

## Lesson 22 Isaiah 41:1-20 Three Pictures of Consolation

### Introduction

The comforting of Zion continues from chapter 40 into chapter 41. It is not easy to say for sure what Isaiah's structure is here. I am using Motyer's structure, which seems to me as valid as any. It's a helpful organizational tool. The theme of consolation helps to organize God's words to Israel and then God's words to the nations.

Whatever structure we use, we will be able to agree on some of the major themes. Isaiah typically establishes themes and then develops those themes by coming back to them repeatedly. Here are three themes that are initiated here and are regularly encountered as we go through the Book of the Servant.

Theme number 1: God is unique. He is incomparable. That was the main theme of our previous lesson. We will regularly come back to the uniqueness of God's being and character. Isaiah develops this theme both by describing the unique character of God and also by denigrating the idol gods of the nations. God is unique.

Theme number 2: God saves His people. God can send His messengers to comfort Israel because God intends to step into history and rescue His people Israel. Isaiah will develop two ideas of rescue: rescue from exile and rescue from sin. God cares about the physical state of His people. He cares for those suffering injustice and oppression. God also cares about the eternal spiritual needs of His people. God saves.

Theme number 3: God works through His servant. The servant theme is applied first to Israel. We will see that in this lesson. Who is the servant? The servant is Israel. God's servant Israel is shown to be weak, powerless, and often disobedient. We need a righteous servant who will act on God's behalf in history. Who will that servant be? Will it be Cyrus, the king of Persia who releases Israel from exile? Yes. Cyrus will be called "God's righteous servant." Is that the end of it? No. Because deliverance from exile is not the greatest need of God's people. Unsurprisingly, we will follow the servant theme through the Book of the Servant.

To our present passage: Motyer's structure is not Gospel, but it is helpful. The consolation of the world is divided into the consolation of Israel and the consolation of the Gentiles. We are in the first half, the consolation of Israel, covered in 40:1-41:20. Motyer sees a nice four-part balance. The first passage, "Comfort O comfort my people," included three voices of consolation. The last passage will contain three pictures of consolation. In-between the three voices and three pictures, we have two passages that emphasize the incomparable God of Israel. He is incomparable as the Creator, and He is incomparable as the world ruler.

We have studied the first two passages in our last two lessons: the three voices of consolation and then the incomparable creator God. In this lesson we will consider both of the two remaining passages: incomparable God as world ruler and three pictures of consolation. These two passages are covered by just 20 verses, Isaiah 41:1-20. We start with God, the incomparable world ruler, in Isaiah 41:1-7.

### The Incomparable God of Israel: World Ruler (41:1-7)

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| <sup>1</sup> "Coastlands, listen to Me in silence,<br>Let them come forward, then let them speak;                               | And let the peoples gain new strength;<br>Let us come together for judgment.                                |
| <sup>2</sup> "Who has aroused one from the east<br>He delivers up nations before him<br>He makes them like dust with his sword, | Whom He calls in righteousness to His feet?<br>And subdues kings.<br>As the wind-driven chaff with his bow. |
| <sup>3</sup> "He pursues them, passing on in safety,  | By a way he had not been traversing with his<br>feet.   |
| <sup>4</sup> "Who has performed and accomplished it,<br>'I, the LORD, am the first,   | Calling forth the generations from the beginning?<br>and with the last I am He.' "                          |



in the land of Ur, he traveled west with his father up the Euphrates to Haran and then descended from the north. The reference to righteousness and the direct reference to Abraham later in verse 8 are the probable motivations for this interpretation. But the language of these verses is the language of a conqueror. Abraham was never depicted as one who comes and conquers.

We could interpret this reference to “one aroused from the east” in a general sense, allowing the ambiguity to stand. A succession of conquerors had arisen in Mesopotamia and would continue to rise up in Mesopotamia; Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians.

