

Our God Saves: Believe

I Am Your God

Isaiah 41

Mark Vroegop

“But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; 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”; 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. 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.” 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” (Isa. 41:8–16).

There are some biblical truths that need to be repeated.

Last Sunday, we walked through Isaiah 40. It’s one of the most important texts in the book of Isaiah and maybe in the entire Old Testament. I started last week’s sermon with a statement that has proven very helpful to me over the last fifteen years: **Christians live by promise not performance.**

To appreciate that statement you need to do three things: know it, believe it, and live by it.

We spent a fair amount of time focusing on knowing and believing this truth. Isaiah 40 concludes with some very important and hopeful verses that help us know how to live. But we didn’t have time to explore them in a practical way. I concluded the sermon with this statement: **Waiting is how Christians live by promise not performance.**

Wait for the Lord

Today, I want to return to the last verse of Isaiah 40 and show you how Isaiah 41 helps us see how to live—how to make this work. Let’s start with Isaiah 40:31:

“but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

When you read this verse, what phrases or words immediately stand out for you?

- Perhaps you see the word “wait,” and you wonder what it means
- Maybe the thought of a renewal of strength is deeply attractive because you find yourself weary
- Perhaps you’re fascinated with the image of an eagle soaring by the power of the up-current
- Maybe the unusual empowerment of runners and walkers is fascinating

All of that would be important to consider and meditate upon. But I’d like to suggest that the most important words are “**for the Lord.**” These three words make the connection between waiting and God’s help. In other words, living by promise and not performance doesn’t mean that you do nothing. No! There’s a lot for you to do. But it sounds like this: “wait for the Lord.”

The Christian life is not marked by passivity, inactivity, or immobility. Being a follower of Jesus is very active, very alive, and very aggressive. **But in the right things and in the right way.**

The word “wait” means to look for or to hope in. It means to look forward with confidence to that which is good and beneficial. . .to have an eager expectation of the Lord’s deliverance.¹ Based upon this definition, God’s people “do” something: they wait. And their waiting is “for” someone: the Lord.

Other translations render the Hebrew word (qavah) as hope (NIV) or trust (CSB). Those are good translations, but they don’t get to the issue of going the opposite direction of activity as well as I think “waiting” does. To “wait for the Lord” feels more transformational because the word “wait” isn’t naturally a positive word. Hope and trust are good words. But waiting is different.

For example, if you tell someone that you are hoping or trusting, they’ll probably respond with enthusiasm: “Good for you!” But if you tell them you are waiting, they’ll likely express sympathy: “Hang in there. We’ll be praying for you.” There’s a natural, negative bias when we think of waiting. But that’s not how the Bible thinks about waiting—at all!

A few examples:

- *“The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him”* (Lam. 3:25).
- *“Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!”* (Ps. 27:14)
- *“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;”* (Ps. 130:5)

This is such an important theme that we’re going to more fully explore it during Advent—which is a season of waiting.

The point in Isaiah 40 that leads into Isaiah 41 is not merely the fact that you are waiting, but what are you waiting for. That makes all the difference in the world! It changes how you wait. Isaiah 40:31 promises renewed strength, soaring like the eagle, and endurance that isn’t typical. “For the Lord”

¹ James Swanson, [*Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew \(Old Testament\)*](#) (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

connects that promise when your present situation. So, if you want to “do something,” wait for the Lord. Waiting produces supernatural results when we are waiting for the Lord.

Isaiah 41 continues this theme but takes it a step further. It’s a chapter that imagines a courtroom, a choice, and confidence.

Courtroom

The 41st chapter is designed to prove the case that God waiting for the Lord isn’t a waste. Remember that the people of Israel are in exile. The circumstances of life would seem to indicate that God has lost, that he has forgotten about his people, and there’s no hope. Isaiah, in chapters 40-55, is making the case for believing in God.

So, God convenes a court to try the case of his trustworthiness. We see this in two places:

“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.” (Isaiah 41:1, ESV)

In the first invitation, the world is invited to make its case. Isaiah records the offering for them to “renew their strength” as well. It’s the same phrase used in Isaiah 40:31. The question at hand is upon whom do they wait? Where does the world look for help and hope?

Everyone trusts and hopes in something. Every human being is waiting for something. The question is whether we are waiting for the “right” something. And, as we’ll see in a minute, you really see what you hope in or what you are waiting for when things get hard or frightening. Often, the places we go to are where we have our idols.

“Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring 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” (Isa. 41:21–23).

God invites the people to the courtroom of heaven to consider what he’s like versus the other things in which we would place our trust.

Now, what’s interesting about this is that this courtroom scene shouldn’t be considered rare. This kind of litigating between what or who we are going to trust happens all the time. Every single day, human beings—in the courtroom of their minds—are making the decision about who or what is really worthy of our trust. Sometimes it’s happening very clearly in your mind as you battle through doubts or keep pointing your heart to what you believe. But at other times, you might not even be aware of the choice that you are making. You are just afraid, anxious, or exhausted. And part of the reason is that you are waiting for the wrong thing.

