

TCC Sunday 5th October 2014 – Fear - Isaiah 40 Isaiah 41v1-29

Title: “No longer crippled by fear”

Purpose: For us to be strengthened in the Christian conviction that God’s people are not to be crippled by fate or by fear.

INTRODUCTION

Great speeches

Franklin D Roosevelt inaugural address speech ...in 1933

“So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is...fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

The truth is that FEAR can be one of the most crippling things in life and being a Christian does not make us automatically IMMUNE or totally INSULATED from FEAR.

But let me say that FEAR has a cousin called FATE that a bit more subtly tends to also paralyse us believing that certain things are unchangeable or unstoppable or even just simply destined to be the way they are!!

Fear can be disabling

One of the hardest things to face is the situation where once you believed yourself to be invincible and then the impossible happened and you were defeated, in fact, completely crushed AND THEN to have to believe that you can rise once again.

This was the psychological and historical profile of the people of God:

- Isaiah had told King Ahaz that Assyria would not prevail
- Isaiah had told King Hezekiah that Assyria would not prevail

And we know something of how the people of Israel were thinking because we have this major prophet called Ezekiel and his prophecy spans the period of time both BEFORE and AFTER the exile.

In chapters 1-24 Ezekiel has a pretty hard time getting the Israelites to believe that they are truly heading for EXILE.

HOWEVER, once the people have in fact gone into exile and are now located in Babylon in chapters 33-48 Ezekiel has an equally hard time convincing them that they will ever emerge out of exile and return to the land.

Structure

Let me say a few words about Isaiah chapter 41 (because being 29 verses long I don't want us to simply get lost in the forest and not be able to see the wood for the trees):

- FIRSTLY in general – when studying any passage – and we tend to go about our bible reading, by picking out chapters and reading one or more chapters each day as part of our discipline of bible reading.

(Let me say, as an aside, that daily bible reading is one of THE most essential parts to living a normal Christian life. If there is one NEGLECT more than any other that I come across as a pastor for the difficulties that Christians experience in their day-to-day Christian lives, it comes down to the fact that at some point they have put aside their daily reading. For some perhaps they had somehow never thought that to read the bible for themselves alone was needed. Perhaps they thought that through some process of SPIRITUAL OSMOSIS they would absorb all the spiritual nutrients they needed for living in this world. However there is no substitute for being able to live normally as a Christian without daily spiritual food and a daily practising of the commands and instructions of the Lord.

As Scripture says (Colossians 3 verse 16) “Let the word of God dwell in you richly...”. Let's face it, the word of God will never dwell in you richly if the only exposure you have to it is on a Sunday and on a Wednesday night during a HouseGroup.)

Well that was an aside – but going back to what I was saying when you read your chapters at the commencement of each new day, it is important to lay hold of some sort of handles on the passage.

It is the easiest thing for the verses to all merge into one big hazy mass which has not the slightest definition and clarity to it.

The necessary solution is to look for CLEAR THEMES that rise up out of the passage.

So here SPECIFICALLY in Isaiah 41 what we notice is that the passage has a lot to say about the subject of FEAR, of being AFRAID and of being DISMAYED as a result.

One example of this would be Verse 10 (but you could look at Verses 13&14 as well) “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

- The SECOND thing to notice (when confronted with a whole chapter) is to see the SECTIONS, and very often a passage will divide down into smaller more MANAGEABLE CHUNKS.

Getting the CHUNK sorted out in your mind is crucial because it means you are working now with smaller pieces.

Not only that if you have a small number of pieces you may well be able to see how the logic of the passage works. How one piece moves across to another.

So speaking specifically now about Isaiah 41 we can see that we have 3 pieces: Verses 1-7, then 8-20 and finally Verses 21-29. And not only that section #1 and section #3 actually overlap very substantially, in fact they are saying very very similar things.

So the end result of, what you might call, "CHECKING OUT THE CHUNKS", is that we realise that Isaiah 41 is exactly like a ploughman's lunch: 2 chunks of bread and a hunk of cheese that is the main juicy ingredient.

