

ISAIAH

Chapter 41

Fear Not, for I Am with You

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. 2 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. 3 He pursues them and passes on safely, by paths his feet have not trod. 4 Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he. 5 The coastlands have seen and are afraid; the ends of the earth tremble; they have drawn near and come. 6 Everyone helps his neighbor and says to his brother, "Be strong!" 7 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. 8 But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; 9 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"; 10 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. 11 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. 12 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. 13 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." 14 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. 15 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; 16 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. 17 When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. 18 I will open rivers on the bare 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. 19 I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together, 20 that they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.

41:1, 5 *coastlands*. Gentile nations. (TLSB)

Refers to all nations. (Luther)

The opening verses of this chapter turn our attention to the nations and islands who worship idols. (PBC)

41:1 Gentile nations are called into the courtroom before the Lord and given the chance to renew their strength, just as Israel is given that opportunity in 40:31. (TLSB)

listen in silence – As if to say, "Two cannot speak at once." Ungodliness wants to do the speaking all by itself, as Ps. 12:4 shows: "With our tongue we will prevail." Now the prophet taunts them: "If you have finished chattering, listen to me for a change and let me have my say. I will give you an example

against your presumption, and that is, *Listen to me in silence.*” It is as if he were saying: “Give me a chance to speak above your noise.” (Luther)

renew their strength. See 40:31. The nations and their gods are challenged to display the same power and wisdom as Israel’s God (see vv. 21–24). (CSB)

“Renew” is said of a dress, namely, when one garment is taken off and another is put on. It is as if he were saying: “Clothe yourselves with another kind of strength. Let us see what you can do, and give us an example. (Luther)

draw near for judgment. The question is simple: Who is ultimately in charge of world events? (TLSB)

The prophet summons his opponents as to a judgment. “Put forth your case. I will put forth mine too, and I will begin.” (Luther)

The scene appears to be some kind of court for settling differences. (PBC)

41:2 *one from the east.* Cyrus the Great, king of Persia (559–530 B.C.), who conquered Babylon in 539 and issued the decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem (see Ezr 1:1–4; 6:3–5). Cyrus is referred to also in v. 25; 44:28–45:5, 13; 46:11. (CSB)

Identity of the one stirred up for service is intentionally vague. It might mean Abraham, Moses, Joshua, or someone else. It certainly fits the Persian king Cyrus (cf 44:28; 45:1). After becoming king of Persia and Media, Cyrus marched west to Lydia on the coast of the Great Sea, subduing it and all intervening peoples. In campaigns “from the north” (41:25), he conquered Babylon. (TLSB)

All of these events occurred about 150 years after the time in which Isaiah lived and wrote. When Isaiah wrote (about 700 BC), Babylon had not yet become a Mideastern superpower. (PBC)

gives up nations before him. Lit, “gives before him nations,” as though casting them down to trample them. (TLSB)

tramples kings. Such as Croesus king of Lydia in Asia Minor. (CSB)

his bow. The Persians were renowned for their ability as archers. (CSB)

41:3 *he pursues them* – He chases after them, he drives them away from their supplies and their booty. (Luther)

passes on safely – Brings back some of the spoils. That is the God for me, this weak God! He proceeds in a gentle manner as if the way had not touched him at all. This is shown by the words. (Luther)

feet have not trod – He moved along easily as if he were flying, as it is said of a long trip, “the way was like lovers’ lane,” indicating the ease of a journey when the travelers are joyful. (Luther)

Conqueror’s advance was so swift that his feet did not seem to touch the paths leading to his victims. (TLSB)

41:4 *done this* – Here the prophet again adduces an example. For God may appear weak for a time, but soon He looks like a different person, one who becomes a whole immense sea out of one drop. Even so

Christ seemed like a drop on the cross, but when He rose from the dead, the whole world was as nothing before Him. (Luther)

calling the generations. Into existence and to face His judgment. (TLSB)

from the beginning. Generation means an age, the duration of one span. In Hebrew generation refers to duration of men, a lifetime. So here: “Who has ever in a whole lifetime, who has ever from the beginning, heard of such things as I am doing? When I call, all the kingdoms rise; on the contrary, when I, God, do not call, they are scattered.” Here you may surely know that all things happen among the nations as a result of God’s calling. (Luther)

first ... with the last. Since the Lord was present with the first of the generations and will still be there with the last of them, he is the eternal Lord of history and nations (see Heb 13:8; Rev 1:8, 17; 2:8; 21:6; 22:13). (CSB)

The Lord’s sovereign power is again affirmed. He is the first (40:28) and will be with the last ones of the earth. (TLSB)

