

How Firm a Foundation (Isaiah 41)

“If God Were Your Father, You Would Love Me”

It is not uncommon in our post-Christian western culture to encounter assertions that claim that all religions are essentially the same, just different expressions and ways of communing with the one divine being. They all have a holy book, a holy prophet, and a holy standard of living.¹ Christopher Johnson, clinical professor of sociology at Texas State University finds the common thread in the system of reward and punishment present in all world religions.² It is the old parable of the blind men and the elephant:

Six blind men each approach an elephant, touching a different part of its body. One feels the leg and says, “It’s like a tree.” Another grabs the trunk and insists, “No, it’s like a snake.” A third touches the tusk: “It’s sharp, like a spear.” Others describe it as a rope (tail), a fan (ear), or a wall (side). The lesson? Each man is limited in perspective, but all are grasping the same ultimate reality.³

This is a common way of defending the doctrine of religious pluralism, the idea that all religions are simply one person’s or one group’s attempt to explain ultimate reality from within their own limited perspective. But such a claim crumbles beneath the weight of its own absurdity. There are two fundamental problems with the parable, and the “all roads lead to God” doctrine it is intended to illustrate.⁴

First, the parable assumes an omniscient narrator. While the six blind men express their limited perspective, the narrator sees all things clearly. He alone knows that they are not really touching a tree, a snake, a spear, a rope, a fan, or a wall; they are really touching an elephant. While the parable (and the doctrine it attempts to illustrate) purports to be humble and non-

¹ “Non-Christians love to point out the fact that other religions are essentially the same as Christianity, having a holy book, a holy prophet, and a pattern of superior behavior”; Andrew M. Davis, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Isaiah* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 237.

² Jayme Blaschke, “World Religions Share More in Common Than Not, If Only One Looks Closely,” June 17, 2021; <https://news.txst.edu/research-and-innovation/2021/world-religions-share-more-in-common-than-not.html>.

³ Daniel Nealon, “Aren’t All Religions the Same,” July 16, 2025; <https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/aren-t-all-religions-the-same->.

⁴ I am following Nealon’s arguments; Nealon, “Aren’t All Religions the Same.”

dogmatic, it actually smuggles in an exceedingly proud and dogmatic claim—namely, that all religions of the world are mixtures of truth and error, but that I alone (the one making the claim) see the whole picture.

Second, the parable does not accurately illustrate the claims of the various world religions. In the parable, there is no real contradiction between a tree, a snake, a spear, a rope, a fan, or a wall; they are all part of the one larger whole, and so, in one sense, they are all right. But the claim that all religions are essentially different expressions of the same truth “grossly oversimplifies” the actual claims these religions are making. Daniel Nealon writes,

Religions don’t merely differ on minor points or cultural customs; they contradict each other at deep, foundational levels. For example, Christianity confesses one eternal, triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Islam, by contrast, rejects the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus altogether. Hinduism embraces millions of gods. Buddhism doesn’t affirm a personal deity at all. These are not small discrepancies. To say all religions are “basically the same” is like saying capitalism and communism are just two takes on the same economic vision. It’s not respectful—it’s reductive.⁵

It not only reductive; its logically absurd. You cannot claim that both “A” and “not-A”—i.e. that God is a personal deity who is distinct from creation and that God is a non-personal deity that is indistinct from creation—are true in the same way at the same time, and be taken seriously.

Clear-thinking people will acknowledge this. “Okay, it is obvious that Christianity and Hinduism or Buddhism are logically incompatible; they cannot be said to describe the same reality from a limited point of view. But surely this is true of the three so-called ‘Abrahamic faiths’—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These all worship the same God, right?” Again, the answer must be “no,” if by “worship” is meant to truly know, truly honor, and truly love God.⁶ Christianity explicitly denies that either the Jew or the Muslim truly knows, honors, and worships the one true God.

Does either a Jew or a Muslim know the one, true God? Jesus says, No!

⁵ Nealon, “Aren’t All Religions the Same.”

⁶ This apologetic response based upon the words “know, honor, and love” comes from John Piper, “Is the God of the Bible the same as the God of the Q’uran?” The Gospel Coalition, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsfV_Ej_BRY.

