

Group Study Outline

Launching Question

Read through the passage together, perhaps taking a section each.

What strikes you from the passage? What imagery stands out to you? Does anything surprise you?

Questions

Look at Isaiah 40:27. How were God's people feeling? Why might they have been feeling like this? What might they have been tempted to do instead of trusting in God?

Verse 1 starts the chapter a bit like a court case, with God presenting his evidence. Look at verses 2-4 and 25-27. What case is God making as to why we should trust in him?

In pairs/groups, look at verses 8-10, 11-13, 14-16. Why should God's people not fear? How do these promises apply to us as Christians?

Look at v5-7 and 21-29.

How is God mocking the worship of idols in 5-7? (compare with 40:18-20)

What is the verdict in 21-29? Why?

How does the end of v24 affect our attitude towards other religions? Or anything that we might be tempted to worship instead of God?

Thinking it through

How would you use this passage to help someone who feels like God has abandoned them?

How would you use this passage to help someone who is worried and fearful about the future?

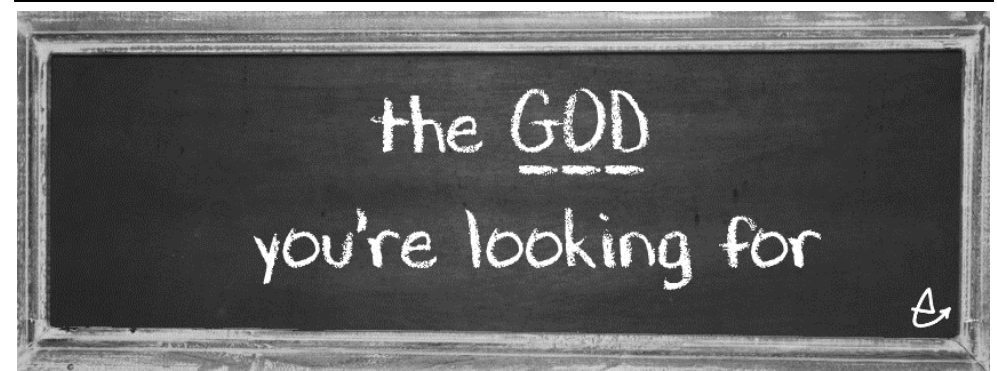
How would you use this passage to challenge someone who is drifting in their faith and more concerned about other things (career/ family/ hobbies etc) instead?

What is making you anxious and fearful at the moment?

Where are you tempted to turn when you are fearful, other than God?

Pray

Isaiah 41:1-29



Isaiah at a glance

Isaiah prophesied at a time (approx. 740-680 BC) when God's people had rebelled against him and judgement was imminent in the form of the Assyrian and Babylon empires. But in chapters 40-55 Isaiah looks beyond this coming judgement to a time when Babylon itself will be destroyed, God's people will return to Jerusalem, and ultimately God's kingdom will draw people from all nations into relationships of peace with God and one another. In the process, Isaiah gives us a grand portrait of the great God who will achieve these far-reaching plans - the God you are looking for.

It's been said that 'to read and believe these chapters means that we have a God who is working out his great salvation purposes in human history, whose word can be trusted and whose kingdom will know no end.' What an enormous encouragement for God's people then, and for our Connect Groups today!

Where this passage fits in...

We've been introduced to the greatness of God in chapter 40. In this chapter God again shows his greatness by predicting the future, in particular, introducing us to the figure of Cyrus who will destroy Babylon and send the people back to Jerusalem. But God also emphasises here his great love and care for his people. The uselessness of the idols the nations worship just highlights how much greater the God of Israel is.

