

“OUR FIRM FOUNDATION”

Everyone experiences times of discouragement, fear, and frustration. Even as Christians, there are times when we begin to feel overwhelmed by the pressures and disappointments of life. While we cannot avoid this, it is of the utmost importance that we learn to deal with it in the right manner. If we do not, we will fall into either cynicism or despair, and we will end up looking for comfort and help in the wrong places. When a Christian gets discouraged or afraid, he needs to be reminded of who God is and what he has promised to do for his people. This is what the Lord is doing in Isaiah 41. He is speaking to the people of Israel at a time when they were discouraged and afraid. And he deals with them by turning their eyes away from their circumstances and causing them to focus instead upon his person and his promises. He reminds them that he, the Holy One of Israel, is with them and that he is able to protect them and help them. This is the most important thing for us to remember when we go through life's dark valleys. We need to remember that the God who promises to redeem us from all of our sins and sorrows is the God who rules over history. This is the message of Isaiah 41: it tells us that *we never have reason to be dismayed, because the living God has promised to be with us, and he is able to uphold us in the face of all of our troubles*. There are three sections to this chapter, and I will therefore divide it into

three sermon points as we study it today: (1) God's verdict upon those who trust in idols; (2) God's promise that he will overcome for us; and (3) God's demonstration that he controls history.

The Uselessness of Idols Demonstrated

In the first part of our passage, the Lord demonstrates the uselessness of idols. This is the focus of verses 1-7. In verse 1, we see God summoning the nations to his courtroom and inviting them to bring their case before him. He is challenging them to prove that they are the ones who give shape to the course of history. And notice what God says as he issues this summons. He says, "let the peoples renew their strength." This is the same phrase that is used in the last verse of chapter 40, where the Lord promised: "they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength." That promise was addressed to believers, but here in verse 1 God is speaking to unbelievers. He is challenging the world to renew their strength in the same way that he renews the strength of those who look to him in faith. Because the people of the world place their trust in themselves and their man-made gods, the Lord forces them to rely entirely on themselves. As we saw in our study of chapter 40, God only promises to give power to the one who acknowledges his weakness. God only renews the strength of those who admit

that their only hope is in him. If you refuse to look to the Lord as your only help and your only hope, then you are going to have to fend for yourself.

Where do you place your hope? What do you turn to for comfort and help when you are worried or depressed or overwhelmed? It is important for us to consider this. Most people believe in God, but many of them look elsewhere for refreshment and renewal. This was impressed upon me while I was reading Iain Murray's biography of Martyn Lloyd-Jones this week. In a sermon that Lloyd-Jones preached near the beginning of his first pastorate, he made the following point:

"last Sunday night I noticed that, while the places of worship...were only sparsely attended, the trains coming from...sea-side places were packed out. Why did these people spend their day at the seaside and in other places rather than in the House of God worshipping? Well, the answer is perfectly plain. They obviously prefer to be at the sea-side and feel that they get more benefit there than they do in their chapels and churches... What I feel like saying to these [people] is this: If you honestly believe...that you derive greater benefit by spending your day in the country than you do by attending a place of worship, well then, go to the

country. Don't come here if you honestly feel that you could do better elsewhere. Unless you feel that something is being offered and given to you here which no other institution can offer or equal, well then, in the name of Heaven, go out into the country or to the sea-side... All I ask of you is, be consistent. When someone dies in your family, do not come to ask the church in which you do not believe to come to bury him. Go to the sea-side for consolation." [vol. 1, 138]

Maybe that sounds insensitive to you, but it is really no different than what God is saying in verse 1 of our passage. If you will not look to the Lord to renew your strength, then you are going to have to do it yourself.

Saving faith is not simply a matter of believing in the existence of God. Most of the people who spend their Sundays at beaches and sporting events and on trails and lakes believe that there is a God. Go ask them and you will see. They believe in God, but that is not the same thing as saving faith. Saving faith means seeing your desperate need for what can only be found in Jesus Christ. And when you see this, you will make the best use you can of the outward means that Christ uses to confer the benefits of his redemption to his people. You will come

to worship on the Lord's Day because you know that something really is being given here that cannot be found anywhere else.

