

## Fear Not

Isaiah 41:1-20

### Introduction

"Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision." So said former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Now, whatever else you think about Winston Churchill, on this point he was right. When we're faced with a difficult situation, fear is often our immediate response, whereas courage takes a bit more thought, doesn't it?

And because it takes thought to be courageous our reasoning, our thinking can be good or it can be bad. We can have courage when, really, we'd be better staying scared and running away – so for example, when we're faced with a hungry lion, it might be sensible actually to run away. Or we can be scared sometimes when, really, we've got lots of reasons to be courageous - like when the lion's safely locked in a cage, it would be strange then to be scared, wouldn't it?

Isaiah is writing to people who were scared. They're in exile, they don't know when it's going to end, they don't know what's going on - is God cross at them? They don't really know. And I've said the last couple of weeks we are in a sort of exile. Literally as we're not able to meet, and not sure when that will happen again, and spiritually as we journey on in this world as Christians as strangers and pilgrims. Should we be scared?

Well God has got a message for his people, and for the nations around them looking on. And the first thing that we see is courage before the judge.

### Courage before the Judge (verses 1-4)

Have a look again at verses 1 – 4 of chapter 41:

*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.  
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.  
He pursues them and passes on safely,  
by paths his feet have not trod.  
Who has performed and done this,  
calling the generations from the beginning?  
I, the LORD, the first,  
and with the last; I am he.*

The scene is a courtroom. God, the judge, summons the nations of the Earth, all humanity to stand before Him. The coastlands were far off places in Israel's thinking and in verse 5 they're another way of saying the ends of the Earth. So God invites everyone from everywhere to come and stand before him as he pronounces judgement on the nations. He

tells them, almost tongue in cheek, to renew their strength – do you see that there in verse 1? I say tongue in cheek because in the last few verses of our previous chapter he's just told us that he alone is inexhaustible, that even our youngest and our fittest grow weary, and that He alone can renew our strength. It's like He's saying, "Come on then! Get your strength back! Do what only I can do, and then approach me!" As we say in Yorkshire: "Come and have a go if you think you're hard enough!"

But first He's got some questions for them to consider before they come before Him. If you look at verse 2: "*Who stirred up one from the east whom victory meets at every step?*" Er... who is it that stirred up the one from the east who is winning all those victories? Who's behind that new ruler on the world stage before whom **your** kingdoms are dropping like dominoes? "Yeah, that would be me!", God is saying.

The new kid on the block, incidentally, is a ruler called Cyrus from Persia. God's going to mention him by name, a hundred years before he came to power, later on in Isaiah - watch this space! But God is the one behind him, pulling the strings. He's always been there, directing the course of history, the first and the last. The faces and names change, but God is still the one behind it all, working out his purposes for history.

Now, you get some conspiracy theorists who reckon that there is a shady group called the Illuminati who are behind all the world's governments directing events, whoever happens to be the president or prime minister, they're the ones in charge. Well, they've got it half right, but it's not the Illuminati who's behind it all- it's God that's behind it all, and he's working out his unstoppable purposes in events both large and small. From the rise and fall of empires, to the rise and fall of the waves. And this is the judge of the nations; this is the one who is summoning all people before him for judgement. When He speaks, you listen, because there is no higher court, there is no greater judge! When He pronounces there are no appeals, no comebacks.

And that's a problem for humanity - because we don't have a great history with this judge. As we saw in the Book of Romans we were looking at the beginning of lockdown, all of us are guilty in some way before God, the judge. None of us has kept His law perfectly. We shrug it off, don't we, as 'nobody's perfect', but what we mean by that is that we're the same as everybody else- and that's true. But what if everyone else is in trouble too? What if we all stand guilty in God's courtroom? What if we do all deserve the sentence the Bible calls Hell - eternal separation from all that's good? Wouldn't it make sense to plead with the judge for mercy rather than for judgement?