God invites us to court to consider who he really is.

Choice

Isaiah lays out the choice for God's people by offering a comparison between the "parties" in the courtroom. God wants his people to understand both what is going on and the choice that is before them. He's bringing the facts to the table.

In verses 2-4, we're asked a series of rhetorical questions that God answers directly:

"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 with 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" (Isa. 41:2-4).

God is establishing his power. He even uses the title "first and last." The idea is that everything within the course of human history is bracketed by God. In Isaiah 40 there was the imagery of the seas being contained in the palm of his hand. Here we have something more philosophical. It's the same kind of truth that Jesus expresses in Revelation 1 – *"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty"* (Rev. 1:8). This statement is connected to the exclusivity of God.

"Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god'" (Isa. 44:6).

In contrast to that, are the "assurances" that human beings embrace by false assurances or fake gods. In 41:5, we see the cause of this. It's fear. Mark it down: when people are filled with fear, they tend to become more tribal and even more idolatrous. Our lust for control breeds false comfort.

"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" (Isa. 41:5-7).

It's ironic and tragic. People who should be scared are telling each other, "Be strong!" And the people are making idols in order to provide for themselves with something to trust in. However, they are making their own gods—even strengthening them with nails. But it's so foolish!

"Behold, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their metal images are empty wind" (Isa. 41:29).

This is yet another reason why the book of Isaiah is so important and helpful. It's written to people who are experiencing the pressure of hard circumstances. And that's when our idols are most likely to be seen. That's when we need to make a choice regarding who we're going to trust.

Idols are the things we look to for security and identity. They are what we go to for control. Idols are the things that, when removed, fill us with anger or anxiety. Idols create an identity crisis. Idols shatter our sense of worth and meaning.

In the courtroom of Isaiah, we're asked to make a choice. Or at least to realize that we're constantly making these choices. But there's only one path for real comfort.

Comfort

Let me connect this chapter to the previous one. The Lord is attempting to provide comfort to his people—remember 40:1? What we find here is that the comfort of God's people rests in who God is. In other words, living in promise doesn't mean only considering the future. That's part of it. Actually, that's the second step. The first step is fully embracing what God promises us about himself.

Look at verses 8-9 to see this:

"But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; 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';" (Isa. 41:8–9).

Therefore, waiting means looking at your future in light of what you know to be true about God right now. We wait by worshipping. Waiting has less to do with what we need to be done versus what's already been done. In order to live by promises for the future, we need to live by the promises that have already been kept.

Rehearsing what's already true helps us wait. Actually, it's how we wait. Let me show you this in three places and then come back to verse 10.

When facing opposition, the Lord promises Israel that they will not be successful (vv. 11-12). But notice why!

"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'" (Isa. 41:13).

When God's people are powerless ("you worm!"), God promises to help them (vv. 14-16). Don't miss the "I" statements in verses 14b and 15a ("I am the one who helps you. . ." and "I make you a threshing sledge. . .")

When the people are needy and desperate, God is the one who is behind every intervention (vv. 17-20). Again, notice all the "I" statements:

- I the Lord will answer them
- I the God of Israel will not forsake them
- I will open the rivers. . .
- I will make the wilderness a pool of water
- I will put in the wilderness the cedar

- I will set in the desert the cypress

God is making this point over and over. Waiting for the Lord is the safest thing you can do! You might feel like waiting means you are doing nothing. But waiting for the Lord is the best thing you can do.

Let's go back to verse 10. Let me help you know how to make this work, especially when you are dealing with fear and anxiety.

Notice that there are five promises—anchored in God's control:

1. I am with you - we are never alone, never abandoned, never deserted
2. I am your God – we rest in the promise of who God is
3. I will strengthen you - God promises to provide the strength that his children need when fearful events and circumstances come our way
4. I will help you - God is going to work for us
5. I will uphold you – he will hold his people up by the essence of his power as a righteous God²

But for the purpose of connecting it to Isaiah 40, and in an effort to help you battle anxiety by waiting on the Lord, I'm going to change the promises into a more prayerful form. Let me encourage you to find a quiet place, settle your heart, slow everything down so that you can prayerfully meditate and rehearse these promises:

God, I'm waiting on you because I know that:

1. **You are with me.** I'm never alone or deserted.
2. **You are my God.** I'm resting in the promise of who you are.
3. **You will strengthen me.** Nothing will happen today that is greater than your provision of grace
4. **You will help me.** You are going to work in me.
5. **You will uphold me.** You have the power to keep me today.

Those who wait for the Lord prayerfully meditate and rehearse these promises.

They weren't just for Israel. Every single one of these promises is fulfilled through the person and work of Jesus. Christians live by promise not performance by waiting.

1. **You are with me**
2. **You are my God**
3. **You will strengthen me**
4. **You will help me**
5. **You will uphold me**

Rehearsing the promises of God is how we wait for the Lord.

² <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/fear-not-i-am-with-you-i-am-your-god>

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