

Homiletics Analysis: Isaiah 46

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Isaiah 46 is a divine courtroom speech in which the LORD directly confronts Babylon's gods — Bel and Nebo — and the idolatry they represent. The chapter opens with a vivid, almost mocking tableau: Bel and Nebo, the chief deities of Babylon's religious and civic life, are being carted away on the backs of weary animals, unable to save themselves or their worshipers (vv. 1–2). The LORD then pivots sharply to address Israel with the antithesis: far from being carried by His people, He has carried them — from the womb, from birth, and He will carry them to old age and to the grave (vv. 3–4). The LORD then presses His exclusive sovereignty: to whom will you compare Me? (vv. 5–7). He dismantles the logic of idol-making — men pour out gold, hire a craftsman, bow down to what their own hands made — and exposes it as the act of one who is “borne by” rather than “bearing.” The remainder of the chapter (vv. 8–13) is a sustained declaration of the LORD's incomparable sovereignty: He declared the end from the beginning (v. 10), His counsel stands (v. 10), He calls Cyrus “a bird of prey from the east” to accomplish His purpose (v. 11), and He declares that His righteousness — His saving work — is near, not far off, for those in Zion (v. 13).

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to break the reader's functional trust in anything other than Himself. The passage does not merely argue against physical idol-worship — it drives at the heart beneath the behavior: the human default toward gods who are manageable, portable, comprehensible, and made to specification. The intent is not primarily informational but diagnostic and liberating: God is exposing the absurdity and spiritual bankruptcy of every substitute for Himself — whether carved wood, civic deity, or any modern functional equivalent — while simultaneously calling Israel (and every reader) back to the only One who has ever carried them rather than burdened them. The closing movement toward “my salvation will not delay” (v. 13) reveals that this is not a lecture in theodicy but a gospel summons: come back, stubborn of heart, because the One who made you is already bringing your rescue.

Subject Sentence: The LORD alone carries His people — Babylon's gods must be carried and cannot save.

Primary Claim: God is demolishing every substitute for Himself — not merely as theological error but as a crushing burden from which He is calling His people to return — because He alone has borne them from birth and will bear them to the end, and His salvation is already on its way.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity and function of Bel and Nebo (vv. 1–2)

Bel is the title (“Lord”) of Marduk, the chief deity of Babylon, patron of Babylon’s imperial pretension; Nebo (Nabu) is Marduk’s son, patron of writing, wisdom, and the scribal arts — and the deity for whom Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus were named. The picture in vv. 1–2 is almost certainly a prophetic anticipation of the fall of Babylon, when cult statues were customarily removed by conquering armies. The debate here is between those who see this as purely predictive prophecy pointing to Cyrus’s conquest (the natural reading in its Isaianic context) and those who reduce it to a literary device without referential historical content. Dispensational and conservative Reformed interpreters rightly maintain the historical-predictive force: the LORD is naming real gods, real nations, and real coming events. The literary-figurative reading underreads the passage’s rhetorical argument, which depends on the actual impotence of actual Babylonian deities being contrasted with the actual power of the actual LORD. Both the contrast and the comfort lose force if the gods are merely hypothetical.

The “carrying” motif (vv. 1–4) — Wesleyan/Arminian appropriation

Wesleyan-Arminian tradition tends to use passages like vv. 3–4 to emphasize God’s gracious initiative and sustaining care while maintaining that the response of the human will is what ultimately determines outcomes. The carrying imagery is acknowledged but softened: God carries those who receive His care, subject to ongoing human cooperation. The Reformed reading insists the text does not support this qualification. The LORD’s carrying of Israel is presented as unconditional and covenantal — “even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you” (v. 4) — grounded in His own identity (“I am he”) and His own purpose, not in Israel’s faithfulness. The very audience being addressed in vv. 8–12 is “you transgressors” and “stubborn of heart” — people who have been faithless — and the promise of carrying persists toward them. The text’s comfort has teeth precisely because it does not condition the carrying on the carried.