Jesus answered [the Jews], “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” (Jn 8:19)

And they will do these things [expel you from the synagogue and put you to death] because they have not known the Father, nor me. (Jn 16:3)

“If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.” (Jn 14:7)

“All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” (Mt 11:27)

You cannot know God the Father, unless you know Jesus the Son. Likewise, you cannot honor (worship) the Father unless you honor (worship) the Son.

“For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.” (Jn 5:22–23)

If you do not worship Jesus as the Son of God, you do not worship God as Father. Similarly, you cannot love the Father unless you love Christ the Son.

Jesus said to them [the Jews], “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.” (Jn 8:42)

So no, it is simply not true that the three Abrahamic faiths are essentially compatible; in fact, they are contradictory. Both Judaism and Islam explicitly deny that Jesus is the divine Son of God and the messianic Son of Man. Both Judaism and Islam explicitly deny that Jesus was crucified as an atoning sacrifice for sinners, and was raised from the dead on the third day. Both Judaism and Islam explicitly deny that salvation is provided through the righteousness of Christ

alone and is procured through faith in Christ alone. And yet, Jesus explicitly made faith in Him the essential condition of justification.

*“Whoever believes in him [the Son] 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.”
(Jn 5:18)*

Religious Jews do not worship (know, honor, love) God, because they do not worship (know, honor, love) Jesus. Muslims do not worship (know, honor, love) God, because they do not worship (know, honor, love) Jesus. And if that is true of religions that share (Judaism) and purport to share (Islam) the same religious history and monotheistic faith as Christianity, how much more is it true of those religions that share neither our history nor our monotheism? Christianity is an exclusive religion, admitting of no religious siblings or cousins. If the claims of Christ are true, all other religious claims are by definition false.

The purpose of Isaiah 41 is to defend the claim that the God of Israel is not one god among many, but is the one true God, to call upon the nations to reckon with that reality, and comfort His people with the knowledge that the one true God is on their side. This chapter may be divided into six sections. Let’s walk through each section, and then conclude by considering whether we reckoned with the reality of God.

I. The Nations Invited (41:1)

First, the LORD invites the nations to appear before Him:

*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. (41:1)*

Several commentators see the tone of v. 1 as more of an invitation to hear a proposal than a summons to stand before God in judgment, and I think that is probably right. There are two main reasons for this. First, God says, “Let the people renew their strength [יחליפו כח],” the exact

phrase used in the previous verse (“but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength [יחליפו כח]” [40:31]), thus providing a verbal link indicating that God is inviting the nations into the same rest which He just promised His people.⁷ Second, the tone and language of v. 1 reminds me of God’s invitation to Israel in Is 1:18–20:

*“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be white as snow;
though they are like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Is 1:18–20)*

In other words, it seems to me that the LORD is inviting the nations (including anyone in this congregation today who is not a follower of Christ) to come and hear His case and judge its merits for yourself (“let *us together* draw near for judgment”).⁸ Let’s begin our exposition, then, by noting the mercy of God, who is under no obligation to extend grace to pagan idolators. Yet He invites them into His presence to hear His case, and offers them the same blessing as His people if they will respond appropriately.

⁷ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1993), 309; Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, NAC 15b (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 127–28; Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 259. Davis and Oswalt view v. 1 as a summons to judgment; Davis, 238; John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 458–59.

⁸ “There is no sign at the beginning of this discussion that God intends to condemn these foreign people; instead, he invites them (a) to recognize himself as the sovereign who controls history (41:2–4) and (b) to renew their strength by trusting in his power (41:1). They need not fear the future if they make the right decision”; Smith, 128. “It is at the heart of Isaiah’s message that the Gentiles are to be fellow-heirs with Israel (19:24–25; 27:13). The Lord, therefore, extends to them, in the envisaged pressures of life, the same renewal that is available to Israel, *i.e.* by coming to him. It cannot, however, be done just like that: there is an issue to be settled, hence the courtroom terminology of approaching, speaking, meeting together, and judgment”; Motyer, 309.

II. The Evidence Presented (41:2–4)

In vv. 2–4, the LORD presents His case for His sovereignty and supremacy.

