

Isaiah 41:8-20

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[0 : 0 0] So we're in Isaiah, Isaiah 41, 8 to 20, page 727. I'm just going to pray for us and then we're going to think about that passage together. Let me pray. Almighty God, we do praise you, we do thank you for your word, the Bible, and we thank that you speak to us through it.

You want to speak to us as a church together, but as we look at it together, you want to speak to us individually about our lives, about the things that we face, and you want to help us to know you more and to know ourselves.

And so we pray that you do that as we look at this together. In Jesus' name. Amen. I wonder if you remember when you were at school, and this happened to me, when you were playing maybe sport, you were doing a PE lesson, you were playing sport, and you were playing football, and the teacher selected two captains, and then instead of the teacher picking the teams, he gave it over to the captains to pick from the rest of the class.

It was great if you were picked first. You know, you're often the best, well it would be, the best football players were picked first, and then it'd slowly get down, and slowly their ability would drop with each round of picking the teams, right up until those who were no good at football were left.

It's even worse if the two captains would then argue about who would take them. I really, we really don't want this kid on our team.

[1 : 4 2] You take him. No, you take him. No, you take him. Maybe you were picked first. I don't know how you were at football. It never got to me that I was arguing over who would take me, but I was probably lower down the list than others.

It's a taste, isn't it, of what it means to be chosen, what it means to be picked, being selected, or conversely, being rejected, being unwanted at an early age.

That feeling we know all too well, we experience it as children, and yet that experience, the feeling of that carries on into adulthood when you apply for a job.

You're either successful, and you feel like you're, it's an affirmation, isn't it, if you're successful in a job application, of your skills, your abilities, your CV, you stand up to the mark, or you receive a no, sorry, not this time.

Somebody else has been chosen. You're selected through your qualifications. All these things, they're marks of, you have to be good at something.

[3 : 0 2] CV, qualifications, how you do an interview, be accepted or passed over. And there are a million other examples where being chosen, being selected in life, is dependent on something about you.

A talent, a gift, a skill that is appreciated and makes the difference. And if you don't have whatever it is, it makes, how does it make you feel?

You feel inadequate. You feel insignificant. Like you can't contribute anything. And here's the thing, we know that that exists in life, but you might have even felt like that as a Christian.

Maybe you have heard the other way Christians pray, and you feel like, I could never pray like that. Maybe even just praying in front of others. You'd love to do, but you feel like your prayers just wouldn't be as good.

Maybe there's some in the church who seem great about talking to Jesus, to other people. To you it doesn't come naturally. And so you, in a sense, in comparison, you feel inadequate and insignificant, like you don't contribute.

[4 : 16] Maybe we feel, you feel like on an individual level, but you might even feel like that about church in general. We're so small. How are we going to make a difference in people's lives as a church?

Maybe you feel largely insignificant that your faith is in the religion, in the whole sphere of society, largely forgotten and irrelevant.

What we're touching on here is exactly how Israel felt when this was written to them. We've mentioned before, it's written to a people who have been kicked out of their nation, their geographical mass.

They've been kicked out, they're in exile, they're in a country called Babylon, ruled by a foreign king with foreign gods, surrounded by foreign people who live differently. And it's because they feel this inadequacy, insignificant, irrelevant, that they're tempted to go and follow the way of the nations.

Feel forgotten, weak and alone. This is our second part, really, in Isaiah 41. You might remember, last time we looked at the beginning and the end, and you remember from last time, perhaps, that the beginning and the end is about how the nations are advertising their, following their way of life and why the nations' way of life are following false gods and doing it their way was better than following the God of the Bible.

[5 : 49] And that it's attractive and there's a temptation for Israel to follow them. Maybe we should just ditch Yahweh, ditch the God of the Bible and follow the way the nations do it.

God tells Israel why that way is so foolish. But yet here, right in the middle, he wants to remind them that they haven't been forgotten, that they haven't been rejected.

But out of all the peoples of the world, he's picked them. He's chosen them. And he has a purpose for them. First thing we're going to look at is Israel, my chosen servant.

Israel, my chosen servant. There's a few points we're going to sort of flesh that out with. Israel has been chosen by God. See that in verse 8. You, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I've chosen.

God chose them and he didn't choose them how the world selects or how the world chooses, how the world picks. God chose Israel not because of a skill, not because of a talent or character trait, but he chose them simply because he set his love on them.

[7 : 08] And it's that that makes them significant. Not in themselves, but they are significant because of their relationship to the living God.

They are his personal possession. You see that he says, you, Israel, my servant. there's a personal relationship and connection. Jacob, whom I have chosen, he says, you're the children, the descendants of Abraham.

Abraham, who is my friend, who I made promises to, that he would have descendants as many as the stars. I have chosen you.

