

The Millennium Forecast

The Book of Isaiah

Text

Isaiah 41:1-29

Topic

Our Almighty God issues a challenge to the gods behind the idols of the nations

Title

“Against All gods”

It’s called ledge-dangling.

A staple in any action or adventure movie is the hero grabbing someone’s hand after they’ve fallen over a cliff or a railing, pulling them up to safety. The ledge-dangler commonly holds on by the fingertips of one hand.

Sam did it in *The Return of the King* as four-fingered Frodo gripped a ledge over the molten river inside Mount Doom.

BTW: Have you noticed that the ledge-dangler is always in the perfect spot for the hero to reach-out to them?

The majority of people do not have the strength to save a ledge-dangler with one arm. And unlike the movies, *you only have a max of 60 seconds to do it*. That was the finding of MythBusters. At or before the minute mark the dangler cannot hold on any longer and slips off.

The LORD is the strong-armed rescuer of Israel.

In our text the LORD told Israel, "I will uphold you with My righteous right hand." He reaches down to save them again and again.

Gentiles, too, need rescuing before. The LORD reaches-out to us with His powerful arm & hand. Tragically we sometimes prefer idols to God.

I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 Your Idol Can't Do Anything But Harm You**, and **#2 Your Lord Can Do Everything To Help You**.

#1 - Your Idol Can't Do Anything But Harm You (v1-7 & 8-20)

You'll get the most out of these verses by admitting you have an *idol* or *idols* in your life:

- The apostle Paul described the Gentile converts in Thessalonica as "turning to God *from* idols" (First Thessalonians 1:9).
- The apostle John wrote, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (First John 5:21).

Turn from idols and then keep them in the rearview mirror.

Curiously, There is no single, agreed upon definition of an idol among Christians.

We commonly say, "Anything can become an idol." That is a cop-out and unhelpful. Among the better definitions I came across were these:

1. "Idolatry as is an attack on God's exclusive rights to our love, trust and obedience."
2. "An idol is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, and anything that you seek to give you what only God can give."
3. "An idol is anything that replaces the one, true God."
4. "Idolatry is having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in the Word."

Martin Luther's definition was, "*Whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God; trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol.*"

If any of those speak to your heart, go with it. I don't get them. I like this simple definition: "Idolatry refers to worshiping idols, images, or other 'God-substitutes.'"

Let's jump into the chapter and see *God v. gods*.

Isa 41:1 "Keep silence before Me, O coastlands, And let the people renew *their* strength! Let them come near, then let them speak; Let us come near together for judgment.

The LORD addressed all Gentile nations. He invited them to come and plead their case as to whether their idols were superior to Him.

As I read verses 2 & 3, try to guess the historical figure.

Isa 41:2 "Who raised up one from the east? Who in righteousness called him to His feet? Who gave the nations before him, And made *him* rule over kings? Who gave *them* as the dust to his sword, As driven stubble to his bow?

Isa 41:3 Who pursued them, *and* passed safely By the way *that* he had not gone with his feet?

This is King Cyrus of Medo-Persia, known to historians as Cyrus the Great. He will be mentioned by name a little later on (44:28 & 45:1).

Why introduce him now? Here is why:

Isa 41:4 Who has performed and done *it*, Calling the generations from the beginning? 'I, the LORD, am the first; And with the last I *am* He.' "

"Calling the generations from the beginning" is a way of describing prophecy. Cyrus wasn't even born yet the LORD called him by name and described his career.

It is said that Nostradamus predicted the rise of Adolph Hitler. It's because he uses a similar word, "Hister." Turns out Hister in Latin is the Danube River.

- You have Nostradamus saying, "Babel, babel, babel, Danube, blah, blah, blah."
- You have the LORD introducing "Cyrus" *nearly 200 years in advance*.

100% accuracy in detailed prophecy sets the LORD apart from other gods and all idols.

I say "other gods" (with a lower-case 'g') because physical idols were understood by Jews & Gentiles alike to be representations of literal supernatural entities. Recall what the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians. They were attending feasts in the pagan temples because they were the best steak houses in the Empire. Trouble was, the feasts involved idol worship and the perversions that accompanied it. Paul said, "the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to **demons** and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with **demons**" (First Corinthians 10:22). Real evil was behind the idols.