Noah was the first in relation to those who came after him but the last in relation to Adam. So we are the last in view of our ancestors and the first in the view of our descendants. This God has established the limits of kingdoms and rulers for all, as Acts 17:28 says, “In Him we have our being.” Just as all kingdoms have their boundaries, they will not go one thread beyond them. (Luther)

I am he – The Lord predates the beginning of history and will continue to exist after the last of temporal things has ceased to be (443:10-13). In all this, He does not change. (TLSB)

41:5–7 By 546 B.C. Cyrus had fought his way victoriously to the west coast of Asia Minor, where his leading opponent was Croesus king of Lydia. Sarcasm and satire are used in the description of the frantic efforts in vv. 6–7—all of them futile (cf. 40:19–20). (CSB)

41:5 *coastlands have seen...afraid* – He is saying that although the nations had seen these things, they were not converted but hardened. (Luther)

have drawn near and come – The prophet is describing them by means of an illustration. There they go. All of them draw near, the one goes to the goldsmith, another to the carpenter. One builds the church, the other the roof. All of them gather together and want to protect their god. They put their heads together and plot, as we see it today in our time. Although they see that all honor is lost, they do not want to stop. (Luther)

drawn near. Distant nations gather in panic at Cyrus’s advance. (TLSB)

41:6–7 The coastlands feel panic but continue to finish work on their idols to make them firm before God’s presence (cf 1Sm 5:1–5). (TLSB)

41:6 *Be strong!* These words are spoken by humans to humans; they are little more than wishful thinking. The words have no underlying support and do not come from any position of strength. One human tells another; the encouragement rises to nothing more than a pep talk. Keep these words in mind when reading the encouragement God gives His people. (PBC)

41:7 *hammer*. He is describing the method of the craftsman's art. These men use large hammers to flatten out the gold. In many places the clang of hammer on anvil is heard. The prophet employs an illustration to say that the smith has also brought other masters together to adorn their own god with gold and silver plating. They put in much work to adorn their god. (Luther)

strengthens it with nails –That is, “he has tacked it down, because that wretched god is so impotent that he must be nailed down so that he may appear to stand.” Thus the prophet refers to their zeal, perseverance, and hard work. In setting up their idol the ungodly do not stop attacking the true God. (Luther)

41:8–9 *my servant*. A significant term in chs. 41–53, referring sometimes to the nation of Israel and other times to an individual. In these passages the title refers to one who occupies a special position in God's royal administration of his kingdom, as in “my servant Moses” (Ex 14:31; Nu 12:7), “my servant David” (2Sa 3:18; 7:5, 8), “my servants the prophets” (2Ki 17:13; Jer 7:25). (CSB)

Unmerited distinction for Abraham and his offspring to be chosen of all families of the earth and to be given a role in God's eternal plan of salvation. However, despite many spiritual and material blessings conferred on it, Israel turned out to be a disobedient servant – so deaf to God's guidance and so blind to His goodness that “He poured on him the heat of His anger” (42:18-25). Chastened, forgiven, redeemed from the Babylonian exile, Israel would again render service necessary for the coming of that Servant of the Lord who would be obedient to death (52:13-53:12). (TLSB)

The text must be construed adversatively. Though we are oppressed by our enemies, we have the solace of the Spirit, as if he were saying, “Let the ungodly have their triumph. Let them assert themselves as noisily as they wish.” *But you, Israel, My servant*. Here he indicates, as it were, the reason why they are persecuted. It is as if He were saying: “Because I appear to be a weak God, and yet they can do Me no harm, they persecute you, My servants.” Let each one, then, know that in his calling he is a servant of Christ, let not a wavering conscience cause doubts whether he is a servant of God. Therefore he must above all determine that he can say with a firm conscience that he is a servant of God, although he is a weak sinner. Because of the Holy Spirit's work and help we are nevertheless servants of God, and therefore it is necessary for all, especially for those who wanted to be the teachers of others, to believe firmly that they are servants of God and to expel every feeling of uncertainty. (Luther)

41:8 *But*. In contrast to the nations of vv. 5–7, Israel does not need to be afraid (v. 10). (CSB)

Now follows a torrent of consolations. If there were only one verse of this consolation, of which in fact there are more than 40, that one verse should be enough to revive a person. (Luther)

Israel – When God calls His people “Israel” or “Jacob,” He takes them back to their origins. (PBC)

I have chosen – The Lord reminds Israel of His past promises by calling Abraham (Gn 12:1-3) and entering into an everlasting covenant with him (Gn 15; 17:7). Dt 7:7-8 indicates that divine election is a pure gift; Israel has done nothing to deserve this status. (TLSB)

friend. † See Ge 18; 2Ch 20:7; Jas 2:23. (CSB)