*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 for 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. (41:2–4)*

The “one” from the east whom victory meets at every step is Cyrus the Persian, whom Isaiah will identify by name in 44:28 and 45:1. The LORD claims responsibility for “giving up nations before” Cyrus “so that he tramples kings underfoot,” and “makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow” (41:2bc). It is by the LORD’s will and strength that Cyrus “pursues them [kings] and passes on safely, by paths his feet have not known” (41:3).

*Who has performed and done this,
calling the generations from the beginning?
I, the LORD, the first,
and with the last; I am he. (41:4)*

The God of Israel is the LORD of destiny, working all things among all nations according to His sovereign decree.

So the LORD claims sovereignty and supremacy over all nations, all kings, all peoples, claiming that all events occur by His sovereign will and omnipotent power. Does anyone see a

hole in the LORD's argument here, a weak link in his chain of reasoning? It is easy to claim responsibility for events that have already happened. For God to claim to be the cause of past historical events is an unfalsifiable—and therefore, unconvincing—claim to sovereignty and supremacy. It is a little more difficult—yet still unconvincing—to make general predications about future events. But that is not what is occurring. The “one from the east,” whom God will stir up and give victory at every step is Cyrus the Persian, and he would not be born for another one hundred years when the LORD revealed this to Isaiah; his conquests would not begin for another fifty years after that. And yet, here in about 700 BC, the LORD revealed to Isaiah,

*Who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd,
and he shall fulfill all my purpose’;
saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’
and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’” (44:28)*

Jerusalem would not be destroyed nor its temple demolished until 586 BC; the decree of Cyrus for the exiles to return to rebuild the city and its temple would not occur until 538 BC.

*Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped,
to subdue nations before him
and to loose the belts of kings,
to open doors before him
that the gates may not be closed... (45:1)*

Isaiah 45:1–13 is all about the conquests of Cyrus the Great, a Persian pagan whom God will move across the stage of history like a marionette.

*For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I name you, though you do not know me.*

*I am the LORD, and there is no other;
besides me there is no God;
I equip you, though you do not know me,
that people may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is none besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness;
I make well-being and create calamity;
I am the LORD, who does all these things. (45:4–7)*

So the argument for God's sovereignty and supremacy, the argument for His uniqueness among all the gods of the nations, is that it is by His will and power that Cyrus the Great will conquer the Middle-East; and the evidence that, when it comes to pass, it occurred by God's will and power, is that God foretold who it was that would do this thing (Cyrus) and what he would do (conquer the Middle-East, and return the exiles to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple) a century and a half before it transpired. And if God raised up Cyrus to accomplish His purpose in 538 BC, does it not stand to reason that God raises up and puts down every other king and kingdom in history? Does it not stand to reason that the God who claims to "work all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11) is telling the truth? Does it not stand to reason, then, that the God of Israel is the one true God, apart from whom there is no other? And what is the reasonable response? It is for the nations to fall on their face in repentance, to receive God's gracious offer of salvation by faith, and to render to Him all praise and honor and worship. And that is precisely how I invite you to respond today.

III. The Invitation Rejected (41:5–7)

But that is not how the nations responded.

*The coastlands have seen and are afraid;
the ends of the earth tremble;
they have drawn near and come.*

*Everyone helps his neighbor
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. (41:5–7)*

Isaiah pulls the rug out from under his readers a bit here. When he begins in v. 5, it seems as though the nations have responded positively to God's invitation. They "have seen and are afraid," they "tremble," they have "drawn near and come" (v. 5). So far, so good. Those are appropriate responses to the revelation of the sovereignty and supremacy of God. But in v. 6, we come to suspect that it is not the LORD that they fear, nor the God of Israel to whom they have drawn near. Rather than turning to the LORD in the face of Cyrus' conquest, they first turn to one another ("everyone helps his neighbor and says to his brother, 'Be strong!'" [v. 6]), then they turn to idols (v. 7). But v. 7 is dripping with irony—they put their trust in idols to deliver them from Cyrus, but first they have to nail them down so that they won't fall over. How irrational—how stupid—it is to reject the invitation from the sovereign Lord of history, who raises up kings and nations and puts them down, who wields Cyrus like a puppet, and instead to put your faith in gods that have to be made of metal and adorned with gold and secured with nails.

