

# GOD'S CHALLENGE TO AN IDOLATROUS WORLD

## Isaiah 41:21-42:13

### A. Introduction.

#### 1. Isaiah as a miniature Bible.

ISAIAH	THE BIBLE
* 66 Chapters	* 66 Books
* 39 Chapters - First Section	* 39 Books - Old Testament
* 27 Chapters - Second Section	* 27 Books - New Testament
* First Section = Judgment	* Old Testament = Judgment
* Second Section = Grace and Comfort	* New Testament = Grace and Comfort
* Second Section = Forerunner Introduced	* New Testament = Forerunner Introduced

#### 2. The context of Isaiah 40:1-41:20.

##### a. The greatness of God *before Israel*, 40:1-31.

We move from the darkness of God's promised captivity for Judah in Babylon, 39:6, to the light of His promised restoration and redemption by means of a deliverer, the Servant of the Lord.

- (1) His greatness proclaimed in comforting grace, vs. 1-2.
- (2) His greatness proclaimed with anticipation, vs. 3-8.
- (3) His greatness proclaimed from Jerusalem, vs. 9-11.
- (4) His greatness proclaimed in sovereign dominion, vs. 12-17.
- (5) His greatness proclaimed against idolatry, vs. 18-20.
- (6) His greatness proclaimed as the Creator, vs. 21-26. (25-26).
- (7) His greatness proclaimed as strength in difficulty, v. 27-31.

##### b. The greatness of God in *delivering Israel*, 41:1-20.

Now God addresses the heathen nations in the Mediterranean regions, having already denounced their idolatry, the sheer foolishness of it when contrasted with His transcendent greatness, 40:18-20, 21-23.

- (1) Consider His omnipotent employment of Cyrus in judging Babylon, and the contrasting impotence of tottering, manufactured idols, vs. 1-5, 6-7.
- (2) Consider His election and deliverance of Israel as “My servant [My friend through Abraham],” vs. 8-9, even in the face of idolatrous hordes, vs. 10-12. God as the “Holy One of Israel” will redeem that “worm Jacob.” God will grant victory whereby Judah will “winnow” (blow away) its enemies away, vs. 13-16.
- (3) Consider His deliverance of Israel from desolation, vs. 17-20.
  - (a) The LORD will satisfy Israel’s thirst, v. 17.
  - (b) The LORD will bring forth springs in the desert, v. 18.
  - (c) The LORD will plant trees in the wilderness, 19.
  - (d) The LORD will provide understanding of His salvation, v. 20.

B. God’s plea for human, pagan religion to defend its futile ways, vs. 21-29.

The Bible often addresses man or the people of God in terms of what is a divinely recommended, sensible course of action when compared with a more popular, foolish route. The language sometimes takes on the setting of a legal argument, a setting forth of a case (Job 13:15-18; 23:1-4; Ps. 2:10; Isa. 1:18-20; 43:25-26; 45:21; Jer. 12:1; 50:33-34; Hos. 4:1; Micah 6:1-5). And the reason for this must surely be that God expects man, sinner though he be, to enter into rational discourse with Him, not mere thoughtless nonsense.

1. God’s biblical rational challenge by invitation, vs. 21-24.

- a. So the God of Israel challenges the vain religionists of this world, “‘Present your case,’ the LORD says. ‘Bring forward your strong arguments,’ the King of Jacob says,” v. 21. But why does He do this?
  - (1) Because God knows, better than anyone, the falsity of any religion that fails to acknowledge His unique, sole dominion.
  - (2) Because God knows, better than anyone, the impotence and deadness of religion in general.
  - (3) Because God knows that true religion concerning Himself will have an evident vital supernatural reality about it.

Hence, like Elijah’s challenge to the prophets of Baal (I Kgs. 18:27-29), God summons the world to bring forth solid evidence of its ability to at least match what God accomplishes. However, as with Elijah, it must be supernatural evidence!

Thus God is indicating that a true relationship with Him will have solid evidence that will validate its reality. That evidence will be supernatural at its root, the working of God in the dark hearts of men that results in radical transformation, 42:6-7.

