

Unrelenting Grace for Idolators

Isaiah 43.22–44.23

Sermon

Perh most pleasant surprise of Mets WS run this fall has been play of § 2nd baseman Daniel Murphy. Before playoffs if anyone were to guess who'd be star hitter, they'd say Yoenis Cespedes. But Murphy has been ridiculous, breaking MLB's record for consecutive games w a home run. As if Babe Ruth showed up at Citi Field in a Mets uni. His success has spawned a great deal of media coverage. [Article in Fri's NY Daily News](#) recounted his life as a HS & college ballplayer. HS coach, Lee Geiger, remembered 1st time heard of future star. Jr Hi coach told him: "I've got a guy that can hit. Doesn't run real well, but he can hit. His name is Daniel Murphy." If you've been following Mets, you'll appreciate irony of that statement. Not known for running prowess, but in deciding Game 5 vs Dodgers went to 2nd on a walk, but when he noticed no one was covering 3rd, took that too. His perf in playoffs proves old maxim: § not **what you have** that matters, but what you do w it.

A lot of truth to that proverb. As egalitarian as our soc is, we all recog that each of us enters this world on dift footings. Esp obvious when it comes to **resources**: dift econ conds whether poorer/wealthier/mid class, dift school districts w better/worse performing schools, dift advantages & disadvs based on a host of things outside our control (culture, fam, race, social status). & while we are right to be concerned about these issues & to work for a more just society that opens equal opps for everyone, the reality is the diffs aren't limited to circs. What we have includes not only background & circs but also our own **abilities**: gifts & talents, intellectual ability, emotional makeup, physical appearance, capacity to imagine & wonder, inclinations, personality, temperament—whether we can hit a curve ball or run fast. Even if we could level out all circs—not poss & frankly not ultimately desirable—we'd never be able to cancel the diffs bc it runs deeper than we can manipulate.

Ergo proverb: not what you have that matters, but what you do w it. An encouragement to make the most out of life. If life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Sure, you may not qualify for NYC dept of ed gifted & talented program, just do your best in school you're in. No, your phys appearance might prevent you from walking the runway, but you can still pursue your dream of modeling. Too bad you can't hit a curve ball, but your love of baseball can transform you into a great coach. Not what you have that matters, but what you do w it.

Not worst advice in world, can spur us to press on in face of difficulty. But doesn't go far enough, something left out. When we follow this advice (which, quite frankly, all of us does every single day), when we do what we do with whatever we have, when we take lemons life has given us—whether our resources or our abilities—and try to make lemonade out of it, it reveals something. & that's what psg Daniel read points to. Isa 43–44 (p. 503). Like last wk's txt, this section transcends chapter divide: *but now* (44.1) links end of 43 w beg of 44. 2nd half of psg presents 3rd case against idols. As I've noted past few wks, this sec of Isa (40–55) presents four cases vs idols & 1st three appear in rapid succession. 1st at end of 41, 2nd in last wk's txt earlier in 43. This one points to folly of idolatry (12–17). Isa presents crafting of idol in exact reverse order: § starts w *blacksmith* (12) who would apply finishing touches, gilding statue for worship; § then back to *carpenter* (13) & his equally skillful work, *measuring, outlining, chiseling, shaping*. But before he can shape wood, he has to *cut down* wood §: ergo v 14a. & before he can chop down a tree, he has to *let it grow* (14b). & before he can let it grow, he has to *plant* it (14c). Exact reverse order. Having gone through process Isa now shows folly of whole thing (§ § 15–17): carpenter chops down tree, splits it in half, uses 1 half to build a fire to keep warm & cook food, uses other half to do what v 13 described—to make a god to worship. To 1st half he says, *Ah! I am warm; I see the fire* (16), § to other half he says, *Save me! You are my god*. Ergo Isa's conc §: *they known nothing, they understanding nothing* (18).

What does that have to do w maxim “not what you have but what you do w it”? § Pretty obvious: that’s precisely what blacksmith & carpenter are doing. Exemplifying that prov. What do they have? Well, *blacksmith* has resources: *tool, hammers, gold/silver* (12). & he has abilities: *might, strength, skill & craftsmanship, even hands & arms* (i.e., not disabled). So also *carpenter*. Resources: *line, marker, chisel, compass, wood*. Abilities: basic engineering skills, craftsmanship, strength (can cut down a tree). But I said that this prov doesn’t go far enough, something missing, & that this psg points to it. When we do what we do w what resources & abilities we have, it reveals something about us. § Reveals **what you believe**. & not just a vacuous sort of faith, flowery theo jargon that has no relation to real life, but what we really bel, what we think makes life work, what gives us purpose/meaning/direction/hope, what makes us get out of bed in morning.

