

Isaiah 44

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Date: 23 September 2007

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[0 : 00] Please turn back with me, if you would, to that portion of Scripture I've just read from Isaiah chapter 44.

I am going to, before I begin the message this evening, I'm going to finish reading this portion of Isaiah 44.

I'm going to read from verse 12 through verse 23 of Isaiah 44.

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 he grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker.

[0 : 57] 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 he 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 he eats his fill.

He also warms himself and he 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.

[1 : 59] He prays to it and says, Save me! You are my god! They know nothing. They understand nothing. Their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see.

Their minds are 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?

Remember these things, O Jacob. For you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you. You are my servant, O Israel.

[3 : 05] 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.

Sing for joy, O heavens. For the Lord has done this. Shout aloud, O earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains. You forests and all your trees.

For the Lord has redeemed Jacob. He displays His glory in Israel. Pray with me.

Father, as we come before Your Word, once again, we ask for Your help. We ask for Your blessing that You would enable us to understand the message You would have for us tonight.

Father, You have made us. We are Your servants. You've not only made us, but You have redeemed us. You have saved us. So Lord, kindle our hearts to hear Your Word.

[4 : 15] Lord, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, this morning, we looked at Isaiah 55 and how God has both made and fulfilled His promises in the Lord Jesus Christ.

that which was inconceivable to us, the forgiveness of sins, a new master, a new land, and eternal life, is now a reality for those who trust in Him.

If you recall, all of that was said in response to a question that somebody asked me. The question was whether or not being a student of God is like being a food critic.

Now, one answer, the positive one, is that God invites everyone to taste what He is offering. There's nobody that He will withhold the food from.

Come, He says. He assures us that the alternatives do not satisfy. And He puts His own reputation at stake. Satisfaction is guaranteed.

[5 : 37] In that sense, Christianity really is for food critics. In fact, Christianity makes for elite food critics. Those who taste God's goodness in Christ know the best.

They recognize the best. And they do not settle for cheap imitations. But that's not a complete answer, is it?

It's not a complete answer. What my friend really wanted to know is how to know. Isn't it? In the natural sciences, you can form a hypothesis.

You can set up and run an experiment. You can get results. You can repeat the experiment several times. Compare the various results that you get.

Come up with reliable data. Certain concrete answers to your questions. Food critics, on the other hand, are just involved in a completely subjective affair, aren't they?

[6 : 45] I mean, think of it. Some people think that sheep's heart and lungs ground up with barley and stuffed into a sheep's stomach.

Okay? Or maybe this. How about coagulated blood turned into pudding? Some people think these are really great ideas.

Others find the idea completely revolting. I mean, there is really a right answer to that question, is there? Alright, well, since you asked, haggis is great, black pudding, no, no, not so much.

Revolting. But isn't religion just merely a matter of subjective opinion? How can anybody ever really know? Well, tonight I want to explore just a little bit.

Not exhaustively, I can't give a complete answer, but I want to explore just a little bit into the negative side of this question. And I want to provide the answer, no, Christianity is not merely a matter of personal taste.

[7 : 57] It is not merely a matter for food critics. The way this question is framed nicely illustrates the two basic intellectual currents that are now involved in a death struggle in Western civilization.

These currents have been popularly described in the rather colorless and unhelpful and boring and dry terms as modern modernism and post-modernism.

And it's okay, you can relax. It's not my purpose to give a comprehensive definition and lecture of modernism and post-modernism. But it is important for us to understand our times.

To understand the world views that animate our culture in order to know how to give Christian answers in our day and age. The great debates raging between modernism and post-modernism are just very sophisticated ways of asking my friends' question.

Is truth with a capital T? Is truth a matter of scientific mathematical certainty? A stable, never-changing foundation known by rational principles?

[9 : 19] or is it perhaps that there is no such stable, unchanging foundation? Perhaps there is no such thing as certainty at all.

Well, the first approach is that of modernism. A world view that has its roots in the 18th century philosophical movement, so ironically called the Enlightenment. Modernism believes in the supremacy of human reason.

For things to be believed, they must first make sense to human reason. They have to pass the test of whether they are rational to us or not. They must be established by facts and argument.

Post-modernism, that is what is after modernism, as the name suggests, has despaired of modernism's attempt to establish the truth, capital T, truth, and post-modernists at their most radical believe that every truth claim is a matter of one's own personal taste, one's own upbringing, or one's own environment.

Put in simple terms, the modernist wants religion to be a matter of scientific certainty. The post-modernist wants religion to be purely a matter of food criticism, that is, personal taste.

[10 : 45] One worldview argues for universal truth mediated by human reason. The other argues for universal skepticism and that all truths are relative. Well, as I think we'll see today, neither of these two great options, these two intellectual currents in our culture, have it right.

