

RELY UPON THE LORD YOUR GOD

41 *Be silent before me, O islands! Let the nations renew their strength! Let them come forward and speak; let us meet together at [the place of] judgment. ²Who has aroused a ruler from the east, one whom [God's] righteousness summons to his service? He hands nations over to him, and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow. ³He pursues them and moves on unscathed, he marches on along a path his feet have not traveled before. ⁴Who has produced this and accomplished it, calling forth the generations from the beginning [of time]? [It is] I, Jehovah—[I am] the first, [before all generations,] and [I will be] with the last [generation]—I am [the one]. ⁵The islands have seen it, and are afraid; the ends of the earth tremble. They draw near [to each other] and come together; ⁶each one helps his neighbor and says to his brother, Be strong. ⁷So the craftsman encourages the goldsmith, and the one who smoothes out [the metal] with a hammer encourages the one who strikes the anvil. He says of the soldering, It is good. Then he nails down [the idol] so that it will not topple. ⁸But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob—[the one] whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham my friend, ⁹you whom I have taken from the ends of the earth and have called from its farthest corners, and to whom I have declared, You are my servant, I have chosen you and have not rejected you—¹⁰[to you I say,] Do not be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; surely, I will help you; surely, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. ¹¹Listen! All those who rage against you will be brought to shame and disgrace; those who oppose you will be as nothing and will perish. ¹²You will seek them—them who fight against you—but you will not find them; those who wage war against you will be like nothing, like nothing at all. ¹³[Such will be the case] because I, Jehovah your God, will hold your right hand and say to you, Do not be afraid; I will help you. ¹⁴Do not be afraid, O Jacob you worm, and you men of Israel; I will help you, declares Jehovah. Indeed, your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. ¹⁵Look! I have made you to be a new sharp threshing implement with double-edged blades. You will thresh the mountains and crush them, and reduce the hills to chaff. ¹⁶You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up, and a gale will blow them away. You will rejoice in Jehovah, and exult in the Holy One of Israel. ¹⁷The poor and the needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. I, Jehovah, will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. ¹⁸I will make rivers flow on the bare heights, and cause springs to gush within the valleys. I will turn the desert into a pool of water, and the parched ground into springs. ¹⁹In the desert I will plant the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive tree. In the wasteland I will plant the pine, together with the fir tree and the cypress. ²⁰[I will do all this] so that men may see and know, that together they may consider and understand, that the hand of Jehovah has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created this.*

²¹*Present your case, demands Jehovah; produce your compelling arguments, declares the King of Jacob. ²²Let them bring forth [their idols] and let [those idols] inform us about the future. Tell us what is about to happen in the [immediate] future, so that we may consider these things and take note of their outcome; or make known to us events that will occur [in the distant future]. ²³Tell us the things that are still to come, so that we may know that you are gods. Indeed, do good, or do evil, so that all of us may be*

dismayed and filled with fear. ²⁴Look! You are worthless, and your works are utterly useless; whoever chooses you [to be their god] is detestable. ²⁵I have stirred up [a ruler] from the north, and he is coming—from [the place of] the rising sun one who invokes my name. He will tread upon rulers as though they were mud, he will be like a potter kneading the clay. ²⁶Who has foretold this from the beginning, so that we might know [about it]? [Who has declared these things] beforehand, so that we may confess, [He is right]? Indeed, there is none who declared [these things], there is none who revealed them. Indeed, [O you idols,] no one has heard any word from you! ²⁷[I am the] first [one to proclaim] to Zion, Look! Look! There it is! And I sent [messengers] to Jerusalem bearing the good news. ²⁸But when I look, I find no one—there is none among them who can give counsel, there is none who can give an answer when I ask them. ²⁹Look! [Their idols] are all worthless; they produce nothing—their molten images [are nothing more than] wind and emptiness. (Isa. 41:1-29)

Introduction

Can you identify with Israel as they are described in this passage of Scripture? They find themselves in the midst of a people who are incensed against them. They are living among a people who strive against them and wage war against them.