- b. Let your popular religion prophesy concerning the future, v. 22-23a.
  - c. Let your idols declare an understanding of right and wrong, v. 23b.
  - d. Let your popular religion be shown for what it really is, worthless, impotent, useless, fraudulent, abominable, v. 24.
2. God's biblical rational challenge by demonstration, vs. 25-29.
- a. The LORD of Israel has demonstrated His power, v. 25.

Again like Elijah who, having mocked the prophets of Baal, then demonstrated the sacrifice consuming power of God (I Kgs. 18:30-40), so God will, in His sovereignty, employ Cyrus to capture Babylon. This same Cyrus, formerly ignorant, will eventually acknowledge Jehovah (cf. 44:28-45:1-7).

- b. The LORD of Israel has demonstrated His omniscience, v. 26-27.

In contrast with the ignorant idols of mankind, it is the LORD alone who predicts the destiny of Babylon and Israel. He speaks, declaring the end from the beginning, but they have nothing to say.

- c. The gods of mankind are demonstrated as mindless, vs. 28-29.

They have no souls, no thoughts, no speech. Their worshippers cry out to them, and there is no voice in response. The prophets of Baal "called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, 'O Baal, answer us.' But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made. . . . [T]hey cried with a loud voice and cut themselves, . . . When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention" (I Kgs. 18:26, 28-29).

So with all of the gods of mankind, material, intellectual, technological, there are no omnipotent, omniscient answers, especially when the great issues of life are confronted, such as evil, guilt, death, destiny, soul contentment, everlasting life. As here, such images are "wind and emptiness."

But this God of Isaiah and Elijah does not stop here at the mere negative dismantling of idolatry, the exposure of its foolishness. Rather He positively reveals the only gospel remedy which is gloriously described in 42:1-4. There is no cause to despair, for either Israel or the Gentiles. There is good news in the coming Servant of the Lord, the Son of God, prophetically proclaimed, who will bring forth saving justice. He will reach out to the nations. In the midst of a world wracked with violence, decadence, desolation, heartbreak, "a bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish."

- C. God's promise of salvation according to divine mercy, Isaiah 42:1-4.

Whereas the "behold" of the previous verse, 41:29, calls on us to contemplate the unqualified vacancy, uselessness and impotence of idolatry in all of its forms, the next verse here, 42:1, by

way of stark contrast, calls upon us to “behold” the incomparable, loving interest of God in man in his desolate, distraught, despairing condition.

1. The saving desire of God, v. 1.

The solution here is nothing less than God's intervention into such a sordid problem, even the visitation of His beloved Son, “My Servant,” by way of commission. He “upholds” him in his earthly ministry (John 5:19, 30; 8:28), having sustained him in His bosom (John 1:18).

- a. There is His *love* for His Son, called “My chosen one,” who is choice, the object of the Father's delight in heaven, and will be so on earth (Matt. 3:17; 12:18; 17:5; John 3:35; 5:20).
- b. There is His *endowment* for His Son, the lavish outpouring of His Spirit, the anointing that designates him as the Christ (61:1, John 3:34), and thus equips him for his vocation.
- c. There is His *purpose* for His Son, the renovation of the world, “the nations/Gentiles” (Ps. 2:8), through redemption instigated by a Jew and His seed. This righteous God desires justice for an unjust world (Rom. 3:21-26). This is the end result of the gospel.

2. The unpretentious desire of God, v. 2.

The modus operandi of God's plan is not to be ostentatious, grandiose, as an earthly potentate might propose. Matthew interprets here: “He will not quarrel, nor cry out; nor will anyone hear His voice [raucously, overbearingly, with pompous rhetoric] in the streets” (Matt. 12:19). Thus, he will come, “like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him” (Isa. 53:1-2). There is a humility in the Son of God's greatness.

3. The merciful desire of God, v. 3.

Here man continues to evidence the futility of his idolatry. For all of his pursuit of relief through religion in general, it has proved to be worthless. There has been no voice of comfort from his manufactured gods. Man's condition has not improved, since his symptoms have only grown worse; anxiety has not abated; guilt has not been relieved; conflict has not yielded to peace. He continues as battered in his soul, feeling near extinguished of life. But Jesus Christ has come to deal with these conditions as no other has. Matthew 12:13-21 applies this verse to Jesus' healing ministry since he rejected the philosophy of the survival of the fittest in the conflict of the jungle, even as an earthly potentate would only preserve fit captives.