I have called you. I have not rejected you. And I want you to notice this morning is that everything that God does for his people, if you notice, he is the one that, it is all coming from him.

It is all initiated by him. You see how many times we get a sentence starting with I. It is God, I have chosen, I call, I am with you, I will strengthen.

[8 : 09] This is not about the people, actually. It is about God. It is about God and what he does for his people, for his church.

Three things I want us to see about what he does for his chosen servant. First thing we are going to see is God strengthens the timid. God strengthens the timid.

Israel has enemies, right, left and centre. The nations are against them, united in their opposition. They are powerful and full of violent rage.

They wage war, we see in verse 12. We can understand why God's people are afraid. And yet, what we see here is, it reminds us, doesn't it, that they face two enemies.

they've got the enemies, the external enemies they face, these different nations, but they also have the enemy within. The enemy within is that they, is their own identity of who they are.

[9 : 22] They've forgotten it. The enemy within is, fear is the enemy, because that's the opposite of trusting God. They've forgotten who they belong to.

The enemy is their own sense of themselves. They are dismayed, they're frightened, thrown off balance, they're knocked sideways. They feel alone and inadequate because they've forgotten who they belong to.

They've forgotten their history, they've forgotten who they descended from and that God loves them. And so God says to them, verse 10, so do not fear, for I am with you.

Do not be dismayed. Don't be frightened. Don't be thrown off balance or knocked sideways. Why? For I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you.

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. With God, they're not alone. They're not weak or inadequate. It is God who strengthens them and their enemies, verse 11, will surely be ashamed and disgraced.

[10 : 28] Verse 12, will be as nothing and perish. I'll remind you again that the church throughout the world are now God's people.

It is not a geographical country or an ethnic people group like we have in the Old Testament, but the church, God's people, is made up of people all over the world who follow Jesus. But just like Israel had enemies, the church, us, we have enemies that rage against us.

We have three that rage against us. We have sin, shove off God, I'm in charge, we know to your rules what we said to the kids. Sin, our own hearts, the enemy within that rages against us.

We have opposition in the world that doesn't want to know God, like the nations that oppose Israel, tempting Israel to follow their ways. and then we have the evil, we have the devil who hates God and wants to take his place.

And all three of those enemies are powerful. On our own, against those three, we have no chance. No chance. No one can stop sinning on their own.

[11 : 37] Our sinful condition is too great. And yet, don't we all sometimes try by willpower just to do the right thing? It works for a bit, doesn't it?

You just, it's like starting a new diet or starting an exercise plan. By willpower, we can do it for a bit, but then we come a cropper because our heart's not really in it.

Our sinful condition is too great. And when we fail, how do we feel? Inadequate. Like we don't have what it takes to be a good Christian.

We've got no chance on our own. We have no chance on our own against the world. The way of the nations is attractive. Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die sucked in by the rat race.

How is the church? How are we ever going to grow and come up and say no against the world's might and reason and attraction and advertisements and live that way?

- [12 : 45] The world is against us. The devil, the evil one, he's too powerful. He tempts you with your own desires. His own, but yet his aim is only to kill, steal and destroy, destroy the church and actually, not just the church, but he wants to take out everyone who bears God's image.

On our own, we have no chance and yet, what we see here is that we're not on our own. Verse 13, God says to Israel and so he says to us his church, 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. The church is strong. God's people are strong because of our relationship with the living God.

He has chosen us to serve him and he empowers us to serve him so we don't need to be afraid or frightened because you don't face powerful enemies alone. It means your sin will be as nothing and perish.

If you struggle with lust, it will be as nothing and perish. If you struggle with anger, it will become as nothing at all. The ways of the nations, the evil one, though they are powerful, will be ashamed and disgraced because the one who you have a relationship with, who has chosen you, is greater.

- [14 : 21] The one who chose you to be is so but will uphold you and strengthen you against powerful foe. God strengthens the timid.

Second one is God transforms the small. Israel was a minnow compared to the other nations, tiny, weak, and small in number, insignificant, irrelevant, and not worth thinking about.

Verse 14, you see how they're described as a worm. It came up the other week in one of the passages we were looking at.

A worm, a worm can't harm anyone, can it? Worms are handled and chopped in two by nursery-aged children. That's what happens to worms.

There's a song about it. I'm not going to sing about it for you but I think we all know that. They are irrelevant to daily life. They're small and weak and the church and we can feel small and weak and we can feel small and weak in Scotland.

- [15 : 26] We might even feel that being part of a church plant. Sat here this morning a small group of people meeting to worship. God transforms the weak and makes them powerful.

You look with me at what he transforms the little weak worm Israel into. It's quite an obscure transformation. You see verse 15 what he says?

