

## Fear Not, You Worm

TEXT: Isaiah 41

PHBF 10.23.16

Scr. Reading: Isaiah 41:1-14

Behold Your God!

You may have noticed, if you've read the Bible much, that this book is filled with commands. And many of them are repeated. So which, would you guess, is God's most frequently repeated command in the entire Bible? Perhaps the "Believe/Trust/Have faith" group? Maybe the "Love God/Love others" group? The "Obey" group? Nope. Not even close.

By far the most common thing God commands us to do is "Fear not." Over 300x, in pages and pages of references, God tells people "Do not be afraid." If fear is a particular struggle for you, get a notebook, look up these texts, and copy every one of them down. Just let the sheer weight of references minister to your soul. Your fears are not trivial to God! He cares. Let this sink into your soul: **God does not... want His children... to be scared. God wants you to live utterly unafraid.**

Three times He says it in our own text:

**v10** *fear not...*

**v13b** *it is I who say to you, "Fear not..."*

**v14** *Fear not...*

All three times He gives Himself as the reason:

**v10** *fear not, for I am with you;*

**v13** *it is I who say to you, "Fear not, I am the one who helps you."*

**v14** *Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I am the one who helps you, declares the LORD; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.*

See, there are 3 ways to deal with fear:

1. Deny it. Convince yourself you are stronger and safer than your fears are telling you.
2. Fight it. Eliminate the threat. If you fear illness, work out, watch your diet. If you fear poverty, work harder, save faster.
3. Surrender it. Face your fear and anxiety, admit your weakness and vulnerability, and trust God with it.

Isaiah 41 deals with all three options, and it shows that Option 3 is the only real way to handle your fear. Why? Because **all three involve trust, and only God is trustworthy.**

Isaiah 41 shows us that **we have only two options: trust God with your fears or trust an idol.** This whole chapter is set up like a great debate:

**v1** *Listen to me in silence, O coastlands; let the peoples renew their strength; let them approach, then let them speak; let us together draw near for judgment.*

"Coastlands" is a poetic reference to faraway people (cf. v5 "coastlands have seen and are afraid"). It's a reference to non-Israelites, those who don't worship the true God of Israel. The very next line abandons the poetic image and just says, "Let the peoples renew their strength." That line is an echo of the previous verse—40:31: "They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength." But now God isn't in the picture. God is challenging the other nations to renew their own strength in the same way He promises to renew the strength of His people.

He says "Let us together draw near for judgment." "Judgment" here doesn't mean "condemnation"; it's decision. "Draw near for judgment" is not the sentencing stage of a court case; it's prior to that. This is the hearing, the debate. The NLT says: "Bring your strongest arguments. Come now and speak. The court is ready for your case." In other words, "Present your evidence. Make your case. Let's discuss this."

God is inviting pagan nations to build a case for why their God-denying way of life works. He's saying, "You listen to me, and I'll listen to you. I claim I am God; you claim different gods. Let's see whose beliefs add up. Let's have a debate." Verse 21 says it most clearly:

**v21** *Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.*

We can summarize God's case in two questions:

- How well does your God predict the future?
- How well does your God protect you?

God begins and ends His case with the first question (2-7, 21-29). In the middle, He deals with the second question.

### How well does your God predict the future? (vv2-7, 21-29)

NOTE: The tone and perspective of this book undergo a massive shift at chapter 40. Chapters 1-39 are largely about judgment; chs 40-66 about comfort. Chs 1-39 are focused on Isaiah's own present day—threat of Assyria & the potential of God's people losing the Promised Land. Chs 40-66 are set in the future—judgment has fallen, Israel is in exile away from the Promised Land, and God promises a return. Predictive

prophesies figure heavily into chs 40-66 (more on that later), so specific that skeptics have suggested the latter half of this book must be written by someone other than Isaiah son of Amoz, someone who came much later in time and actually saw these things happening in his own day (recording the news, not predicting the future). PROBLEM: The Bible doesn't admit that possibility. It claims one author (1:1), and there's no suggestion anywhere to the contrary. In fact, John quotes both sections of the book back to back and attributes both to Isaiah:

**John 12:37-41** *Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, <sup>38</sup> so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" <sup>39</sup> Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, <sup>40</sup> "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." <sup>41</sup> Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.*

Verse 38 quotes Isaiah 53:1; v40 quotes Isaiah 6:10. But John refers to one person: "Isaiah said THESE THINGS because HE saw his glory and spoke of him" (v41). If we take the Bible at its word—which we really have to if we are going to follow Jesus on this point—we have to admit one author to this vast and varied prophecy.