Ok, with that said, we are going to cover this chapter under two simple headings:

- God is to be feared (combining Verses 1-7 & Verses 21-29)
- Therefore we need not be afraid (Verses 8-20)

1] Taking CYRUS by the RIGHT HAND – No room for FATE (Verses 1-7 & 21-29)

A courtroom

Now, along with noticing the uppermost themes of a passage and the chunks that are clearly there, one thing that is helpful to do is to look out for the STARTING POINT.

And Verse 1 shows us very clearly that this is a COURTROOM SCENE:

- See how there is a **CALL TO ORDER** – "Be silent before me, you islands!"

It is a bit like **the house of commons** when the Speaker has to say "Order order!!"

- Then we have the **SUMMONS** at the end of Verse 1 "...let us meet together at the place of judgment."

And for the wise, a **SUMMONS** is not something that you should ignore, because it comes backed by all the power of the authorities (the police, the law courts etc.).

- Notice the **ECHO** there in the second line of Verse 1 "Let the nations renew their strength!".

At a minimum, this underlines that what God is calling them to is quite serious and that they need to prepare for the encounter they are about to have.

However, if you just flick back to the verse that ended and underlined the last chapter – that magnificent Isaiah 40, then you will see that there is a definite and deliberate **ECHO** here.

So Isaiah 40 Verse 31 "...but those who hope in the Lord will **RENEW THEIR STRENGTH**. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

So God, through His prophet Isaiah is saying: "Well, if you won't place your hope and trust in me and draw strength that way – well then how about you **RENEW YOUR OWN STRENGTH YOUR OWN WAY.**"

Verse 21, the start of the other similar "HUNK OF BREAD" (to use my sandwich illustration), sounds a similar courtroom note: "Present your case," says the LORD. 'Set forth your arguments,' says Jacob's King."

Q. So what then is the flow of things here?

Q. What is going on if we just disentangle the parts a bit?

Well God, as we got to Chapter 40 comes with the Gospel, He comes with:

- beautiful words, words of a caring Shepherd
- words of comfort & unbelievable tenderness
- words of good news, of forgiveness and of payment for all our sins – Hallelujah! Praise God!

AND, if that was not enough, recognising that the people, the exiles of God in Babylon are struggling, **He also gives them a fantastic promise**, we read it a moment ago:

(Isaiah 40 Verse 31) "...but **THOSE WHO HOPE IN THE LORD WILL RENEW THEIR STRENGTH**. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.")

SO NOW, as we get over into Chapter 41, we see 2 plain and rather stark alternatives opened up before us:

- one represented by the islands (or it might say coastlands in your version) which represent those far-flung nations that SOUNDLY DO *NOT* BELIEVE
- the other representing God's people who DO BELIEVE, (though they are still captive to FEAR)

Want to be brief

Now I want to be **reasonably brief here**, in this first section, so that we have a bit more time to consider ALTERNATIVE #2 and the very practical subject of FEAR.

Because the third section from Verses 21-29 really just mirror these opening 7 verses I'm pretty well just going to keep my focus on the first 7 verses.

A hot button issue of the day

Now as soon as the courtroom is assembled, God sits at the judge's bench and **zeroes into where the real issues are**.

We tend to talk about **HOT BUTTON ISSUES OF THE DAY** and for us that might well be:

- HOMOSEXUALITY/SAME-SEX MARRIAGE
or even more likely and more lately
- the dramatic & somewhat alarming rise of ISIL (or ISIS or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria).

And back in the middle of the 500's BC, they too, probably had constant nervous discussions about a certain nation and ruler that was on the rampage.

Verse 2 starts with this very **HOT BUTTON TOPIC** and the question:

“Q. Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service?...”

It goes on ***READ **Verse 2b-4*****

Although it does not here, in **Chapter 41**, put a “name in the frame”, Isaiah does give us the name in **Chapters 44 and 45** – he is **CYRUS, THE PERSIAN**.

This is what we read (Isaiah 44v24,28-45 verse 1):

“I am the LORDwho says of **CYRUS**, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid.” ’
“This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to **CYRUS, WHOSE RIGHT HAND I TAKE HOLD OF ...**”

God’s point is – Q. So who is this who brings Cyrus forth?