A young man named Dan is a contemporary Christian who could identify with these Old Testament people of God. Dan had a summer job as a house painter; throughout the summer he found himself despised and his faith ridiculed by the boss and the other members of the painting crew.

A young man named Frank is a contemporary Christian who can identify with these Old Testament people of God. Frank's own mother would mockingly sing hymns at the top of her lungs as a way of taunting Frank and his Christian faith.

Can you identify with these Old Testament people of God? Have you ever found yourself in an environment that was hostile to your Christian faith and threatening to you as a Christian? At school? At work? Among your neighbors? In your own home?

May this present passage of Scripture encourage us to rely upon the LORD our God, especially when we find ourselves in a hostile and threatening situation.

I. Rely upon the LORD Your God, Because He is the Sovereign God (Isa. 41:1-7,21-29)

The LORD summons the nations to appear before Him (vs. 1.) The western coastlands of the Mediterranean are commanded to be silent before the LORD; the LORD instructs them to draw near to settle the issue, Who is God?

The LORD now interrogates the nations gathered before Him (vs. 2-3.) He inquires, *"Who has aroused a ruler from the east, one whom God's righteousness*

summons to his service?" The reference is to Cyrus, the Persian conqueror, who would become a mighty power. The question being raised is, What God has summoned Cyrus to be His servant? This act of summoning Cyrus to be His servant was done in righteousness—it is almost as though God's attribute of righteousness has come forth from His divine presence and taken the initiative in summoning Cyrus in its service. The whole emphasis is upon the fact that Cyrus' acts of conquest are ordained by the LORD as acts of righteous judgment upon the nations—this act was not capricious, the employment of Cyrus as conqueror was a righteous act of judgment on the part of the LORD.

The interrogation now probes deeper and the answer is supplied (vs. 4.) What God has designed this work of employing Cyrus as His servant, has set the work in motion, and is now carrying it out in history? Indeed, who is that God who has fashioned and controls **all** of history? (vs. 4a) The answer is now given: It is the LORD—Jehovah, whose very name means, "I AM the Living One." He declares, "*I am the first, [before all generations], and [I will be] with the last [generation]—I am [the one]*" (vs. 4b.) The point being made is that the LORD is the sovereign God who precedes history and who is working in every generation of history; He is God over history and who, operating in history, accomplishes His sovereign will.

Verses 5-7 describe how the nations view the advancing Cyrus with alarm—but they fail to see the God who raised him up. Cyrus' conquests send tremors of fear rippling throughout the west, reaching even its farthest extremities (vs. 5.) But what do men do in the face of this approaching terror? They look to one another, seeking to encourage each other (vs. 5c-6.) They look to their worthless idols: it is a time of crisis, more idols need to be made, and those idols need to be securely fastened in place so that they do not topple over! (vs. 7) They do not look to the LORD, the sovereign God of heaven who raised up Cyrus and who controls all of history.

The LORD proceeds to directly challenges the idols to defend themselves and demonstrate that they are legitimate deities (vs. 21-24.) He calls upon them to set forth their case, to speak in their defense, to give compelling reasons why men should believe in them (vs. 21.) He challenges them to display their ability to communicate and to display their divine knowledge of future events (vs. 22.) Ironically, the idol worshipers themselves must be called upon to bring forth their idols, for the helpless images made of wood and stone are unable to come under their own power. The LORD now addresses the idols directly and demands of them, "*Tell us the things that are still to come, so that we may know that you are gods. Indeed, do good, or do evil, so that all of us may be dismayed and filled with fear*" (vs. 23.) The idols are challenged to foretell future events, to do something, to do anything, to demonstrate that they are worthy of fear and reverence! In disgust, the LORD declares to the silent, lifeless idols, "*Look! You are worthless, and your works are utterly useless; whoever chooses you [to be their god] is detestable*" (vs. 24.) Here in these verses of Isaiah is set forth both the folly of idolatry as well as the sinfulness of idolatry, note Romans 1:21-23,25,

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles ... ²⁵They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. (Rom. 1:21-23,25)