We are often tempted to laugh at idolaters. Most of us were raised with a cultural worldview that inherently believes that "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man" (Acts 17:24), and that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one" (1 Cor 8:4). We would never think of taking a block of wood or a stone or a hunk of metal and fashioning it into an image, then bowing before it and offering sacrifices to it. And yet, what purpose is this idol fulfilling in the lives of those who make it in vv. 5–7? It is hoped that it will provide them with security and deliver them from their enemies. Other idols are fashioned in the hope of providing prosperity and fertility. These are the two main functions of idols—they are supposed to deliver me from evil, and provide me with joy. Now, evaluate your own life and ask yourself, "Where do I turn to deliver me from evil and provide me with joy?" And if the answer is anything other than "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," you are an idolater. Most idols in the West are not

made of wood or stone or gold. Probably the most important verse in the Bible on idolatry doesn't have anything to do with the kinds of idols you might find in Hindu or Buddhist temples. In Colossians 3:5, Paul writes,

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you; sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these things the wrath of God is coming. (Col 3:5–6)

Similarly,

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Eph 5:5–6)

Covetousness is idolatry; discontentment is idolatry. Coveting a certain home, a certain car, a certain kitchen, a certain lawn, etc. is idolatry. Coveting a certain look, a certain physique, a certain wardrobe is idolatry. Coveting a certain relationship—a wife, a husband, a child, a friend... is idolatry. And what makes such things idolatrous? Some of the things I just mentioned are legitimate desires—marriage and children and friendship, for example. So what makes a desire idolatrous; what turns a legitimate object into an idol? A thing becomes idolatrous when you turn to it to deliver you from evil, or to provide you with joy. If you say, for instance, “I need to have a spouse in order to be delivered from the evil of loneliness,” you have made that spouse an idol and you are an idolater. If you say, “I need to have this house in order to be content,” you have made that house an idol and you are an idolater. If you say, “I need this phone/this outfit/this book/this experience in order to be content,” you have turned that thing into an idol and you are an idolater. Much of what transpires on Amazon when you are doomscrolling late at night is probably idolatry, because you are not purchasing that item because you need it, but because you want it to deliver you from discontentment and to provide you with joy. If you want to identify idolatry in your life, just follow the trail of your time, your money, and your affection. Louie Giglio writes in a 2011 book,

[E]verybody has an altar. And every altar has a throne. So how do you know where and what you worship? It's easy. You simply follow the trail of your time, your affection, your energy, your money, and your allegiance. At the end of that trail you'll find a throne; and whatever, or whomever is on that throne is what's of highest value to you. On that throne is what you worship. Sure, not too many of us walk around saying, "I worship my stuff. I worship my job. I worship pleasure. I worship her. I worship my body. I worship me." But the trail never lies. We say we value this thing or that thing more than any other, but the volume of our actions speaks louder than our words. In the end, our worship is more about what we do than what we say.⁹

So follow the trail of your time, your money, and your affection, and you will find your idols. Another way to identify your idols is to look for chaos and conflict. Because when your idol is threatened, you will get angry. You will yell, you will curse, you will pout, you will manipulate, you will explode. Outbursts of anger are tell-tale signs of idolatry in the heart.¹⁰

The point of vv. 5–7 is that when confronted with the clear evidence of the LORD's sovereignty and supremacy over the nations and over history, the nations rejected it and turned instead to lifeless idols. Do not make the same mistake.

IV. The Saints Comforted (41:8–20)

In vv. 8–20, the LORD turns his attention to His saints, to His redeemed, to His people, who do not turn to idols to deliver them from evil and to provide them with joy, but rather turn to the LORD their God. And what do they find? They find deliverance from evil (vv. 10–16) and they find the provision of joy (vv. 17–20).

First, however, look at how the LORD describes those who turn to Him and trust Him.

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

⁹ Louie Giglio, *The Air I Breathe: Worship as a Way of Life* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006), 10–11; quoted in Brad Bigney, *Gospel Treason: Betraying the Gospel with Hidden Idols* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2012), 117.

¹⁰ Bigney, 123–30.