Abraham was given the same title in 2Ch 20:7; Jas 2:23. (TLSB)

These are the loftiest and most agreeable consolations, as the terrors induced by Satan are the bitterest. God calls Abraham by the most attractive name. God promises him that all of us who walk in the

footsteps of Abraham's faith are his offspring and God's friends. *Jacob* must be applied not only to the Jews but to all believers. You are "offspring of Abraham, My friends." To hear someone call you "friend, elect servant" should make a person leap for joy. (Luther)

41:9 *I took ... called.* Abraham originally came from Ur, near the natural boundaries of the Persian Gulf and Zagros mountains.. (TLSB)

farthest corners. The word "took" is equivocal. It means "grasp," "lay hold of," "hold fast." Some say, "I have made you strong." Our translation reads, "I took you," as if to say, "I speak to you, the One who once led you out and called you. I am the God who led you forth by the hand of your fathers." This also applies to the apostles: "You are My friends, servants, etc.," by virtue of the office they have. Then He calls to mind the blessings which He had first given to the fathers. (Luther)

you are my servant – This pertains to the title. Then follows the comfort. It is the kind of name a father would give his son: "You are my son, I am your father. I have raised you and taken care of you, etc." By these names he reminds him of his blessings. (Luther)

Israel was to act as a kingdom of priests to the world (cf Ex 19:5–6). At Sinai, Israel is distinctly marked and empowered to be evangelistic; the nation is commissioned to be the go-between concerning the Lord and the nations. (TLSB)

41:10 *not fear ... be dismayed.* So God spoke to His servants of old (Abraham, Gn 15:1; Isaac, Gn 26:24; Joshua, Jsh 1:5–9). Because our sinful nature is hesitant to believe that there is nothing whatsoever to fear if God says, "I am with you," He must say again and again, "Fear not," and thus strengthen our faith. (TLSB)

Even though the people are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, Yahweh commands them not to fear. "Do not fear" appears in a variety of settings in the OT. Its use here parallels its use in accounts of Israel's confrontation with enemies at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:13-14) as well as during the conquest (e.g. Josh 8:1-2; 11:6). Now Yahweh promises that Israel's foes will again be defeated. His people need not do a thing, only trust (Ps. 46:10). Yahweh will handle their two most pressing problems. Through Cyrus, he will defeat Babylon (Ch.47), and through the Suffering Servant, he will atone for their sin and conquer even death (53:10-12). (CC)

As God's people endured their captivity, they could easily despair. They might look around anxiously, wondering what peril or threat was next. (PBC)

Now follows the comfort. It refers to the New Testament. These are promises. *Fear not.* "Be not afraid, speak up freely against the fear of the flesh which asks, 'Should I not be afraid when I am in the midst of evil men and persecutors?' " These people, who are timid and despairing and despised within and without, God encourages here so that they may say vigorously and without fear, "In remarkable ways Satan afflicts and torments us inside and out, and this is the cause of our fear." But God consoles them: "Fear not, because you are not alone, just as no Christian is alone even outwardly," as Christ says, John 16:22. This is the grace and glow of the Word and the consolation of the godly, to know that they are not alone, although there appear to be afflictions and a sense of fear; fears within and fightings without. Therefore God consoles them: "You must look at the person who is speaking, who calls back the person who is desperate and crushed to the lowest hell: Reflect on the circumstances of the dangers in which we are, and then think of the person of God who is saying to you, 'I am with you.' What does that mean? That 'I' is worth more than 100,000 princes and kings. Cling to Me. Do not give in to evils. Though you are a sinner, I will protect you. Just don't give in, though Satan comes at you with his onslaught." Satan assails us in a twofold manner, by force and by perseverance. Whom he cannot strike down by force he

torments by continuous pressure and perseverance. “Just hold fast, because I, too, am persistent. I can be at your side with power, might, and strength.” For this reason the Word must be preached constantly because of the persistence and tricks of Satan, who is always after us and always walks about alertly. Away with those who say, “I now know, I have heard the Word enough,” only to fall into smugness. It is then that Satan returns. He can act very shrewdly. He can leave you when you strike him with the Word, but after a week, a month, or a quarter year he comes back and stabs you mortally through fornication, wrath, etc. Therefore a Christian must always be on his guard. For that reason God says *Fear not*. “Don’t go soft, because I am persistent. Just cling to the Word. We will be a match for the devil.” (Luther)

For I am with. The promise implies taking someone’s side in a way that brings protection, support, deliverance and success, and engenders the response of confidence and courage rather than fear, and obedience rather than resistance. God’s commitment to be present with his people goes back to the book of Exodus, where he first assures Moses at the burning bush, “I will be with you” (Ex. 3:12). Matthew begins his Gospel with an account of Jesus’ miraculous conception and birth in fulfillment of Is. 7:14, with its promise of Immanuel, “God with us.” When Christ returns, believers will enjoy his presence perfectly and eternally. “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man...God himself will be with them” (Rev. 21:3). (CC)