He says, See, I will make you into a threshing sledge new and sharp with many teeth. It's a farming image and the threshing sledge is a piece of kind of ancient farming equipment pulled by cattle.

It's pulled over the harvested ground on the floor and it would kind of separate the grain and the good sheaves the part that the farmer wanted from kind of the rubbish the chaff that he didn't want.

It would separate them from the part of the harvest that they would want it to be kept. It had a serrated edge that's the teeth the many teeth that would cut and keep the good stuff from the bad stuff.

- [16 : 32] Yet look with me then we have kind of images start to layer on top of one another because this threshing sledge Israel the transformed threshing sledge is not cutting grain.

You see what he's cutting? Look with me. It's second half of verse 15. You will thresh the mountains and crush them and reduce the hills to chaff.

Israel is transformed from a worm something that the threshing sledge would pass over that is in the ground into a powerful piece of farming equipment that doesn't cut grain but that is able to cut down mountains and make hills to nothing.

That is the transformation. Insurmountable obstacles will not stand in the way of God working through his people. All to say don't fear being small.

Don't fear our or your apparent irrelevance or insignificance because God transforms the weak and the small. We may be small but we're significant because we're chosen by God and he transforms us to the world.

[18 : 01] We may look small but we are mighty in the Lord. The living God works through us even though small to bring salvation to his people. When we meet here this Sunday morning a group of 30 we meet with the God who created the heavens and the earth.

Do you think this meeting here 30 people meeting in the community centre has more influence and more power than any power exerted by any leader in any office in any part of the world.

The Oval Office when we pray this meeting has more power than any decision that's going on in the Oval Office because we are meeting with the God who created the heavens and the earth.

Our prayers have eternal significance. Our worship has eternal significance. Our witness has eternal significance because we are meeting with the God who created the heavens and the earth.

We are small but we are transformed to be powerful. A threshing sledge that crushes the mountains and reduces the hills to char. Third one.

[19 : 23] God answers. He transforms the one but he answers the poor and needy. Israel fell empty. They had no land, they had no king, they had no riches, they had no gold, they had no home.

Verse 17, perhaps we read that they went searching to try and meet their needs. You see with me in verse 17, the poor and needy search for water but there is stone, their tongues are parched with thirst.

But I the Lord will answer them. I the God and Israel will not forsake them. And we see he does two things, he gives them shelter and he gives them water and shelter. Verse 18, I will make rivers flow on barren heights and springs within the valleys.

I will turn the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into springs. I will put in the desert, here's the shelter, the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. It's like the living God turning the Sahara desert, the hottest desert in the world, less than one inch of rain per year, turn it into an oasis of life and vitality.

Pools of water, growing trees for their shade. Of course, it's there to echo how God provides for his people, not in the Sahara, but when they travelled through the wilderness, when they were rescued from Egypt.

[20 : 44] That's exactly what God did. He provided water that came out of a rock. He did that then. He's saying, I can do that again. It is picture language to provide life where there is death, showing his people that he's not forsaken, he's not forgotten, he listens and provides abundantly in ways they could never imagine.

He answered. He's telling Israel that yes, they might look small, insignificant, inadequate, worm-like, afraid, frightened nation, who nobody cares two hoops about.

And the message to his people today, the message to us, is that God wants to use the nation, he wants to use the church, not despite their inadequacy and insignificance, not despite their smallness, but because of it.

Because of it. What that means for you and for us is this, that if you feel inadequate, if you feel like you don't have what it takes, if you feel it insignificant and you've got nothing to contribute, you're exactly the person God is looking for.

That is a question, the question you need to really ask yourself is this, can you come to God with nothing? Can you come to God with nothing?

[22 : 10] Can you say to God, I don't have what it takes to do any of the things you've asked me. I'm not strong enough, I don't have enough confidence, I don't know how to pray, I fear rejection in comparison to everyone else, I'm no good.

I definitely can't speak to people about you, I just don't have that gift. I'm not gifted, I can't stop sinning, I give in to temptation all the time, I want to change but I can't. I don't have what it takes.

I want to but I can't. Can you say to God that I'm coming to you with nothing at all? God's response to that type of prayer is perfect, you're just the one I'm looking for, you're just the person I'm looking for.

You feel like you can't talk to people about Jesus? Great, you're just the man for the job. Because God says, I'm going to strengthen you to do it, I'm going to help you, I will transform you from a worm into a threshing sledge, I will help you to do it, because then it's me who's done it and it's nothing to do with you getting the glory.

So that no one may boast but in him. You're exactly the person I'm looking for because that is total dependence on me.

[23 : 27] God made the weak things to shame the strong and the foolish to shame the wise. None of us were called or chosen because of what we were. He called and chose us because of what we were not.

