

Text: Isa 41.8-16

We are in a little “Prelude to Christmas” — these passages we are planning to study for Christmas are so fascinating to me that I had to get a head start on them with this little look into Isa 41.

Last week we talked about how God called a convention of the nations to announce he had someone coming from the east, a terrifying figure. Most commentators identify this as Cyrus, the Persian, who would destroy the Babylonian Empire and conquer lands to the west as far as Egypt.

The nations, in the prophecy don't turn to the true God. Instead, they fashion new gods, and nail them securely to their base so they won't fall over. This new god is sure to deliver them, is the implication. Never mind that the true God is the one who called the fearsome conqueror to his task.

Now the focus of the passage shifts to Israel. There are many interesting things in this passage. I could camp out here for several messages, but we will try to keep it down to just this one.

The nations are afraid. If the nations are afraid, so, too, could Israel be afraid.

After all, the future days Isaiah is seeing are the days after the Babylonian conquest. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem; it is true. But a tiny remnant remained in the land (just a handful). And even better, a thriving remnant resided in Babylon itself. Jeremiah and Ezekiel told them to put down roots, build homes, have families, and prosper.

And they did.

Yet like all empires, Babylon grew fat and happy and weak. The Persians rose to take them out.

In this circumstance, why should the Jews in Babylon have joy at the coming of Cyrus? Could he be worse to them than the Babylonians? Shouldn't they be fearful like the nations?

Our passage answers that, but it does more. It looks over the horizon, far into the future, and sees that God intends to deliver Israel forever. There is no need to fear.

Read Isa 41.8-16

Proposition: Two things eliminate fear for God's people: God's promises and their kinsman-redeemer.

We should say something about the organization of the passage.

The first two verses address Israel and call to mind her heritage (8-9)

The next four verses are an inclusio based on “fear not”:

“Do not fear, for I am with you...” 10a

“Who says to you, Don not fear, I will help you” (13b)

The next three verses are an inclusio based on “the Holy One of Israel”:

Your Redeemer: the Holy One of Israel (14)

You will glory in the Holy One of Israel (16)

I. God speaks to Israel (8-9)

A. The four identifications of Israel (8)

1. My servant

- a. This term is used twenty times in the singular (Isa 39-53) and eleven times in the plural (Isa 54-66)
- b. In the singular, sometimes it refers to Israel, the nation, as here (first usage in this important section)
- c. Other times it has a different use:

“There are also passages in which the servant is differentiated from actual Israel and has a mission to Israel (Isa 49:1–9; 42:1–7; 50:4–10; 52:13–53:12). This servant must be identified with the Israel-servant, but he must also be distinguished from them, having a mission to them (as explicitly stated in 49:5–6; cf. 49:3). Obviously this is the reverse of eponymous heroes who bequeath their names to their countries and nations so that the same term refers to both. Here, the focal member of the group arrives last rather than first.”¹

- Obviously, this individual is the Messiah, and these uses are the Servant Songs

¹ Walter C Kaiser, “1553 עַבְדִּי,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 640.

- d. The root idea of Servant, though, is of one who does the bidding of his master and works for the master's interests
- 1) In Ancient Israel, Israelite slaves in the nation were protected (they retained rights)
 - 2) Their service was for a set time, by agreement or by calendar (year of Jubilees)
 - 3) The exception was the servant who voluntarily remained in the master's service for life (the pierced ear)

P^s 40.7-8 Then I said, "Behold, I come;
In the scroll of the book it is written of me.
8 I delight to do Your will, O my God;
Your Law is within my heart."

2. Jacob whom I have chosen

- a. Chosen over Esau
- b. A transformed man

3. Descendant of Abraham

- a. Emphasis here is the word "seed"
- b. Points back to the Abrahamic covenant

4. My friend

A word of close relationship, lit. "beloved"

B. The reminder of God's choice of Israel (9)

1. Taken from the ends of the earth

- a. Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees
- b. Jacob from his sojourn in Haran with Laban
- c. The nation from out of Egypt

2. You are my chosen servant (again the word servant)

Remember our context, Israel is in Babylon, Cyrus is coming, God is saying: I have chosen you [even though I disciplined you]

II. God reassures Israel (10-13)

A. I am with you, do not be anxious, I will uphold you (10)

B. All your enemies will be shamed and dishonoured (11)

1. On this one the commentaries struggle

2. They want to identify the time and the situation

a. One says, "it must be Assyria, because Assyria was ashamed when 185,000 soldiers woke up dead" (Isa 37-39)

b. Another says, "the language must be taken generally; it does not refer to the Babylonians or to any other peoples in particular."²

3. The verbs are future, and Cyrus wasn't an enemy of Israel

In my opinion, this is a little glimpse to the end of days, when Antichrist will gather his armies against Israel and be confounded.

C. Your enemies will, in fact, be non-existent (12)

D. Reason: I am the Lord your God (13)

You can see I am flying through this. We could pause and dwell on some of these words, but let's stay with the big picture: Cyrus is coming, and Israel needs to have no fear.

Then God makes an even bigger promise...

III. God promises to Israel (14-16)

A. Israel's weakness: "you worm Jacob"

1. A worm isn't much in the world

2. Second designation: you men of Israel – they are but men, they are not heroes

B. But Israel has something better than inner strength: a redeemer

1. This is the famous kinsman-redeemer we see often in the OT (the *gô'el*)

² Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1977), 85–86.

Recall the marvelous story of Boaz and Ruth for this image.

2. Constable says of weak Israel, “However, she had a next of kin (Heb. *go’el*, redeemer)—the Holy One of Israel—who would take on her care and provide all that she, His family, needed—and more.”³

It’s like the Lord is saying, “your enemies don’t know who your daddy is”

C. The powerful image of Israel in her Redeemer’s hands (15-16)

1. He will make them into a threshing sledge

a. A threshing sledge was a boat-like structure

b. It had sharp metal or stones underneath

c. Weights would be piled on top

d. Oxen would pull it over harvested grain to winnow the wheat (or what have you)

2. This sledge will not thrush grain

a. It will thresh the mountains and pulverize them

b. It will make the hills like chaff

Hills and mountains are metaphors for kings and kingdoms

“The Lord would transform the helpless worm, a tiny thresher of the soil, into a powerful “threshing sledge”—by giving her His power.”⁴

D. The outcome: you will glory in the Holy One of Israel

Conclusion:

Proposition: Two things eliminate fear for God’s people: God’s promises and their kinsman-redeemer.

No fear! God has a plan for Israel, and it runs through the Redeemer.

³ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Isa 41.14.

⁴ Constable, Isa 41.15.

Ultimately, for this to take place, the One Servant of God, the one man who is ultimate Israel, must complete his work in the world.

We know that his great work is done on the cross, but there is one little thing that remains: We wait for his coming.