As I said, in verse 1 God is summoning the unbelieving world to his courtroom to make their case for their claim that they control the course of history. Beginning in verse 2, God makes his case that he is Lord over all that takes place in this world. He does so by pointing to the fact that he stirred up "one from the east" who would lay waste to the nations. This is a reference to something that had not happened yet: the conquests of Cyrus the Great, ruler of the Medo-Persian empire, in the mid-6th century B.C. Cyrus conquered Babylon and established his kingdom as the new superpower in the Near East. His regime brought about real change in the lives of those he governed. Yet the Lord says that *he* is the one who has performed and done this. God's dominion is not limited to the nation of Israel. It is not restricted to the religious sphere of life. He is Lord over all.

Verses 5-7 describe how the peoples of the earth will respond to what God is going to do through Cyrus. They will be afraid, and in their fear they will turn first to each other and then to their idols for help. We see the same thing in the world today. When tragedy strikes, what do people do? Oftentimes, they help, comfort, and encourage each other. You probably remember seeing this take

place after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center ten years ago. Now of course, it is a good thing for people to help one another through difficult experiences. But the point that the Lord is making in these verse is that the words that people speak to one another at such times will always be hollow and empty if they are not words that point to him. The people in verse 5 tell each other to “Be strong!”, but what good is that when it is only those who wait for the Lord who can renew their strength?

This helps us understand why people eventually turn to idols for comfort and help. Words are not enough. We need something solid, something in which our hope can rest. In Isaiah’s day, this was done by crafting a statue to represent your god, which is what is being described in verse 7. It was believed that you could win the favor of your god by showing proper respect to its image. In our day, idolatry is usually expressed in other ways. Many worship at the altar of consumption, trying to satisfy their perpetual discontentedness by making purchase after purchase. Many immerse themselves in the world of entertainment or pursue the life of distraction that is made so readily available to us through our digital media. Many are fixated on health and exercise. Many place their hopes in their investments or in politics. Many look to food, or alcohol, or sex, or pornography to satisfy the longings of their soul. There are all

sorts of idols in our world. And whatever the idol, the result is always the same. Those who turn to idols for help are placing their trust in something that cannot save them. They are relying on things that have been crafted by human hands.

Enemies Overcome

In the next part of our passage, the Lord turns his focus away from the unbelieving world and toward his people. And as he does so, he gives his people three reasons why we should not be afraid when we are faced with trouble. He tells us of three things that he will overcome for us. First, God promises to overcome our enemies. This is the focus of verses 8-13. How can we be sure that the Lord will overcome those who set themselves against us? We can be sure of it because God has chosen us to be his very own. God calls Israel “my servant.” He calls her “the offspring of Abraham, my friend.” These names apply to you if you are a Christian. God has claimed you as one of his people. This is the doctrine of unconditional election, the doctrine that says that before the foundation of the world God appointed some to eternal life. It was not by our efforts that we became God’s people. He chose us. He took us from the ends of the earth. He called us from its farthest corners. This is why we can be certain that he will not abandon us to our enemies.

This is extremely comforting, and not just on a personal level but also on a corporate level. Think of all the forces in this world that set themselves against Christ's church. The church has many enemies, and not just on the outside but on the inside as well. But God assures us that all of them will be confounded. The Lord is with his church. He will strengthen her. He will uphold her by his righteous right hand. The day is coming when the church will look around for those who contend with her and she will not be able to find them. This is what God is saying here. Nothing can prevail against the church of Jesus Christ. We really are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Weakness Overcome

The second reason that God gives for why we should not be afraid when we are faced with troubles is that he promises to overcome our weakness. This is the focus of verses 14-16. God says, "Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I am the one who helps you." Now, you might not like being called a worm, but think about what God is saying here. I am no expert, but worms seem pretty pathetic to me. They can't even get off the sidewalk in time to avoid getting baked when the sun comes out after a rainstorm. God is not insulting us when he calls us worms, he is just pointing out the truth. We are weak and helpless.