Judgement for the exiles time has already begun as Cyrus has been sweeping across the known world, bringing God's judgement on nation after nation, empire after empire. By the time he was finished, the empire he founded would rule from the Balkans in Eastern Europe to the Indus Valley in modern day Pakistan. From Crimea in the North, to the border of Sudan in Africa in the south. It would subdue Egypt, Libya, Asia Minor and most significantly Assyria and Babylon - the very nations that had taken the Israelites into exile. Judgement has come upon them, God had used them for judgement, but they were not innocent of the crimes they had committed. God had just to take off the leash of these violent nations and what followed was the carnage that they had always wanted to do. There was no compulsion here, but God still gets his way.

The nations are judged - but the judgement of nations is a mere echo, a shadow of the judgement to come. All of humanity must stand one day before God. And that's what's pictured next. The question is how will they come before God? Will they beg Him for mercy? Or will they do something else? Well, the first group come forward with false courage, and that's our next heading.

### **False Courage (verses 5-7)**

Have a look at verses 5 to 7:

*The coastlands have seen and are afraid;  
the ends of the earth tremble;  
they have drawn near and come.  
Everyone helps his neighbour  
and says to his brother, "Be strong!"  
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.*

Who comes forward to defend humanity? A craftsman and a goldsmith. Trembling, they come before the judge of all. They know they've been worshipping idols – in fact, these guys were involved in making them. They made false gods, less than God. But instead of dropping to their knees and pleading for God's mercy they come up with a plan - a plan with three parts!

#### False Church

Part 1 is False Church – do you see that there in verse 6? Everyone helps his brother. As they approach God for judgement humanity bands together. They help each other. Now, this might seem a little weird, isn't the world always fighting each other? Not when it comes to God - when it comes to God, they club together to fight Him. Think about Jesus' death for example. Jesus death united humanity like no other event; He got warring factions like the Romans and the Jews, the Pharisees and the Herodians, all of them working together... to have Him put to death. Psalm 2 said just this, a thousand years before Jesus, as it talks about the nations plotting together against God's chosen King. Humanity doesn't agree on much, but it agrees it doesn't want the God of the Bible and it certainly doesn't want Jesus.

So they start their own gatherings, their own churches of mutual support to stand against God. So that's part 1: False church. That's the first part of their plan.

#### False Gospel

The second part of their plan is: False Gospel. Have a look at the second half of verse 6; and they say to their brother, "Be strong!". They tell each other to be strong. Now, you can see why, coming before this awesome God, that we saw in verses 1- 4, you can see why they needed strength, can't you?

But their message is baseless. It sounds all cheerful and positive, but there's no foundation to it. How can they be strong before God? How can they even stand in his presence? It's the 'Gospel of positive thinking'. I know we've been looking at some particularly encouraging

passages recently on a Sunday morning, but what I'm not doing is preaching the power of positive thinking. If the encouraging things we've been saying have no basis then we have no reason to hope, no reason to have courage. A positive message with no basis is not a positive message, it's a lie. In the end the house of cards will come tumbling. But they preach this to each other, "Be strong!", but they have no basis, no reason to be strong.

So, part 2, they preach a false gospel to each other. And then finally, their third part of their plan, is a false God.

### False God

Have a look at verse 7:

*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.*

This, I have to say, is my favourite plan, just for the sheer ridiculousness of it! The craftsman and the goldsmith get their false gods ready to take on the true God. They make an idol and they complement each other's craftsmanship - well, you've got to be encouraging at church, haven't you? "Ooh, I do like the soldering, that looks really good!" They go as far as pronouncing the work of their hands, 'good' - not realising the irony that the true God said the same thing after making the whole world and everything in it!

Then it gets even better, how can they make sure their idol can stand before the God who moves nations and empires? What do they do? They nail it to the plinth! They nail it to the plinth - let the stupidity of that sink in for a second! "Yeah, that'll work, we'll nail him down!" That's their big plan! They double down on their idol, hoping that, somehow, it'll help them when they literally meet their maker!

We laugh, don't we, at such stupidity, but it's what we do with idols, isn't it? Instead of giving them up, so often we double down in them and hope for the best. If work is our idol, we work twice as hard and hope that that will pull us through. If money is our idol, then don't we try and make sure that we have more money - don't we think that that will make us secure? If popularity is our idol, we sell more and more of ourselves in the name of people pleasing or fame. We're very committed to our idols, aren't we? The problem is that when we stand before God, they can do nothing for us, no matter how much we've invested in them.

