

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Seventeenth Week - First Day

CYRUS CALLED BY NAME

"Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, 'You shall be built,' and to the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid'" (Isaiah 44:28).

It is interesting to note that in the prophecies of Isaiah there is a gradual preparation, as it were, for the distinct bringing forth of Cyrus by name. In the thirteenth chapter, entitled "The Burden of Babylon," Cyrus and his warriors are brought forth without being named--and without Cyrus himself being characterized by any distinguishing epithet--as the ministers of the Lord's judgment upon Babylon. But in the next prophecy, the forty-first chapter of Isaiah, Cyrus is indicated as "the righteous man out of the east." And in the final prophecy in chapters 44, 45, and 46, the Lord not only names Cyrus but calls him "my shepherd," "my anointed," and "the man that executes my counsel." These taken all together form a splendid series of characterizing epithets such as never in Scripture are given to any but the most illustrious of the Hebrew race.

One of the designations of Cyrus, "the man who executes my counsel," furnishes the key to the prophetic view of his character and position. It is a view which pervades all that is said of him and promised to him, and forms the most striking and the most sustained of the instances in which the Lord not only asserts his supremacy in the government of the world, but reveals the mode in which that government operates and the form in which it is most usually conducted. The marked manner in which Cyrus and his Persians are represented as set apart to execute the purposes of the Lord, while they considered themselves pursuing their own objectives, cannot fail to suggest many interesting reflections in how God acts in executing the high purposes of his will. We find that He often does this through agents who little think about whom they are serving and may in fact be ignorant of even his name.

But the forty-first chapter brings Cyrus before us in his own proper person:

"Who raised up one from the east?
Who in righteousness called him to His feet?
Who gave the nations before him,
And made him rule over kings?"

Who gave them as the dust to his sword,
As driven stubble to his bow?" (Isa. 41:2)

An old interpretation assigns this prophecy to Abraham, on no other ground, apparently, than that he also came "from the east" and was eminently a "righteous man." But this view is now generally seen to be untenable, for none of the other circumstances enumerated here and in the ensuing verses is applicable to Abraham; whereas they all agree with Cyrus and his exploits. However, the greatest difficulty is supposed to be found in the designation of Cyrus, a heathen, as a "righteous man."

But this title, which indicates one who acts with habitual rectitude and would not consciously inflict wrong--in other words, a just man--is not in Scripture confined to Israelites. What is more, it correctly describes Cyrus, whose name has long been held in honor by his countrymen not only for his military exploits but for his character.

Proceeding now to the important passage that forms the conclusion of the forty-fourth and the beginning of the forty-fifth chapters, we read:

"Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd,
And he shall perform all My pleasure,
Saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built,"
And to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid."
Thus says Yahweh to His anointed,
To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held--
To subdue nations before him
And loose the armor of kings,
To open before him the double doors,
So that the gates will not be shut:
I will go before you
And make the crooked places straight;
I will break in pieces the gates of bronze
And cut the bars of iron.
I will give you the treasures of darkness
And hidden riches of secret places,
That you may know that I, Yahweh,
Who call you by your name, am the God of Israel.
For Jacob My servant's sake,
And Israel My elect,
I have even called you by your name;
I have named you, though you have not known Me."

This is a very astonishing passage. Here is a man singled out by name more than a century before his birth, and his character and career are distinctly marked out for him. The prophet

himself was apprised of the importance of this circumstance, as appears by the last of the verses we have cited in which two goals of this extraordinary revelation are avowed: first, that a certain conviction might be worked upon the mind of Cyrus himself by the evidence of this old prophecy and, second, that a benefit might be gained for the chosen people.

The fact that Cyrus' name was given so long before he existed merits our attention. The Hebrew name is "Koresh," which is clearly a Hebrew form of the same name which the Greeks (and we after them) represent by "Cyrus." They tell us that this name was from a Persian word signifying the sun. Khur accordingly signifies the sun in Pehlevi, which was the ancient language of Persia, as it does also in modern Persian. The prediction becomes even more remarkable when we consider that the prophecy of Isaiah was uttered while the Persians were a remote and obscure people, when they could scarcely have been known more than by name in Palestine, and when probably no one acquainted with their language could be found in all the country. Yet here the prophet gives a future man a name that exhibits the characteristics of a language unknown to the Jews and which has in that language a marked and pointed significance due to the homage the Persians paid to the sun.

We can illustrate this fact by a familiar comparison, that of supposing a Persian of the reign of Nadir Shah had foretold that a hundred years thence a queen named Victoria should reign in England, the name Victoria being entirely foreign and strange to him and having significance only among a people whose existence was scarcely known and whose language was not understood by a single person in his country. We see, therefore, that the signal inspiration of this prophecy of Isaiah is enhanced by three facts. First, the prophet himself could not have even known that such a name as that which he gave to the coming man existed; second, Isaiah could not have known it was a name bearing any significance in any language; and, third, he had no way of knowing it was a name likely to be given to any person.

We are, indeed, informed by the Greek writers that Cyrus was the name which this prince assumed when he became king, his original name having been Agradates. But there is reason to suppose that the name Agradates was with the Greeks only a translation of the Pehlevi word or name Khur-dad, "gift of the sun." But the Lord had not only called Cyrus by his name, He had also "surnamed" him--that is, He bestowed upon him titles of high honor such as no heathen prince had ever received. What were these titles and honorable distinctions? "The righteous man," "My shepherd," and "My anointed."

Regarding the first of these titles, we know that good kings and rulers are called shepherds in Scripture, as they are also in the ancient classics. It is a fact, however, that David, Cyrus, and Christ in his Messianic character are the only sovereigns to whom the title is personally given. And what is most remarkable, Cyrus himself was partial to this title. Xenophon describes him as saying, "The business of a good king and of a good shepherd are much alike. The shepherd ought, before all things, to provide for the welfare and safety of his flock, and to make use of these creatures consistently with their happiness; and a king ought in the same manner, to make men and cities happy, and in the same manner to make use of them."

Cyrus is also called the Lord's "anointed," in reference to the ancient custom of anointing kings with oil at their inauguration. Thus to be merely "the anointed" was of no peculiar distinction to Cyrus, but to be "the LORD'S anointed" was a very high distinction; for in Jehovah's providence Cyrus was appointed to be the prince under whose rule the Jews were to be restored and the other purposes of his will accomplished.