*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” (41:8–9)*

God is here speaking of Jacob/Israel/ the offspring of Abraham, not as they are reckoned by ethnicity, but as they are reckoned by election; He is speaking of Jacob/Israel/the offspring of Abraham, not as they are by natural birth, but as they are by new birth. How do I know? For one thing, the move from v. 7 to v. 8 is not merely a move from the nations (Gentiles) to Israel (Jews), but from idolators to the worshipers of God. And not every ethnic Israelite was a worshiper of God in spirit and truth; most, in fact, were not. When we are considering the salvation which God has promised in the Messiah, the Servant of the LORD (and that is the theme of Isaiah 40–66), we must consider Jacob/Israel/the children as it exists under the new covenant in Christ. And the entirety of the New Testament is clear that it is all those and only those who are in Christ by faith who are the true children of Abraham and the true heirs of the promise, regardless of their ethnicity (cf. Romans 9–11, Galatians 3–4). The point is that Isaiah 41 is not divided between Gentiles and Jews, but between idolators and the true worshipers of God. And what is said of those who trust in God alone to deliver them from evil and provide them with joy? Six incredible truths:

- You are chosen of God (“whom I have chosen” [v. 8]; “I have chosen you” [v. 9]). You did not initiate this relationship with God; He did. And it is not based upon your merit; it arises from His mercy. If God is your soul’s deepest comfort and highest joy, then just bask this morning in the knowledge that God chose you, freely and unconditionally, for salvation in Christ.
- You are called of God (“you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners” [v. 9]). You did not go looking for the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd sought and found you. He called you by name, and you heard His voice and followed Him (Jn 10:3, 27).
- You are beloved of God (“Abraham, my friend” [v. 8]—lit. “my beloved” [אהבי]¹¹). And as the covenant was made with Abraham *and his descendants*, and as you are a

¹¹ Smith, 133.

child of Abraham, you have entered into that same friendship with God (Jn 15:13–14). You are loved by God.

- You are a servant of God (“my servant” [vv. 8, 9]). Motyer reminds us not to impute the worst images of chattel slavery into this picture, for “Mosaic legislation extended protection to the slave and—such was the institution—had to make provision for the slave who loved his master and would not leave slavery (Ex. 21:2ff).”¹² And if that was true of earthly masters, what must be the joy and privilege of being called the slave of God?
- You are kept by God (“I have . . . not cast you off”). The Good Shepherd loses none of His sheep (Jn 10:28). Do not fear that God will forget you, abandon you, betray you, cast you off. He will do no such thing. You are precious to Him, and He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it unto the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6).
- You are an heir of God. Finally, you are a child of Abraham, an Israelite, a son of Jacob. You are an heir of the covenant, and to you belongs everlasting life and fellowship with God in Promised Land, the new heaven and new earth.

At the heading of this section, we read these words: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God” (40:1). How’s this for comfort? When you find yourself down this week, or hard-pressed by trials or temptations, remind yourself of whose you are and of the immense privileges that belong to you in covenant with God through Christ.

What, then, is promised to those who turn away from idols and trust in the one true God? He exercises His sovereign supremacy to deliver you from all evil and to provide you with fullness of joy. In other words, the very thing people turn to idols to provide, only to find them worthless and futile, the LORD richly provides for His people. First, we find that God delivers His people from all evil. Look at v. 10:

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.

¹² Motyer, 312.

If you recognize those words, that's because we sang them earlier this morning in the hymn *How Firm a Foundation*:

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word?
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus hath fled?

What is this firm foundation of our faith? What has God said to those who have fled to Jesus for refuge, instead of running to idols? The hymnwriter quotes Isaiah 41:10:

“Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by mine righteous omnipotent hand.”

Test Him in this, and see His word does not prove true. Instead of fleeing to idols for strength and comfort, flee to your God. Instead of looking to idols for joy and pleasure, look to your God. The exiled Israelites felt helpless before the constant ebb and flow of nations and kings. But what did God do for His own? He raised up a pagan king who returned them to their homeland to rebuild their city and their temple. Perhaps you feel helpless before a constant, crushing loneliness. Do not look to the idols of bitterness and self-pity, or the idols of pornography or an immoral relationship. Seek refuge in your God from the evil of loneliness. Perhaps you feel anxious in the face of circumstances you cannot control. Do not look to the idols of overeating or overdrinking or over-entertaining. Look to your God to shelter you from the storm and to strengthen you to withstand the assault. I could keep giving applications, but I think you get the point. Do not look to idols to deliver you from evil; look to your God.