There's no conclusion here as to what happens as they stand there before God with their figurine nailed to a brick trying to look brave, but Isaiah's going to return to their stupidity again and again, as he goes through this section. He finishes the chapter like this – have a look at verse 29, right at the end of the chapter, if you've got a bible there:

*Behold, they are all a delusion;  
their works are nothing;  
their metal images are empty wind.*

That's really the conclusion of what's going on here. They stand no chance. So humanity as a whole comes before God with false courage. Well, what of God's people, those languishing

in exile, now and then? Well, they can stand before God with true courage, that's our last heading.

### **True Courage (verses 8 – 20)**

They can stand before God with confidence. The reason that they can do that is that God gives believers three solid reasons for true courage. The first is that God says...

#### I am with you

Have a look at verses 8-10:

*But you, Israel, my servant,  
Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;  
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";  
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.*

There's a massive difference between the nations and God's people. His people here are described as His servant - that phrase is going to be repeated again and again in this section of Isaiah so look out for it! But it's not just that they're his servant, they're the children of his friend, Abraham. They're those he has chosen, those he has gathered from the ends of the Earth.

There are clues here that it's not just the nation of Israel that he's talking to. The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians, Galatians 3:29, "*And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*" And again, Galatians 3:7, "*Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.*" We see them here gathered from the ends of the Earth. Now that could refer to the Exodus from Egypt, but it certainly, wording it in that way, gives us a much broader scope, doesn't it, as to who we're thinking about.

So what does God say to his people, his servant, his chosen? Well, verse 10: "*Fear not, for I am with you.*" Fear not. The most repeated command in the Bible is "Do not be afraid". Do not be dismayed, here, is a similar idea. It literally means to look around, as if you look around when you're nervous or scared. Out in the big wide world, it's scary, but we're not to be scared. Why? Because God is with us! We're not alone; we're not in it all by ourselves. God is with us. And that doesn't just mean he's there to keep us company, he's with us to help us.

What does He promise to do? Well, He says here, **He will strengthen us.** We all need strength, don't we? The nations try to renew their own strength, to stand up against God, but as we read last week in Isaiah 40:29, "*[God] gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.*"

God isn't looking for strong people. God is looking for weak people to give strength to. If you look through the Bible, you'll see that most of the problems come with God's people when they feel strong, not when they feel weak. When we feel weak there's that wonderful promise that we had from last week, Isaiah 40:31a, "*but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles...*" And we saw then that God was promising to get them home again, just like he had done in the Exodus when he bore them on wings like eagles. The nations have gods that have to be strengthened by them – we saw that with nails and solder. But we have a God who strengthens us. So that's the first part of that promise: He will strengthen us.

But it also says there that **He will help us**. It's the same word there as in verse 6. But whereas they only have each other to help each other, we have God's help. The word help comes from the word to surround. It's as though God surrounds us on all sides, protects us from the foe - as though he forms a shield around us to keep us safe. So God isn't so much promising to help with a promotion at work or your grades at school - but it is God promising his protection when difficulties arise. Not that those difficulties and trials won't hurt or sting, but that He will keep us safe in His love until we make it home.

And then the third part of the promise is that **He promises to uphold us**. The word there that's used for uphold is the same word that's used of Aaron and Hur and what they do with Moses' arms as he stands on the hillside in Exodus 17. They hold up his arms so that victory might come to the Israelites. Well, what they did for Moses' arms, God does for us.

He upholds us. He keeps us from falling or fading. He keeps us going and firms us up. How does he do that? He does it With His righteous right hand, or better, his victorious right hand. His right hand that brings salvation. Whichever translation you use, He's using his right hand. His best hand if you like, not that God has a worst hand - or indeed a literal hand, unless you count what He has with Jesus' hands! What it means there though is that God is holding us up with his strong and victorious hand. He will not let us go; He will not let us drop; He will uphold us.

And isn't this such an encouragement for us, as we journey on as strangers and pilgrims in this world? God promises to strengthen us, surround us and uphold us. We have no need to fear judgement when God chooses to treat us this way. We have courage before God, not because we are strong, but because he promises to give us strength.