They both fail to get the most basic thing right. God is the Creator and the Redeemer. And we are sinful creatures.

That is the basic thing. Let's begin with modernism, shall we? Specifically, the worldview that seeks to establish all human knowledge on the basis of human reason, or, as it's more popularly understood, I would say, in our culture, it would be, it's not spoken of in terms of human reason, it's spoken of in terms of science and scientific certainty.

Is it scientific? That's what we all want to know, right? Anytime there's a study done or a newspaper article and somebody's making some kind of claim, people want to know, well, yes, but is it scientific?

Scientific becomes the standard by which things can and must be believed. Well, we, the church, are constantly being told by those in the know, that our culture has turned away from modernism. [12:11] It's turned away from modernism. It's now characterized as a post-modern culture. We're being told in theological journals and in a massive number of books filling our bookstores, in evangelical conference after evangelical conference, that the church needs to change its proclamation to fit this new post-modern culture.

Now, let me make clear that I, for one, totally believe in speaking the Christian message in a relevant fashion. I totally believe in speaking the Christian message in a relevant fashion. But I also believe that these assessments that our culture is now post-modern are somewhat premature. Not exactly right.

Why do I say this? There has been in recent years a resurgence of the old classic modernist worldview. If it had ever disappeared, which I strongly doubt it, is clearly back in force today. There is, in fact, a new atheism making a comeback. If post-modernism is the end thing, then why does a man like Richard Dawkins, an atheist scientist and author of such works as *The Blind Watchmaker*, subtitled, *How the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*. [13:38] And his most recent work, this doesn't tip off what he thinks at all, his most recent work is *The God Delusion*. These books enjoy not weeks, but months on international bestseller lists.

Not to mention his two-hour specials on the BBC television. Others have joined this great success. Sam Harris wrote a book called *The End of Faith*. Christopher Hitchens, a popular writer, has published a book recently called *God is Not Great, How Religion Poisons Everything*. Victor Stanger, here's one, *God, The Failed Hypothesis, How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*. I mean, I could go on and on. This is a booming business, publishing these books. And none of these authors are postmodern. They are all committed to the older modernist view. Science, that is, science as understood by human reason, is the arbiter, is the judge of what we may believe.

Now, there's not time, obviously, for an extended lecture in the discipline of science in the post-Enlightenment era, nor would I be qualified to give such a lecture. I could mention that these men pretend that science is some kind of neutral, dispassionate arbiter of truth claims, but in fact, their very view of science is influenced by all kinds of philosophical influences and assumptions.

[15:08] But let's get to the core of things. Modern scientists like Richard Dawkins are case studies for Isaiah 44.

Case studies for Isaiah 44. in our text tonight, God unleashes a remarkable critique. It's remarkable. What a sense of humor God has in this text. Exposing the folly of this man who takes a piece of wood, burns half of it for his meal, and bows down to the other half saying, save me, you are my God.

How foolish! I mean, this is a sarcastic text. God is intending to be sarcastic here. Look at how foolish this is.

This ignorant, foolish man takes something so good, so valuable, so instrumental to his life and well-being.

[16:15] Wood for his fire. I mean, fire is so essential to life, isn't it? He takes this good thing and he makes it his God. Just because something is good doesn't make it God.

Now, this man is surely a primitive pagan, isn't he? Certainly, we can see that. But have not modern scientists like Richard Dawkins convinced themselves that because science is so good, it's so valuable, it's so instrumental to our very lives and our well-being and who can deny that?

That it must be worshipped. I am not for a moment speaking hyperbolically. Richard Dawkins speaks of nature and scientific discoveries in a manner that can only be called worship and devotion.

the late scientist Carl Sagan, a man who once deified the cosmos as all that is or ever was or ever will be, he said this, if we must worship a power greater than ourselves, does it not make sense to revere the sun and the stars?

Hidden within every astronomical investigation, sometimes so deeply buried, the researcher himself is unaware of its presence, is a kernel of awe.

[18 : 01] We should worship the sun and the stars. This is the great rational scientist telling us this. Admitting it for just a moment, there's a kernel of awe.

I want to suggest that the new atheists are all guilty of idolatry. Human reason is a splendid thing. Experimentation is a glorious and God-honoring undertaking, but not every question nor every experience can be fit into the one-size-fits-all approach of scientific experiment.

You know this to be true. Think of drilling oil for a minute. I'm going to make a complete fool of myself now, okay? I've chosen as my illustration drilling oil when probably half the men in here are very familiar with drilling oil.

I picked that one, okay? That's what you get for trying to be relevant, eh? there's a lot of things you need to know to drill oil. There's a lot of factors you need to take account of.

