

Isaiah Part 23: “Do not fear, for I am with you...”

Isaiah 41

The helper of Israel (Isaiah 41 v 1 to 29)

“Be silent before me, you islands!” (v 1) – the Hebrew word for ‘islands’ also occurs in passages such as Isaiah 11 v 11, Isaiah 20 v 6 and Isaiah 40 v 15, where it is translated as ‘coastlands’ – the idea is probably best expressed as ‘distant lands’. Here, God is calling all nations, even distant lands, to be silent before him. Why? Because they are coming to God’s courtroom: “Let us meet together at the place of judgment.”

“Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service?” (v 2) – God questions the idolaters from the distant lands, and asks them who authored this important event in human history. Most commentators believe the ‘one from the east’ to be Cyrus the Great, the king who united the Medes and Persians into a mighty army that conquered Babylon, some 150 years after Isaiah’s prophecies. Note that in verse 25 Cyrus is also referred to as “one from the north” and “one from the rising sun”.

“I, the LORD—with the first of them and with the last—I am he” (v 4) – here, God declares that he is the first and the last, the ‘bookends’ both before and after the saga of human history: starting the story, ending the story, and keeping the whole story together. This means that God has a plan for human history, and directs the path of human events, and our individual lives, towards his designed fulfilment. Jesus takes the same title of the ‘first’ and the ‘last’ in Revelation 1 v 17 and Revelation 22 v 13, thus claiming to be God.

- The (non-Jewish) ‘nations’ in their fear make new idols (verses 5 to 7). How are these idols shown to be worthless (verses 23, 24, 28, 29)?
- Assuming that the reference in both verses 2 and 25 is to Cyrus, what is God’s relationship to this mighty conqueror, and to the events of history in general (verses 2 to 4, 25 to 27)?

“The islands have seen it and fear” v 5) – when they met this God of all authority and power, they feared. They were brought so low by this encounter with God that they had to encourage one another to go on! “They help each other and say to their companions, ‘Be strong!’ (v 6). “The metalworker encourages the goldsmith” (v 7) – what did they do with the fear they felt after their encounter with God? They let the fear drive them away from the true God: instead of surrendering to this God of glory and majesty and power, they turned from God, and made for themselves ‘gods’, idols of gold! Isaiah lays on the irony. It took a lot of work to make a good god. It took skilled workers, organization and teamwork (“the one who smooths with the hammer spurs on the one who strikes the anvil”). If they didn’t do it right, the god might not be able to stand up (“the other nails down the idol so it will not topple”).

- What promises does God make to Israel in verses 8 to 20? In what sense are they true for us today? See 2 Corinthians 1 v 20.

“But you, Israel, my servant” (v 8) – in contrast to the God-rejecting and idol-making people of the distant lands, Israel is God’s servant, where the name ‘Israel’ is derived from the root verb ‘sa-rah’ meaning to contend with, persist, exert oneself, persevere; and ‘el’ meaning God. Remember, the man who wrestled with Jacob until daybreak said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed” (Genesis 32 v 28).

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“Jacob, whom I have chosen” – lest Israel become proud, God reminds them of their other name ‘Jacob’, which means supplanter, trickster, untrustworthy. They are only the servants of God because he has chosen them. “You descendants of Abraham my friend” – since Abraham was the ‘friend of God’ (2 Chronicles 20 v 7); James 2 v 23), his descendants had a special place before God. And we are also God’s ‘friends’, not because we are descended from Abraham, but because of our relationship with Jesus (John 15 v 14, 15).

“Do not fear, for I am with you” (v 10) – this is both a command and a promise: Israel is commanded not to fear. When the God who rules over the nations (v 2 to 4), the God who chose us (v 8, 9), when that God tell us not to fear, we must take him seriously! But there is also a promise. We do not fear, because God says ‘I am with you’. What more do we need? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8 v 31)

“I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth” (v 15) – God so helps Israel, so empowers them, that they are able to cut down mountains as if they were a great threshing machine, removing mountains and seeing their dust blown away. The point is clear: nothing, not even a mountain, will stand in their way when God helps them. Jesus expressed a similar idea in Matthew 17 v 20.

“I will make rivers flow on barren heights” (v 18) – in response to the cry of the “poor and needy” (v 17), those whose tongues are parched with thirst, God sends miraculous supplies of water – he has hidden resources we know nothing about.

“I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set junipers in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together” (v 19) – God can take the most barren wilderness, and make it into a beautiful forest. All the trees mentioned here were indigenous to Judea, while other kinds of tree show up after Babylonian captivity. Thus, the mention of these trees helps demonstrate the timing of the Book of Isaiah being prior to the Babylonian captivity.

“That people may see and know... that the hand of the Lord has done this” (v 20) – miraculous supplies of water and forests in the desert are impossible without God, so he gets the glory when the work is done.

“But you are less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless” (v 24) – Paul quotes this idea in 1 Corinthians 8 v 4.

“I have stirred up one from the north, and he comes” (v 25) – in contrast to the idols who can tell nothing of the future, God knows that he will bring Cyrus from the north to conquer the Babylonians, who had conquered Judah and Jerusalem and taken them captive. God would use Cyrus to allow the Jews in exile to return (see Ezra 1).

“Who told of this from the beginning, so we could know...?” (v 26) – not the idols; they know nothing. Not man, for “I look but there is no one” (v 28).

Finally, the verdict is read at the trial: “See, they are all false! Their deeds amount to nothing” (v 29). Apart from God, in the grand scheme of things, all the greatness of man is worthless, and all his great works amount to nothing.

And what of the idols? “Their images are but wind and confusion.”

Prayer – O Lord, you have commanded us not to fear, for you are with us, not to be dismayed, for you are our God. You have promised that you will strengthen us and help us, that you will uphold us with your righteous right hand. We praise you that you answer us when we are needy, and when we seek you, and you will not forsake us; for you are the Lord our God, who takes hold of our right hand, and who says to us, ‘Do not fear’. So, help us not to fear. Help us always to trust you. We praise you in Jesus’ name, Amen.