God dispels their fear with the promise that he is with them and is their God, that is, he is next to them and pledges to remain with them as a powerful source of help.

strengthen ... help you. How different these words are from the words of encouragement that the nations spoke to one another in verse 6. There one human being encouraged another human being to be strong in the face of difficulty. (We are in this altogether) But these words are spoken to humans by God. He can actually do something about their situation. This God promises to strengthen, help, and uphold his people. Notice how the comfort piles up. (PBC)

“Because I am with you. I am your strength. Your strength amounts to nothing; it will easily evaporate. I am your strength and your authority.” He does not only say, “I will strengthen you,” but also, “I will help you,” that is, “I will attend you incessantly, so that you do not go soft.” (Luther)

I will uphold you – This beautifully brings the supreme comfort to a close. He uses a new word, *I will uphold you*. Christ grants the strength of His own righteousness to all believers and descends on the wretchedness of all who rely on their righteousnesses. Therefore he says here: “Only the righteousness of Christ, which is His own, this alone helps you against all enemies.” There he indicates that the Christian man is especially distressed by his own righteousnesses or is even perplexed by sins, his own and those of others and false ones. Day and night Satan is busy making sinners afraid, and with endless devices he assails this citadel, a happy conscience. That is something he cannot endure. But Christ fortifies this citadel against all the assaults and endless schemes of Satan. “Do not be confused, do not fear sins, and do not rely on your righteousness, but walk the middle way. Grasp My righteousness, and cling to it alone.” (Luther)

right hand. A hand of power and salvation (see Ex 15:6, 12; Ps 20:6; 48:10; 89:13; 98:1). (CSB)

Yahweh promises that, with the same right hand he employed against Egypt (Ex. 15:6, 12), he will uphold Israel. (CC)

The final words emphasize and underscore the comfort. The right hand represents power and strength. The right hand represents power and strength. (PBC)

righteous right hand. Yahweh's hand is "righteous" or "just," recalling how he accounted "righteous" to Abraham and justified him through faith alone (Gen. 15:6). (CC)

Yahweh's righteous right hand will uphold servant Israel so that the people will not stumble (cf. 40:30-32). His intervention will bring about victory through Cyrus, whom he calls in "righteousness." (41:2). Yahweh's greatest gift of righteousness comes through the vicarious suffering and death of his Servant, which makes many righteous through faith (53:11). (CC)

God's powerful hand is righteous. Righteous means "right, correct, straight, appropriate, and proper." In righteousness God had determined to bring about the deliverance of all humanity for sin, death, and hell. He had promised to do so and would remain faithful to all those promises. God would remain righteous – right, true, straight – in carrying out the details of that promised deliverance. (PBC)

As events unfolded in the dark days of captivity, the generations after Isaiah could return to these words and find comfort. God had not deserted them. They would return from captivity, and God would fulfill all the promises he had made to his dear friend Abraham. They need not fear or be anxious about anything at all. (PBC)

Any Christian can read these words and find rich comfort. Believers can turn to the Lord for comfort, knowing that the Lord stands behind these words.

"My righteousness has a right hand and has strength enough to help you." Satan, however, attempts to seduce us by means of our own righteousness, and by this deceit he safely hides himself. Therefore he must be opposed especially by the Gospel, which plunders him and makes him naked. This light of the Gospel strips him, and for that reason he fights against the Gospel and its servants with every device at his command. But here God comforts his own. *I will uphold you with My victorious right hand.* Now follows the second part of the consolation. We have heard those consoling words by which God promises to be at hand, to strengthen and encourage, and by that Word He makes us firm against that righteousness of ours. This righteousness has from the beginning caused all the ungodly from Cain down to the present to fall, leading them to choose certain works for themselves and departing from the true faith. This is the common pestilence of all the ungodly, that they boast of their own righteousness. But these words apply to the strengthening of our faith. Here we must struggle and labor to kill the flesh so that its own righteousness may not raise its head. (Luther)

God's right hand fights for His people in power, while with His left hand He holds the right hand of His child Israel. (TLNB)

Numbers 11:23, *The LORD answered Moses, "Is the LORD's arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you."*

Numbers 11:21 *six hundred thousand men on foot.* The numbers are consistent: A marching force of this size suggests a total population of over 2,000,000 (see note on 1:46). Moses' distress at providing meat for this immense number of people (v. 22) is nearly comical—the task is impossible. (CSB)