The second reason believers can be brave and take courage is that God promises...

#### I will overcome your enemies

We see that in verses 11-14. Those who seek to trip up us on our journey He will make as nothing, it says there. Even if we were to look for them, we won't be able to find them, they shall be brought to justice.

Why? Not because we're anything special. Have a look at verse 14:

*Fear not, you worm Jacob,  
you men of Israel!*

In verse 14, we're described as a worm. Now, I think that's actually a bit strong - it can describe a worm, and it does in other places, but I think from context it's more likely a grub,

a baby insect. Last time God described people as grasshoppers, and I think bearing that in mind we should take it that way. In which case the image is not so much, "Ew! A worm! Disgusting!"... it's a picture of weakness and helplessness.

And in that context God says, fear not, I am the one who helps you. You who can do nothing, I will redeem you, rescue you, buy you back. Your enemies shall not take you, I have you safe in my hand, and your tormentors shall become as nothing. So that's the second promise that He makes; I will overcome your enemies. So, He will be with us, and He'll overcome our enemies.

And the last reason believers can be brave and have true courage is that God promises...

### I will make you a way home through the desert

This last section is probably the most confusing part of the passage, but really what we have are two extensions of an image that we saw in chapter 40. That image was the highway through the wilderness.

God's people were stuck in exile in Babylon. Between them and home was the massive Syrian desert. I've been looking it up this week – it was as hilly as the Pennines, and more dry than the Sahara. The Syrian desert was a massive obstacle - that's why most people, then and now, choose to go round it, in what's often called the Fertile Crescent. They sort of take a detour to get around that desert.

But God had used the picture of a massive road he would make straight through the desert direct from Babylon to Jerusalem. God had told the people to get ready for Him to appear and bring them home on that road. But how would they get through the hills? And how would they survive in the desert?

Well, God answers that here. The people will become a threshing sledge. Have a look at verses 15-16:

*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;*

A threshing sledge was a contraption used to separate the husks of wheat from the grain inside. It was heavy wooden board with sharp objects attached to the underside to scrape the grain and it was pulled along the ground by an ox, normally, because it was so heavy. It would gouge massive lines in the ground, as it sort of raked, sort of grated the ground. God's people are going to become a threshing sledge that will grind the mountains to dust as they travel home. There ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough, to stop God bringing them home.

But how would they survive the journey in one of the driest places known to man? Well God will provide for his people on the journey. Those who are thirsty on the journey will be quenched - we see that in the next section as it talks about people seeking water being given water. God will open rivers, fountains and springs in the wilderness. Have a look at verse 18:

*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.*

God is bringing His people through the wilderness; He's providing water for His people as they go. And of course, God's people should have known this. God had done this the last time they were in the wilderness on their way to the promised land, bringing water from the rock to feed the people. There's so much water here that it lists seven kinds of trees that will grow. What once was barren and lifeless will become fertile and full of life.

But when is he talking about? When the exiles returned home in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC? Or is it some date off in the future?

Well again as we've seen in the last couple of weeks, actually these verses point us to Christ. All these promises point us to Christ. It is he who is called 'God with us' at his birth, who promised to be with us to the very end of the age. It is he who defeated our greatest enemies, death, hell and sin, by triumphing over them on the cross. It's He who is the fountain of living water that is promised in these last verses, who gives us the Spirit in abundance, who gives refreshment to the weary soul in the wilderness. Jesus himself said in John 4:14, "*Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*" And, again, in John 7:37, "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.*" John tells us there that Jesus is speaking of the Holy Spirit. Jesus refreshes us by the Holy Spirit, renewing our strength and our energy and our resources.

So these are not some obscure promises for ancient pilgrims, they're not some old world horticultural project for tree planting. They're firm foundations for us for real courage. They're solid promises for us to be brave when life gets hard. And they're there to point us to God. Why is God doing this? Look at verse 20:

*that they 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.*

He wants them to know that He's doing this. He wants them to know that He is providing for us. Not by our strength, not by the nations' strength, but by God strengthening his people, helping them and upholding them.

Fear is a reaction, courage is a decision, and this passage shows us that we have ample reason to be brave in the face of the future, and have courage in our great and wonderful Saviour.