Theme Sentence

Fear not, for God is in control of events and is on the side of his people

Application

- See that God is in control of events and looking after his people
- So don't be afraid, but trust in God
- And don't turn to anyone or anything else for refuge

[RA]

Commentary

- 1 God uses legal language to call the coastlands, i.e. all the nations, to a great trial. He invites them to come to him to renew their strength (40:31). The trial will determine who is worth trusting, the God of Israel or the gods of the nations.
- 2-4 God presents the first piece of evidence in this trial by asking a question. He points to a victorious ruler who has been stirred up from the East. No one can stand against this mighty conqueror. Later, Isaiah tells us this is Cyrus, king of Persia (45:1). But here, the focus is not on the identity of the conqueror, but on rather on who has stirred him up. Who has caused this king to triumph? Who has given him his strength and caused the nations to fall before him? Who has planned all this? It is the LORD. He is in control of history. This is generally true, that whatever happens, God is in control. But Cyrus was especially important to Israel as he would be the one who would defeat Babylon, and allow the people of Israel to return to their land and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. So God has stirred up a warrior who will do good to his people.
- 5-7 How do the coastlands respond to what they see of this warrior? They are terrified and so they go about making idols. Note the similarities between these verses and 40:18-20. The people turn to idols for help. But note the ironies in these verses. The idols are man-made: the craftsmen declare it to be good (note God's verdict on *his* creation in Gen 1:4 etc.). They have to strengthen their god with nails so it won't be moved. What use is a god like that?
- 8-10 In contrast, the true God helps his people. And so they should not be afraid. These two truths are repeated in each of the next three paragraphs. In these verses, God reminds his people that he has chosen them. He reminds them of Jacob and Abraham, their ancestors whom God chose and promised to make into a great nation. He reminds them that he is the one who has formed them as a nation, calling them from the ends of the earth. They are his chosen servant. So they don't need to be afraid, he will help them. These promises also apply to all whom God has chosen from the nations, who have become part of God's people through faith in Jesus.
- 11-13 Here God promises his people that he will deal with their enemies so thoroughly that the Israelites won't be able to find them, no matter how hard they look! The people may currently find themselves surrounded and overwhelmed by enemies. But those enemies shall become nothing at all. So they don't need to be afraid, God will help them. As Christians we see this as Jesus defeats sin, death and the devil at the cross, and will one day return and wipe out all those who oppose God's people.
- 14-16 Again, the don't need to be afraid, even though they are as weak and pathetic as a worm. Because again, God will help them. He will make them into a threshing sledge, which cuts up the wheat so the grain is separated from the chaff. In the same way, Israel will judge the nations. They will thresh the mountains and the hills. From the beginning, God promised Abraham that he would 'bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you, and through you all nations on earth will be blessed.' God has chosen his people to be a light to the nations, to bring blessing to all peoples, ultimately through Jesus. And so when the nations welcome God's people and worship their God, they are blessed. When they oppress God's people, their judgement is sealed. And the same is true of the church today. As God's people preach the good news of Jesus to all nations, those who welcome the message and messenger gladly will be saved. Those who reject the message and abuse the messenger will be judged. Though God's people may seem insignificant, they are like a threshing sledge, separating the nations for judgement.
- 17-20 God gives further reassurance to his people, promising to help the weak and needy (as they must have seen themselves), giving those in the desert the two things they most need, water v18, and shelter v19. This imagery harks back to the time the people of Israel left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness, and God looked after them. God will again bring his people back into their land.
- 21-24 We're back in the courtroom. God has demonstrated his power and his care for his people. Now the gods of the nations are challenged to set forth their case and bring their proofs. Say something about the past that can be considered. Or predict the future. Do good or do harm. But they do nothing. So the verdict in v24, they are nothing, their works are less than nothing. And people who choose to worship them are an abomination.
Note, the worshippers of false gods are not just foolish or mistaken. They are deliberately choosing to worship something useless instead of the LORD. Hence they are deeply offensive to God, an abomination.
- 25-27 God's second piece of evidence. He has already mentioned that he 'stirred up' one from the East. Here he refers again to him ('one from the North' – the ancient empires of that time were based East of Israel but they always attacked from the North). This time the emphasis is on God declaring this good news in advance. This prophecy came to Isaiah approx. 200 years before it actually happened, and so God proves his control of events by declaring what he will do long in advance, so that his people will trust in him.
- 28-29 Repeat of the verdict on the false gods, who cannot do anything, in contrast to God who declares the future. They are nothing, a delusion. So who will you put your trust in?