

3. The Delusion of Trusting other gods

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[0 : 0 0] Now, as I say, we've been looking at this great chapter, Isaiah 41, which you can find on page 601. This week we're looking at the final part of the chapter, verses 21 to 29, but I'd like to read the whole chapter to put that in context.

In Isaiah 41, God, the Lord, is speaking, and he's summoning the nations of the world, he's summoning the individuals in those nations to come and listen to him, and to listen to what he has to say about the world, and to encourage us to look at the world, as I say, as God sees it. So, God speaking in Isaiah 41, verse 1, Listen to me in silence, O coastlands. Let the peoples renew their strength. Let them approach, let them speak.

Let us together draw near for judgment. 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.

[1 : 1 6] Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning, I, the Lord, the first, and with the last, I am he.

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 with the anvil. Seeing of the soldering, it is good, and they strengthen it with nails so that it cannot be moved.

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 furthest 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.

[2 : 1 7] 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 wage war against you shall be as nothing at all, but 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 and the Holy One of Israel. You shall glory.

[3 : 2 1] 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.

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. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive.

I will set in the desert the cypress, the plain, and the pine together, 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. Set forth your case, says the Lord. Bring your proof, 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?

[4 : 22] That we may know you are gods. Do good or do harm. That we may be dismayed and terrified. Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing.

An abomination is he who chooses you. 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 tremble on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay, who declared it from the beginning, that we might know one before him.

That we might say, he is right. There was none who declared it, none who proclaimed, none who heard your words. I was the first to say to Zion, behold, here they are, and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news.

But when I look, there is no one among these. There is no counselor who, when I ask, gives an answer. Behold, they are all a delusion, and their works are nothing.

Their metal images are empty wind. That is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to our hearts, and to our lives. It's said that one of the most popular viewing things on television is so-called reality television.

[5 : 46] People sit for hours, apparently, and watch all kinds of dysfunctional people sitting on sofas, talking the most boring and platitudinous drivel to each other.

A world which is totally divorced from the reality, in other words, of most of our lives. And you say that idol worship is something that belongs to the past, to the Bible.

Sometimes I think our whole entertainment industry, our whole advertising industry, the whole way in which our civilization works is based on unreality and idolatry.

Think of modern advertising, which encourages us to travel into fantasy land, which encourages us to aspire after all sorts of things, which may not be bad in themselves, may not be wrong in themselves, but encourages us to live in a world of unreality.

Orwell got it wrong, you know. Big Brother is not watching us. However, for the past ten years or so, we have been watching Big Brother in our millions, apparently.

[6 : 55] And indeed, apparently, there are many people in mourning because Big Brother is going to be taken off the screens. And I can't honestly say I feel for them.

Because so much of the modern entertainment industry encourages us to live in a non-real world. Or to put it another way, encourages us to see the world not as God sees it, but the world as we would like to see it.

Now this chapter we've looked at, we looked first of all, two weeks ago, at the danger of ignoring God. In verses 1 to 9. Last week, we looked at the delight of trusting in God.

That's verses 8 to 20. And in our final study, now we're going to look at the delusion of trusting other gods. That's verses 21 to 29.

Now God is summoning the idol worshippers, and indeed the idols, to make their case. Set forth your case, says the Lord. He says, look, if this is the real world you're living in, tell me about it.

[8 : 01] Show me that it's worth living in. Show me that your ideas are true ideas. Set forth your case. Bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob. King of Jacob, an interesting phrase.

We saw already that Jacob is the cheat, the liar, the deceiver, who is transformed by God into a totally new person. In other words, whose eyes were opened from delusions to reality.

And you see, the point about this is, surely, that the gospel is public truth. While we have to come to God as individuals, it's not just simply a private belief that we have, and which we talk about in little huddles.

The gospel is public truth. And God is saying, now look, you idol worshippers, you people who believe in delusions, what's your gospel? Do you have a public gospel that will change lives?