Perh that observation seems more obvious in this psg than in real life in our contemp world. After all, these guys are literally bowing down to skillfully carved block of wood & crying out to it, *Save me! You are my god!* (17). Prob very few if any of you did that this past wk. & yet I would suggest that same thing is true for us sophisticated NYers on UWS. B’s word for that: **idolatry**. § Taking something good & making it ult, finding something in creation & making it the purpose of our existence. No better contemp exponent on idolatry in our culture than friend & pastor Tim Keller (*Counterfeit Gods*). In *Gos in Life* exposes 20 dift idols of our hearts (p. 43). Not going to go through all of them here, but let me share a few w you & see if what you’re do w resources & abilities you have exposes any of these idols in your heart: “Life only has meaning if...

- § “I am highly productive & getting a lot done” (work idolatry)
- § “This one pers is in my life & happy to be there and/or happy w me” (indiv pers idolatry)
- § “I have a certain level of wealth, fin freedom, & very nice poss” (materialism idolatry)

- § “I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life” (comfort idolatry)
- § “I am being recog for my accomplishments & I am excelling in my work” (achievement idolatry)

Now if you're a Xian, it'd be real easy at this pt to simply nod your head & say, “Go get em, preacher. Sic those godless idolators!” But missing something patently obvious in txt: not address to godless nats but to **G's peo**. Why case vs idols preceded by charge of guilt: § 43.24—*you have burdened me w your sins & wearied me w your offenses*. & why case vs idols concludes w encouragement to repent: § 44.21—*remember these things, Jacob*; § 44.22—*return to me*. Idolators not just those who contend G doesn't exist or who literally bow down to gilded statues. Idolators include peo who come to church every Sun, read B every day, affirm our conf of faith. Idolators include you & me. So even if you're not guilty of idols just identified (& I'd q you on that!), prob find yourself in some other idols: “Life only has meaning if...”

- § “Peo are dependent on me & need me” (helping idolatry)
- § “I am adhering to my relig's moral codes & accomplished in its activities” (relig idolatry)
- § “My poli/soc cause is making progress & ascending in influence or power” (ideology idolatry)
- § “My children and/or parents are happy/happy w me” (fam idolatry)

We turn to things like work or pleasure or service or family & cry out, “Save me! Give me meaning! Be my identity! You are my god!” & perh nowhere is folly of our idolatry revealed more than when our god fails us—when we're sick & cannot be productive/can't keep up w Joneses/our parents aren't happy w us. Or maybe opp is true: insufficiency of our idols most exposed when we succeed, & we're still empty inside. “Gave best years of my life for this award/opp/victory—& that's it?”

That's all there is? Got to be something more." Either way, our idols fail us, our souls are crushed, & maxim taunts us: "that's all you got?" It's at soul-crushing moments like those, when our idols are revealed to be imposters, when our efforts to justify our existence aren't adequate, that we agree w **G's diagnosis: § nothing (9)** = "meaningless." *ashamed* (3x in 9–11). Don't misunderstand: G's not being harsh here, any more than a MD is being harsh when she tells you you have cancer. G's not being harsh, he's being honest. & deep down, if you've lived long enough, you know he's right. You've spent your best years/most diligent labor/brain & strength to win those idols & they have failed you. You finally recog all your efforts were in vain & you're simply ashamed.

But here's the thing: G's honesty is not honesty of an enemy who's rubbing your nose in your defeat. His honesty meant for your good, his diagnosis meant to prepare you for the cure (**what we need**). See, if MD doesn't tell you you have cancer, you're never going to agree to chemo. Who would do that? In same way G has to tell you expose your cond so that you'll take comfort in his remedy. & if you doubt that G intends to give you the cure, if you think I'm just foisting goodness onto a G who is fundamentally cruel & mean, all you need to do is look at what he says **§: do not be afraid (2), do not tremble, do not be afraid (8)**. G not telling this to his peo so they'll stand in fear of G's judgment, but to give them hope. How is it that idolators like us can poss not tremble in his presence? How can we who have been exposed and stand ashamed not also stand in fear? Bc no matter how persistent we are in our idolatry, G's grace is still more persistent. Even though we are unrelenting in our idolatry, G is even more unrelenting in his grace.