In contrast to the idols of the world, the LORD presents Himself as the true God (vs. 25-29.) He reaffirms that He has raised up a mighty conqueror (Cyrus) who shall do His bidding and shall invoke my name (vs. 25)—i.e.; this conqueror shall acknowledge that the LORD gave him his victories, thereby giving glory to the LORD. That conqueror’s testimony is recorded in Ezra 1:1-3,

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of Jehovah spoken by Jeremiah, Jehovah moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: ²“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “Jehovah, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of Jehovah, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:1-3)

The LORD inquires of the idols, Which one of you declared these things beforehand (as the LORD Himself is now doing some 150 years before the fulfillment of these events)? Again the LORD must answer His own question, None of you foretold these things! (vs. 26) The LORD declares that He is the first to announce these future events, He has announced them to His people, and they contain the message of good news for His people: Cyrus would release the people of God from their Babylonian captivity and allow them to return to the land of Israel (vs. 27); see again Ezra 1:1-3. Neither the idols nor the wise men of the world have been able to foresee these events that the LORD has now announced and that He Himself will bring to fulfillment (vs. 28.) The LORD concludes His discourse by declaring that all the idols are altogether worthless (vs. 29.)

At all times, but especially when we find ourselves in a threatening situation, let us rely upon the LORD our God, because He is the Sovereign God. In the words of the hymn writer, Fred S. Shepherd,

Trembling soul, beset by fears, “Your God reigns!”
Look above and dry your tears: “Your God reigns!”
Though your foes with power assail,
Nothing against you shall prevail;
Trust in Him—He’ll never fail:
“Your God reigns, Your God reigns!”

II. Rely upon the LORD Your God, Because He is the Faithful God (Isa. 41:8-16)

In verse 8 the LORD reminds His people of their identity. Israel is the LORD's *"servant."* Israel had been called by God to live in covenantal devotion to Him, and by so doing would enjoy His covenantal fellowship and blessing. The LORD further identifies Israel by the name of the nation's forefather, *"Jacob—[the one] whom I have chosen."* The reference here is to the fact Israel was sovereignly chosen by God and made to be the object of His redeeming grace, while the surrounding nations were left to continue on their own chosen course unto perdition—as was the case with Jacob's brother, Esau. Quoting from the prophet Malachi (Mal. 1:2-3), the Apostle Paul expounds on God's sovereign choice of bestowing His saving grace upon Jacob:

And not only [this], but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, [even] our father Isaac ¹¹(for [the children] not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of him who calls), ¹²it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." ¹³As it is written, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." (Rom. 9:10-13)

The writer to the Hebrews goes on to identify Esau as being *"a profane* (or, "secular") *man"*—that is to say, a man whose life is centered on this present world, without regard for, and, indeed, with hostility toward, the LORD and His kingdom. Finally, the LORD identifies Israel as being *"the descendants of Abraham my friend."* The assurance of Israel's preservation lay in the fact that the LORD promised Abraham, His friend, a great host of descendants, *"He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'" (Gen. 15:5.)* Our father in the faith, Abraham, is designated as the friend of God; but we, as believers in Christ, being spiritually descended from Abraham, are designated as the very brethren of God's own beloved Son, Jesus the Messiah: *"[Jesus] is not ashamed to call them brothers. ¹²He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers' ... And again he says, 'Here am I, and the children God has given me'" (Heb. 2:11,12a, 13b.)* As such, we are given the promise of the Lord's faithfulness to us; the Lord Jesus declares, *"And this is the will of him who sent me, [namely,] that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but should raise it up at the last day. ⁴⁰My Father's will is that every one who looks to the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn. 6:39-40.)*

In verse 9 the LORD reminds His people of their security. It begins with God's initiative in salvation, *"I ...have called [you]."* In the New Testament era this truth is expounded by the Apostle Paul as follows: *"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8.)* Then there is God's far-reaching grasp, *"I called you from the farthest corners [of the earth]."* Again, in his epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul asks the question, *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8:35.)* The implied answer is, "No

one!" The LORD continues to expound to His Old Testament people the fact of their security in His covenant by asserting His unbreakable Word, "***I have declared, ... 'I have chosen you and have not rejected you.'***" That same unbreakable word is also given to the New Testament covenant community, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ: "***[God] will also confirm you to the end, [so that you may be] blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord***" (1 Cor. 1:8-9.)