Do you have public truth that will make people wise? Do you have anything that will open people's eyes? Come on now, present it. Speak in the marketplace, if you like, where wisdom, we are told in Proverbs, speaks and cries out, now's your chance, says God to the idols.

[9 : 16] And notice, God is being totally fair. God is saying, look, if you have a case, I'll listen. He's not bullying. See, it's often said that religion actually oppresses people, and very often religion, of course, does, because there's such a thing as man-made religion, which is another form of delusion.

But the gospel liberates. In spite of what people like Richard Dawkins say, the gospel not only opens eyes, but it opens minds. It encourages people to think there is a case to be made.

And in contemporary Britain, it's certainly not the case that it's the gospel who is trying to bully people. It's other ideas which are trying to push out the gospel.

That's the situation then. I want us to look at two things for a few moments. First of all, what I call living in fantasy land, which is verses 22 to 24.

God says, look, you've come to court, now make your case, and I've got two questions to ask you. The first question is this, in verses 22 and 23, can you predict the future?

[10:28] Verse 22, tell us the former thing. Sorry, let them bring and tell us what is to happen. And then in verse 23, tell us what is to come hereafter.

Now the whole business of the occult, horoscopes, Ouija boards, tarot cards, and so on, which is a modern form of idolatry, is an attempt to peer into the future, an attempt to control the future, an attempt to manipulate the future, if you like.

And if you look at the whole history of that kind of thing, throughout, throughout time, and in our own day, it's amazing, the delusions that people will believe in. But of course, the reason why we are so anxious to know the future, is because we feel helpless and vulnerable.

Much of our anxiety comes from uncertainty, doesn't it? We don't know what's going to happen. It may be that, in verse 22, let them tell us what is to happen, means the near future, the immediate future, next months and years, and what is to come hereafter, about the more distant future.

But everything in horoscopes, tarot cards, and so on, is pure trickery and delusion. Whereas, this God is not confined in time and space.

[11:47] He created time, after all. If you look back at Genesis 1, whatever else the seven days mean, it means that God created time. He's in control of the whole course of time.

Now, it's a very natural human thing to feel vulnerable and to fear for the future. And that's where the Gospel has the answer, isn't it? Because this Gospel says the future belongs to God.

Not just the immediate future, but the distant future. And only in trusting in that God, can we escape from fantasy land? Can we have an assurance that we'll go beyond time and go beyond the circumstances of time?

So, can you predict the future? The answer is no. Secondly, can you interpret the past? That's the other question God asks the idol worshippers.

Verse 22, tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome. Now, surely the point of that is not just tell us what happened in the past.

[12:52] That's easy enough. Read the history books, you'll find out what happened in the past. And historians, to some extent, can tell us what happened in the past. When you read history, you find that historians are always disagreeing, they're interpreting, reinterpreting.

There are different goodies and baddies, depending on which history you read. If you read the history of the 20th century, modern politics, then of course you'll find different interpretations.

And if you read contemporary history, listen to the news and so on, there's always different ways of interpreting who are the goodies and who are the baddies. No, what God is saying is not can you tell what happened in the past, but can you interpret what happened in the past?

Can you see where history is going? Can you know what the final result will be? That's what God is saying. And then, they're silent. You can imagine the idol worshippers stand totally silent.

Their idols are totally silent. And he says almost in exasperation, verse 20, do good or do harm. We may be dismayed and terrified.

[14:02] Now, so when God says do good or do harm, he basically says do anything at all.

Because good and harm, good and evil, are a biblical way of talking about everything that there is.

And that's why he says you're nothing. You're less than nothing. And the person who will worship you is distasteful to the Lord because they're escaping into unreality.

So that's the first option. We can live in fantasy land. We can live in the world as we would like it to be rather than the world as it is. We can feed our minds on delusions.

We can feast our eyes on delusions. But ultimately, what will happen? Nothing less than nothing. It will end in tears. It will end in emptiness.

So what's the alternative to living in fantasy land? The alternative is living in the real world. And that's what verses 25 to 29 are about.