- a. There is relief for the *bruised reed*. We know that reeds were extremely widespread alongside creeks and rivers; like man, they were tall, yet weak, so that a “bruised reed” was a pitiful sight, quite useless in the manufacture of household items, being fit only for burning.

- b. There is relief for the *flickering wick*. We know that a bright flame shone from a well trimmed wick, unrestricted by the accumulation of ash. But a smoky, near extinguished wick of flax, not transmitting oil well, would often be discarded since it had become useless.
- c. There is relief from *unrighteousness*. We know that the times of Jesus were harsh in terms of Roman iron-fistedness and Jewish legal/Pharisaic tyranny. But He has come to restore the reign of the righteousness of God in the place of human unrighteousness.

The great question arises then as to why Jesus Christ has come? At Nazareth he declared that it was, “to preach the gospel to the *poor*, . . . to proclaim release to the *captives* and recovery of sight to the *blind*, set free those who are *oppressed*” (Luke 4:18), in other words, bring redemption to the broken reeds and flickering wicks of this world. Paul describes these people as “not many mighty, not many noble; . . . the foolish things of the world, . . . the weak things of the world, . . . the base things of the world and the despised, . . . the things that are nothing” Yet God has “chosen them” (I Cor. 1:26-28).

#### 4. The effectual desire of God, v. 4.

Now to this point the focus has been upon God's great mercy, His relieving love, whereby those who are in agony find relief through Christ. But now the sovereignty of God is combined with this mercy. In Isaiah 9:1-7 this same mercy is described. Those experiencing anguish, contempt, darkness, burden, oppression, bloodshed, will, through Christ, see a great light, be increased in gladness, have burdens lifted, and participate in a kingdom of righteousness. Then the sovereign guarantee is: “The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this” (Isa. 9:7). There is guarantee here, certainty. Jesus Christ will not come in vain.

So in Isaiah 42:4 the reassuring emphasis is the same: “He will not be disheartened or crushed until He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands [Gentiles] will wait expectantly for His law.” In other words, Jesus Christ will certainly gather all of his broken reeds and smoking wicks. That is why he has come, and he will not fail. At the same time he calls to broken reeds and smoking wicks to heed his call; he seeks out the “weary and heavy-laden” that he might give them rest (Matt. 12:28). If your soul is crushed and spluttering for life, there is only one place to go. As Isaac Watts has written:

He'll never quench the smoking flax,  
 But raise it to a flame;  
 The bruised reed He never breaks,  
 No scorns the meanest name.  
 Then let our humble faith address  
 His mercy and His power:  
 We shall obtain delivering grace  
 In the distressing hour.

D. God's pledge of salvation according to His righteousness, Isaiah 42:5-9.

The glorious merciful, sovereign work of redemption promised by the Servant of the Lord, that is Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, in vs. 1-4, is enough to make any "bruised reed," and "dimly burning wick," salivate with hope and desire. Hence God is not slow to enhance the earnest interest of the burdened sinner so that what He has pledged, He will certainly, unfailingly accomplish. Sometimes we believe that what we long for is just too good to happen. Hence what follows then is a strengthening, reassuring explanation: "Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it" (Isa. 46:11). Hence "what God had promised, He was able to perform" (Rom. 4:21). Thus you can depend upon what God promises.

1. The pledge of His creative right, v. 5.

Man places great importance on the issuing of patents whereby an inventor maintains exclusive rights concerning what he alone has created. Even more so, God as Creator has absolute rights to deal with "bruised reeds" and "dimly burning wicks" as He alone determines. Of course man, in exasperation, will often destroy what he makes due to its continuous failure; but God here has a different attitude. What He has created is not totally discarded, even when it rebels against Him. He has the right as the Creator to lift up the fallen, heal the bruised and restore the brokenhearted.