Back to our text...

**vv2-4** *Who stirred up one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. <sup>3</sup> He pursues them and passes on safely, by paths his feet have not trod. <sup>4</sup> Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he.*

God's first challenge is to ask these pagan nations who stirred up this powerful military conqueror: "victory meets at every step... gives up nations before him... tramples kings underfoot." Who is He talking about? He tells us 4 chapters later:

**45:1-4** *Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed...*

Cyrus the Great ruled Persia from 559-530 BC. He conquered Babylon in 539 and almost immediately issued a decree which allowed the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1). Isaiah ministered from about

740-685 BC. He is predicting by name a ruler who will appear on the world scene nearly 150 years in the future! **Can your god do that?!**

**vv21-24** *Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob. <sup>22</sup> Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. <sup>23</sup> Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified. <sup>24</sup> Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing; an abomination is he who chooses you.*

How well can your god predict the future?! If he can't, he is nothing.

But notice that God does more than merely *predict* the future; He makes it happen:

**v25** *I stirred up one from the north, and he has come, from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name; he shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay.*

God didn't just know ahead of time that Cyrus was coming. God actually "stirred him up." Same point in v2-4:

**v2** *Who stirred up one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He [God] gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he [God] makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow...*

The subject "He" in both statements is the LORD. Cyrus's victories were the Lord's doing. Principle: God guides all events, even secular political events, even brutal events(!) for His own purposes.

**v4** *Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he.*

God's direct involvement with Cyrus isn't a unique event. It's evidence of an ongoing divine plan governing all historical events from start to finish. He does this because He is the Great "I AM," the first and last, the God who was, who is, and who always will be. He depends upon nothing for His existence; everything depends upon Him. Can your god do that?!

Unless your God is the LORD, he can't! And that means you have good reason to be very afraid!

**vv5-7** *The coastlands have seen and are afraid; the ends of the earth tremble; they have drawn near and come. <sup>6</sup> Everyone helps his neighbor and says to his brother, "Be strong!" <sup>7</sup> The craftsman strengthens the goldsmith, and he who smooths with the hammer him who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering, "It is good"; and they strengthen it with nails so that it cannot be moved.*

Nations who don't know God are afraid of hostile world leaders. They recognize their weakness in the face of history's unstoppable march forward. The events of world history are way beyond their control. So they gather together in uneasy coalitions and try to encourage each other. How? By constructing idols—a craftsman and goldsmith get together to hammer and solder and fasten to the ground more gods to trust. But really, how can that help?

The craftsman stands back from his creation and murmurs: "It is good." Sound familiar? It's a parody of God's original creation. The real god here isn't the idol; it's the craftsman himself, creating, willing, strengthening, declaring. **When you abandon the real God, the only resources you have left are your own.** You can almost picture this timid little man in his shop, lifting up his welders' shield, surveying his work, and trying to suppress his fear by saying, "It is good." What he really means is "Sure hope this works..." Just to make sure, he drives a few nails through the base so it won't fall over. Not a very good feeling. That's what we're reduced to if we don't trust Jesus as our Savior. We're left shoring up our teetering idols instead of resting in the strong arms of God.

"The first effect of not believing in God is to believe in anything." (attributed to Chesterton) When fearful people lose their sense of God, what do they do? Create something else to believe in. And it never helps!!

### How well does your God protect you? (vv8-20)

"But you" – drawing a contrast, distinct from the nations. People who don't trust God nervously prop up whatever they are trusting and hope it will be enough. On the other hand, God holds His people up in His own all-powerful hand:

**vv8-10** *But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; <sup>9</sup> you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off"; <sup>10</sup> fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

"my servant... chosen... offspring of Abraham" is all covenant language. Israel is distinct from the other nations because God has made specific promises to them in Abraham. They inhabit a story filled with promises from God! Look at how God draws out the promises of the covenant one by one and lingers over them: "I chose you. I called you from far away to come to me. You are my servant. I have not cast you off. I am with you. I am your God, I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you. People with these promises in their hearts are utterly fearless!

Verse 10 is one of the most popular verses in Isaiah, for obvious reasons. It's a great one to write on a 3x5 and post on your bathroom mirror...

