

God's Greatness Continues

Isaiah 41

Isaiah 41:1-7 - *"Keep silence before Me, O coastlands, and let the people renew their strength! Let them come near, then let them speak; let us come near together for judgment.*

² *"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? ³ Who pursued them, and passed safely by the way that he had not gone with his feet?"*

⁴ *Who has performed and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? 'I, the Lord am the first; and with the last I am He.'"*

⁵ *The coastlands saw it and feared. The ends of the earth were afraid; they drew near and came. ⁶ Everyone helped his neighbor, and said to his brother, "Be of good courage!"*

⁷ *So the craftsman encouraged the goldsmith. He who smooths with the hammer inspired him who strikes the anvil, saying, "It is ready for the soldering." Then he fastened it with pegs, that it might not totter."*

Background Notes

Isaiah 40 begins the second major division of the book of Isaiah. In our last Talk we mentioned that the theme of the second division of the book is "the comfort of God for His people." This theme is in great contrast to "the judgment of God," the theme in the first section of Isaiah.

In chapters 40-48, the greatness of God was emphasized as a means of bringing comfort to God's people. In chapter 40 Isaiah emphasized the themes of the greatness of God in His creation and the greatness of God in the deliverance of His people. He continued the emphasis on God's greatness in chapter 41, with three more areas where God is great: God confronts the nations, God conserves His people, and God controls the future. This should bring great comfort to God's people!

Doctrinal Points

1. There is comfort in knowing that God confronts the nations.

Verse 1 was a courtroom scene. All the Gentile nations - even to the farthest coastlands – were called into God's court for judgment. They were told to keep silent, and only to speak when God asked them for their input. The Lord told all these proud nations that He alone calls the shots, because He is sovereign over all the nations (v2-4).

To prove it, God would raise up “one from the east” who will overrun all nations before him (v2). This is a prediction of the expansion of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great. In fact, Cyrus will actually be named in chapter 45. This is an amazing prediction, because Isaiah wrote his prophecy a good 150 years before these events! Cyrus was “called in righteousness” (v2) because God raised him up to deliver His people from their captivity in Babylon, and to give them the opportunity to return to Jerusalem.

How did the nations respond when God confronted them? They were afraid, they trembled, and they tried to encourage one another (v5-6). But instead of turning to the Lord, they constructed helpless idols to come to their aid (v7).

So there's no question as to who will win the court case between God and the nations! There is comfort in knowing that God confronts the nations.

2. There is comfort in knowing that God conserves His people.

Isaiah 41:8-13 - *“But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham My friend. ⁹ You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest regions, and said to you, ‘You are My servant. I have chosen you and have not cast you away.’”*

¹⁰ Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’

¹¹ “Behold, all those who were incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced. They shall be as nothing, and those who strive with you shall perish. ¹² You shall seek them and not find them— those who contended with you. Those who war against you shall be as nothing, as a nonexistent thing. ¹³ For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’”

In Isaiah 41:8-20, the nation of Israel was called the servant of the Lord. In the “Servant Songs,” beginning in Isaiah 42, we will see that the “Servant of the Lord” is an individual - the coming Messiah.

But in chapter 41 the nation of Israel was called God's servant. God chose Israel, and the Lord conserved, protected and cared for Israel. Other nations would perish and be no more, but Israel will always be conserved and preserved (v11). There will always be a Jewish people.

Isaiah 41:14-16 - *“Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I will help you,” says the Lord and your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.*

¹⁵ “Behold, I will make you into a new threshing sledge with sharp teeth. You shall thresh the mountains and beat them small, and make the hills like chaff. ¹⁶ You shall winnow them, the wind shall carry them away, and the whirlwind shall scatter them. You shall rejoice in the Lord, and glory in the Holy One of Israel.”

Verses 14-16 look forward to a time when Israel will not be a little worm amongst the nations, but will be like a giant threshing machine that could actually destroy hills and mountains.