But further, this principle applies especially with regard to Israel, the nation that God created, covenanted to bless, and to whom He revealed Himself as to no other nation. Hence, God who created the material and human realms, is not about to give up even when there are many "bruised reeds" and "dimly burning wicks" among His redeemed ones. His creative rights guarantee this; He has not "created the heavens and stretched them out" in vain. He has not made "the earth and its offspring" only to annihilate them in disappointment. He has not imparted "spirit [and life in the soul] to those who walk in it" and then given up on such a rebellious race. He will not quit! So, for those inclined to think this way, there must be recollection of what He has revealed about Himself.

2. The pledge of His revealed righteousness, v. 6.

To the Hebrew mind, the language here instantly reminds of Exodus 3:13-15; 6:2-8. However in those passages the term "righteousness" is not used whereas here it is by way of further explanation. In other words, God is reminding the reader that back of His exclusive revelation of His being to His people was infinite integrity, even the righteousness of God. And that being so, His sending of His "Servant," His Messiah Son, has all of the backing and certainty of what He has promised in the past as well as the "new things" he will accomplish in the future, even the healing of "bruised reeds" and the blazing arousal of "dimly burning wicks."

In these present perilous times such truth of God's integrity is immensely reassuring. Hence there are five principles that God encourages us to understand.

a. First, remember specifically that "I am the LORD."

God considers specific identification of who He is to be of vital importance. He is not a nondescript deity, a mere abstract first cause, but Jehovah, the great "I Am." He is

to be carefully distinguished from all other gods, v. 8. He is not only the one and only God, but He who revealed Himself to Moses and Israel with great specificity. He is a God of distinctive and unique characteristics, and one in particular that calls for emphasis here, that is “righteousness.”

- b. Second, remember that “I have called you [My Servant] in righteousness.”

God the Father has, in His perfect integrity, employed His “Servant” for a very specific task. The plight of “bruised reeds” and “dimly burning wicks” has led to a divine plan for their rescue. In this way, His original promise to them will stand firm. It involves the righteous God devising a righteous plan to save unrighteous human debris. The greatest frequency of the word “righteousness” is 68 times in Psalms, then 52 times in Isaiah, and most frequently in the New Testament, 35 times in Romans. It is a word essentially descriptive of God’s moral integrity. He is fundamentally holy, righteous. Herein lies man’s biggest problem since he is, at heart, unholy and unrighteous. And Isaiah in the Old Testament, like Romans in the New Testament, is fervently concerned with the reconciliation of this matter.

So the plan is for God the Father, who is righteous, to devise a righteous plan to save the unrighteous through the employment of His Son. Hence, “By His [the Father’s] knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as he will bear their iniquities” (Isa. 53:11). If a man or a woman has no knowledge of their unrighteousness in *His sight*, then they have no understanding of why Jesus Christ the righteous one has come in the first place. Isaiah is emphatic about this: “Listen to Me, you stubborn-minded, who are far from righteousness. I bring near My righteousness, it is not far off; and My salvation will not delay, and I will grant salvation in Zion, and My glory for Israel” (Isa. 46:12-13).

- c. Third, remember that “I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you,” cf. v. 1.

The expressions of the Father’s pleasure during the earthly ministry of His Son well indicate His hovering interest in the plan of redemption set before him (Matt. 3:17; 12:18; 17:5). Then there was also the appointment of angelic assistance (Matt. 4:11; Luke 22:43). Supremely there was the Father’s raising His Son from the dead (Rom. 10:9; Gal. 1:1) whereby he was received back into His Father’s bosom with expressions of triumphant praise (Rev. 4:10-11; 5:11-14).

- d. Fourth, remember my covenant to “the people,” Israel.

Even as the commission of Jesus Christ, to his church, was that of witnessing “both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8), and Paul similarly witnessed “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Acts 9:15; Rom. 1:16; 2:9), so the prophetic Word here upholds this order. First, the Lord Jesus will be appointed by the Father “as a covenant to the people” (Isa. 54:10; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 16:60-63). According to Malachi he will be “the messenger of the covenant” (Mal. 3:1) through the shedding of his own blood (Luke 22:20). Hence, “God has not [finally] rejected His people whom He foreknew” (Rom. 11:2).