You need to know, I'm sure, I'm sure, what kind of soil is being drilled, how big a drill bit to use, the right amount of mud to pour down the shaft, what the pressure should be.

[19 : 23] When the well is drilled and the oil is flowing, you need to keep constant track of the pressure in the pipeline, the buildup of residue and joint. I know, I'm just going to quit now, okay?

because I'm cracking you all up. Some of you are engaged in very kind of work all day long, are you not? Math and science is very important to your job, is it not?

Now, let me ask you a question. When you get home from work, do you kiss your wife that way?

Are you thinking to yourself, okay now, what's the precise distance of her head from mine?

What's the velocity and closure rate of her face to mine? Let's make sure we get it right here. Oh, now, pucker the lips just this tiny little percentage. I don't want to gross her out now.

Okay, now, what's the exact angle I need to tilt my head compared to hers, relative to hers? Okay, now, okay, there we go.

[20 : 30] Now, apply pressure. Okay, no, not too much, not too much. We don't want to knock her teeth out now, okay? Of course you don't. If you do kiss that way, I can guarantee you're not married.

Mathematical precision is a tremendous good. It's a necessary thing for a wide variety of things, not least engineering. But what foolishness to make it the criteria for knowledge and experience in general, in general, there's no mathematical formula for love.

Science and human reason are not designed, nor are they qualified to provide even the criteria for our knowledge and experience of other people, much less God. It cannot supply the criteria for answering ultimate questions, who we are, where we're headed.

And science itself already assumes an answer to many of those ultimate questions. Now, this demand that one human faculty reason and one method of using that faculty, empirical science, the demand that that be the source and standard for the entirety of human knowledge and experience is a kind of knowledge that God calls ignorance.

Look at verses 18 and 19 with me. They know nothing. They understand nothing. This is cognitive. Their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see.

[22 : 08] And their minds are closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think. No one has the knowledge or understanding to say, half of it I use for fuel.

I even bake 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? When people make their own understanding the measure of all things, it is nothing short of idolatry.

Worshipping the creature instead of the creator. Now, many have reacted against the kind of arrogance that is displayed by the modern scientists.

Yet, they err in the opposite direction. Postmodernism calls into question the very idea of absolute, unchanging, foundational truth with a capital T.

Instead, there are relative truths in a lower case T. Each person, each community, each culture, in essence, creates its own worldview, creates its own truth.

[23 : 19] truth. This is, of course, a very influential intellectual current at the present time. It's found in various watchwords, multiculturalism, tolerance, diversity, and the like.

This is the food critic version of truth. Beauty is completely in the eye of the beholder. What is true for you is true for you, and what's true for me is true for me.

Where it crops up in this bit of moral equivalence you hear these days. One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. You hear that?

Well, at the end of the day, is the food critic any different from the scientist, the modernist scientist?

Well, no. One's own understanding, one's own private truth is still the measure of all things.

You see, whereas the scientist proclaims that everyone should bow down to his block of wood, the post-modernist proclaims that everyone should get their own block of wood and leave other people alone.

[24 : 35] It becomes a little bit of a problem when my block of wood tells me to not leave you alone. Therein lies an allegory of modern geopolitics.

The post-modernist really does want to retreat to the primitive polytheistic paganism of Isaiah's day, where, as another biblical text puts it, everyone does that which is right in his own eyes.

This is moral and intellectual anarchy, and it is lampooned by God in Isaiah 44. It's so arbitrary.

There's no rhyme or reason. The idol can come from a blacksmith or it can come from a carpenter.

It can be made from cedar or perhaps cypress or oak or pine.

I mean, he keeps giving us different kinds of wood to show there's no rhyme or reason here. This is arbitrary. It can be used for a variety of things.

[25 : 40] Fire for warmth, roasting meat, baking bread. And yet, this thing manufactured by a human being and used by a human being is now submitted to by a human being.

That which a human rules and controls is now somehow to rule and control him. There's very little difference between this and each person or each community making up moral rules to follow.

Creating moral maxims and then pretending that they'll save you. But you just made them up. How can they possibly save you? You see, one cannot be both the creator and the creature at the same time.

That is the point of Isaiah's highlighting of the blacksmith and the carpenter. Look at verses 12 and 13. The blacksmith forges with the might of his arm, yet he gets hungry and loses his strength.

He drinks no water and he grows faint. The mighty blacksmith is himself dependent. The carpenter who roughs the wood with chisels also needs fire for warmth and food.

[26 : 57] They are each independent, the carpenter and the blacksmith. They are lords of their materials, yet they are helpless and utterly dependent on their materials at the same time.

Now, God's argument ends here in a very tragic place. Look at verse 20. This person feeds on ashes. A deluded heart misleads him.

He cannot save himself or say, is not this thing in my right hand a lie? Listen to that last phrase again.

