

Let me give you a brief outline of what Isaiah is doing here in chapters 40-42.

In chapter 40 three voices call for Jerusalem and Judah to listen to the voice of the LORD
 Two voices remind Jerusalem that the Word of the LORD endures forever,
 and then herald Zion calls to the other cities of Judah to wait on the LORD
 In the midst of exile and distress,
 remember that those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength.

Then in chapter 41 God himself speaks.

Chapter 40 has called the people of God to listen up!

Now God himself addresses first the nations, and then Israel, “my servant.”
 Isaiah 38-55 is the “book of the servant.”

While the Son of David—the King—played center stage in Isaiah 1-37,
 the Servant comes to the fore in Isaiah 38-55.

And chapters 40-42 set the stage for Isaiah’s understanding of the Servant.

There is an absolute antithesis between the Servant of the LORD and idolatry.

There is simply *no place* for idolatry in the Christian life.

Isaiah calls for a day of judgment for the nations,
 because the nations trust in their idols.

And so – starting in chapter 41, verses 8-20, we heard

God’s blessing to “my servant Israel” (41:8-20)

Twice in this section God says “fear not...behold”

Concluding with six “I will’s” in verses 17-20

Then, as we just read, we hear God’s challenge to the idols (41:21-42:4),
 with another three “beholds”

Concluding with eleven “he will’s” in 42:1-4.

And finally we hear God’s promise in 42:5-17,

opening with two declarations of I am the LORD (42:6-9),

including a “behold” in v9

a call to praise him (42:10-13),

concluding with fourteen “I will’s” in verses 14-17,

ending with the final condemnation of those who trust in idols.

42:17 ends with the shaming of those who trust in metal images –
 precisely where chapter 41:1-7 began.

Last time we heard Isaiah introduce the Servant as Israel.

Israel is the elect Servant—the one whom God upholds and sustains.

God will use his servant—“worm Jacob” to thresh the mountains –

to judge the nations.
And God will provide water in the wilderness to quench the thirst of his Servant.
He will be the shelter and refuge of his people.

1. The Challenge to the “Gods” (41:21-29)
a. Prove Yourselves! Behold, You are Nothing! (v21-24)

At the beginning of chapter 41 Isaiah declares that the nations have heard God’s call—
“They have seen and are afraid; the ends of the earth tremble.”
But they do not turn to Yahweh—they take refuge in idols.
Then Isaiah turned to contrast those who trust in idols with “Israel, my servant”
Now in 41:21-42:4, Isaiah provides a second contrast.
The LORD challenges the idols to a contest.
This is what Elijah did at Mount Carmel. (1 Kings 18)
Elijah called for the prophets of Baal to call down fire from heaven.
The prophets of Baal implored their god to send fire from heaven,
but nothing happened.
Then Elijah prayed, and Yahweh sent fire from heaven.
Now through the prophet Isaiah, The LORD challenges the idols once again:
(Verses 21-24)

*²¹ Set forth your case, says the LORD;
bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.*

*²² 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.*

*²³ 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.^[b]*

*²⁴ Behold, you are nothing,
and your work is less than nothing;
an abomination is he who chooses you.*

The gods of the nations cannot tell the future —
neither can they do good or harm.

But in contrast, Yahweh is the one who “declared it from the beginning” (v26)
He is the ruler of history who brings all things to pass.

Isaiah uses three “beholds” to signal the three sections of this contrast.
The first two “beholds” in verses 24 and 29 function as concluding statements.
After giving the evidence of the folly of idols, the “behold”
serves to call attention to the conclusion of the matter:

“Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing;
an abomination is he who chooses you.” (v24)
“Behold, they are a delusion; their works are nothing;
their metal images are empty wind.” (v29)

And in contrast, the LORD himself says, “Behold, here they are!” (v27)
as he sent to Jerusalem a herald of good news.

b. I Have Proved Myself! Behold, They Are All a Delusion (v25-29)

²⁵ *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 clay.*
²⁶ *Who declared it from the beginning, that we might know,
and beforehand, that we might say, “He is right”?
There was none who declared it, none who proclaimed,
none who heard your words.*
²⁷ *I was the first to say^[c] to Zion, “Behold, here they are!”
and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news.*
²⁸ *But when I look, there is no one;
among these there is no counselor
who, when I ask, gives an answer.*
²⁹ *Behold, they are all a delusion;
their works are nothing;
their metal images are empty wind.*

The scathing sarcasm is evident.

Idolatry is futile and worse than worthless.

But as usual, Isaiah is engaged in play on words.

Notice the way that he uses the term “wind”—ruach—in this passage.

40:7 “the grass withers, the flower fades, the breath (ruach) of the LORD blows
on it”
40:13 “who has measured the Spirit (ruach) of the LORD?”
41:16 “you (the servant/worm Israel) shall winnow them and the wind (ruach)
shall carry them away”
41:29 “their metal images are empty wind (ruach)”

42:1 “Behold, my servant...I have put my Spirit (ruach) upon him”
42:5 “Thus says God, Yahweh...who give breath (ruach) to the people”

Six times “ruach” is used—but in three different ways:

Wind, Spirit, and breath.