- e. Fifth, remember my covenant to “the nations,” the Gentiles.

But furthermore, the Lord Jesus will also be appointed by the Father “as a light to the nations.” Even the neglect of Israel toward the Gentiles will not be allowed to interfere with the largeness of the mercy of God toward those who are blind, imprisoned, and tormented in darkness, cf. v. 7. “I will also make You a light of the nations [Gentiles] so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6, cf. 22-23; 52:10, 15; 60:1-3; 62:1-2). Great is God’s mercy.

Was there ever kindest shepherd  
 Half so gentle, half so sweet,  
 As the Savior who would have us  
 Come and gather round His feet?  
 There’s a wideness in God’s mercy  
 Like the wideness of the sea;  
 There’s a kindness in His justice  
 Which is more than liberty.  
 There is welcome for the sinner,  
 And more graces for the good;  
 There is mercy with the Savior;  
 There is healing in His blood.  
 For the love of God is broader  
 Than the measure of man’s mind,  
 And the heart of the Eternal  
 Is most wonderfully kind.

3. The pledge of His redemption, v. 7.

Here the figurative language of v. 3 concerning “bruised reeds” and “dimly burning wicks” is explained in down-to-earth terms.

- a. There will be *sight for the blind*, that is those who have no perception of the truth of God even when face-to-face with it. Isaiah emphasizes this disability more than any other Old Testament writer, and 42:16, 18-19 is the greatest concentration, though note v. 20.
  - b. There will be *freedom for the captive*, that is those who are hopelessly bound to the tyranny of human religion, especially the demands of self-serving religious performance, also the carnal, sensual, pleasure seeking agenda of this world, cf. 61:1.
  - c. There will be *light for those in darkness*, that is those who are morally and spiritually snared in the mire, the gloom of this world. Here also Isaiah focuses on light more than any other Old Testament writer, again note v. 16.
4. The pledge of the His covenant name, v. 8.

Once more, cf. v. 6, God emphatically, definitively, exclusively declares Himself alone to be the worthy recipient of glory. His name is “the LORD,” and He is jealous for its reverent appreciation, but especially by His people to whom it was revealed. However, it is His



Servant, the Messiah, the Savior, who comes as the embodiment of that “name,” to accomplish the merciful salvation that the “name” represents (52:6-7).

5. The pledge of the His New Covenant, v. 9.

Hence we appreciate that “former things” concerning the prophesied coming of Cyrus to capture Babylon, perhaps his early presence, 41:25, have come to pass. Yet these are minor compared with the more substantial prospects that Messiah will accomplish, his own exaltation, the redemption of Israel, “a covenant to the people,” and the conversion of the heathen, “light to the nations,” v. 6. Here is advance notification in much the same way that John the Baptist was the forerunner. Something glorious and universal and effectual is in prospect, and those who truly appreciate this will be moved to spontaneously express the delight of their soul. That means is now revealed, the praise of God in song.

E. God's praise of salvation according to a new song, Isaiah 42:10-13.

The Hebrew word שִׁיר, *shir*, in “Sing to the LORD a new song,” obviously refers to heartfelt response to the preceding good news concerning the saving work of the coming Messiah. Here we are faced with the right order and role of music amongst the people of God. In captivity, Israel had no place for music (Ps. 137:1-4) whereas, having returned to Jerusalem, under Nehemiah there were “singers, songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God” (Neh. 12:46). However, there is something quite more advanced here. A person of this world may sing songs and appreciate music. Even a religious person may sing songs. Nevertheless the character of this type of music will be focused upon man in one way or another, even the singer himself. Style may vary, but the essential interest will be human enjoyment at differing levels of sensuality, entertainment, emotional stimulation, and heart satisfaction.