The big question then, why does he do it like this? Why does he do this? I'm going to move on to kind of a final point. Is Israel my chosen advert?

Israel my chosen advert. You'll remember, I've mentioned it already, the illustration we had a couple of weeks ago, adverts that draw you in, that suggest to us point us to buy things because they tell us our life will be a bit better if we get sucked in to buy whatever it is they're selling.

If you buy this aftershave, you can have this six-pack and look this good. If you buy this car, your life can be as good as this. That's what adverts do. It's what the nations do. Follow the way of the nations like an advert. And last week, last time, we saw the temptation of to follow the way of the nations.

Israel's purpose, as God's chosen servant, was that they were supposed to be the advert. They were to point out to the nations that following the God of the Bible, following the living God Yahweh, the God who rescued them from Egypt, was that they would see Israel and be drawn to worship him.

[24 : 53] Look at me, verse 20. So that, I'm going to do all of this. I'm choosing you. I'm going to strengthen the timid. I'm going to transform the world.

I'm going to answer the poor and needy. Verse 20. So that people may see and know, may consider and understand that the hand of the Lord has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it.

He wants Israel to be an advert to the nations. He wants the nations to be tempted by Israel, to be tempted to ditch their old ways and become his people, to see how they live and go about their ways and attract them to follow him, to draw them in.

That is the purpose of the church today, to draw people, the nations, to follow Jesus Christ. The church, we're to be the best advert for following Jesus.

Like a magnet, drawing people in, compelling people. that people may see us and go, look how different they are. Look at how they get through difficulty.

[26 : 01] Look at how they love one another. Listen to what they say about this man. We don't obviously live in Old Testament Israel.

They were waiting for Jesus to arrive. We live on the other side of the cross and resurrection. Israel failed in their role to be this compelling nation to draw people in.

But where Israel failed, Jesus succeeded. He is the true Israel. And it is because of the coming of Jesus that the church is now able to succeed and fulfil these verses because we're empowered by his spirit to draw people in.

To draw people back to God. Jesus is working through the church, fulfilling and completing these words in Isaiah. Isaiah. So that people may know, may consider and understand that the hand of the Lord has done this.

That he is doing it. He is doing it through us. That he is strengthening you. That he is being, upholding you with his right hand.

[27 : 08] That he is transforming you day by day and where you feel poor and needy. He is using you to become that oasis. He is bringing salvation to others.

Not despite your inadequacy and insufficiency but because of it. And as we come in for landing, these ideas come together.

God chose us to be his servants. We come with nothing. In fact, we must come with nothing. That's what draws people to him. If God chose us, used us because of something about ourselves, we might be tempted to take the glory for ourselves.

But when he uses people who don't have what it takes, when he uses those who feel inadequate, insignificant, who can't boast in themselves, all glory has to go to him. He chooses the weak things in the world to shame the strong, the foolish to shame the wise.

You're exactly the person God is looking for. If you feel like that. Because he'll work through you. He'll help you. And he'll strengthen you. We know in our lives why this is possible.

[28 : 22] It's because of the gospel. Because there was a time when we raged against him. When we were part of the world and we were their enemies.

There was a time when, before we were transformed, when we were like a worm. There was a time when we were poor and needy and our hearts were barren.

But the living God, who is the one who's mighty, came to be a worm. So that we who are worm-like can be mighty.

So that we who were at odds with him, who were at war with him, could have peace with him. so that we who are poor and needy and without life could have rivers of living water flowing in our barren hearts.

That's the gospel. And that is the reason that you are empowered, the church is empowered, to draw people to himself. let's pray.

[29 : 36] Almighty God, we praise you. We praise you for what you have done. And Lord, if we're being real with ourselves, we know that we feel like Israel did at times.

We feel inadequate and insignificant. we feel like we don't have what it takes. There's things that we love to be and yet we feel like we fail. And yet, I praise you that you use us not despite that but because of that.

And so we come to you this morning as a church. We come to you with nothing. We say, we don't have what it takes. We are inadequate to do the things that you've asked us to do. And so would you do the impossible in us?

Would you use us for the things that you've called us? We come to you asking that because only you can do it because we can. Help us to live faithfully.

Help us to turn away from sin. Help us to put to death the works of the flesh. The sinful things that we keep on doing that we regret and we don't want to. Help us to positively do the things that we feel unable to.

[30 : 47] To grow in our prayer lives. To speak to people about you. Help us to be kind and to put away all these things. Help us to reject the way of the world.

We thank you that you are the one who transforms us. And we thank you for the gospel. We thank you that you are the one who do this through the blood and the death and the resurrection of your soul.

We praise you and ask that we know your blessing in all these things. Strengthen and help us with prayer. Amen. Amen. Thank you.