

Do Not Be Afraid . . . You Worm!

Introduction

The Text

- A. So we continue on in our “Do Not Be Afraid . . .” series, and this morning we are dropping into [Isa 41:14](#). Let me read it here, pray, and then we’ll start to work things out: “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.”

Less of Ourselves and More of God

- A. It seems to me that, if we are ever to truly be helped in our times of trial and fear, two things of necessity must take place:
1. The first is that we must come to see how small and insignificant, how powerless and even vile we really are. We must come to see our true place in the universe and be lowered and deflated back down to reality.
 2. The second is that we must come to see God. We need a fresh sighting of the glory and the grace of God in Christ.
 - a. In essence, I suppose what I am saying is that what we need is to see less of ourselves and more of Him.
- B. And I know often in trial we, by nature and by reflex, tend to move in quite the opposite direction.
1. When hardship or something dreadful comes upon us, we instinctively feel we must be the ones to rise up and meet it. We feel the resources for encountering and overcoming it must somehow be found in us. We feel we must get bigger not smaller. We must draw up plans and take action.
 - a. And so there are, of course, people who will look at what I’m proposing here at the start of this message and claim that such a thing is not practical enough to be of any real profit. “In the midst of a global pandemic and economic meltdown, don’t show us more of God,” they say. “Don’t distract us with theology. We don’t want to sit around musing on the divine. Show us what to do. Tell us how to fix things. Give us an action plan for getting out of this mess.”
- C. But don’t you see? Such a mentality, while it may masquerade as part of the solution, is in truth actually a bigger part of the problem. Do you know what I mean?
1. Self-reliance, self-sufficiency, self-aggrandizement, self-infatuation, self-centeredness, self-focus, self-help—all of these things, ironically, while centered on the self, end up pillaging it of its peace.

- a. We don't need more of ourselves in these times. No, brothers and sisters, we now (more than ever!) need more of God!

“Comfort My People”

- A. I find it quite amazing. I'm not sure how well you know the book of Isaiah, but the book can be quite nicely divided into two or three parts . . .
- B. The first part is composed of [chs. 1-39](#), and here the prophet Isaiah is addressing the Jews there in Judah in particular and warning them of God's judgment that will befall them if they don't repent of their covenant infidelities and return to Him in faith and obedience. He warns first concerning the Assyrians and then later concerning the Babylonians—whom he says will eventually sack the holy city, plunder its treasures, and carry its people off into exile.
 1. That's how [Isa 39](#) ends, with an ominous prophetic word delivered to King Hezekiah: “⁶ Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord.⁷ And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (vv. 6–7).
 - a. And this, of course, we know comes to pass in 586 B.C.—a little over a century after Isaiah uttered these words—when Nebuchadnezzar rolls up on Jerusalem and unleashes the full wrath of the Babylonian Empire against it.
- C. But then in [Isa 40](#), it's as if the prophet suddenly shifts gears.
 1. Here now he begins to speak prophetically, looking forward to the people of God as they will be when in exile, and addressing them there in that place. And here's how it begins: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God” (v. 1).
 - a. And we say “Comfort”?! I want comfort. Six weeks into this shelter-in-place order and I'm feeling a bit like an exile these days too—even in my own home. Can I have some of this comfort? How do I get it?
- D. Well, it's amazing where God goes on from here as the chapter continues. For He immediately highlights precisely those two necessities I mentioned at the outset.
 1. If you want comfort in the midst of your exile, if you want help in the midst of your trial, if you want courage in the midst of your fear . . . here's what you need: You need to see less of yourself and more of God. Get your eyes on Him!
 - a. So vv. 6-7: “⁶ A voice says, ‘Cry!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass.” So the prophet is told first to cry out regarding the insignificance and inherent weakness and transience of man. That's part 1 of this message of comfort. Interesting.

- b. But that is not all he is told to cry out. The chapter carries on, v. 9: “Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’” So it’s not just see less of yourself . . . it’s see more of God! It’s a two-part message and both are required to get at this comfort He’s promising them in their exile.

Two Realities in One Verse

- A. And, of course, these are the two realities that are brought together most potently, even most scandalously in our verse this morning: “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” (Is 41:14).

- 1. Less of me, more of God = No fear, courage, comfort, peace, joy, and on and on!

- B. So that’s really the essence of what we’re going to be bringing out here this morning, but I’m going to do it by locating this verse within the larger context of these surrounding chapters in Isaiah. And we’ll be making our way through three headings in particular: (1) Accusation; (2) Temptation; and (3) Redemption.

(1) Accusation

God Has Forgotten

- A. Under this first heading of Accusation, I simply want to help us feel a bit of what Israel was feeling at this time.