*Behold, all who are incensed against you
shall be put to shame and confounded;*

*those who strive against you
shall be as nothing and shall perish.
You shall seek those who contend with you,
but you shall not find them;
those who war against you
shall be as nothing at all.
For I, the LORD your God,
hold your right hand;
it is I who say to you, "Fear not,
I am the one who helps you." (41:11–13)*

What a tender image: “For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand,” as though we were toddlers crossing a busy street. And, if you think about it, that is not an inaccurate description of what it is like trying to navigate this evil life. On our own, we fare no better than three-year-olds in a Walmart parking lot on Black Friday; but God our Father holds our right hand and guides us safely across. And what is saving faith, then? Saving faith is holding on to His strong hand, and none other. Verses 11 and 12 remind us that we have bitter and vengeful enemies; they probably are not flesh and blood (Eph 6:12). But whether they are rulers, authorities, cosmic powers over this present darkness, spiritual forces in the heavenly places, or those men under their sway, they will not succeed. They “shall be put to shame and confounded”; they “shall be as nothing and shall perish” (v. 11). They shall vanish away, and be as nothing at all (v. 12). “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Mt 6:13) is not an empty prayer.

*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.
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;*

*you shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away,
and the tempest shall scatter them.
And you shall rejoice in the LORD;
in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory. (41:14–16)*

The main idea behind these verses is that the LORD will supply His people who trust in Him with the all-sufficient strength they lack in and of themselves. In ourselves, we are as a worm (v. 14) attempting to harvest mountains of wheat (v. 15). But the LORD, our Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, is our help (v. 14). And how does He help? By turning a worm into a threshing sledge. A threshing sledge was “a heavy wooden platform fitted underneath with sharp stones and pieces of cutting metal which was dragged over the crop to chop the straw in preparation for winnowing.”¹³ This particular threshing sledge is “new, sharp, and fitted with teeth”—in other words, nothing is going to stand in its way (v. 15). Then, when the mountain fields are thoroughly threshed, the people will winnow what remains, and the LORD will send a strong wind to blow away the chaff (v. 16). So not only do we have the image of a strong father holding the hand of his little child as he guides the child through the evils of this world (v. 11–13); we have the image of God turning the worm into a threshing sledge, the child into a mighty warrior, and in this way delivering them from evil (vv. 14–16). The LORD delivers in both ways.

And the result of this deliverance is joyful worship—“And you shall rejoice in the LORD; in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory” (v. 16). This provides a nice bridge to the second work God performs on behalf of those who turn from idols to trust in Him—He provides them with fullness of joy.

*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.
I will open rivers on the bare heights,
and fountains in the midst of the valleys.*

¹³ Motyer, 313.

*I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry land springs of water.
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,
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. (41:17–20)*

People turn to idols not only for deliverance from evil, but to seek fulfillment and pleasure. But the best an idol can provide is a fleeting joy, a momentary pleasure; in the end, it proves hollow and illusory, and ends up leaving you emptier than you were before. What God provides those who trust Him is “fullness of joy, and pleasures forevermore” (Ps 16:11). If you put your poetry hats on, you can interpret the imagery of these verses. The LORD’s people are wasting away of thirst, but can find no water. But they turn to the LORD, and He satisfies them. He opens up streams in the deserts, springs in the wilderness. He causes rich forests to grow in desert lands, providing shade from the scorching heat of the sun.¹⁴ These images are all about pleasure, satisfaction. And there are only two ways to seek it—in God, or in anything else. You were made for pleasure; you were made for God; and you were made to find your deepest and most lasting satisfaction in God. Why, then, would you think that a created thing could provide greater joy than the Creator? Don’t shortchange your soul; glut it in God. Do not be as the Israelites of old, of whom God said,

*Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD,
for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters,*

¹⁴ “Water (18) and shade (19) are the two great needs of the desert-traveller (Ex. 15:27). None of the trees mentioned are fruit trees: the whole point is shelter”; Motyer, 314.

*and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jer 2:12–13)*

Do not seek satisfaction in the broken cisterns of created things; go to the fountain of living waters. To do otherwise is an evil so appalling that it shocks the very heavens above.