The question we are supposed to consider is who aroused the conqueror? Who is calling the shots behind this unstoppable power that comes from the east? Who really rules the world? Isaiah’s point may be that all rulers, whether acting in submission to God or in submission to their own interests, all conquering rulers ultimately serve God’s righteous plan. Right now in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin believes he acts out of the determination of his own will. But his action, even though evil, causing the deaths of thousands of Ukrainians and even thousands of his own soldiers, that action ultimately serves the sovereign plan of God in history. That could be the point here. It is definitely one of the points made in the Bible. It is made in the book of Habakkuk, where the prophet is shocked that God would punish unrighteous Judah through the even more wicked, conquering army of Babylon. That’s this idea of God ruling even through wicked leaders.

That may be the message here. But I do not think this “one aroused from the east” is intended as an ambiguous example of all human rulers. He is ambiguous here, but I think he is revealed later in Isaiah. At this point in Isaiah, we do not know who he is. I think the intent is that later, when we encounter Cyrus, the king of Persia, God’s servant, at that point we think, “Oh, that’s who Isaiah was talking about back in chapter 41.”

I think this is forecasting for us a figure that is going to fit this description. And Cyrus does fit the passage well. He came from Persia. That is not only east of Israel, that is east of Babylon. He was a great man of history that was raised up and everybody fell before Cyrus’ Persian army. The case of Cyrus acting as a servant to accomplish God’s plan to free exiled Israel serves as a specific example of the general principle that fits all human kings. Kings fulfill God’s sovereign plan, whether they intend to or not. The call to this king “in righteousness to God’s feet” may suggest that in this case Cyrus is seen as acting in right submission to the will of God. We do not have to go so far as saying that Cyrus believed in God as the one and only God. He could have believed in God as one of many, as the true God of Israel, not the true God of everywhere. And in that belief, he could have shown respect to God. We’ll have to wait in see how Isaiah describes Cyrus when we get there later.

The rest of verses 2 and 3 describe him as a victorious conqueror. He is unstoppable!

He delivers up nations before him	And subdues kings.
He makes them like dust with his sword,	As the wind-driven chaff with his bow.
<sup>3</sup> “He pursues them, passing on in safety,	By a way he had not been traversing with his feet.

He makes his own roads as he goes. Verse 4 comes back and asks again, “Who is ultimately responsible for the victory of this king?”

<sup>4</sup> “Who has performed and accomplished it, ‘I, the LORD, am the first,	Calling forth the generations from the beginning? and with the last I am He.’ ”
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The first verset asks the question, “Who has performed and accomplished it?” We are supposed to wonder, “Who really is behind the victorious conquest of this leader? Who controlled the circumstances that caused this particular man to come to power at this particular time? Who motivated him to attack? Who empowered him to succeed? Was it all luck and human ingenuity? Who has really performed and accomplished this great feat? Does Cyrus get all the credit?”

With this first verset in verse 4 we are thinking about who has accomplished the victory of an eastern conqueror that has been described in verses 1-3, but then the second verset of verse 4 takes us from

the action of this one king back to the very beginning of humanity. Its not, "Who has accomplished this conquest?" as we have been lead to suppose. The question shifts to, "Who has called forth generations from the beginning?" God! God has called forth the generations from the beginning.

That answer to the question "Who?" is made very clear in the second line of verse 4. "I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last I am He." A lot of truth is packed into those two versets and we will spend a bit of time on this. We need to analyze it. We will encounter similar statements in chapters 43, 46, and 48 (43:10–13, 25; 46:4; 48:12). This is all speaking to the uniqueness of God. You know, one of our major themes. "I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last I am He."

Yahweh brought forth the generations, and yet, Yahweh Himself has no generation. Unlike most pagan gods, He does not trace His origin back to yet another god. "I, the LORD, am the first." The English Lord in this verse is the Hebrew name, "Yahweh." "I, YAHWEH, am the first."

Isaiah does not then write, "and the last." He writes, "and with the last." That's interesting! The Lord God Yahweh was alone at the first. But He has called forth the generations in order that human beings might enjoy relationship with Him. And in the last He is with us. Or maybe it is better to think about us being with Him.