Over against what we have done, G declares to us what he has done. **§** 1st, **forgiven** us (43.25 **§**). *blot out* like lifting a stain from shirt. Note irony: "Sin blots the char" (*Motyer*, 340) but G blots out the sin. *remembers no more*: not that G forgets (omniscience!) but even better—chooses not to bring it up again. Dift image in 44.22 **§: swept away**

offenses like a cloud. Drives our sin away as w a strong wind. § Also redeemed us (§ 44.22). Like last wk, term for bringing a close fam relative under your care, someone who's lost a spouse & thus source of income/means of survival, e.g., Boaz & Ruth. G brings us under his care, shelters us under his wing—us, idolators though we are! No need to tremble or fear, for G does this for us. Doesn't wait for us to clean ourselves up 1st. Look at order: *return to me, for I have redeemed you*, not “return to me & then I'll redeem you.” G's grace comes first!

But how can that be? How can G show unrelenting grace to idolators like us? How can he forgive sinners? redeem the lost? He can do it bc there was One who never used his resources/abilities to create his own id, employed everything he had—circ/opp/fin resource—to give glory to 1TG. & when he came to end of his life, far from finding acceptance/appreciation/success—everything we want—he was given trembling & uncertainty & shame—everything we deserve. Only in *Isr's M*, t&g Isr, J himself is this psg fulfilled. Only in J can G forgive guilty. Only in J can G redeem broken. & that is precisely what he has done. & he did it for idolators like you. If you doubt that G could show you grace in the midst of your idolatry, look to J, to the cross, to empty tomb. He lived life you've failed to live, died death you should have died, lives again to give new life. This is the hope of the gos & it is for sinners like you.

But grace never leaves a pers where it finds them. Ergo 3rd action of G: forgiven, redeemed §, poured out his Sp (3 §). Sp means by which we given new life, One who unites us to J & conforms us to his likeness, One who animates us so that we join w G in his work of renewing all things for the glory of X. Sp often forgotten member of Godhead—bros & sis, we dare not forget the Sp of G! He is water for your thirsty heart, streams for the dry ground of your soul. & we're not end of blessing, but means by which that blessing flows as far as the curse is found (4 §): *like grass in a meadow* = the spread of G's blessing in exponential ways to unforeseen places. G employs us to advance his fame.

Ergo grace transforms us idolators. Not just that we repent of idolatry, but positively Sp at work changing us to be like J. **How we're changed:**

§ 1. **Associate w G's peo** (44.5 § §). When Sp poured out on peo, those peo id w Y: good tattoo if ever! Connection bet *belong to Y & taking name Isr*. Sp unites us w X & by virtue of our uwX we are bound w G's peo. Ergo settling into one ch body, id'ing yourself w other bels, ch membership. More: make Y's peo your own. Pray for them, talk, take part in comm groups, check in. A visible sign that you are the L's.

§ 2. **Declare G's hope** (44.8 §). *my witnesses*, i.e., one called to testify to what has happened. If you know NT much at all, imposs not to hear overtones of J's words to his discs before ascension: *you shall be witnesses for me in Jeru & in all Judea and Samaria & to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1.8). Witness *ipso facto* a verbal responsibility. Everyone around you is an idolator—not just out there, but in here, right now! & we, the redeemed broken, the forgiven idolators, are called on to testify to hope of what G has done.

§ 3. **Renew G's creation** (44.22 §). Might sound esoteric, but don't want you to miss how psg ends: who is called to *burst into song? Mtns, forests, trees*. Very thing used for idolatry now renewed for original purpose, i.e., glory of G. Creation misused/abused by our idolatry & for us who are redeemed part of our calling is to reverse what sin has done. No longer working for achievement/success/power, but for G's glory.

Soc says: not what you have that matters, but what you do w what you have. G says: what you do w what you have reveals what you really bel. & in gos J says: look what I have done w what I had—laid it all down to make you mine. & now he has given you his Sp that you might be like him, laying down your own way so that his glory might be seen in you. L G, let your Sp fall on us that we may be renewed & that your glory might draw all peo to yourself.