Well it is me of course, I am the one who directs all of history.

Verses 5-7 outline what these far-away unbelieving lands are doing – they encourage each other, so as not to lose heart and say, Verse 6, “Be strong!” and then, to put it very simply OUT POPS A FINELY CRAFTED IDOL to which they stand back and say “It is good” and then they nail it down to make sure it can’t topple of it stand!!

God produces history

In Isaiah we see that:

God not only **predicts** history, but also

God **produces** history

God it is that “TAKES THE RIGHT HAND OF CYRUS” and gets him to dance to the tune that he wants.

Some application

I think by way of simple application:

- **FIRSTLY – it is God who directs people’s minds and hearts.**

Q. How many times have you simply given up OR given in all because you felt that nothing could ever change?

Well recall to mind what [Proverbs 21 Verse 1](#) says “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”

So never take upon you a FATALISTIC attitude – as Christian we never say die and we never say “Que Sera Sera” ‘What will be will be’ (that for the benefit of the Spanish speakers amongst us!).

- **SECONDLY – God always achieves His purposes.**

In BOTH the big events and also in the small events of your life and mine, God is working His purposes out and therefore we should be highly encouraged - *NOT* like the false encouragement and worked up feelings that spur on the IDOL CRAFTSMEN.

I want to move on to the MEAT of our SANDWICH and part 2:

2] Taking the YOU by the RIGHT HAND – No room for FEAR (Verses 8-20)

In his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, [J. R. R. Tolkien](#) tells of the old king **Theoden** who has become convinced by his counsellor **Wormtongue**, who is really an enemy agent, that the situation is hopeless.

So he sits dejected in his darkened palace, waiting for the enemy to come and bring his kingdom and his life to an end.

However, one of the members of **the Fellowship of the Ring**, **Gandalf**, comes and tells **Theoden** that he may indeed die, but that for himself he would rather die confronting the enemy on his charger than sitting in gloom on a meaningless throne.

Theoden’s mind is not changed at once, but eventually under Gandalf’s prodding he sees **Wormtongue** for who he really is and when that happens, the atmosphere changes.

Theoden rises to his full height and calls for his warriors, who come with relief, and they ride to battle.

In the darkest hour, a miracle occurs and the battle is won. But if fear had prevailed, there would have been no battle and no miracle.

Facing fear

Q. So how can we face fear?

After all there do seem to be so many things that are fear inducing:

- we have - **climate change** that threatens the planet
- we have – lurking fears that one day there could be a **global financial meltdown**
- we have – the ongoing decline of the health service
- erosion of religious freedoms

- an escalating war on terror

the list goes on and on.

Q. So how does the Christian dismiss fear?

Q. Are we just to keep repeating to ourselves, like a mantra, the words “fear not for I am with you!” – and then automagically we will find that all is well and in will flow the perfect peace of Christ?

Let’s look at these verses, from Verse 8-20 and notice what it tells us:

- The FIRST thing to know is that there in Verse 10, the instruction to “not fear” is, in fact, **A COMMAND:**

Verse 10 “So DO NOT FEAR, for I am with you; DO NOT BE DISMAYED, for I am your God.”

As you see it is also REPEATED, just in case we didn’t quite feel the impact the first time.

We see God’s pastoral heart here as He knows how we are made and that we have a tendency to be fearful of things.

- The SECOND thing we should see is **THE ANSWER FOR OUR FEAR:**

Given that just repeating words over and over will not actually help us – we are told 2 vital facts:

- 1) One is that He will be with us and
- 2) the other is that He is our God.

Time and again in Scripture we find those comforting words from God (oftentimes conveyed by an angel) telling people that they are not to feel what naturally their own senses or situation are telling them.

Take Gideon as just one example – God comes to him through his angel and tells him that he is to go and defeat the great and mighty Midianite army and he tells him not to be afraid.

And I can imagine Gideon sort of saying under his breath something along the lines of “LIKE THAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN!!”.