Isaiah did not end there. "I, YAHWEH, am the first, and with the last I am He." "I am He" here at the end of the second verset points back to the name, "Yahweh," at the beginning of the first verset. The verse is chiastic. Listen to the balance, "I, YAHWEH, am the first, and with the last I am He." Each verset has two phrases. The middle two phrases are, "am the first," and, "with the last." They are connected by the words, "first and last." The beginning phrase, "I, Yahweh," parallels the ending phrase, "I am he." Explanation of the name, "Yahweh," was given to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. Moses asked, "With what name should I identify you, God, when I go to the people?" God responded, "I am who I am. Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'" And that's the basic idea communicated in the name Yahweh. The name does not carry any tense in Hebrew, so it can be translated, "I was who I was," "I am who I am," "I will be who I will be." The timelessness fits the nature of God. He was, He is, He will be. In our language the present tense matches that timelessness best, just saying, "I am who I am." When we know the meaning of Yahweh, the parallelism of the verset stands out. "I Yahweh," the first phrase of the first verset parallels, "I am he," the last phrase of the last verset.

It is wonderfully well balanced, and yet it is even communicating different things. The first verset communicates the independence of Yahweh as the One who is without origin. "I Am" is first. And He is alone as the One who is first. The last phrase communicates the independence of God as One who is self-existent. "I am He." The LORD depends on no other. He simply is, "I am." He is first, He is self-existent, He is independent of all others, and He is with us. He is both transcendent and immanent. That means he is so far out of our league – transcendent - and yet, He is able to be right here with us - immanent. There really is an amazing amount of truth packed here into a very small amount of space.

Before moving on, I am wondering with this verse: does it remind you of something else? "I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last I am He." Does that bring to mind any other Scripture outside of Isaiah? What does it bring to mind? John uses this language repeatedly in both Revelation and in his Gospel. In Revelation 1:17 John writes, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last (Revelation 1:17)." And in fact, John has three ways of saying the same thing. They all show up in 22:13, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." That's pretty emphatic, it's three-part repetition. It's like, "holy, holy, holy." And maybe it is also supposed to be trinitarian, pointing to the Father, who is first and last; the Son, who is first and last, and the Holy Spirit, who is first and last.

But Revelation is the not first book that came to my mind when I read this. The first book I thought of was the Gospel of John. And that is John's primary way of announcing Jesus' self-witness to His own divinity. Seven times Jesus says, "I am," in the book of John. Actually, it's 14 times: it's seven times



saved by gods of their own making. Yahweh is rejected. And the peoples do what they always do, “Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.” Rejection of true worship of God always involves a turning to something else, a turning to idols, whether those idols are physical or are the less easily identifiable idols of our hearts. Sad, sad.

God is incomparable. He is first. He is last. He is “I am.” He reigns sovereign over human events. He is the true world leader. And to the last, He is with those who respond to His invitation to come near.

The nations fear but cannot experience consolation. Comfort requires knowing who God is and submitting to the truth of who God is. God gives strength to those who wait. He gives strength to those who listen in believing silence. He is the transcendent Creator of all things and the immanent ruler, who guides human affairs and concerns Himself with the well-being of His people.

### Three Pictures of Consolation (41:8-20)

As we began with three voices of comfort, we conclude with three pictures of comfort. The text is Isaiah 41:8-20. I will address the three images one by one: Israel the servant, Israel the worm, and Israel the afflicted. First, Israel the servant, verses 8-13.

*Israel the Servant (8-13)*

8	“But you, Israel, My servant, Descendant of Abraham My friend,	Jacob whom I have chosen, And called from its remotest parts
9	You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And said to you, ‘You are My servant,	I have chosen you and not rejected you.
10	‘Do not fear, for I am with you;  I will strengthen you, surely I will help you,	Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’
11	“Behold, they will be shamed and dishonored; They will be as nothing and will perish,	all those who are angered at you those who contend with you.
12	“You will seek but will not find them, They will be as nothing and non-existent,	those who quarrel with you, those who war with you.
13	“For I am the LORD your God, Who says to you, ‘Do not fear,	who upholds your right hand, I will help you.’