- 1. You remember, the exile in Babylon had gone on for many decades and it was a long 70 years in total from the destruction of the first temple in 586 B.C. before the second temple was finally rebuilt in 516 B.C. And as the years piled one on the other, the burden of it all began to get heavier and heavier. There by the waters of Babylon, Israel began to think God had forgotten them.

- B. So God identifies their accusation in *Isa 40:27*: “Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God?’” That’s what they’ve been saying: “I must be hidden from You. You must not be looking at me anymore. You are neglecting me.”

- 1. I thought at this point of *Psa 137* where we read of Israel saying this: “¹ By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. ² On the willows there we hung up our lyres. ³ For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ ⁴ How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! ⁶ Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!” (vv. 1-6). “We refuse to sing in Babylon. We’re going to save our songs for Jerusalem. We will never forget Zion and our God!” That’s at least their claim.

- a. But, then, now here in [Isa 40:27](#) we start to see what makes this so painful, don't we? Though they had at one point determined never to forget God, it, over time, really seemed to them as if God had forgotten them!
- C. And I wonder, haven't you ever felt similarly?
- 1. Perhaps you're feeling this way even now, in the midst of this pandemic. Watching the world in the state that it's in, seeing the way this is affecting your family, your community, your job, your finances, and so forth.
 - a. Have you reached the point yet where you've said with Israel here: "My way must be hidden from You. You don't see me. You're not moving for my good. You've left me to myself. I'm reading my Bible. I'm praying all through the day. I'm keeping you in remembrance God. Why then does it seem like You've forgotten me?!"

(2) Temptation

Eying the Idols

- A. Well, that's the Accusation. But with this Accusation we find there's always an accompanying, and even more devastating, Temptation.
- 1. And here I'm thinking in particular of the temptation towards idolatry. In other words, the move goes something like this: "If YHWH has forgotten me, I guess I better go find another god who can actually be of some help."
- B. For Israel, the temptation would have been twofold. They're captivity in Babylon would seem to them to be a signal not just that their God has likely forgotten them, but also that He's simply not strong enough to take on the gods of Babylon. Even if He did remember us, He couldn't save us.
- 1. This is really how people evaluated things in ancient times. Everything was a battle of deities. Mine versus yours. So if I become your captive, well then the only logical conclusion is that not only am I inferior to you, but my god must be inferior to yours as well.
- C. So these are the sorts of things they are feeling here as they remain languishing in exile. They're starting to eye the other gods around them. "Look at the Babylonians going about free—enjoying life. What if we bent our knee to this or that god of theirs? Might we then experience the same? What has YHWH ever really done for us anyways but get us in this mess in the first place?"
- D. In [Isa 41:5-7](#), God outlines for us the way this sort of thing plays out among the nations. After referring to the rise of Cyrus of Persia and the menacing threat that he then represented for the various peoples around, He says: "⁵ The coastlands have seen and are afraid; the ends of the earth tremble; they have drawn near and come. ⁶ Everyone helps his neighbor and says to his brother, 'Be strong!' 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."

1. In case the language is lost on you here, Isaiah is describing people scrambling in fear and coming together to build various idols to bend their knee to and set their hope upon. And Israel is, no doubt, starting to be tempted towards this sort of thing (in truth, they've always been susceptible to it!).

Modern Versions

- A. Now, before we think ourselves too modern for such silly nonsense—"We don't build little gods and bow to them, how ridiculous!"—we need to realize that we do much the same, only in our own way. We have our own perhaps more sophisticated versions of idolatry.
- B. So when it seem following God is hurting us more than helping, when we cry out to Him for relief and He seems to have forgotten us, we too look around at those whose "gods" seem to be working better for them and we're tempted to bend our knee to the same.
 1. So if God has yet to grant you that significant other you've been long praying for and then you watch as your friend just landed a great catch and you're thinking how did she pull that off? Well, look at her. Look at what she wears. Look at what she reveals. No wonder she got noticed. And so you start bowing to the idol of beauty. Let's show a little more skin, let's get that plastic surgery, let's do what we've got to do to get what I want.
 2. You might be so tired of living paycheck to paycheck. You just feel like man it's so stressful, we're never secure, I'm always anxious, I rarely sleep, it's taking a toll on my family. And then I see those guys with the high end jobs and their six figure salaries and it's like everything's always going right for them. Even in this pandemic, they're not worried. Sure they've lost a lot of money but they've still got a lot of safety next. Wouldn't that be nice?! They can just buy their way out of trouble into ease. And so you start bowing to the idol of money. And you start chasing it, doing whatever you got to do to get it.
 3. I know we've already mentioned this many times, but truly it's this idolatrous instinct that's behind all this silly, selfish hoarding and stockpiling that we're witnessing—whether it's toilet paper, or hand sanitizer, or eggs, or flour. We're trying to increase our stash and build it out because we think somehow in there we'll have security. It's ridiculous.
 - a. We pride ourselves on being so modern and sophisticated, but we me might as well be bowing to little statues at this point. We may call our idols by different names, but they represent the same sort of things. The matter is no different at the heart.
 - i. It's me looking to some other created thing to do for me what only God ultimately can.