41:11–12 *all ... those.* The nations. (TLNB)

41:11 *be ashamed and disgraced.* Cf. 45:17; 50:7; 54:4. (CSB)

Here again there is great abundance. Not only will you stand fast in your conscience and your faith, but you will also overcome your enemies, celebrate a triumph over them, and, beyond that, make them subject to you. Three things are embraced: We shall be established, we shall be protected, and we shall

triumph over our enemies. There he is dealing with the fight of the Word and faith, which we wage against Satan, against the wise and exalted of this world. Against these we must fight not with the sword but with the Word. Therefore he says here that for adversaries you have the flesh which makes you weak, the world and its wisdom, and Satan with all his accomplices. The Christian is a great soldier. If he should defeat one enemy, the flesh, the world is there to attack and contradict you. In endless ways it will oppose you as a heretic, a rebel, or a subversive, it will harass you with supreme disgrace, while from another side all the rulers of this world, kings, princes, and intelligentsia, will be against you, as we see today. This is the supreme offense, to be opposed by such splendid and influential people. Yet their end will be disgrace. At first appearance everything looks glorious, and the enemies see nothing less than glow. This is the Hebrew way of writing, that is, in the opposite direction. Therefore the conscience thinks otherwise. When God says, "I will help you," conscience replies, "I feel someone crushing me." When God says, "I will be with you," it seems to me like, "You go away, Satan is with me." Summary: All things seem the opposite of what they are. All things are borne with a confused disgrace. (Luther)

shall be as nothing. This is grand language. It signifies that our opponents are vigorous men, not sluggish, as they initiate indictments and charges against us. For the moment things look like this: They who strive against you seem to be everything, while you are nothing. You must read all these words in the opposite direction, like Hebrew. In the beginning the situation is different from what is promised. (Luther)

41:12 *you shall seek* – This is taken from Ps. 37:36: "Again I passed by, and ... he could not be found." Study that passage, where the ungodly are compared with Lebanon and its tallest cedars. The godly man is strong, while even the greatest of the ungodly vanish away. (Luther)

as nothing at all – The prophet depicts all these things on a grand scale. These men shall perish in disgrace. They shall be confounded and brought to naught. Faith and the Word are led back to these great truths. (Luther)

41:13 *hold your right hand.* To strengthen them and keep them from stumbling. (CSB)

It is as if He were saying: "I am your Lord God, who has first established you through faith." Then that faith progresses and confesses, and it strengthens and teaches others also. Here the litigation of the whole world begins, but do not be afraid. *For I hold your right hand.* "You cannot move this hand of yours unless I take hold of it. I bless and promote your work." (Luther)

fear not. Here again He calls us away from our own strength and the size of our enemies, as if to say, "Listen, I am with you, although your opponents are many and your resources are few." You have God as your Helper, that is, according to His Word, although according to appearance things look quite different. *I will help you.* Faith has no other object than the pure Word, even though all indications are to the contrary. (Luther)

41:14 *worm.* A reference to their feeble and despised condition in exile (cf. Job 25:6). (CSB)

Israel is compared to a worm, and their enemies to mountains (v 15). Only with the Lord can such a worm crush such mountains. (TLSB)

Compared to the events and personalities of world history, God's people were little. Next to Cyrus and the great Persian Empire, they were insignificant. They were a little nation that could easily be consumed by the surrounding empires, as robins snatch worms from the ground. (PBC)

I am the one who helps – “Not only will you be protected, but you are bound to be victors over the victorious and to celebrate triumphs over the strong.” This is a remarkable thing, that the worm is to conquer a large and highly intelligent army. (Luther)

Redeemer.† Deliverer from Babylonian exile (in a new exodus). The Hebrew for this word refers to an obligated family protector and thus portrays the Lord as the Family Protector of Israel. He is related to Israel as Father (63:16; 64:8) and Husband (54:5). (CSB)

Occurring more than 10 times in the following chapters, this comforting title of God describes what He must do to rescue His helpless people. (TLSB)

Holy One of Israel.† The title occurs with “Redeemer” also in 43:14; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5. The two terms together suggest the doctrine of the redemption of sin through Christ. (CSB)

41:15 *threshing sledge*. Cf. 28:27; Mic 4:13; Hab 3:12. (CSB)

Formed with several heavy timbers tied together, with sharp rocks or metal driven into its underside; used to separate grain from husks and stalks. Figure of speech likens the destruction of nations (cf 25:10) or enemies (e.g., 2Ki 13:7; Am 1:3–5) to the same physical circumstances as grain when it is threshed. Israel’s enemies will be worn, crushed, and scattered to the winds. (TLSB)

