

Isaiah 41:21 – 42:17

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Isaiah 42 has the first Servant Song, (42:1-9). Isaiah is giving increased attention to Christ's mission to the Gentiles who worship idols. The Lord Jesus will establish justice in all parts of this earth. This means Gentiles will leave those idols and come to worship the Lord. To determine whether the idols are real gods, he challenges them by a test. Whoever is real can tell the future and control events to make a prediction happen. The Lord calls on idols to meet him in court and do the same, if they can. They fail; they cannot speak. The Lord is not pleased simply to prove Gentile people wrong; he will be gracious to them. He will send his Servant who can speak. That Servant, Jesus Christ our Savior, will bring salvation to them. We are the former Gentiles he has delivered.

This passage highlights Gentiles. It opens with God identifying himself as Jacob's King to foreigners. They are urged to bring their idols to meet the Lord in court for a judgment about their authenticity. God gives an example of his power from the Gentile world; he will stir and call a Gentile leader (Cyrus) to do as he has said before he was even born. This is an event which happens outside the territory of the Jews. The work of his Servant will one day reach to the Gentiles in distant lands (42:4). He refers to himself as the One who gave life to the people of the earth (v.5). Jesus is to be a light for the Gentiles (v.6). As a result, Gentiles in all the earth will sing their song of praise to the Lord (vv.10-12).

41:21-23 The God of one nation (Israel) calls on the people of all other nations to bring their gods to meet him in court. Whether their gods are real gods will be settled by a simple test. They have a choice: the idols may explain the past, or foretell the future. Either option involves making statements. The Lord confronts them to do anything, good or bad, but do something! In this way, one can tell if the idols are gods. There is no reply.

41:24 The verdict The idols fail the test. God as Judge tells what he thinks of them. Their silence shows that the gods and their works are worthless. Not only are false gods detestable, but whoever chooses them becomes like them (Jeremiah 2:5; Psalm 115:8).

41:25-29 In 41:1-4 the people of the world were invited to answer the question: who did what the Lord predicted? They give no answer but turned back to their gods (41:5-7). After the challenge to their gods in vv.21-23 – and again with no reply – the God of Israel made a prediction, given in writing years earlier through his prophet Isaiah. The prediction is a repetition of 41:1-4. The man referred to in it is not yet named; the emphasis is still on who is able to declare the future. He (Cyrus, who is not named till 44:28) would come from the east and the north. Persia is east of Israel, but with a desert between, invaders from that direction approached Israel from the north. He would call on the Name of the Lord, not as a worshipper but by his action (Ezra 1:1-4). He would subdue (v.2) rulers easily. Like soft mortar, they were unable to resist him.

The Lord's question is not "Who is this unknown man?" but "Who told you about him?" The verdict would be that whoever revealed this answer would be declared right. No idols had any answer.

The sequence is important. God planned what he would do, told what he would do, and aroused Cyrus to do it. The prediction was long before the event; v.26 says *beforehand*. No idol said anything about this. Only the true God can foretell, so only the God of Israel is true. There was no revelation from idols; the Gentiles live in darkness (42:7) because they have no word from the Lord. No spokesman from the idols can give true counsel; no one answered the challenge of the God of Israel. They (both idols and those who worship them) are false.

The idolater, snared in a fraudulent religion, has a god he made, one he can see, but one that cannot speak. We have a God we did not make, one we are not yet allowed to see, but a God who has spoken through his prophets, his apostles, and especially his Son (Hebrews 1:1).

God had given “a messenger of good tidings” (v.27). Possibly that messenger was Isaiah who would write the words “comfort my people” (40:1). Through God’s prophet Isaiah, God tells of the man who would one day announce that Jerusalem would be rebuilt. Her hard service was completed (40:2). The Jews could go home (44:26, 28). The messenger in v.27 is not identified, just as in 40:3-11 when there were three voices speaking for the Lord. The main point is that God had told beforehand what he would do and the idols said nothing.

Was there more than one Isaiah? In modern times many scholars have asserted that the Isaiah who wrote the early part of this book is not the same one who wrote these words in chapter 40 and following. They do not believe Isaiah could know such detail as the name of Cyrus and his decision to allow the Jews to go home to rebuild their city and temple. So they argue that it must have been a man who knew another way what Cyrus would do and added this material to the Book of Isaiah. That spin on this prophecy reveals that those “scholars” do not really believe in the God who can make a detailed prediction beforehand and then carry it out. If a later man living in Babylon did write these words, he would be a fraud, and the Bible would be a book of deception. It is horrible to teach that a man knew of Cyrus’ decision after the fact, and then wrote in God’s Name pretending God had predicted all this well in advance, when he knew this to be false. (See 42:9) This idea of a second Isaiah is even worse, because Isaiah makes a special point of saying that one can know who the true God is by this example of God revealing what he would do long before it happened. This illustrates the kind of unbelief some teachers have toward the Bible. By means of prediction, God shows Himself to be God, but these teachers deny that it is real prediction. In this way men contradict God!