**vv11-13** *Behold, all who are incensed against you shall be put to shame and confounded; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish. <sup>12</sup> You shall seek those who contend with you, but you shall not find them; those who war against you shall be as nothing at all. <sup>13</sup> For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, "Fear not, I am the one who helps you."*

God promises to vindicate His fearful, vulnerable people before all their enemies. He will shame them, bring them to nothing, and utterly eliminate them.

When Jesus comes, we see in His ministry all the different "enemies" He confronts. He heals disease. He restores the guilty. He overpowers Satan. He conquers sin. THESE are the worst enemies of God's people. Imagine Satan, guilt, death and disease utterly embarrassed, brought to nothing, and eliminated. The shame and guilt you feel over your sin? Shamed and confounded. The prince of demons who "strives against you shall be as nothing." Instead of you dying, death itself "shall perish." You will literally "seek those who contend with you but not find them." You could run CT scans and blood panels all day and never find a trace of cancer. Eat carbs with no fear of a diabetic reaction or a blood sugar spike. Check your pulse 25x a day and never find it above 80. Mow the lawn for hours without any allergic reaction. Why not? Because "I the LORD your God, hold your right hand; I am the one who helps you."

**vv14-16** *Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I am the one who*

*helps you, declares the LORD; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. <sup>15</sup> Behold, I make of you a threshing sledge, new, sharp, and having teeth; you shall thresh the mountains and crush them, and you shall make the hills like chaff; <sup>16</sup> you shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the tempest shall scatter them. And you shall rejoice in the LORD; in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory.*

“Worm” is a picture of insignificance and weakness. It’s not an insult. God is acknowledging our smallness and helplessness in the face of our greatest fears.

“Threshing sledge” = a farm implement used to separate grain from straw. For centuries, Israel’s enemies would run over her, beat her down, steal away the best fruit of her culture, leave only the chaff. But now, God says He’s going to turn the tables. He will make Israel into a threshing sledge and they will do the damage. Even mountains won’t stand in their way.

**vv17-20** *When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. <sup>18</sup> I will open rivers on the bare 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. <sup>19</sup> I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together, <sup>20</sup> that men may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.*

The God who stirs up and guides the great crises of history also pours our refreshment on His thirsty people.

- Jesus – “whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst” (Jn 4)
- It’s a picture of the Holy Spirit – the very *person of God* indwelling us and filling our lives. And not just a little trickle of water, but a whole pool, an entire spring—so much of God that “men may see and know, ay consider and understand together that the hand of the Lord has done this.”

The hard thing about trusting God is, He doesn’t always eliminate the thing we fear. This is fascinating to me. When we are afraid, God deals directly with us first. Eventually, He gets to the threat, but He always addresses us first. He always says, “Don’t be afraid,” and then maybe

later He eliminates the problem. Why that first part? Why not just eliminate the threat? If my family is having a picnic and a bee starts buzzing around my daughter’s drink and she starts screaming, my first reaction is to kill the bee. And then I reassure Julia. But God always does it exactly opposite. Jesus and the disciples are out in a boat, Jesus falls asleep, a massive storm whips up, water starts filling the boat, the disciples are terrified, they wake Jesus up: “Save us Lord, we are perishing!” Perfectly natural sequence to all that. Makes complete sense. But then this: “Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?’ Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm” (Mt 8:26). Jesus addresses them. Then gets up. Then rebukes the storm. He doesn’t even get out of bed first, much less “kill the bee.” He speaks to them about their fear before He even stands up.

**Why? Because God wants our trust, our heart.** If He eliminated every threat as soon as we became aware of it, we’d have no real reason to trust Him. We could live by sight, not by faith. Nothing to fear would mean nothing to trust God for. If there’s never a bee, there’s never any reason to trust the Father. Or even think about Him. Instead, our mind is preoccupied with the picnic, the food, the friends, the sunshine. All the while, the most important thing in our lives—in fact, **the Person whom to know is eternal life**—sits by and we never even notice.

The gospel is where we learn this the best. When God wanted to show us His love and give us the best gift, He gave us—not perfect security from every possible harm—but His Son. To die for our sin and rise victorious over sin and death and every other threat that could possibly come against us. God gave us Himself so He could have US.

The biggest threat to your happiness is not the thing you most fear—the bee, the cancer, the failure of the company, the election, the future. **The biggest threat to your happiness is that you might live your whole life and not know God.**

**John 17:3** *And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

The biggest threat to your happiness is that you might live your whole life and not know God. He gave you Jesus to make sure that never happens.

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