When will this time be? Israel was never that strong after the days of David and Solomon, and Isaiah wrote this book well after their time. So when will this be? Verses 17-20 give us the key.

Isaiah 41:17-20 - *"The poor and needy seek water, but there is none. Their tongues fail for thirst. I, the Lord, will hear them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. ¹⁸ I will open rivers in desolate heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry land springs of water.*

¹⁹ I will plant in the wilderness the cedar and the acacia tree, the myrtle and the oil tree. I will set in the desert the cypress tree and the pine and the box tree together, ²⁰ that they may see, and know, and consider, and understand together that the hand of the Lord has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it."

These verses look forward to the future return of the Messiah, when He will establish His earthly kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital. The prophecies in these verses were certainly not fulfilled when the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity. And these prophecies should not be "spiritualized" and applied to the Church. Some teach that they are fulfilled in the Church as "spiritual waters of refreshment" and "spiritual fruit." No! These promises were made to **Israel** - and the Church has **not replaced Israel**.

These promises of Israel being over the nations (v15-16) and the land of Israel becoming fruitful and prosperous (v19-20) will be fulfilled **literally** in the future, when the nation of Israel returns to the Lord and is restored to the Lord. "...*the Holy One of Israel has created it*" (v20).

This will happen when the Lord Jesus returns to earth. The return of the secular state of Israel to the land today is only a foretaste of what is to come in the future. There is comfort in knowing that God conserves His people.

3. There is comfort in knowing that God controls the future.

Isaiah 41:21-24 - *"Present your case," says the Lord. "Bring forth your strong reason," says the King of Jacob. ²² "Let them bring forth and show us what will happen. Let them show the former things, what they were, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare to us things to come. ²³ Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods. Yes, do good or do evil, that we may be dismayed and see it together. ²⁴ Indeed you are nothing, and your work is nothing; He who chooses you is an abomination.*

The court case with the nations that began in verse 1 was put on hold in verses 8-20, while the Lord comforted His servant Israel. In verses 21-24 the court case resumed. The idolatrous nations were challenged to prove that their gods were true by having them correctly interpret history and predict the future.

Obviously the false gods could not predict the future with certainty – they couldn't even interpret history correctly. But **God can!**

Isaiah 41:25-29 - *"I have raised up one from the north, and he shall come; from the rising of the sun he shall call on My name; and he shall come against princes as though mortar, as the potter treads clay.*

²⁶ Who has declared from the beginning, that we may know? And former times, that we may say, 'He is righteous'? Surely there is no one who shows; surely there is no one who declares; surely there is no one who hears your words.

²⁷ The first time I said to Zion, 'Look, there they are!' And I will give to Jerusalem one who brings good tidings. For I looked, and there was no man. I looked among them, but there was no counselor, who, when I asked of them, could answer a word.

²⁹ Indeed they are all worthless; their works are nothing; their molded images are wind and confusion."

Once again the Lord announced the future coming of Cyrus, the Persian ruler, from the east and north of Israel (v25-27). The good news of verse 27 is that Cyrus would permit the Jews to return home from their Babylonian captivity. And remember that Isaiah predicted this about 150 years ahead of time!

As proof that He controls the future, notice that the Lord did not use the soon-coming Babylonian Empire, which was already on the rise, for his prophetic statement. If Babylon had been used, a skeptic of the Bible could say that this was not prophecy, but intuition or reasonable foresight. Even the false prophets possessed that! No one but the Lord could give such detailed and long-range prophecy like the coming of Cyrus.

There is comfort in knowing that God controls the future.

Practical Application

When you feel like a worm, read Isaiah 41

Did you ever feel like a worm? Small, insignificant, ignored, lowly, stepped on, fearful? That's the way Israel felt among the nations during Isaiah's day! But God told Israel not to fear: *"Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel!"*(v14).

Why was there no need to fear? Because the great God, who confronts the nations and controls the future, also cares for His people! *"I will help you," says the Lord and your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel"* (v14).

What was true for ancient Israel is true for every believer today. So when you feel like a worm, read Isaiah 41!