The Second Commandment assumes there are lesser gods: "Thou shalt have no other **gods** before me" (Exodus 20:3).

We hesitate to say it, but *there are other gods*. They are lesser, evil supernatural beings who inhabit the unseen realm.

Isa 41:5 The coastlands saw *it* and feared, The ends of the earth were afraid; They drew near and came.

"Coastlands" is - are you ready? - a *synecdoche*. It is a figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole. God was challenging all Gentile nations.

Isa 41:6 Everyone helped his neighbor, And said to his brother, "Be of good courage!"

Rather than turn to the LORD in repentance, the nations form alliances in order to resist him.

Isa 41:7 So the craftsman encouraged the goldsmith; He who smooths *with* the hammer *inspired* him who strikes the anvil, Saying, "It *is* ready for the soldering"; Then he fastened it with pegs, *That* it might not totter.

Their strategy was to have the master craftsmen from each nation cooperate in making the best idols possible from the most precious minerals and materials. Not even Cyrus could match their gods-squad (or so they thought).

Drop down to verse twenty-one.

Isa 41:21 "Present your case," says the LORD. "Bring forth your strong *reasons*," says the King of Jacob.

Isa 41:22 "Let them bring forth and show us what will happen; Let them show the former things, what they *were*, That we may consider them, And know the latter end of them; Or declare to us things to come.

Isa 41:23 Show the things that are to come hereafter, That we may know that you *are* gods; Yes, do good or do evil, That we may be dismayed and see *it* together.

The LORD challenged the devotees of the idols to accurately predict the future, or do *something* to show their superiority.

The LORD loves these challenges. Elijah immediately comes to mind. He took on 450 prophets of the god Baal in a survivor fire challenge. They couldn't get fire, but the LORD did, and then Elijah killed them.

Isa 41:24 Indeed you *are* nothing, And your work *is* nothing; *He who* chooses you *is* an abomination.

Harry Houdini used to go around exposing psychic fraud. God exposed the gods as defrauding their worshippers. It was abominable to the LORD that they would choose them over Him. They were no help to them, while He was ready to bless them for believing.

Isa 41:25 "I have raised up one from the north, And he shall come; From the rising of the sun he shall call on My name; And he shall come against princes as *though* mortar, As the potter treads clay.

Wait; didn't God say that Cyrus would come from the east in verse two? He did. And doesn't the sun rise in the east? It does. How, then, does the north fit?

Cyrus was Persian but conquered Media - hence Medo-Persia. Persia was east, Media was to the north. Thus Cyrus was from the east *and* the north. Pretty detailed, n'est-ce pas?

Isa 41:26 Who has declared from the beginning, that we may know? And former times, that we may say, '*He is righteous*'? Surely *there is* no one who shows, Surely *there is* no one who declares, Surely *there is* no one who hears your words.

Isa 41:27 The first time *I said* to Zion, 'Look, there they are!' And I will give to Jerusalem one who brings good tidings.

Isa 41:28 For I looked, and *there was* no man; I looked among them, but *there was* no counselor, Who, when I asked of them, could answer a word.

Isa 41:29 Indeed they *are* all worthless; Their works *are* nothing; Their molded images *are* wind and confusion.

The word "righteous" in this usage means He is 100% "right" in His prophecies. It was a simple choice: God or gods? Do people still say, "No brainer?"

Idolatry refers to worshiping idols, images, or other God-substitutes. We should not assume that the literal worship of idols & images no longer exists. Roughly ½ of the world's population, over 4B people, bow down to physical idols & images and the demons behind them.

God-substitutes are our struggles. Lists include things like wealth, pleasure, power, and honor.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "A person will worship something, have no doubt. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming."

#2 - Your Lord Can Do Everything To Help You (v8-20)

Back to verse eight for insight about the LORD's love for His servants.

Isa 41:8 'But you, Israel, *are* My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, The descendants of Abraham My friend.

I know that I sound like a broken record, but it is always important to point out that God will *never* cast away the nation of Israel. These verses were addressed to ethnic Jews, the descendants of Abraham through Jacob, patriarch of the twelve tribes.

Author Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary in Lisle, Ill., **does not view the re-establishment of the modern state of Israel as related to biblical prophecy.**

Earlier this year, McKnight and co-author Cody Matchett released *Revelation for the Rest of Us*, in which they contend the Bible's final book is about Christian discipleship for the church, then and today.