The Cyrus oracle (v. 11) — Dispensational concern

Dispensational interpreters sometimes note the Cyrus material in Isaiah 44–46 as a fulfilled prophecy demonstrating predictive inspiration, while simultaneously insisting that the broader promises to Israel in these chapters await a literal national fulfillment in the future. This is a genuine and partially valid point: the promises of vv. 12–13 (“I bring near my righteousness, it is not far off; and my salvation will not delay”) do point to a restoration

that is both historically proximate (the return from Babylon) and ultimately fulfilled only in Christ. Reformed interpreters affirm both the immediate historical referent (the return under Cyrus) and the ultimate Christological fulfillment — the “salvation” and “righteousness” of v. 13 find their fullest expression in the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel (Romans 1:17). The dispensational insistence on a separate future fulfillment for ethnic Israel independent of the Messiah is not required by the text and introduces a complexity the passage itself does not generate.

Idol-making as universal human condition (vv. 5–7) — Lutheran appropriation

Lutheran Law/Gospel interpretation reads vv. 5–7 primarily as Law-function: the absurdity of idol-making is meant to drive the reader to despair of self-constructed religion and flee to the grace of the LORD. This is partially correct and worth retaining: the passage does function diagnostically, exposing the bankruptcy of idolatry before the gospel of vv. 8–13 arrives. However, the Lutheran framing sometimes reduces the idol passages to a preparatory function, failing to attend to how the LORD’s own character — His carrying, His sovereignty, His declared purposes — is itself the positive content of the passage. The Reformed reading holds both: the idol passages function as diagnosis (Law-function), but the LORD’s own self-disclosure is not merely gospel-relief from the Law’s pressure — it is the substantive content the reader is being invited to return to.

Verdict: The Reformed reading — unconditional covenantal carrying, genuine predictive prophecy, Christological fulfillment of the righteousness and salvation oracles, and idol-diagnosis in service of full-orbed return to the LORD — best accounts for the whole passage in its literary, historical, and canonical context.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 1:31** — “The LORD your God carried you, as a man carries his son” — the carrying motif’s covenant roots in the wilderness, establishing the pattern Isaiah 46 restates and escalates to the grave.
- **Psalms 115:4–8** — “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands... Those who make them become like them” — the canonical parallel that extends the idol-satire of Isaiah 46:5–7 and makes explicit the spiritual consequence: you become like what you worship.
- **Isaiah 40:28–31** — The LORD does not grow weary; He gives strength to the faint — the immediate canonical context of Isaiah’s “servant songs” section establishing the LORD’s inexhaustible carrying power against which the exhausted beast-of-burden gods of vv. 1–2 are contrasted.
- **Romans 1:21–25** — The universal human exchange of the truth of God for idols — Paul’s New Testament expansion of Isaiah 46’s idol-diagnosis as the root of all

human spiritual bankruptcy, confirming the passage's claim is not historically bounded but universally applicable.

- **Philippians 1:6** — “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion” — the New Testament restatement of the LORD's carrying commitment from womb to grave: the One who initiated will complete, grounding assurance in His faithfulness, not ours.

Aim: To confront every functional idol in the reader's life — exposing both its absurdity and its weight — and to invite the reader into the rest and freedom of being carried by the only One who has never put them down.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Bel and Nebo collapse under their own weight; their images are loaded on animals; the gods stoop, bow, and cannot deliver their burden	Opening tableau — the gods must be carried; contrast with v. 3–4 is the passage's structural hinge
3–4	The LORD addresses Israel directly: “I have carried you from the womb... to gray hairs I will carry you; I will make and I will bear; I will carry and will save”	The antithesis: He is carried by nothing; He carries everything; the promise extends to death
5–7	Rhetorical challenge: to whom will you liken Me or make Me equal? Idol-making described: pour out gold, hire craftsman, bow down, cry to it — it does not answer, cannot deliver	Exposes the absurdity of the exchange: the idol is made, placed, cannot move, cannot save
8–9	“Remember this and stand firm... remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other”	Call to memory and repentance; the basis is God's unique incomparability
10	“Declaring the end from the beginning... my counsel	Sovereignty over time and history — the theological

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
11	shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose” “Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country” — I have spoken; I will bring it to pass	ground for everything that precedes and follows Cyrus oracle implicit; the LORD’s word accomplishes what it declares
12–13	Address to the “stubborn of heart, far from righteousness” — but “I bring near my righteousness... and my salvation will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion”	Closing gospel movement: not to the deserving but to the stubborn; righteousness and salvation are coming regardless

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	The Gods That Must Be Carried
2	3–4	The God Who Has Always Carried You
3	5–7	The Absurdity of the Exchange
4	8–11	Remember: This God Declares the End from the Beginning
5	12–13	Hear, Stubborn Heart: Salvation Is Already Coming

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD alone carries His people — Babylon’s gods must be carried and cannot save.