In verse 10 the LORD assures His people of His sustaining presence. "***Do not be afraid, for I am with you.***" In the New Testament era, the risen Lord Jesus reaffirms for us the same assurance: "***surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age***" (Matt. 28:20.) The LORD now proceeds by declaring, "***Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.***" Because the LORD is our God, we are not to be panic-stricken, we are to have confidence in Him. As the Psalmist testifies, "***My help comes from Jehovah, who made heaven and earth. ³He will not allow your foot to be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber***" (Psl. 121:2-3.) Next the LORD assures Old Testament Israel, "***I will strengthen you ... I will help you ... I will uphold you.***" Speaking from personal experience, the Apostle Paul declares, "***the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength***" (2 Tim.4:17.) In light of the LORD's faithful, the Psalmist exhorts us, "***Cast your burden upon Jehovah, and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous to be moved***" (Psl. 55:22.)

In verses 11-14 the LORD assures His people that He will defend them. The enemies of God's people shall be confounded, they shall not prevail (vs. 11.) Furthermore, those enemies shall be removed (vs. 12.) This protection and deliverance is due to the mighty presence of the LORD our God: holding our hand, summoning us to fear not, and pledging to help us and to be our Redeemer (vs. 13-14.) Then, in verses 15-16, the LORD gives assurance to His people that they shall be more than conquerors. Back in verses 11-12 we find God's people surrounded by enemies and Jacob himself is described as a "***worm.***" But now in verses 15-16 God's people are described as a new and sharp threshing instrument that threshes mountains of grain. What is referred to here is a threshing sled: a board that was pulled by oxen while the driver stood on it; attached to the underside of the board were sharp, knife-like blades. The board was driven over the ears of grain spread on the threshing floor, the sharp blades would chop the grain to pieces and thereby release the kernels from the husks. The imagery is conveying to us the truth that just as we are identified with Christ in His humiliation, so shall we be joined with Him in His power and exaltation. As the Psalmist testifies,

May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, ⁷to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples ... ⁹to carry out the sentence written against them. This is the glory of all his saints. Praise Jehovah. (Psl. 149:6-7,9)

At all times, but especially when we find ourselves in a threatening situation, let us rely upon the LORD our God, because He is the Faithful God.

... the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength ... And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸The Lord will rescue me out of every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Tim. 4:17-18)

III. Rely upon the LORD Your God, Because He is the Sufficient God (Isa. 41:17-20)

In verse 17a God's people are described as being "*poor and needy*"—they seek water, but find none, their tongue is parched with thirst. Note that the LORD's people are not exempt from the various trials and tribulations of this life. Indeed, God at times permits us to reach the very extremity in a particular trial or hardship, as was the experience of the Apostle Paul,

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. (2 Cor. 1:8-10a)

But in verse 17b there follows the assurance, "*I, Jehovah, will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.*"

In verse 18 the LORD promises to sustain His people in "the wilderness." Indeed, the LORD further promises to transform "the wilderness" into a paradise (vs. 18b-19.) Here, expressed in Old Testament poetic terms, is the promise of the new creation to be experienced in blessing by all those who trust in Christ the Savior. The new creation of which the Apostle Peter writes:

... the day of God ... will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. (2 Pet. 3:12-13)

Note, too, the promises of God given in the Book of Revelation,

Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Rev. 7:16-17)

At all times, but especially when we find ourselves in a threatening situation, let us rely upon the LORD our God, because He is the Sufficient God.

... he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest upon me. (2 Cor. 12:9)

Conclusion

As we live for Jesus in this present world, it is inevitable that at one time or another we will find ourselves in an environment that is hostile to our Christian faith—we will find ourselves in a situation that is threatening to us as Christian people. This present passage of Scripture assures us that at all times—but especially at those critical times—we may with confidence rely upon the LORD our God.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. (Psl. 46:1)