An End-Run Around God

- A. Our idols never truly deliver. And God brings this out again and again in this section in Isaiah.
 1. But here's the thing, here's why they are still so appealing, so tempting: They offer us a tantalizing chance to do an end-run around the God of the Bible where we can get what we want without having to wait for Him, trust in Him, submit to Him, or obey Him.

- B. So, at the end of the day, what we must see then is that even as we are turning to other gods it is still an issue with what we said at the beginning concerning the self.
 - 1. I'm getting bigger here. It's not less of me but more of me. I'm elevating myself over God. Indeed, even as I'm bowing to other gods, in essence it's still just me trying to play god.
- C. And when we're in this place and posture, God can't bring comfort, or encouragement, or even redemption. So He's going to have to deal with this. And that's what we see especially brought out in [Isa 41:14](#) . . .

(3) Redemption

"Worm"?!

- A. Look at [Isa 41:14](#) again now once more: "[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.](#)"
- B. I'm going to key all of my reflections under this last heading here off of this word "[worm.](#)"
 - 1. Because I know that's what initially jumps out at us, right? You probably saw the title for this morning's message—"[Do Not Be Afraid . . . You Worm!](#)"—and thought: "Well this sure is going to be an encouraging message! Worm?! Who does this pastor think he is, calling me a worm?!"
 - a. Well, admittedly, I wouldn't have thought such an idea encouraging at first either, and I certainly wouldn't have had the boldness to call you this were it not for the simple fact that God has called us this first. And what we shall soon see is that He means such good for us by it.
- C. But first we must deal with the word itself. And there's just no way around it. It's not flattering. The Hebrew can refer to various kinds of insect larvae—worms, maggots, grubs. And whenever it's used in the Scriptures, it's always in a negative light.
 - 1. So in [Exo 16:20](#) it refers to worms that spoiled any manna Israel tried to keep to the second day.
 - 2. In [Deut 28:39](#) and [Jonah 4:7](#) it refers to worms that destroy crop and plant.
 - 3. In [Job 25:6](#) it's used with reference to the sorry estate of man before God—we're just little grubs before Him.
 - 4. In [Isa 14:11](#) it refers to the worms that cover a man when once he's brought down from his pomp and placed in grave.
 - 5. In [Isa 66:24](#) it is used as a picture of unending judgment and hell where we're told the worm never dies.
 - a. So it is not a flattering image to say the least. It doesn't make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside. It might even make you a little mad at God. We don't like hearing such things about ourselves.

- D. Megs and I have just started watching that show *The Crown* on Netflix about Queen Elizabeth. And just the other night Winston Churchill, Prime Minister at the time, was having a portrait done up in celebration of his 80th birthday.
1. And while this guy is painting him it becomes more and more obvious just how anxious Churchill is that the artist portray only those things that are endearing about himself—“Don’t show my weakness, my frailty, the toll that age, politics, and war have taken on me.” In other words: “Don’t show me as I really am. Don’t put me in an honest and humbling light.”
 - a. When the painting was finally unveiled to him, he hated it. Because it was true to life . . . and it wasn’t flattering. So he never hung it up. And, rumor has it, his wife burned the thing to ash.
- E. And so like that, some of you hear this word from God and you won’t stand for it. You won’t be talked to in this way, even if there is something true in it, even if He has a point.
1. And I want to say, don’t burn the portrait just yet. Let’s hear God out.

A Final Question and a Fourfold Answer

- A. I want to ask a question now that will really take us to the end of this message, and that is this: What is God doing here? Why does He refer to us in this way? What is He getting at? Is He mad at us? Is He trying to scold or shame us? Is He name-calling or trash-talking like some bully on a playground? What’s He doing?
1. I’ve got four things, and we’ll obviously have to hit them somewhat quickly . . .

