeebled. We are not constructed in watertight compartments, one of which might be ruined while the others remained intact.”*
[Strong, Systematic Theology]

Remember the Lord (44:21,22)

Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you. (NIV)

Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant: I have formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee. (KJV)

Remember these, O Jacob, and Israel, For My servant thou [art], I formed thee, a servant to Me thou [art], O Israel, thou dost not forget Me. I have blotted out, as [by] a thick cloud, Thy transgressions, And as [by] a cloud thy sins, Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee. (YLT)

‘REMEMBER’ – BECAUSE OF WHO I AM, I WILL NOT FORSAKE YOU — in Deuteronomy Israel is again and again told to ‘remember’ what the Lord had done for Israel in delivering them from Egypt and bringing them to the promised land. Here the ‘remember’ is not necessarily a specific historical act of God but rather Israel was to remember who God is, His character. “All of Israel’s remembering is to be in the context of her special relationship to God. He had not merely shaped her, but he had shaped her for the special purposes of service. The role of servanthood is mentioned twice in three phrases, and the second occurrence is emphatic. *Thus in the light of all that has been said about the Lord’s superiority over the idols and in the light of this special relationship that Israel bears to him, she must not interpret the exilic experience to mean that God has forgotten her. The purpose for which he created her — evidence of his sole Godhood — has not yet been fulfilled. How can he cast her off?*” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

THE ROOT PROBLEM – SIN — “[P]hysical deliverance is not Israel’s deepest need. To think that way would be to ignore the real cause of the exile, which was sin. Until that sin is addressed, that is, not only forgiven but corrected, the true historic significance of the exile will have been overlooked.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] “This [sin] Jehovah clears away, just as when His wind sweeps away the clouds, and restores the blue sky again (Job 26:13). *Thus does God’s free grace now interpose at the very time when Israel thinks He has forgotten it, blotting out Israel’s sin, and proving this by redeeming it from a state of punishment. What an evangelical sound the preaching of the Old Testament evangelist has in this passage also!* Forgiveness and redemption are not offered on condition of conversion, but the mercy of God comes to Israel in direct contrast to what its works deserve, and Israel is merely called upon to reciprocate this by conversion and renewed obedience. The perfects denote that which has essentially taken place. Jehovah has blotted out Israel’s sin, inasmuch as He does not impute it any more, and thus has redeemed Israel. All that yet remains is the outward manifestation of this redemption, which is already accomplished in the counsel of God.” [K&D, *Isaiah*]

HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY — “The final phrase, ‘Return to me, for I have redeemed you,’ underlies one of the key points in *Isaiah*: the importance of the human response to the divine initiative. Israel is captive, both to Babylon and to her sins. She can do nothing to deliver herself. The initiative is wholly in God’s hand. If she is to be bought back, redeemed, God alone must do that. But how will Israel respond to the initiative? God’s activity on her behalf does not in itself produce the response. Unless Israel is willing to act in faith on the evidence of God’s activity, then the activity is in vain. So long as Israel lies down in hopelessness and despair, the wonderful provision of Cyrus, and the even more wonderful provision of the Savior, will be in vain. This is

the reason for the recurring challenges not to fear, not to believe they are forgotten, and not to forget who, and whose, they are. The great danger of the exile would not be that God would be unable to act, but that Israel would fail to respond in faith to his actions.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] I realize such a concept is *anathema* to some who over-emphasize the doctrines of grace. As I read and typed the quote in, I could already hear the response of some: ‘*But if Israel ever responds, even that response is initiated and given unto them by the Lord and His Spirit!*’ I would not deny that statement; the point is however that ***God’s provision and spiritual enabling is not the direct emphasis of Isaiah at this point, the emphasis is upon the response and man’s responsibility.*** Isaiah is not now teaching the sovereignty of God. He is not now teaching that God is the first cause in all spiritual matters. All that is true but God through Isaiah is at this time commanding Israel to return unto God. That emphasis is just as true and necessary as the emphasis that God must provide the spiritual enabling. To teach from this passage in any other manner is no different than taking God’s command for all men to repent (Acts 17:30) and teaching people to sit back and do nothing. ‘If God wants to grant repentance, He will give them repentance!’ ***The scripture teaches us to compare scripture with scripture in our studies, but it no where teaches us to ‘explain away’ scripture with other scripture!*** I personally like Oswalt’s comments at this point: God has done something for man, now it is man’s responsibility to respond. That is a proper emphasis.

“I have swept away your offenses like a
cloud, your sins like the morning mist.
Return to me, for I have redeemed you.”

— Isaiah 44:22 NIV