“Not only are you protected by believing the Word, but you will also completely lord it over your enemies and crush them, remembering that yours will be a victory of the Word, not of the sword.” These are emphatic words in the likeness of a thresher. Different regions have a variety of threshing methods. In the Holy Scriptures we most often find threshing by the hooves of oxen, a threshing sledge with teeth, new and sharp on both sides. The Hebrew word is *הַפִּיפִּי*. We call it two-edged. It must be a sharp threshing sledge, toothed on both sides, like a harrow. This must have been the sharpest kind of threshing. It appeared in the time of the apostles, who obviously threshed mountains and hills with a sledge. *New and having teeth*, that is, double-edged. The Word of the Gospel is most powerful and best equipped for putting our own righteousness to shame, as with a toothed sledge. Read the Acts of the Apostles. There you will see how the apostles thresh away (Acts 13, 14, 15). All righteousness and law is nothing. There the apostles strike down the proudest piety and righteousness with one word. “Why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples?” (Acts 15:10). (Luther)

That is, “you will be My best equipped tool,” by the Word alone, not with the sword, as we did up to now. Thus we say, “Your wisdom is folly, your power is impotence, your church is confusion. Christ’s power, wisdom, and glory alone prevail.” This is what thorough threshing means. As the farmer threshes the grain he has gathered for himself, so the Gospel has mountains and hills which it beats and threshes for the sake of the straw. The Holy Spirit and the prophet trample, thresh, and grind up the whole world and its righteousness, which are mountains. (Luther)

mountains ... hills. Probably represents the nations. See 2:14. (CSB)

These are the elite of the world, who rely on their own works. They are all the sects and powers and righteousness of the world. The Gospel moves in among those mountains and threshes them. This, then, makes us secure, so that we do not despair in the face of the size of our enemies. (Luther)

make the hills like chaff. All who oppose God and His truth will become like so much chaff that the wind drives away. Those who strive against God, His people, and His truth will become nothing. (PBC)

41:16 *winnow*. A figure of judgment used also in Jer 51:2. (CSB)

Every obstacle in “the way of the LORD” (40:3) will dissipate. (TLSB)

So we do the threshing first, and then we separate and winnow the ungodly from the godly. (Luther)

tempest. Storm or tornado. (TLSB)

glory. Once helped, Israel will become a vehicle for the Lord to bless the nations so they will give glory to Israel’s God (43:10; 45:20–23; 48:20; 49:6; 52:10; 56:6–8; 60:1–3; 66:18–19). (TLSB)

rejoice. That is, “you shall boast and be truculent and defiant in doctrine and the Word and in His righteousness, not in our own glory.” (Luther)

41:17–20 Cf 40:3–5. (TLSB)

41:17 *poor and needy*. Israel in exile or on the way home (cf. v. 14; 32:7). (CSB)

Beyond help in war, the Lord also provides for the daily needs of His people. Alludes to Israelites in the wilderness after the exodus. Cf Ex 15:22–27; 17:1–7; Nu 20:2–13. (TLSB)

When God’s people rejoice, it does not mean that they will never experience difficulty. In captivity, God’s people would be in desperate condition – poor, needy, thirsty, lonely. They would find no relief. (PBC)

will answer. Just as God had delivered His people in their bondage to Egypt centuries earlier, He would hear their prayers and deliver them from Babylon. (PBC)

41:18 *rivers ... on bare heights*.† There are no limits to the help “the poor and needy” (v. 17) can expect. Nature springs into action at God’s command (cf. Ps 107:33). (CSB)

Nature springs into action at God’s command. (TLSB)

Both the victories and the ends of this conflict are the opposite of what we expect, because he is speaking of thirst and dryness. The promise is made allegorically. The more thirst and dryness there was, the more abundance and moisture there will be. (Luther)

midst valleys – He is speaking of flat land. In Hebrew fiat land is the name for places situated in the plain, producing nothing, with no pasture or arable land, not places where there are farms and fields. Therefore he says here, “in the midst of the fields,” where there is nothing but sand and thirst and heat, in such places there shall be fountains and rivers. This is what it means to do everything out of desperation. Where formerly we would have said, “Nothing can possibly grow in a place like this,” there everything should now grow most abundantly. Our consciences are truly “fields” like that, where we see nothing but God’s wrath and no grace. Yet in spite of everything we shall win. With God’s weapons the fiery darts of the evil one (Eph. 6:16) will not strike you, as Paul shows. Remember, then, that Christ is the victor for you against the world, against heretic, flesh, and all demons. This alone must be your boast, that Christ is king and that His glow and righteousness must be promoted, while we simply take off our shoes and cling to His Word. (Luther)

pool of water – Where he locates nothing but the most hopeless and trackless desert, there shall be rains and rivers. Likewise, when our situation is utterly desperate, we must not despair, because the

greater the trial, the greater a blessing will follow. Where formerly there was not one drop of water, I will give rains and fountains gushing forever. Therefore, the more we are afflicted, the more we have hope, not in ourselves but in God. (Luther)