Answer #1: He Wants Us to See the Impotency of Our Own Idols and Efforts

- A. God’s redemption can only begin for us when once we’ve finally given up on all else. We cannot get around this. If we are not willing to let Him take us here than we shall find He cannot take us anywhere at all.
1. We tend to move from idol to idol to idol, thinking that, though this last one didn’t fully pan out, this next one surely will. It is only when finally we say enough of all of this—when we realize I can’t fix it, I can’t figure it out, I don’t know what to do—that God can really begin with us.
 - a. I’m sure all of our personal testimonies begin with something like this. “I thought I was awesome, and then I realized I’m not.”
- B. And that’s the point here. We are in the dirt, we are helpless little worms. We don’t have the resources or the wherewithal to get it straightened out. We need to own that.

Answer #2: He Wants Us to See the Difference Between Ourselves and Him

- A. You notice in the text, God refers to Himself as “the Holy One” (Isa 41:14).
 - 1. When God refers to Himself as such He is setting Himself apart from all else. He is accenting the fact that where we are mere worms wriggling about in the dirt, He is God seated above the highest heaven. No other god or man can compare.
- B. And so much of these chapters in Isaiah have been devoted to this very point. You won’t find a more lofty view of God than Isa 40.
 - 1. I do not have time to bring it all out now, but one verse that brings together what we’ve been saying thus far is Isa 40:22, where Isaiah declares of God: “It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers . . .” We are the insects in the dirt. He is God above it all.

Answer #3: He Wants Us to Know Where True Help Can Be Found

- A. Now, to this point, you’re thinking: This is still not encouraging. Nick, you said good news was coming here, I don’t see it. Well, here it comes! It’s all in many ways been building to this.
 - 1. You see, God is not here merely trying to accentuate the gap between us and Himself. He does not get a kick out of putting us down and showing off. That is not the point at all.
 - a. The point in all of this has been to help us see where, in our troubles and times of exile, true help can be found! That’s the point!
 - i. Stop looking to yourself and your man-made idols. You’re just a worm and your idols less than worms. Instead look out and up instead to the God who is over it all. I am not just separate from you, I am coming down and in towards you to help.
- B. So in our text: “I am the one who helps you . . . ; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 41:14). I’m not just holy and set apart. I’m right here, with you in the dirt.
- C. And this has been the message throughout these chapters in this section of Isaiah.
 - 1. Back in Isa 40:11, after talking about the might and strong arm of the Lord, Isaiah tells us: “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.” He’s not just strong and above us. He’s tender and right here with us.
 - 2. Or at the end of Isa 40, after talking about how the Lord is the everlasting God who doesn’t faint or grow weary, we come to see how He takes that which is solely and properly His own and, in grace, gives it freely to His people: “³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; ³¹ but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (vv. 30–31).

3. As we keep reading through [Isa 41](#), we see again more of this: “¹⁷ 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.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.¹⁹ 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,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” (vv. 17–20). I’m holy, set apart, yet I’m with you, right here.
 4. And if we press on beyond the boundaries of [Isa 41](#), we come to [Isa 42](#), and here we find what’s been referred to as the first of four Servant Songs.
 - a. The prophet begins to speak of this Servant of God who will come, He’ll have God’s Spirit upon Him, He’ll care for the broken and the weak, He’ll establish justice, and accomplish this great redemption for God’s people.
- D. We know now He’s talking about Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment and fullest expression of all we’ve been discussing here.
1. God is infinitely high above us. We are infinitely set below Him in the dust. The gap between us expands on into forever.
 - a. And yet in Christ, God bridges that gap. The holy One steps down off His throne and gets into the dirt with the worms. And He does more than just get into the dirt with the worms, doesn’t He? He becomes a worm.
- E. Earlier, I held back one other instance where that Hebrew word for “worm” shows up in the OT: [Psa 22:6](#).
1. It’s a prophetic Psalm pointing forward to Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus even quotes from it as He’s dying. [V. 1](#) of the Psalm will be familiar: “[My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?](#)” And this whole Psalm is really this vivid picture of what Jesus experienced at Calvary.
 - a. But in [v. 6](#), it’s very interesting. Here is what this suffering Servant says: “[I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people.](#)”
- F. The Holy One is our Redeemer. The King of kings is our Servant. God becomes a worm. To help us. To comfort us.

Answer #4: He Wants Us to Be Comforted and Unafraid in Our Trials

- A. The opening exhortation in [Isa 41:14](#) is “[Fear not . . .](#)” That’s where all this has been going. Comfort. Courage.
- B. Listen, here’s the wonderful thing. Because we know Jesus, now we can admit our helplessness, we don’t have to burn the portrait, we can own it. We can confess our sin and junk. We can admit

we're weak and frail. And still not fear. Because it's not about me. It's about Him and He's right here. Less of me. More of Him. That's it.