

“Who Declares the Future?”

Isaiah 41:21-19

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

- 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.*

Introduction: Anxiety

What causes you anxiety? On a lighter note, I could say that as a Philadelphia 76ers fan, Joel Embiid's health and physical conditioning cause me anxiety, especially as the playoffs come each season. As an Orioles fan, I can say that Orioles closer Craig Kimbrel caused me a lot of anxiety, and now the lack of a closer causes me anxiety. As a Star Wars fan, every new Star Wars movie or TV series causes me some anxiety, as I don't know if it'll be great, okay, or terrible. But, truthfully, none of those things really matter to me all that much. They're all just entertainment and not really central to my life.

As I was getting ready to preach on this passage and had been thinking about it throughout the week, the Lord in His good providence brought me a couple of hours of sleepless anxiety Friday night (actually, early Saturday morning), as the concerns, obligations, demands, disappointments, and expectations of life all took turns parading themselves through my sleepless mind. It all began with a dream about a tornado at about 3:30 and finally ended around 5:30 when I fell back asleep.

Life as fallible, limited, sinful people in this fallen world has no shortage of material for anxiety. But what is anxiety and why do we experience it? What do we do when we experience it, and how can we be more and more free from it? Our passage today addresses the issue of idolatry directly and boldly, but why were God's people turning to idols, what effect were these idols having on them, and how and why was God calling them back to Himself? If we look closely, we'll see the universal human experience of idolatry lurking just below the surface, working its ugly will.

And so, this passage about idols has much to say to us as we seek to know and follow Jesus more faithfully, especially as we struggle with anxiety.

The Powerlessness of Idols (v. 21-24)

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Our passage today is a courtroom scene, a trial, a contest between the LORD and the idols being worshiped by God's people instead of the Lord. The LORD issues the summons, and He calls on His people to bring their idols before Him. The obscure "*Let them bring them*" at the beginning of verse 22 is important. The LORD is saying: "Let me people bring their idols." The idols have to be brought before the LORD by His people because the idols are powerless to come on their own. They're helpless, useless, lifeless things that need to be carried by their worshipers. This alone should tell God's people how foolish they are for trusting in these idols.

But then, God challenges the idols to tell what is coming in the future, or even to explain what has truly happened in the past, or even to explain the current state of affairs accurately. But the main focus is on a challenge for these lifeless idols to accurately predict something that is going to happen in the future.

This challenge actually gets to the heart of anxiety and why people are prone to turn to idols. Anxiety is our failed attempt to predict and control a future that is beyond our knowledge and out of our control. As we attempt to know and control or be adequately prepared for the coming future, we cannot do it, and so we get anxious. Then, we tend to turn to people and things that promise us some measure of predictive knowledge or control of the unknown future.

Just as in Isaiah's day, being in the business of offering anxious souls the illusion of a predictable future is still big business. Whether it's the palm readers and psychics or the political pundits and economists on the cable news networks, many people make a good living offering the promise of a glimpse into the future, one that may ease our anxiety. But also, as it was in Isaiah's day, so it is now, these are all just idols who promise us control and who lie to us.

The ancient Greco-Roman world had the Oracle at Delphi, which was the preeminent prognosticator for 1,000 years, from the 600s BC to almost 400 AD. We have everyone from Punxsutawney Phil to the Oracle of Omaha to the latest

financial expert predicting the newest hot stock or the next impending market crash. These might not be as lifeless as carved images, but when it comes to accurately predicting or controlling the future, they are just as worthless.

God is calling us as His people to give up our idols and to surrender to Him the underlying reasons for why we look to idols – our fear of the uncertain future and our tendency to grasp for control over things God has not placed in our hands.

Hear what Jesus our Savior and King says to us:

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

³⁴ “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

- Matthew 6:25-34, ESV

God doesn't just call us to set aside our anxieties and the idolatry they inevitable produce, but He calls us to trust Him because He is all-powerful and because He loves us more than we could ever imagine.

The Sovereign Declaration of God (v. 25-27)

Here in Isaiah 41, God calls His people to trust in Him by declaring to them what He is going to do, in contrast to the helpless, worthless, nothing idols –

*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.*

God speaks here is a great ruler to come whom He stirs up "from the north" and who will trample on rulers. Later in Isaiah 44-45, God specifically names this great world ruler from the North, Cyrus, who will be the King of Persia over 150 years after Isaiah gives his prophecies. It is Cyrus who will restore God's people to Judah and Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile, and the Lord named him years before the exile even happened.

People raise two objections to this prophecy of the coming of Cyrus:

First, Isaiah 41:25 says, "*He shall call upon my name.*" And we know that Cyrus was not a believer. While it's true that Cyrus did not repent of his idolatry and trust in the Lord alone, the words of his proclamation for the restoration of God's people are a proclamation and a calling on the name of the Lord.