The Servant Song 42:1-9

Isaiah has four Servant Songs: 1) 42:1-9; 2) 49:1-7; 3) 50:4-11; and 4) 52:13 -- 53:12. This Servant is the Lord Jesus Christ, (Matthew 12:15-21). In vv.1-4 God the Father speaks of the Lord Jesus, and in vv. 5-9 speaks to him of the mission assigned to Him, a mission to bring God’s truth to the entire world, a task he will succeed in fulfilling.

Some Bible versions do not translate all the words Isaiah uses. Often he uses a word that may be translated as ‘See’ or ‘Look’. It is a marker to show emphasis. This Hebrew word appears at the beginning of 41:24,29 and 42:1. Thus we have a See! You idols are less than nothing! (41:24), and See! They are false (41:29), followed by See! (42:1) which means: now have a good look at My Servant! There is a great contrast here. The idols say nothing, but the Lord sends his messenger who will speak.

42:1-4 The delight the Lord has in Christ is related to his character and accomplishments. As a servant, he is obedient to the Father who commissioned him. He is supported by the Holy Spirit. All true prophets had the Spirit, but Christ had the Spirit without limitation (John 3:31-35). As God’s chosen, he did not appoint himself to his task (Hebrews 5:1-5). His voice is not that of a loud revolutionary; his tone matches the tenderness of his dealing with the weak. In 40:2, God ordered his spokesmen to speak tenderly, and Christ will do the same. A smoldering wick has already lost its flame; even the smoke is almost gone. A reed is easily bent at the place of a bruise. Christ will minister to weak and helpless people graciously. It is hard to imagine the One from whom the earth will flee in fear (2:19-21) speaking to the weak without intimidation. He is the One who hates crushing the poor (3:13-15). The servant would become a man and experience human weakness (2Corinthians 13:4; Hebrews 5:7), yet he would be upheld by the Lord to do a difficult task in which he is not discouraged and goes on to complete it. (He will finish it! John 19:30)

The text repeats this theme: he will bring justice; in faithfulness he will bring forth justice; and he will establish justice in all the earth. Justice is the principle of the Lord’s dealings with all. He blesses good and curses sin without exception. He is unswerving in his justice. However, it is not just the principle that this text has in view. Justice is often the righting of wrong, but that meaning does not exactly fit here. The court challenge of 41:21-29 produces a decision. The decision of the court is the justice of Isaiah 42, so that

decision must be announced to the world. The “justice” is the court decision that the Lord God of Israel is the true God, and that all the idols are false. It is the task of the Servant to carry this verdict of one true God to the world, a message essential to salvation.

Christ as our Prophet, Priest, and King There is no salvation without the human heart being conquered by one greater than the sinner, and set free from the power of the devil. Jesus the Savior is a Warrior King who rescues us. Just as there is no salvation without sin atoned for in an offering that satisfies the justice of God, so the Savior Who offered himself for us is our Priest. Salvation does not happen unless sinners receive the message of forgiveness. This message must be carried to the sinner; so our Savior is a Prophet, and this is the emphasis in the first Servant Song.

42:4 In the law the islands will put their hope. To put one’s hope is to place faith in a message, and when men believe the message, they are saved. This indicates that Christ brings far more than information. To bring salvation, he brings also the needed response to his message. The word “law” here is a broad word that includes guidance. He guides by his word to salvation by instilling faith in himself and his work.

42:5-9 The context is the salvation of the Gentiles. The context has been related to idols, all of which lack speech and truth. The result of false religion is blindness, captivity to error, and darkness (v.7). This is the problem the Servant has been commissioned to change. Nothing can stop him. The same Lord who stretched out the heavens puts that same power to work (v.5). He is the Maker of all men; all receive their breath from him; now he will act in similar power to save them through the ministry of Christ. Jesus will bring light, sight, and freedom.

As in v.1, the chosen One is called to this service. God had a plan in mind. When it is executed, the word “righteousness” is frequently used to describe God’s activity. His activity, whether in salvation or retribution, is his righteousness on display. He was righteous in calling Cyrus (41:2) simply because it was what God was doing. He is righteous in calling Christ.