You can’t translate them all the same way.

But Isaiah is intentionally playing on the three different senses of Ruach
in order to communicate one point.

The God who blows the nations away with his ruach--
The God who has put ruach in all people who walk on the earth--
it is that God who has put HIS ruach upon his Servant.

The idols of the nations are empty ruach.
But the Servant of the LORD is filled with the Ruach of Yahweh.

And Yahweh’s Ruach is a powerful Ruach.

Because it is His Ruach that blows upon the nations with the force of a mighty tempest!

Therefore God declares (42:1-4)

2. The Elect, Spirit-Anointed Servant (42:1-9)

a. “A Bruised Reed He Will Not Break” – the Servant Will Bring Justice (v1-4)

*42 Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;*

*I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

² *He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;*

³ *a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.*

⁴ *He will not grow faint or be discouraged^[d]
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.*

This “behold” establishes the contrast between the Servant and the idols.

They are filled with an empty wind—an empty spirit,
but he is filled with the Spirit of the LORD.

Therefore he will bring justice to the earth.

The Servant of the Lord is a Spirit-filled Servant.

The Servant of the Lord cannot be isolated from the Spirit of the Lord.

The Spirit and the Servant are plainly two distinct persons here.

But their work is identified as one.

The Servant will succeed where Israel has always failed in the past,
because the Servant will be equipped with the Spirit of Yahweh.
And God declares what the Servant will accomplish in six “he wills”
He will bring forth justice to the nations.
That is really the central point.
All six “he wills” amplify this one thing.
The nations have failed to produce justice.
In Isaiah 5, when God set forth his case against Israel and Judah,
Isaiah declared:
“He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness, but behold, an outcry.” (Is 5:7)
Now God sets forth his solution.
He will put his Spirit upon his servant Israel,
and Israel will bring justice to the nations.
Indeed, the Servant Israel will not grow faint
(echoing 40:31)—meaning that he will wait for the LORD
and renew his strength through trusting in Yahweh.
And through his patient faithfulness he will in the end establish justice in the earth

Matthew 12:18-20 quotes these verses and says that this spoke of Jesus.
Especially his care for the poor and the sick—
the bruised reeds and faintly burning wicks.
We often think of bringing justice as a glorious event,
as Jesus comes in power and majesty to destroy the wicked.
But Matthew says that this was fulfilled
as Jesus walked the streets of Galilean villages,
healing the sick and casting out demons.
In our day “justice” is a matter of loudly demanding our rights.
But Jesus brought justice through quietly doing good.
“He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street.”

In Isaiah 1-37 Isaiah frequently speaks of the work of the Son of David
and the work of God in identical terms.
In Isaiah 9 the “child”—the “son” is even called “the mighty God.”
Likewise here, after saying that the Servant will bring justice to the nations,
42:5-17 goes on to say that God himself will do this.

Verse 13 says that Yahweh goes out “like a mighty man.”
Isaiah seems to understand that while Israel is indeed the Servant,
the Servant also shares in some divine qualities.

42:5-17 then sets forth God’s promise to his Servant.
If the Servant will not grow faint or be discouraged until he has established justice in the earth,

then God will not rest until he delivers his people and brings them to himself.
(Read 5-7)

b. “A Covenant for the People” – the LORD and His Servant (v5-9)

⁵ Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people on it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
⁶ “I am the LORD; I have called you^[e] in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people,
a light for the nations,
⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Echoing the language of chapter 40,
God says indeed, I am Yahweh,
and I have called you, O my servant, in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you.

And in a remarkable statement of God’s purposes for all history, God says:
“I will give you (Israel, my servant) as a covenant for the people,
a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.”
Israel—the Servant—is a covenant for the people, a light for the nations.
This is what God had said in Exodus 19.
Israel was to be a kingdom of priests,
a holy nation that mediated the blessing of God to the nations.
But they had fallen short over and over again.

But that purpose has not been forgotten.
God will indeed bring it to pass.
Israel will indeed be the covenant for the people, the light for the nations.
Because the Word will become flesh.
God himself will become Israel.
He will accomplish what Israel failed to do.
He will come as the Spirit-endowed Servant to open the eyes of the blind,
and to release the prisoners from the dungeon.
I am Yahweh; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.

⁸ *I am the LORD; that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to carved idols.*
⁹ *Behold, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth
I tell you of them.”*

Behold!

(Once again uses this exclamation to signal the conclusion of the section)
the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth I tell you of them.

God’s purposes will not be thwarted.
His glory will be revealed.

