

Text: Isa 41.1-7

This year I am planning to cover the Servant Songs for our Christmas series. I was wondering what to do for the afternoons for the next couple of Sundays leading up to the first planned message when I thought of preparing the ground for the Servant Songs.

How does Isaiah set them up? What can we learn from the setup and apply to our lives?

I began to read some of the material I already have on the subject and thought it would be interesting to start in Isaiah 41 with this message:

Preparing for Christmas: A Time of Fear

When Debbi saw that title in the bulletin, she was a bit surprised and suggested you all might have negative expectations from the message.

I said, "The title is doing exactly what I want it to do, stir up interest."

What do you think of the current times we live in? We have political leaders in our country and around the world who are questionable, have serious flaws, and create something of an atmosphere of fear for the future through their ideas and actions.

We also have a couple of zones of conflict in the world, some well known and some hidden (relatively). News of this kind doesn't lend itself to confidence or calm.

The passage we have in Isaiah today predicts a similar time of uncertainty and fear. Not only Israel, but the nations are fearful. But God will have a word of encouragement for Israel. We will look at the predicted time of fear in the message today.

Read Isa 42.1-7

We are stopping in the middle of a stanza according to my Bible, but I want to focus today on the confusion and false hopes of the nations.

Outline of Isaiah

Isa 1-5: God's case against faithless Israel

Isa 6: God's call of the prophet

Isa 7-36: Israel's crisis of faith: trust God or the nations

Isa 37-39: A case study: Hezekiah and faith

Isa 40-55: God's grace to Israel (setting of the Servant Passages)

Isa 56-66: Israel's future

Outline leading up to the First Servant Song

Prologue: Comfort My People (40.1-11)

Encouragement: the superiority of Israel's comforter (40.12-31)

The God of History prophesies (41.1-29)

The First Servant Song (42.1-9)

We are looking at this preparation for the Servant Songs that I call "The God of History prophesies."

One writer sums up our section this way: "This section consists of ... a trial speech in which Yahweh proves His case by giving a near prophecy of His choice of Cyrus as a righteous liberator (41:1-7)..."¹

Proposition: The work of God in the world causes nations to fear, but believers should trust.

I. A call to convocation (1)

A. The participants: "coastlands" and "peoples"

1. The coastlands "were the farthest reaches of the Gentile world: nations that bordered the seas, the ends of the earth then known"²
2. The peoples are called to assemble in silence: to listen to what God has to say

B. The purpose: to benefit the nations

1. "gain new strength"
2. Opportunity to speak
3. Opportunity to hear God's valuation

¹ F. Duane Lindsey, "Isaiah's Songs of the Servant Part 1: The Call of the Servant in Isaiah 42:1-9," *Bibliotheca Sacra: Dallas Theological Seminary* 139, no. 553 (1982): 13.

² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Isa 41.1.

The word picture is as if God is calling the nations to consider what he is doing and discuss what they should do about it

II. A call to consider (2-4)

In these verses God lays out what he is doing for the nations to consider

A. The first question: “who has aroused one from the east” (2a), which is answered in 2b-3

1. This figure is a warrior
2. The nations are delivered to him
3. He makes the nations like dust
4. He pursues them swiftly

This warrior is not righteous, but he is called in righteousness. That is, God is rightly calling a warrior to his service.

The warrior is not called by name, but as we continue to hear these passages, we find he is “Koresh” — “Cyrus” (Isa 44.28-45.1)

B. The second question: “who has performed it” (4a) which is answered in 4b

1. Who did this, “calling forth the generations from the beginning” — *i.e.* controlling the events of history
2. Answer: the Lord, the first and last

“God is the ultimate strategist who controls history. It has always been so, and it will always be so, because no other god preceded Yahweh, neither will any other succeed Him.”³

C. Evaluation

1. The Lord’s message is not reassuring to the conference attendees
2. He has spoken of a swift warrior coming to crush all in his path
3. He speaks of his own control of history, he has done all this

³ Constable, Isa 41.4.

4. What should people think as they hear this message?

They should not fear but trust God. This is the message of God to Israel throughout Isaiah's work. The nations need to trust God as well.

III. A fearful consequence (5-7)

A. The nations shake (5)

1. Their first thought is fear
2. They hear God's message and are terrified

B. The nations speak (6)

1. They don't speak to God
2. They speak to one another, trying to encourage one another: "be strong!"

C. The nations seek (7)

1. They seek their gods
2. They call on the craftsman
 - a. He smelts the metal of the idol
 - b. He hammers it out into shape
 - c. He solders the pieces together
 - d. He sets it up with nails so it will not totter
3. Their word to one another: "it is good"

"One worker 'strengthens' (*wayēḥazzēq*) the other and they 'strengthened' (*wayēḥazzēqhû*, NIV 'nails down') the idol with pegs so that it does not fall over."⁴

Conclusion:

Proposition: The work of God in the world causes nations to fear, but believers should trust.

⁴ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 15B, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2009), 131.

As Isaiah writes, he is picturing a servant called by God to bring blessing to Israel. In history this was Cyrus who ended the Babylonian captivity.

The nations had cause to worry about Cyrus, but the captives of the Babylonians rejoiced.

Cyrus prefigures the Messiah, the Suffering Servant. The nations are afraid of him, too. They will look for someone else to calm their fears.

As we look out at our fearful world, we need to put our trust in our Lord Jesus who will bring all things out right in the end.