The “I” statements – I will take hold; I will keep; I will make – all reveal the involvement of the Father in the work of the Servant. The Father was in Christ bringing reconciliation of himself to the world (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

42:6 **God will make Christ to be a covenant for the people.** The promise to Abraham was that in his seed (Christ) all the nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:16). Through Christ, blessings covenanted to Abraham will come to Gentiles. Nations will experience grace (Isaiah 55:3-5). In Father Adam, who represented all his children, all die from the curse on him and his (1 Corinthians 15:22). Christ, whose obedience is blessed, represented his children as their Father (9:6); in him all will live. Adam disobeyed for us and in his act we sinned and are condemned, so all men die. Christ obeyed for us, and in him we obeyed. His obedience brought justification and life (Romans 5:12-19).

42:8 The Lord speaks of himself with his name “LORD”, a name no other has. He identifies himself by it and declares that he will not allow competitors to share his glory. Idols cannot speak; they are not gods, and they shall not have the glory due to God alone. God is glorified when his works are recognized. He is glorified, as well, by the confusion false religion brings to those trapped in it. It shows that those claiming his position are unworthy of it. God is the determined defender of his glory.

In the ministry of Isaiah, a number of things earlier in the book had been declared and fulfilled: the quick fall of Israel and Aram (7:7-9); the judgment of God on Judah by means of the Assyrians (7:17); the frustrating reliance on Egypt (30:1-14); the salvation of Jerusalem by judgment on the Assyrians (30:27-33). These are former things! Worthless idols were unable to declare any of them (41:22). God then declares what he would do next. It is his great glory that he can do so. He announced these “new things” through in the prophetic ministry of Isaiah, his prophet. The “new things” only happened after Isaiah had been dead for over a century.

42:10-12 The mission of the servant was to the world. Jesus was taken as an infant to Egypt. As an adult he entered the Roman region of Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13). Apart from that brief record, he was only in the land of Jews. Through servants commissioned (John 20:21) to share his work as a “fellow worker” (2 Corinthians 6:1), he fulfills his commission and is presently active with those who carry his gospel to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20). I believe the Great Commission is first a task assigned to Christ by the Father and then shared by the Lord Jesus with his church. Spreading the gospel is a form of fellowship we have with the Lord.

In Isaiah 42 we have in advance the encouragement of future praise to the Lord for saving the nations. In Isaiah 2 we had a foretaste; here in 42:1-7 we have the means. What makes it all happen is the successful work of Christ, the Lord’s Servant. The scope of his work is given by stating extremities: those who go down to the sea, and those who do the opposite by climbing mountains. And further, those near at hand like Kedar and Sela, and those far away in the islands. The worship is presented in terms of praise, singing, raising voices, joy and rejoicing, proclaiming his praise (with the intention of having more involved in it), and giving glory to the Lord. (See 24:14-16.) These are ones who once sat in darkness, (v.7), but were brought the liberating truth of God. God’s delight in his Servant has spread to become the delight that sinners acquire when eyes blinded by idols are opened to see the glory of the true God in the face of Christ, the glory of God (2 Corinthians 4:4-6). The “new song”, a fresh realization of the new activity of God, is connected to the “new things” of v.9.

Kedar was a son of Ishmael (Genesis 25:13). God has not forgotten the Arabs. The Bedouins of the desert who survive ancient judgments will be few (Isaiah 21:17; Jeremiah 49:28-31) but few is not none. In the end, they too join the song of the entire world. Sela is a city of Edom. Isaiah 34 uses Edom to typify God’s judgment on the godless world; yet even Sela, in the mercy of God, shall join the praise.

49:13-17 Another Exodus deliverance is coming. I think this section has reference to the salvation of Gentiles, because: **1)** the context is the effect of Christ’s work on the nations; **2)** it is a deliverance that is a long time in coming (v.14); and **3)** the blind of Israel would be led back to culturally familiar things, such as the worship of the Lord, but the Gentiles would come “on unfamiliar paths” (v.16) to One they had never known. (See 65:1 and Romans 10:19-21)

The setting is the passion of a warrior. A second metaphor is the eagerness of a woman to give birth after carrying her baby a long time. One day after so long, the Messiah would come and bring blind idol-worshipping Gentiles out of darkness. What lies ahead is a combination of destruction and salvation. The false religions will be destroyed and a host of people will be saved. The response is mixed; some are saved; some remain true to their false gods. There is a Gentile “them” in 42:16, to whom the Lord is committed. He promises not to forsake them, though they are still unaware he has determined to save them! The Lord has in his heart elect Gentile sheep too. Jesus said, “I must bring them also!” (John 10:14-16)