Isa 41:9 *You* whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And called from its farthest regions, And said to you, 'You *are* My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away:

I submit that this describes the Last Days regathering of Israel from being scattered to "the ends of the earth," to "the farthest regions." He will never "cast [them] away." No one can supersede or replace ethnic Israel. Their gifts and calling as God's "servant" cannot be revoked. God will never forsake them, even in their backslidden unbelief.

Isa 41:10 Fear not, for I *am* with you; Be not dismayed, for I *am* your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.'

Next to verse ten write *God Wanna' Hold Your Hand*.

I miss holding hands with the kids when they were little. Mostly it was a simple, loving gesture. But in parking lots (or WalMart) you hold their hands a lot tighter, right? You have superior strength to protect them.

When called to serve or to suffer, if we take stock of our own strength, we should always find it to be less than we thought, and less than we need. God forbid we would say to Jesus, "I got this!"

An anonymous commentator wrote,

Do we not remember seasons of labor and trial in which we received such special strength that we wondered at ourselves? In the midst of danger, we were calm; under bereavement, we were resigned; in slander, we were self-contained; and in sickness, we were patient. The fact is that God gives unexpected strength when unusual trials come upon us. We rise out of our feeble selves. My own weakness makes me shrink, but God's promise makes me brave. Lord, strengthen me "according to Thy Word."

Isa 41:11 "Behold, all those who were incensed against you Shall be ashamed and disgraced; They shall be as nothing, And those who strive with you shall perish.

Isa 41:12 You shall seek them and not find them - Those who contended with you. Those who war against you Shall be as nothing, As a nonexistent thing.

Despite the unprecedented hatred of the Jews, Israel will always prevail. It doesn't mean they would not be conquered or taken captive. It meant they would endure to the end. Take a look back at Israel's modern history and you see this prophecy fulfilled in the wars she has fought since 1948.

Isa 41:13 For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.'

Isa 41:14 "Fear not, you worm Jacob, You men of Israel! I will help you," says the LORD And your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

Isa 41:15 "Behold, I will make you into a new threshing sledge with sharp teeth; You shall thresh the mountains and beat *them* small, And make the hills like chaff.

Isa 41:16 You shall winnow them, the wind shall carry them away, And the whirlwind shall scatter them; You shall rejoice in the LORD, *And* glory in the Holy One of Israel."

"Worms" isn't derogatory. Boring into soil, worms help with crop health. What we have here, then, is an agricultural metaphor. Worms & threshers, of course, do different things. The point is this: Our strength is like bringing worms to an ag field, whereas the Lord can provide power on a scale way beyond what is natural.

Isa 41:17 "The poor and needy seek water, but *there is* none, Their tongues fail for thirst. I, the LORD, will hear them; *I*, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.

Isa 41:18 I will open rivers in desolate 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.

Isa 41:19 I will plant in the wilderness the cedar and the acacia tree, The myrtle and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the cypress tree *and* the pine And the box tree together,

Isa 41:20 That they may see and know, And consider and understand together, That the hand of the LORD has done this, And the Holy One of Israel has created it.

These are miracles of preservation. Isaiah was again shown the future. The last 3½ years of the seven years of tribulation will feature the antichrist going all-out to murder every Jew on the planet. God's "hand" will rescue them. As Jews flee from haters, God will miraculously provide the two things you need most in a desert: water & shade.

Do you fall a lot? I'm prone to falling. It's just one of the many fun side effects of Parkinson's. One or two times, as I was going down, I've yelled out, "***I'm coming, Elizabeth!***" (Because who doesn't think of Fred Sanford at a time like that?).

I've avoided a full-scale fall a few times because there was something I could grab hold of

You see the lesson, right? If my hand is in the Lord's hand, He won't let me fall.

As Sam reached for Frodo, he said, "Give me your hand. Take my hand. Don't you let go. Don't let go... Reach."

Does Jesus reach-out to you... Or do you reach-out to Him?

Yes; He does & You do.

Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. He said to him, " 'Stretch out your hand,' and he stretched it out" (Mark 3:5). Jesus told the man to do what was not possible and he did it. So, yes: Jesus reaches out to us & we reach out to Him.