Listen to how Chronicles ends:

²² Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: ²³ "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.'"

Secondly, critics of the Bible have said this prophecy of Cyrus is far too specific, so it must not have come through Isaiah, but it must've come much later. Well, we have no evidence of a later portion of Isaiah written by a different writer, other than this critical objection that such prophecies cannot be possible. Also, part of the

reason why Isaiah was held in such high regard as a true prophet is because he gave clear prophecies like this, and they were later fulfilled. That was part of the criteria for accepting a prophet as true and faithful. If we held our modern prophets to this same standard, how many would survive their most recent round of predictions?

Another faithless and critical way we might respond to this kind of prophecy is to object that God doesn't disclose the future to us the way He did through Isaiah. But God has given us so many prophecies that He has fulfilled so perfectly as to give us ample reason to trust Him. He has demonstrated that He alone knows and controls the future.

Noticed the way the Lord speaks about Cyrus. He's not predicting the future as one who is looking and seeing what will happen. He is declaring the future as the One who rules over the affairs of men and nations. He is not asking us to trust Him simply because He knows what's coming and others don't. He's asking us to trust Him as the One who provides and guides, who overrules and sovereignly orders every detail of our lives.

Everything that happens to you in your life happens right on schedule and in line with God's purposes for His glory and your true and eternal good. It's not that God is pleased with everything that He orders and allows, or that tragic things aren't sad and hard or that evil things aren't evil. No, God is not telling us to call everything good, but rather to look His good hand at work in everything and to trust His good heart and sovereign control when we can't see the reason why He orders things the way He does.

A good surgeon doesn't like cutting people and making them bleed, but he does so with a healing intent in view. If we can trust a fallible surgeon to make us unconscious and cut us open with a scalpel for our good, can we trust the God who made us in His image and who gave His Son for our salvation to use pain, loss, heartache, and uncertainty to deepen our dependence on Him and show us that His goodness is greater than our greatest pain?

The Sad State of an Idolatrous People (v. 27-29)

When people will not trust the LORD and will insist on trusting in idols instead, what happens? We get an accurate depiction of this sad state in verses 27-29 –

*²⁷I 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.*

God gives the Gospel to His people. He gives them the Gospel, and He gives them Gospel heralds. The Gospel is the Good News of the kingdom of God, that God reigns in heaven and earth for the good of His people, and He can be trusted. The Gospel was given through prophets like Isaiah before Jesus came into the world, but when Jesus entered our world as the Word of God made flesh, full deity made fully human, the Gospel became a specific man, Jesus of Nazareth, and the work of salvation He accomplished to secure His people to Himself and give Himself to His people forever.

The Gospel clearly calls us to repent of self-reliance and worldly idolatry and trust in Jesus Christ not only for forgiveness of sins and for our soul's eternal salvation but also for our daily bread and our security in storms and the meeting of every true need we have in this life. If God can be trusted to save us forever, surely He can be trusted to get us through the next election cycle or the next downturn in the economy or the next stage in our family's life. But we must trust Him.

When the church turns aside from trusting in the Lord, we don't find better help and greater wisdom in the world and its idols. Instead, we're left without wisdom, as God sadly depicts in verses 28-29. No one is able to give sound wisdom because all they've trusted in is empty delusion. Sometimes, we really are tempted to think that we need more than the answers the Bible gives, and so we neglect the serious and prayerful pursuit of the Lord in His Word and in prayer and we turn to the world for answers and insights. That is an empty chase. We need the Lord. We need His Word. We need His Holy Spirit. We need His church. We need His Son and our Savior. We need to be in heart, mind, and life the people of God and not people of the world.

Conclusion: Fear, Trust & Hope

The Lord calls us to three things this morning in this passage, which are all really one thing. What shall we do in response to God's Word?

Fear the LORD.

Trust in the LORD.

Hope in the LORD.

We often think of fear, trust, and hope as three different things. We fear financial ruin, so we trust in our investment strategy, and we hope for a secure retirement. We fear cultural decay, and so we trust in some politician making promises, and we hope in the outcome of the next political election to bring us what we want.

But our fears, our trusts, and our hopes are really so interconnected, and they reveal what we really worship. If it's money, we fear the loss of money and trust in money to bring us the hope of never running out of money. Why? Because money in the bank can ease our anxiety. And so on . . .

Mostly, we just want to be happy and successful and secure, and so we are guided by fears and trusts and hopes that we think will bring us these outcomes. But nothing this world offers can compare to Jesus. Psalm 16 concludes:

*You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.* – Psalm 16:11, ESV

If we truly hope in the LORD, we will fear ever betraying or breaking faith with the LORD and plead with Him to keep us trusting in Him by His grace. Nothing could be better than being with the LORD forever, and nothing could be more horrible than being separated forever from His love and under His just wrath. And so, our fear and our hope and our trust must all be anchored, centered, and sustained in Christ alone!