However what distinguishes the singing here is that it is qualified as “new,” hence different from the common variety. It distinctively focuses upon God and not man, whether we consider the content of the song or the interest of the singer (Ps. 33:1-5; 40:1-3; 96:1-6; 144:9-10; 149:1-2; Rev. 5:8-10; 14:1-3). Here the “newness” especially concentrates upon the “new things” of v. 9, that is the glorious newness of the saving ministry of Messiah, the new covenant in His blood. As Charles Wesley enthusiastically writes:

My heart is full of Christ, and longs  
 Its glorious matter to declare!  
 Of Him I make my loftier songs,  
 I cannot from His praise forbear;  
 My ready tongue makes haste to sing  
 The glories of my heavenly King.

We now consider four aspects of this “new song,” in vs. 10-13.

1. It is a “new song” directed to the LORD, v. 10a.

This type of music is radically different from all other in this world because it is *not* chiefly concerned with the instrumentalist, the soloist, or the lyricist. The fundamental concern is *not* tonal quality, harmony, verse structure, rhyme, or meter. These are not unimportant, but they all must be subservient to the primacy of direction of human affections.

- a. The *direction* of this song is from man to God.

It is not from man to man in admiration, or from man before man seeking applause. Rather it is for every man, woman, and child, who has a stake in the “new things” of v. 9, not merely the specialist. Here is justification of the primacy of congregational singing. Hence Isaac Watts has well written:

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath,  
And when my voice is lost in death,  
Praise shall employ my nobler powers;  
My days of praise shall ne'er by past,  
While life, and thought, and being last,  
Or immortality endures.

- b. The *content* of this song is radically new.

The concern here is not human experience, even human improvement, although these interests have importance. Instead, here God is the all-consuming interest. Of course the God to be addressed in song has been well defined, v. 6, so that such music will especially emphasize His characteristics, His attributes. Consider Frederick William Faber's hymn:

My God, how wonderful Thou art,  
Thy majesty how bright!  
How beautiful Thy mercy-seat,  
In depths of burning light!

2. It is a “new song” from the ends of the earth, vs. 10b-11.

Here is portrayed the result of effectual missionary outreach concerning the Servant of the Lord, Messiah. Thus Philip Doddridge has written:

Grace, 'tis a charming sound  
Harmonious to the ear;  
Heaven with the echo shall resound,  
And all the earth shall hear.

The islands, the wilderness regions, villages, even Arab communities, are eventually to hear and rejoice in song at the salvation Christ brings. So Sarah Stock has taught us to sing:

Let the song go round the earth—  
Jesus Christ is Lord!  
Sound His praises, tell His worth,  
Be His name adored;  
Every clime and every tongue  
Join the grand, the glorious song!

3. It is a “new song” that glorifies the LORD, v. 12.

The acknowledgment of the glory of God, His holy magnificence, His mighty grace, His radiant goodness, is to be acknowledged universally, joyfully, even chorally, though

exclusively. Here is the fruit and end purpose of genuine evangelism. Charles Wesley expresses this zeal as follows:

O for a thousand tongues to sing  
 My great Redeemer's praise,  
 The glories of my God and King,  
 The triumphs of His grace!

4. It is a “new song” of the sin-vanquishing LORD, v. 13.

Those who sing cannot but appreciate the zeal of Christ that confronted no small foe. He was determined to assail Satan's kingdom, to confront it throughout the earth, to go to the heart of the problem, that is the blight of sin that had infected every nook and cranny. Never was there a warrior comparable to the Lord Jesus Christ. He “led captivity captive, and gave gifts [spoils] unto men” (Eph. 4:8, KJV). So that those who have received the spoils of Christ's conquest over sin are eager to sing in praise of His triumphant victory. Edith Cherry has taught us so to sing:

'We rest on Thee', our shield and our Defender!  
 We go not forth alone against the foe;  
 Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,  
 'We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.'

Yes, 'in Thy name', O Captain of salvation!  
 In Thy dear Name, all other names above;  
 Jesus our Righteousness, our sure foundation,  
 Our Prince of glory and our King of love.

'We go' in faith, our own great weakness feeling,  
 And needing more each day Thy grace to know;  
 Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing:  
 'We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.'

'We rest on Thee', our shield and our Defender!  
 Thine is the battle; Thine shall be the praise  
 When passing through the gates of pearly splendor,  
 Victors, we rest with Thee through endless days.