41:19 These trees will beautify the desert (cf. 35:1–2). Several are named in 60:13 in connection with adorning the place of God’s sanctuary. Acacia wood was used for the tabernacle (Ex 25:5, 10, 13). The pine tree and myrtle replace thorns and briars in 55:13. (CSB)

We shall first look at the grammar. Many words expressing given entities are confused. The names of colors are all perverted too. Thus we call gold red, although it is hardly reddish. So also the names of trees are mixed up. Here he names unfruitful trees, trees that are commonly large and tall. But the smaller trees, such as grape vines and cherry and apple trees, are the fruitful ones. The taller specimens are unfruitful. The text has “acacia”; we have translated the Hebrew עֵץ־אֶרְזִי with “fir tree.” We may well speak of those that have resin as not rotting. The ark was built of such wood. (Luther)

cypress – This is the statement. The discussion is about the extremely wretched thirst of the heart. This is the despair of conscience, a despair that brings forth blasphemies against God, as the experienced well know. Here He offers consolation for these trials, because He wants to take them away when despair is at its height. It is as if He were saying: “I will surely recall them, not only by supplying an abundance of water, but I will also gently lead them in shady places along the rivers which are most agreeably sweet. I will not give them seasonal rains and huts that will collapse, but I will give them a permanent water supply and eternal houses of trees full of branches; that is, as before they were engulfed in endless trials, so now they shall be refreshed in lasting strength.” After that lasting affliction, “he seeks water, and there is none,” there will follow a time of unending consolation, as these allegories indicate. The Psalms are full of these statements, that in all trials we see that there is no end. “There is none.” (Luther)

41:20 *they may see* – The Holy One of Israel does these things in order that His saints may see and know and consider. God does this in order to recall us from ourselves back to Himself. For that reason God sends a variety of trials, heresies, and the cross in order to train His own and mortify them in their own righteousness and presumption. Therefore He piles up words, *that men may see and know, may consider and understand together*. I can teach them in no other way than through such a cross as “the Holy One of Israel has created. (Luther)

consider and understand – And may place it on their heart, and grasp and feel *that the hand of the Lord has done this*. That is a real school of afflictions and continuing conflicts. (Luther)

created it.† These fruitful conditions result from God’s new creation in behalf of his people. (CSB)

41:1–20 The Lord lowers the nations but prepares for Israel’s restoration. Today, follow where the Lord leads, according to the teachings of His Word. He will take you by the hand and walk with you to clear the way, so great is His mercy in Christ. • Lord Jesus, at the Father’s right hand, sanctify me and guide my steps, that I walk like Abraham, Your friend. Amen. (TLSB)

The Futility of Idols

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

41:21 *set forth your case* – A new chapter ought to begin here. For above, having rejected their idols, he called them tauntingly to judgment, as before he had taunted them with the works of God. So now he taunts them with the Word of God. “Surely you will not say such things to me,” as if to say, “All the things you have done are lies. However, our God does what He says.” Here, then, the prophet taunts them with the Word and speech. “Surely you will not imitate Him with works and bring a tree into being, but with words (Luther)

Recalls 1:2, where the heavens and the earth are called to the heavenly courtroom to be witnesses against Israel (cf v 1; Hos 4:1; Mi 6:1). (TLSB)

bring your proofs – The second argument: He ridicules them from the viewpoint of the Word. It is as if he were saying: “You have gods, but they have no word and they do nothing.” Our God, however, both speaks and acts. None of the pagan idols could speak but were dumb or spoke in double-meaning oracles. (Luther)

King of Jacob. The Lord is ruler of Jacob’s descendants, the Israelites. (TLSB)

41:22 *them.* Nations and their idols (v 23). (TLSB)

former things. Earlier predictions or accomplishments. (CSB)

Cf 14:26–27, where the Lord insists He has a plan for the nations that cannot be thwarted. (TLSB)

things to come – All divine prophecies are based on the First Commandment, if we believe that God is our protector. These are general divine promises. There are also specific promises, such as the one concerning the deliverance through King Cyrus. It is of these prophecies regarding distinct persons and places that the prophet is speaking here, and these are prophecies difficult to believe. The general promises, however, spring from faith in the First Commandment. God is the preserver, etc., therefore He will set me free; this is the conclusion drawn from a general promise. (Luther)

41:23 Asking for a prediction of the future, specifically the Lord’s use of Cyrus. Cf 45:1, 13.