Primary Claim: God is demolishing every substitute for Himself — not merely as theological error but as a crushing burden from which He is calling His people to return — because He alone has borne them from birth and will bear them to the end, and His salvation is already on its way.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine what you are carrying that was supposed to carry you. (*Mind/belief*)

The passage's opening image is of exhausted animals buckling under the weight of gods that were supposed to be sources of strength. This is the diagnostic question Isaiah 46 presses on every reader: what have you been treating as a load-bearing support for your life — security, career, relationships, reputation, health — that has turned out to be a burden you have to maintain rather than a foundation that holds you? The passage requires the reader to name these things honestly, not as abstract “idols” but as specific structures of trust that have never once carried them through a genuine crisis.

2. Let the carrying claim of verses 3–4 reshape how you feel about your weakness and age. (*Affections/worship*)

The LORD's promise to carry Israel “to gray hairs” and “to old age” is addressed to people who are already old enough to have lived through exile, loss, and the full weight of their own failure. This is not a promise to the young and promising — it is a promise to the worn-out and faithless. The appropriate response is not mere cognitive acknowledgment but affective relief: the God who made you has never once set you down, and He does not plan to start now. The grief, fatigue, and shame that have accumulated over decades of ordinary faithlessness are not disqualifying — they are precisely the conditions under which He says “I will carry you.” Allow yourself to receive this.

3. Stop constructing gods you can manage, and return to the God who manages you. (*Will/behavior*)

The idol-making sequence in vv. 5–7 describes a specific behavior pattern: men who take raw material, shape it to specification, place it where they want it, and then bow down to what they have made. The contemporary version of this is not wood and gold — it is the deliberate construction of a version of God (or a version of life-security) that fits within our parameters, requires nothing we are unwilling to give, and does not interrupt our plans. The practical application is concrete: identify where your “god” has been customized to your preferences, and ask whether you are worshiping the LORD of Isaiah 46 or a projection of your own desires. Return is the word the passage uses — turn back, come back, this is not a permanent departure if you stop now.

4. Anchor your confidence about the future in the LORD's track record of declaring and delivering, not in your circumstances. (*Mind/belief*)

Verse 10 is one of the most sweeping sovereignty claims in all of Scripture: “declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done.” This is not a philosophical argument for omniscience — it is a pastoral argument for stability in chaos. The Israelites facing Babylon had no visible reason for confidence about their future. The LORD's answer is not a better set of circumstances but a longer and clearer view of His own history of doing exactly what He declared. The application is: when your circumstances give you no ground for confidence, go back to the record. He said it. He did it. He is saying it again. He will do it again.

5. Do not wait until you feel righteous to receive the righteousness the LORD is bringing. (*Affections/worship*)

The audience addressed in vv. 12–13 is specifically “stubborn of heart, far from righteousness” — people who are not in good standing, not currently oriented toward God, and by any measure disqualified from receiving what follows. And it is to this precise audience that the LORD says “I bring near my righteousness, it is not far off; and my salvation will not delay.” The preaching application is direct: do not defer returning to God until you have cleaned yourself up enough to make the return feel appropriate. The passage’s rhetorical structure places the gospel announcement inside the address to the most faithless portion of the audience. The righteousness is being brought to you — you do not produce it and present it to God.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Isaiah 46 makes a claim about the nature of deity that is categorical and exclusive: only a God who is uncreated, unconstrained by time, and subject to no external process is actually God. The LORD distinguishes Himself from all alternatives not primarily by moral superiority but by ontological uniqueness — He is the One who carries rather than is carried, who declares the end from the beginning, whose counsel stands regardless of human or cosmic opposition. The chapter also reveals that God’s sovereignty is not cold sovereignty — it is covenantal and personal. His carrying of Israel from womb to old age is not an impersonal force but a relational commitment. The juxtaposition of the two kinds of gods — those made by human hands and the One who made human hands — reveals that the human impulse to worship is not itself the problem; the problem is the catastrophically wrong objects toward which that impulse is directed. True worship is not the manufacture of gods in our image but the reception of the God who made us in His.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Isaiah 46 is a canonical anchor for the Reformed doctrine of God’s absolute sovereignty and for the Reformed understanding of grace as unconditional. The LORD’s promise to carry Israel “to gray hairs” — addressed to transgressors, to the stubborn of heart, to those far from righteousness — is the Old Testament form of what Reformed theology articulates as perseverance of the saints: God’s commitment to complete what He began, grounded in His own faithfulness rather than the believer’s. The Cyrus oracle (v. 11) demonstrates God’s sovereign use of pagan instruments to accomplish covenant purposes — a pattern that structures the entire Reformed understanding of common grace and providence. Most significantly, the chapter’s closing announcement — “I bring near my righteousness... my salvation will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion” — is the Old Testament ground note of what Paul will call