He cannot save himself. He can't save himself. But neither can he say this is a lie. He cannot save himself, yet he cannot not try to save himself.

Human beings left to themselves live in intellectual darkness, pretending to be the measure of all things, pretending to be the judge and arbiter of truth, beauty, and goodness.

[28 : 05] They ultimately feed on ashes and are devoured by their own folly. Both modernism and postmodernism suffer from the same self-centered oversight.

They are so committed to their own autonomy, that is, they are a law unto themselves. They are remarkably free to leave God out of their equations, both the mathematical ones and the ones of moral equivalence.

They both presume that God is irrelevant to the discussion of truth, beauty, and goodness. This is because the lenses through which they are committed to looking have been ground in such a way as to blot him out of consideration from the start.

They've already ruled him out. This is a picture of us all, isn't it? We all once walked in this very darkness.

The Apostle Paul puts it in Galatians 4, formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now you know God, or rather, are known by God.

[29 : 28] We were like the Gentiles, he tells us in Ephesians 4, darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

But now, Paul declares, something has happened. God, in His goodness and in His grace, did not leave us to our own devices.

He did not leave us to grope around in darkness. We've been given wisdom from God. We read it earlier, 1 Corinthians chapter 1.

Contrast this wisdom from God with the wisdom of the world. And it is the wisdom of the cross. 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, in Isaiah, by the way, it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate.

[30 : 42] 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? Paul goes on to elaborate, saying that it is Christ Jesus, the power of God, and the wisdom of God, who has become for us our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

This is not the wisdom of this age. This is not the wisdom of the rulers of this age who are coming to nothing. This is the wisdom of God's eternal plan to seek and save lost, ignorant, self-seeking, self-important sinners.

God did this in sending His Son, who died a criminal's death for us, and who was raised to eternal life for us.

This fact, this act, makes all the difference. The God who made us and formed us, the Creator of all, the very One that we in our own wisdom left out of the equation, treated as irrelevant to the ultimate questions of life, the universe, and everything.

This is the God who publicly manifested His love and grace to us in the crucifixion and resurrection of His Son. The certainty of this message does not ultimately rely, Paul tells us, on eloquence or superior wisdom.

[32 : 18] But it does involve knowledge. In the light of God's great love for Him, Paul now resolves, he says, to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

And so it is for us as well. This great act, the Gospel, the death and resurrection of Christ for us, Christ dying our death and now living our life, is the Son that gives light to all our surroundings. The wisdom of God displayed in the Gospel tells us this. It is not we who find God, but God who finds us.

It is not we who find God, it is God who finds us. While we were groping in darkness and gloom, pretending that the cosmos was all that was, is, or ever shall be, resolutely making the absolute claim that nobody can really know absolute truth, God shined His love into our hearts.

C.S. Lewis puts this beautifully. I believe in Christianity, he said, as I believe in the Son. Not only because I can see it, but because by it I see everything else.

[33 : 45] I believe in Christianity as I believe in the Son, not only because I can see it, but because by it I see everything else.

The Gospel, Christ crucified, puts life, the universe, and everything into its proper perspective. In your light we see light, the psalmist says.

We sang it just a moment ago. This Gospel tells of an autonomous, foolish people saved by the grace of the God who made us. So, is Christianity for food critics?

No. So long as you make yourself your desires, your tastes, your tools, your reason, your intellect, your feelings, your emotions, the standard and basis for all that you believe, so long as you cling to your autonomy and act as a law unto yourself, so long as you try to be both master and servant, creator and creature, you will never know the love of God, for you will have fashioned a fantasy world with no God to love you.

you will have believed the wisdom of this world and on account of that rejected Christ who alone is the wisdom of God.

[35 : 23] So, lay aside your self-sufficiency tonight. Lay it aside. Acknowledge yourself to be God's creature. Acknowledge that you are not competent to tell the end from the beginning.

you are not competent to make sense of the ultimate questions. Hear instead the gospel of grace offered to you and you will hear the very wisdom of God which is eternal life.

Jesus himself. Let us pray. God, what a great and mighty thing you have done in the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

Thank you, Lord, for fixing our gaze this day on him and him alone. We thank you for bringing us out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of marvelous and wonderful light.

We thank you, God, that you give us light to see. that by your light you shine the light of truth into all the rest of our life.

[36 : 45] Father, help us to live by that light of truth. Help us to live by your word. Help us to resist the temptation to follow the wisdom of this world.

To resist those who would tell us that you cannot be known. Or those who would tell us that we should each just worship our own God and that's okay.

Help us to resist and help us to cling to the gospel of grace which you have showered on us and which you have shown us today in your word. We pray all of this, Lord, in the name of our King, our leader, our Master, our Savior, Jesus.

Amen. Amen.