V. The Challenge Extended (41:21–24)

In vv. 21–24, the LORD invites the nations who trust in their idols to bring them forth and put them to the test. Can they prophesy of future events, much less bring them to pass? No, they cannot. Why? Because they are no gods; they are nothing.

*Set forth your case, says the LORD;
bring forth your proofs, says the King of Jacob.
Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen.
Tell us the former things, what they are,
that we may consider them,
that we may know their outcome;
or declare to us the things to come.
Tell us what is to come hereafter,
that we may know that you are gods;
do good, or do harm,
that we may be dismayed and terrified.
Behold, you are nothing,
and your work is less than nothing;
an abomination is he who chooses you. (41:21–24)*

Can their idols tell the ancient past? No, for they were not there. Can their idols tell the distant future? No, for they are not there either. None but the LORD is the first and the last (41:4), existing eternally. I love v. 23: “Do good, or do harm... just do something!” But they can’t, because they are nothing; in fact, they are less than nothing. And look at the very last line of v.

24—“an abomination is he who chooses you.” Those who seek deliverance from evil or provision of joy in anything other than God is an abomination to God. Strong words.

VI. The LORD Victorious (41:25–29)

The LORD then proclaims His victory over the idols. The very thing He challenged the idols to do but they could not—prophesy the future and bring it to pass—the LORD has done.

*I stirred up one from the north, and he has come,
from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name;
he shall trample on rulers as on mortar,
as the potter treads the clay.
Who declared it from the beginning,
that we might know,
and beforehand, that we might say,
“He is right?”
There was none who proclaimed it,
none who proclaimed,
none who heard your words.
I was the first to say to Zion, “Behold, here they are!
and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news.
But when I look, there is no one;
among these there is no counselor
who, when I ask, gives an answer.
Behold, they are all a delusion;
their works are nothing;
their metal images are empty wind. (41:25–29)*

The “one from the north” (v. 25) is Cyrus, who also is “from the east” (v. 1). From the perspective of Jerusalem (where this prophecy originated, the nations of the east (Assyria, Babylon, Persia) came from the north, due to the impassible Jordan River that formed Israel’s

eastern boundary.¹⁵ Though it is said that Cyrus “will call upon my name,” this need not be understood in the sense of saving faith; Cyrus was a pagan, and as such, a religious pluralist who was all too happy to pay homage to whatever god would help him.¹⁶ The LORD’s point is that none of the idols of the nations could have done what the LORD did—to predict *by name* a future conqueror from a kingdom not yet in power, to predict *in detail* the works he would perform, and to the bring it to pass *precisely* how He predicted it.

Good News of Great Joy

Look again at v. 27:

*I was the first to say to Zion, “Behold, here they are!
and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news. (41:27)*

Put yourself in the position of Israel whilst in exile in Babylon in 538 BC. As you watch Cyrus the Great conquer the mighty Babylonian empire, you remember the words of Isaiah written down one hundred fifty years earlier. The LORD said this would happen, and it did. But this is not all the LORD spoke. He also spoke of good news, a gospel. And this gospel was not merely that there would arise a king (Cyrus) who would return the exiles to restore Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (44:28). He also spoke of another King, another Servant whom He would raise up, upon whom He would put His Spirit, and through whom He would bring justice to the nations and salvation to His people. This King, this Servant of the LORD, would proclaim an infinitely greater return from exile in the accursed domain of darkness into the kingdom of light (Col 1:13–14); this King, this Servant of the LORD, would build a new Jerusalem and a new temple, not a building of wood and stone, but a church of redeemed sinners whom He would transform into saints. This Servant of the LORD will make His appearance next week in Isaiah 42, but I will give you spoiler today. He is Jesus Christ, and in Him alone is salvation from sin, death, and hell, for He is the one mediator between God and man, the one substitute for sinners, the one atoning sacrifice for sin that can satisfy the righteous wrath of God. Trust in Him.

¹⁵ See Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, Volume 3, Chapters 40–66 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 101.

¹⁶ See Motyer, 317; Smith, on the other hand, sees this as an insurmountable problem and evidence that Is 41:25 does not refer to Cyrus; Smith, 148.