Isaiah shifts from the nations who rejected God and turns his attention onto Israel, who were chosen long ago.

8	“But you, Israel, My servant, Descendant of Abraham My friend,	Jacob whom I have chosen, And called from its remotest parts
9	You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And said to you, ‘You are My servant,	I have chosen you and not rejected you.

The Covenant still stands. God views Israel as His servant. The translation, “servant,” softens the word for us. It is the word for Hebrew word for, “slave.” “But you, Israel, My slave.” Still, the word, “servant,” is the better choice, because the Hebrew concept of slave included a range of situations or uses. A foreign slave could be set to work in fields or mines and might be treated harshly if he had a cruel master. A Jew might serve as a slave to other Jews in the sense of an indentured servant. It was a way to pay off debt without going to prison. If the work was agreeable to the slave or if he fell in love with a fellow slave and had children, he might choose to remain with that master. In such a case he would probably be more of a servant than slave.

It was not unusual for free men or nobles to refer to themselves as a “slave” or, really, as a “servant” of a king. In the first part of Isaiah, the Book of the King, God refers to the court official Eliakim as

“my servant” (22:20). The court officials who speak to Isaiah are called, “servants of Hezekiah” (37:5). The Rabshakeh is called, “a servant of the king of Assyria” (37:6). In these cases, a servant is one who sees himself at the service of someone in a higher position. The way we hear the word “slave” does not quite capture the idea so well as one who freely submits to the authority of someone in a higher position. God is not addressing Israel as a slave in the meanest sense of the word. He is addressing Israel as a slave in a positive relational sense. As a son willingly serves his father, so Israel is to willingly serve her true Lord.

The reference to “Israel, My servant” is clarified as the whole Covenant people Israel; this is not the former Northern Kingdom of Israel, and we see that because of the use of the name, “Jacob,” in the parallel verset. “Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen.” This is all the people who came from the Patriarch. God’s people Israel are God’s servant, and they were chosen by God for that role. That choice is traced back to Abraham, who God refers to here as, “My friend,” which also throws a bit of a different light on the idea of “servant.”

Isaiah reminds Israel that God took them from the ends of the earth, from its remotest parts. The reference is to Abraham, so the remotest part here is to Ur, a significant ancient city on the Euphrates near the Persian Gulf. God chose Israel when Israel did not yet exist by calling Abraham and his barren wife to the promised land.

Israel is not in relationship by accident, nor are they in relationship by their own power or by their own goodness. They are in relationship with God because of His sovereign choice. Isaiah repeats at the end of verse nine those two key words, “You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you.”

Even though Israel finds herself back in the land Abraham from which they once called out of, God assures them that He still sees them as His servant. They are still His chosen nation. They may feel rejected. They know they failed to keep faith to God. And they know that’s the reason they were exiled. They may feel very much rejected. But God says otherwise. They can count on the security of this covenant relationship. “I have chosen you and not rejected you.”

Moving on, similar to how verses 8 and 9 are bracketed by the words, “servant,” and, “chosen,” verses 10-13 are bracketed by the phrases, “Do not fear,” and, “right hand.” Verse 10,

<sup>10</sup> ‘Do not fear, for I am with you;	Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you, surely I will help you,	Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’

This is the outcome of not being rejected. “You are mine. And because you’re mine, I am going to strengthen you. I’m going to uphold you.” The nations feared and set themselves to making idols – idols that they had to uphold so they wouldn’t totter. Israel is to not fear. They may not be in the land of Israel, but God is with them where they are. “I am with you. Do not anxiously look about you. I am your God.” And again, we get the promise of strength that was extended at the end of chapter 40. Wait on the Lord and your strength will be renewed. Here God says, “I will strengthen you. I will help you with my righteous right hand.” And He is committing Himself to the help of His people. After this promise of strength during the time of trial – the period of exile - God also promises restoration. Israel’s state will be reversed. Those who oppress Israel will be vanquished. Verses 11-13,