In Isaiah 40 we heard three voices calling us to listen to the Word of Yahweh.
Yahweh has now spoken.
What should our response be?
(Read v10-13)

3. The Coming of the LORD (42:10-17)

a. A New Song from the Coastlands (v10-13)

¹⁰ *Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth,
you who go down to the sea, and all that fills it,
the coastlands and their inhabitants.*
¹¹ *Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the habitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the top of the mountains.*
¹² *Let them give glory to the LORD,
and declare his praise in the coastlands.*
¹³ *The LORD goes out like a mighty man,
like a man of war he stirs up his zeal;
he cries out, he shouts aloud,
he shows himself mighty against his foes.*

Throughout the scripture the term “new song” refers to a song of victory.

It is a song that is sung after the triumph of Yahweh over his enemies.

So it is not a call to *write* a new song,
but to *sing* a new song.

In other words, it would be entirely appropriate to sing Psalm 96 or 98
as the new song.

What Isaiah is saying is that you cannot sing Psalm 98 the same way
once God has brought Israel home from exile.

Or, for us, you cannot sing Psalm 98 the same way once God has raised Jesus from the dead.
Because God is a mighty warrior who “shows himself mighty against his foes.”

But how does God show himself mighty?

God himself speaks, concluding this section with two statements about the past,
followed by 14 statements about the future.

God says that he has restrained himself in the past.

He has not gone forth as a mighty warrior.

But now he will.

b. The Labor of the LORD in Bringing Judgment against Idolatry (v14-17)

*¹⁴ For a long time I have held my peace;
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labor;
I will gasp and pant.*

*¹⁵ I will lay waste mountains and hills,
and dry up all their vegetation;
I will turn the rivers into islands,^[1]
and dry up the pools.*

I will cry out like a woman in labor; I will gasp and pant.

How does God reveal himself as a mighty warrior?

Well, just think of a woman in labor!

How’s that for a mixed metaphor!

Mighty man—man of war—

And then—here comes the screaming woman in labor!

God created man male and female, after his own image.

Therefore the entirety of human imagery is appropriate with reference to God.

He uses this image to describe himself.

Because what a woman experiences in giving birth to a child
is analogous to what God “experiences”

(in whatever sense that term is appropriate of God)

in the act of bringing his people to himself.

And when God cries out like a woman in labor,

when he gasps and pants,

the breath/ruach/Spirit of his mouth lays waste mountains and hills.

Yes, the same mountains and hills that the Servant is supposed to thresh in 41:15.

The work of God in delivering his people is the same work as the worm.

God and Israel, Yahweh and his Servant, are once again doing the same thing.

But when this happens, God will lead the blind in new paths:

*¹⁶ And I will lead the blind
in a way that they do not know,
in paths that they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I do,
and I do not forsake them.
¹⁷ They are turned back and utterly put to shame,
who trust in carved idols,
who say to metal images,
“You are our gods.”*

And in a final contrast, Yahweh declares that those who trust in carved idols are turned back and put to shame.
If you trust in false gods, you have no place in the kingdom of God.

You may have noticed that in verses 7 and 16 Isaiah has introduced the theme of blindness.

Next week we will be exploring that theme even more,
as Isaiah speaks of the Servant the one who is blind and deaf
(Isaiah 40-55 is really all one sermon,
I just doubt that you would have the patience to sit through the ten hours
it would take to work through the whole text at once!)

But verse 17 ties us back in with 41:7.

Those who turned to idols in 41:7 are now turned back and humiliated.
Yahweh alone is the true God.
His Servant is the one who is filled with wind/Spirit.
He alone will bring justice to the nations.

Turn with me to Matthew 3

(Read v13-17)

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him,^[c] and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son,^[d] with whom I am well pleased.”

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations.

“Thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

Is it possible that Jesus is referring to Isaiah 42?

The baptism of Jesus is where Jesus is officially designated the Servant.

If he is going to bring justice to the nations,

if he is going to bring righteousness,

then he must be baptized with water and the Spirit.

He must be filled with the Spirit.

And the Father even declares, this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased,
echoing the language of Isaiah 42.

Therefore, when the Father puts the Spirit upon Jesus,
he doing what he promised he would do to “help” Israel.

The gift of the Spirit endows and equips Jesus as the true Israel
to accomplish his task as the Servant of the LORD in bringing justice to the earth.

But we cannot stop there.

Because that is not the end of the story.

On the day of Pentecost the Spirit was given to the church.

(And in John 20 we see the precursor to that in Jesus giving the Spirit to the disciples)

Because you have been united to Christ and made a partaker of his Spirit,
therefore God is pleased to call you his Servant and heir.

Because Jesus has brought justice to the nations,
you are called to share in his calling.

You, after all, are now the true Israel, the Servant of the Lord in whom God takes delight!

Therefore we are now called to mediate the blessings of God to the nations.

We are the covenant that God gives to the people,
as Jesus says, “you are the light of the world.”

As we behold the darkness of this world—the blindness of our friends and neighbors,
let us take heart, for our God has promised that he will turn the darkness into light.

And let us walk by faith, and not by sight,
with confidence that our God will do as he has promised.