TELL US WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS – I take this to refer to a new kind of prophecy, that they begin to predict new things. It is as if the prophet were saying: “Have you anything more in your books to foretell? Set it forth! But you cannot do it.” Either kind of prophecy is impossible for them, whether from Scripture or outside of Scripture. “Is there anybody among you who can prophesy either from Scripture or apart from Scripture? If so, we will hear him. We predict the future. Your prophecies concern the present, and already you are boasting, sneering, and rejoicing while you say that as it is now, so it will remain forever.” But that prophecy of theirs is empty. (Luther)

gods. Unless the idols can interpret history (“the former things”) and foretell the future (“what is to come hereafter”), their claim to deity is a fraud. (TLSB)

Do good or do harm. Here the prophet again challenges them to show forth the good and the bad they do. He is here not speaking of a moral work, of merit, but of a work with good and evil effects, as if to say, “you are breathing out hatred and threats. Let us see whether you are able to do good or bad. We shall see whether you can confirm your affairs and destroy ours, for such is your effort.” Let us see the endeavors of the heathen who try to benefit their own people. Those benefits did not endure. (Luther)

41:24 *you.* Idols. (TLSB)

less than nothing ...abomination. Like the nations that worship them. “All of your designs and words, your oracles and your deeds, are nothing.” In Hebrew the word for “work” is equivocal. It is used to designate both the work and the reward, as, “the work of the farmer is the harvest.” So it is used above (Is. 40:10): “Behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him.” So here *your work*, that is, the result and fruit you are hoping for, amounts to nothing. Thus he says here *you are nothing*, that is, “all your plans and labors are for nothing,” and *your work*, that is, “the yield,” amounts to nothing. (Luther)

41:25 *stirred up.* “I promise and I threaten, and then it happens. When I speak, it happens accordingly.” (Luther)

from the north. Cyrus came from the east (v. 2) but conquered a number of kingdoms north of Babylon early in his reign. From the perspective of a Palestinian writer, invasions came primarily from the north (see 14:31; Jer 1:14; 6:1, 22; 10:22; 46:20; 50:3, 9, 41; 51:48). (CSB)

Cyrus (the Lord’s shepherd, cf 44:28). Cyrus came from Persia, east of Babylon; his conquest of Babylon would have spread into Judah from the north. (TLSB)

shall call upon my name. Cyrus used the Lord’s name in his decree (Ezr 1:2) but did not acknowledge him (see 45:4–5). (CSB)

In his proclamation permitting the exiled Israelites to return to their homeland, Cyrus said, “The Lord, the God of heaven has... charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem” (Ez 1:2). (TLSB)

trample... mortar ... clay. Similar to Assyria in 10:6. Cf. Na 3:14; Mic 7:10. (CSB)

41:26 *from the beginning.* Before these events began to unfold (cf. v. 4). (CSB)

it. Prophecy about Cyrus. (TLSB)

41:27 *here they are.* Words about the deliverance from Babylon. (CSB)

they. Glad tidings. (TLSB)

Not only did the Lord predict what He would accomplish, He also recorded it for the sake of His people. (PBC)

herald of good news. Isaiah serves as God’s recording secretary in this debate with the nations and the idols. (PBC)

41:28 *no one.* The court case concludes; the Gentiles have no one who will speak on their behalf. Their idols are only a delusion of sinful humanity. The Lord, therefore, is the only means of salvation (43:12; 50:2; 59:16; 63:3). (TLSB)

This is taunting and gloating whereby the prophet ridicules the helplessness of his opponents. I have the power, they have none. There is no prophet to teach. There is no wise counselor who could educate, and if anyone who has doubts and questions wants further information, no one is able to speak. These are most appropriate words in opposition to human powers and teachings, which cannot guide one conscience or give it counsel or offer one reliable piece of advice and judgment. Always, even in their firmest opinions, their heart throbs, because they have no sure answer according to the Word. (Luther)

among these. No gods could have instructed the Creator (40:13). (TLSB)

41:29 *they.* Idols. (TLSB)

are nothing. In Hebrew we read יִרְאָה, “delusion,” “futility,” because all their teachings and regulations are *empty wind*. There is nothing firm there, but everything is empty. They themselves are useless, and all their plans are as empty as the wind. This is the tragedy, that all their endeavors thus become of no account. (Luther)

41:21–29 The Lord puts the nations and their idols on trial and finds them wanting. Believers today should not put their confidence in the message of false prophets, horoscopes, or other means of predicting the future, but should judge all things according to the Word. The Lord, your King, will silence all accusations against you and declare you free in Christ. • O Lord, silence my accusers, and grant me confidence to follow Your Word, which proves itself true again and again. Amen. (TLSB)