The good news, however, is that God is the helper of the weak. As he said in chapter 40, he gives power to the faint. This is exactly what we see him doing in verses 15-16. He says that he makes his church into a threshing sledge, an instrument that was used to separate the chaff from the grain at the threshing floor. Threshing and winnowing are metaphors for judgment. When God says that the church will make the hills like chaff, he is saying that the fate of the nations depends on their response to the gospel that he sends us to proclaim. Think about that for a moment. The eternal destiny of the people among whom you live and work and play hinges on whether or not they will embrace the faith that you profess. As Jesus said, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." (John 3:17-18 ESV) We need to keep this in mind as we interact with people in our day to day lives. They are being threshed and winnowed for the day of judgment. We need to be praying and looking for opportunities to point them to Christ.

Circumstances Overcome

The third reason that God gives for why we should not be afraid in the face of trouble is that he promises to overcome our circumstances. This is the focus of verses 17-20. God says that he will provide water for the poor and needy when they are in a dry and weary land. This recalls how the Lord cared for the people of Israel during their time of wandering in the wilderness. He made water spring forth from a rock. He sent bread down from heaven.

Notice how God points to his faithfulness in the past to assure his people that he will care for them in the present. As we read the Bible, we need to store up in our minds the many instances of God's provision and care for his people throughout history. And when we find ourselves in our own wilderness, we need to bring those instances to mind. We need to look to these examples from the past to persuade ourselves that God's promises are not idle, that they are not merely a matter of sentiment. God is faithful to his Word. He has proven it in the past, and he will continue to prove it in your present and into your future.

There are going to be dry times in your life. There are going to be times when you find yourself in a weary land where there is no water. Maybe you are facing such a time right now. Maybe you are in the wilderness today. In the Bible, the wilderness is the place of testing. It is the place where we are made to see our

true condition with greater clarity. The wilderness exposes our neediness. And for this reason, it is also the place where we can see the hand of God in our lives more clearly. When the Lord provides for you in a desert-like situation, you realize that he is the one who is caring for you. You can see that he is the one who has done it.

God's Control over History Proven

In the last part of our passage, God proves that he has perfect control over history. This is the point of verses 21-29. These verses begin with the Lord issuing another challenge to the unbelieving world. He tells them to set forth their case for their gods. Can their gods make sense of past history? Can they predict what is yet to come? Can they actually cause something to happen, whether good or bad? If not, then they are not gods at all, and those who place their trust in them are without hope.

After making this point, the Lord once again states his own case. He says that he stirred up one from the north to come and trample the rulers of the nations into the dust. This is another reference to Cyrus the Great. He was previously referred to as one who came from the east because he is the ruler of Persia, which

is to the east of Babylon. Here he is referred to as one from the north because he is also the ruler of Media, which is to the north of Babylon.

The important thing about this reference to Cyrus' conquests is that Cyrus had not even been born when Isaiah first penned these words. God is predicting the future here. He proves that he rules over history by revealing what will happen in the days to come. This is the point that God is making here. He not only knows the future. He brings it to pass.

In this chapter, we see that the things in which the people of the world place their trust are nothing. In Isaiah's words, they are "empty wind." But our God rules over history. He knows what will take place tomorrow, and the next day, and every day after that. He knows it because he is the one who brings it to pass. This is the God who promises that he will always be with us: the God who is in perfect control of the course of history. If such a God is with us, then nothing - not our enemies, not our weakness, not our circumstances - can be against us. He has given us his word that he will strengthen us, help us, and uphold us. What more could we ask of him?

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,

Sermon on Isaiah 41
An Exposition of Isaiah, # 35

Grace PC, Laconia (8/14/11)
Rev. Andy Wilson

is laid for your faith in his excellent Word!

What more can he say than to you he has said,

to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?