But God says to him and gives him the TRUMP CARD – because I will be with you. Basically God is saying – if you’ve got me then you’ve got everything.

It is that idea that “one with God is a majority”.

- The THIRD thing to notice is that God is VERY EMPHATIC ABOUT THIS:

The second part of Verse 10 reads on:

"I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

So He's going to **STRENGTHEN**, He's going to **HELP**, He's going to **UPHOLD**.

Even just in the English translation it is pretty strong sounding.

In the Hebrew there is a small particle ('aph') which means something like YEA or YES or IN ADDITION and so that NET translation of the bible renders it like this:

(Verse 10 – NET) "Don't be afraid, for I am with you! Don't be frightened, for I am your God! I strengthen you— **YES**, I help you— **YES**, I uphold you with my saving right hand!"

The right hand of God

Notice the reference there, at the end of the verse, to the righteous right hand of God.

This hand is both righteous and powerful – it was with this hand that He raised Jesus from the dead.

But notice also the ongoing repetition of the command to not fear in Verses 13&14:

- Verse 13 starts with something important: "For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you."

When you were a child – all was well with the world when you had hold of your parents hand – nothing concerned you, you were free and totally secure.

Let me say this morning – if you are a child of the LORD God, through faith in His dear Son – THEN NOTHING HAS CHANGED!!

He takes hold of your right hand in order to BANISH ALL FEAR.

- Q. I don't know what you think of "worm theology" – those passages in the bible that make a point of saying that we are "worms in God's sight"?

See Verse 14 "Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you, declares the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel."

The point here is not that God does not confer on us any dignity or value – it is not a statement of our worthlessness in God's sight – rather it is God way of telling us that He knows we are small and puny and helpless like a worm and so ALL THE MORE will He help us.

Q. See the title He takes up here? "your REDEEMER" – this is that Hebrew word GOEL which is a term

loaded with meaning – it referred to that person in the family – the Kinsman Redeemer – who took responsibility to provide help to other family members should they fall into debt or poverty or some other misfortune.

And God aligns Himself as the ultimate GOEL for you and for me. He takes upon Himself full responsibility to help us.

How the passage ends

Looking at the final set of verses from Verse 15-20 we see a single theme which unites them:

- In Verse 15 God undertakes to TRANSFORM THEM.

“See, I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp with many teeth...”

This sort of language seemed very far from their present reality – but this is our God.

How many times our parents must have taken us by the right hand led us to something perhaps to a circus and we were amazed, our humdrum experience was suddenly transformed 100x.

- In Verses 17-20 there is another TRANSFORMATION.

This time the picture is of those languishing in desert conditions and they are searching desperately for water – it says “their tongues are parched...”.

I would imagine that someone here is feeling utterly PARCHED and the Lord would say to you “I can help you – in fact I take it as my Redeemer responsibility to uphold you – and to TRANSFORM YOUR SITUATION.”

READ Verse 17-20

Q. Did you see where it ended?

With the HAND OF GOD – with His Righteous RIGHT HAND.

CONCLUSION

As we come full circle - tell me – Q. Where do you find yourself this morning?

Perhaps you sense you are hedged in, curtailed.

It could be a bit worse really – you are being squished by FEAR, paralysed by a sense of FATE.

So I must say to you – Q. Do you not know, have you not been made aware of God’s right hand?

- FIRST OF ALL – he holds every power player, every head of state, every Barack Obama, every President

Putin by their RIGHT HANDS to lead them wherever He so pleases.

God does not merely PREDICT history
He actually PRODUCES history

- SECOND THING – he holds YOU by YOUR right hand

Q. To control you, to restrict you, to put a limiter on you? NO – He’s your Kinsman Redeemer

He STRENGTHENS YOU,
YES – He HELPS YOU
YES – He UPHOLDS YOU

AND – if that was not enough – HE PROMISES TO TRANSFORM YOU and the things that affect YOU.

So then:

Q. DO YOU REALLY KNOW OF THE LORD’S RIGHT HAND?

If you do – then FATE and FEAR cannot snatch you away and cannot cripple you any longer.

Praise be to God – His name be forever praised!

AMEN