the “righteousness of God” in Romans, the righteousness that is not achieved but received, brought near by God to the undeserving. Every dimension of this chapter — the idol-diagnosis, the carrying promise, the sovereignty declaration, the gospel announcement — conspires to locate salvation entirely within God’s character and initiative, which is the heartbeat of Reformed soteriology.

Main Takeaway

The gods you have been trusting to carry you are collapsing under their own weight — they always were. The LORD has been carrying you since before you had words to ask Him to, and He has promised to carry you all the way to the grave and beyond. He is not waiting for you to become worthy of the rescue He is already bringing. Stop maintaining the idols. Come back. He has never once put you down.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the passage to a historical curiosity about Babylonian religion.** The preacher who spends significant time on Marduk, Nabu, and ancient Near Eastern cult practices risks producing a fascinating history lecture and missing the passage’s diagnostic force entirely. The idol passage is not primarily antiquarian — it is a mirror. The congregation does not worship Bel, but they absolutely construct gods to specification, place them where convenient, and carry the weight of maintaining them. The preacher’s job is to surface the contemporary form of the exchange, not merely describe the ancient one.
- **Preaching vv. 3–4 as general encouragement without the idol-diagnostic context.** “I will carry you to old age” is a genuinely comforting promise, but extracted from its context — where it stands as the direct antithesis to gods that must be carried — it becomes a generic reassurance rather than a liberating contrast. The comfort of vv. 3–4 has full force only when the hearer has just felt the weight of the idol’s burden in vv. 1–2. Sequence matters: feel the burden first, then receive the promise.
- **Moralizing the idol passages into a behavior-modification sermon.** “Stop worshiping idols” as a bare imperative is precisely the kind of preaching Clowney’s anti-moralism principle guards against. The passage does not say “try harder not to trust wrong things.” It says “remember who has been carrying you all along, and come back.” The application must be gospel-grounded: the reason to abandon the idol is not willpower but a better object — the One who has never needed you to maintain Him.

- **Failing to land the sovereignty claim of v. 10 pastorally.** “Declaring the end from the beginning” can easily become an abstract doctrine of omniscience rather than the pastoral anchor the text intends it to be. The preacher must make the move explicit: the reason this declaration matters is not that God is epistemically impressive but that the congregation’s specific fears about the future — real, named, concrete fears — are already accounted for in the counsel of the One who has never once misspoken a promise.
- **Preaching the gospel announcement of vv. 12–13 only to the already-believing.** The passage specifically addresses the “stubborn of heart” and “those far from righteousness” — a description that fits the unconverted hearer as precisely as the backsliding believer. The closing movement of the chapter is evangelistic as well as reassuring. The preacher should not assume all hearers are already in covenant relationship; the text’s own rhetoric opens toward those who are not.
- **Missing the Christological fulfillment of “righteousness” and “salvation” in v. 13.** The righteousness (tsedaqah) and salvation (yeshuah) the LORD promises to bring to Zion are not merely political restoration from Babylon — they are the Old Testament idiom for what will be fully revealed in the righteousness of God in Christ (Romans 1:17, 3:21–26). The preacher who limits these terms to the historical return under Cyrus has truncated the passage’s canonical reach and left the congregation short of the gospel. Name Christ here. The righteousness He is bringing near has a name.