[15:03] And that's what the gospel calls us to, to live in the real world. In spite of what critics of the gospel say, it's not calling us to escape into a ghetto.

It's not calling us to some kind of cocoon where nothing can ever harm us. It's saying, open your eyes to the real world. What is God able to do?

And the interesting thing is, God is able to do the very two things that the idol gods cannot do. First of all, he controls history. He doesn't just foretell history.

He controls it. I stirred up one from the north and he has come. Now, in the first study I said that this refers to the Persian king Cyrus who overthrows the Babylonian empire.

Remember, Isaiah is speaking this many hundreds of years before these events actually happen. God has revealed to him the future. He's revealed that God's people are going to go into exile in Babylon.

[16:04] But he's also revealed Babylon is going to disappear and another empire is going to take its place. And he shall call upon my name.

That doesn't mean that Cyrus was actually a believer in the Lord. What it means is, God is saying, look at this Persian emperor. He is actually showing people that I am the Lord because I raised him up.

Not that he himself is a believer. His very actions proclaim that there is a Lord of history. History is coming from somewhere. History means something.

And history is going somewhere. Not like the warlord Tamerlan who boasts in Marlow's play, I hold the fates fast bound in iron chains and with my hands turned fortunes wheel around.

That's probably what Cyrus thought. But what God is saying through the prophet is, in the real world, all these regimes that rise and fall, all the empires and the nations that tread across the world stage, they are all controlled by the Lord of history.

[17:12] And that's why we can trust in this God. That's why instead of living in fantasy land, trusting in delusions, we can trust in this God because he is Lord of the past and of the present and of the future.

But the other thing is he doesn't only control history, he interprets history. Remember the other question, not just do you foretell the future, but can you interpret history? Verse 26, who declared it from the beginning that we might know?

In other words, before all this is happening, he's saying to the prophet, tell this to the people, so that when it happens, they won't be dismayed, they won't be depressed, they won't be discouraged, because they know that the Lord is in charge.

He knows the end from the beginning. He knows exactly how long circumstances will be. Adolf Hitler boasted the Reich would last for a thousand years, and of course we know very well it didn't last anything like that.

But the point is, these warlords who tread on the world stage, filling it with sound and fury and huffing and puffing and posturing, they are simply in the hands of the Lord.

[18:28] Things can change, things do change. So living in the real world means believing in the God who controls history and tells us what it means.

There's one further thing I want to say. There's a point in verse 27, I was the first to say to Zion, behold, here they are, and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news.

In other words, this is not just a theory. This isn't just something to think about and to expand our minds. This is a gospel, this is good news.

And it's good news to the world to go out and tell people that God reigns, to tell people whose lives are in a mess, to tell people who are entangled and facing huge and complex problems.

God is in charge. I was the first to say, behold, here I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news. And when we preach the gospel, when we talk to people about the Lord, that's what we are doing.

[19:30] We are basically saying to them, basically saying to them, the good news is that the Lord of history, the one who will be your judge on the last day, that this God cares for you.

How has he shown he cares for us? He's shown he cares for us by giving us his word, which opens our eyes to reality, and sending his son, the living word, who embodies that.

So, you see, this great chapter, it's not just for ancient, ancient, God's ancient people in the 8th century BC. This is a message for everyone.

Remember back at the beginning, listen to me, O coastlands, let the peoples renew their strength. Coastlands, the distant lands in the west, and the peoples, that's everyone.

This is a message for everyone. Remember the three Ds, the danger of not trusting God. the delight of trusting in him, and finally, the delusion that grips those who do not see the world as God sees it.

[20 : 37] May God bless each one of us here. Open our eyes to the reality of his world, and to the wonder of his gospel. Let's pray. Father, we praise you that the word is not far from us, that you have given to us this glorious gospel.

We have a gospel to proclaim, and that this gospel is one that is available to everyone we meet, everyone we know, and to strangers to the uttermost parts of the earth.

So send us away from here, Father, changed in our hearts and in our lives, and open our eyes, we pray, to see the world as you would have us see it. We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.