<sup>11</sup> “Behold, they will be shamed and dishonored;	all those who are angered at you
They will be as nothing and will perish,	those who contend with you.
<sup>12</sup> “You will seek but will not find them,	those who quarrel with you,
They will be as nothing and non-existent,	those who war with you.
<sup>13</sup> “For I am the LORD your God,	who upholds your right hand,
Who says to you, ‘Do not fear,	I will help you.’





I will make the wilderness a pool of water	And the dry land fountains of water.
<sup>19</sup> "I will put the cedar in the wilderness, I will place the juniper in the desert	The acacia and the myrtle and the olive tree; Together with the box tree and the cypress,
<sup>20</sup> That they may see and recognize, That the hand of the LORD has done this,	And consider and gain insight as well, And the Holy One of Israel has created it.

In this specific picture of affliction and need, Israel is depicted as a people lost in a wilderness, unable to find water. The image reminds us of the Exodus. And there is an important reminder there. Release from exile, or release from slavery must be followed by a long journey home. That was true of Israel being freed from Egypt, and it will be true when Israel is freed from Babylon, it is also true of every person set free from slavery to sin. Every person called home first has a journey to complete. And the way home is often hard. Hope can easily fade on the way.

God promises not to forsake His people. As before, God emphasizes His personal connection to Israel as their Covenant God. "I Yahweh will answer them myself, as the God of Israel I will not forsake them." He promises not to forsake them on the way. Once you have reached the Promised Land, you know you are not forsaken. You're with God. He has brought you home. The water He promises here is not water of that Promised Land; it is water on the way. "Rivers on the bare heights, springs in valleys, the wilderness made into pools and dry land into fountains." And with that water there are plenty of trees. And other than one mention of olive, they are not fruit trees. They are shade trees to provide relief from the burning sun, because this is a picture of moving through the wilderness. So it's cedar, and acacia, and myrtle, and olive, and juniper, and box, and cypress. God promises to place trees in the wilderness and in the desert. God will care for His people as they journey home.

In places where there should be no water or shade, they find shade and water. Isaiah says that God will do this so that Israel may see, and recognize, and consider, and gain insight. God wants to provide for His people in such a way that they will know "The hand of the Lord has done this. The Holy One of Israel has created it." I think that's a challenge for us to look for the blessing. We are on our way home to Heaven. We are on our way home. And it's sometimes a struggle. Sometimes it's a wilderness. God is going to bless us on the way. He is going to give us what we need to gain strength. We are going to be weary because you don't need to be given strength if you're not without strength, if you're not tired. So He is going to give us the water and the shade. He is going to bless us on our way home to remind us that we have secure relationship with Him, that He is with us. But we still need to recognize the blessings when they come. And that's our prayer. We pray for the blessing. We need to also pray that we might see, that we would recognize, that we would consider, that we would gain insight, that we would discern God at work in our lives, even when we maybe don't feel it; that we would notice the blessings that God has given to us to give us strength and to keep us going.

All three pictures of comfort here have depicted Israel in a state of need. Israel the servant; Israel the worm; and Israel the afflicted traveler. All three pictures also depict God as Israel's hope. God will transform their lowly state. God will restore their honor. God will give new strength. God will provide water and shade. What God will do this? Yahweh, your Covenant God, the Holy One of Israel. Those two names are repeated three times each, Yahweh, Yahweh, Yahweh; Holy One, Holy One, Holy One. Yahweh, the Covenant God who will be faithful to bring Israel home as promised. And the Holy One of Israel whose glory fills the Earth: He is able To know God is to know that He cares, to know that He is able, to know that He is with you, to know that He will fulfill His promises to bring you home.