



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## We Follow Because He Can

Isaiah 41.21-29

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### *Introduction*

1. Travel and communication capabilities that have effectively shrunk our world, along with the popularizing of ideologies and belief systems formerly unknown (or scarcely known) in the West present challenges to Christians to justify the idea that there is but one true God (1 Thess 1.9). And monotheism is probably more acceptable in today's world than the teaching that Jesus is the only way to approach God (John 14.6). Many, even some who profess a form of Christianity, affirm that the various religions are all different approaches to the same God.
2. Another challenge comes from practical idolatry. Some who claim sole allegiance to the Judeo-Christian God of Scripture and would never accept that there are multiple ways to God nevertheless have not made God the top priority in their lives (cf. Matt 6.19-24; Col 3.5).
3. A story told by apologist Ravi Zacharias in a recorded lecture I heard illustrates the first level of response to these challenges we need to pursue. A street preacher kept preaching his message even though everyone ignored and avoided him. When asked why he persisted, he said, "I used to preach to try to persuade others. I now preach lest they persuade me."
4. We do not need to stop trying to persuade others. But the number and insistence of the current challenges can erode our resolve. We need to take steps lest they persuade us.
5. Our text points to three reasons why we should follow God over all others, to be considered after reviewing Isaiah's setting and teaching.

### *Body*

- I. Isaiah's Setting and Teaching.
  - A. Remember that Isaiah is addressing a situation where the people were in captivity and wondering about it.
  - B. Isaiah 41 reassures them about God and challenges those who would subdue them.
    1. Verses 8-20 declare a God of deliverance and renewal.
    2. The setting for that declaration is a courtroom scene envisioned in vv. 1-7. In the scene, Yahweh testified first about his superiority, leaving those who would defend Babylon with nothing but fear, confusion, and empty exhortations.

- C. Our text (41.21-29) is the mirror image of vv 1-7.
1. This time, Yahweh's rivals speak first (21-24).
    - a) The challenge is issued to the Babylonians in a series of imperatives: bring (21), tell (21), tell (22), tell, do, do (23).
    - b) They are challenged to give persuasive evidence worthy of consideration: that we may consider, that we may know (22), that we may be dismayed and terrified (23).
    - c) Babylon and her advocates are told, "Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing; an abomination ["detestable" - NIV] is he who chooses you" (v. 24; cf. vv. 11-12).
  2. Yahweh's testimony is both different and contains more substance (25-29).
    - a) He affirms that he is controlling events, reminding them that he "stirred up one from the north" (25; see v 2), no doubt a reference to Cyrus.
    - b) In contrast to the gods of Babylon, Yahweh can declare things ahead of time that mortals cannot know, predictions that are proved true by coming to pass (26).
    - c) He is the one who declares "good news" (27); indeed, he is the only one who can declare good news because only he can effect genuine newness (recall 14-20).
    - d) His rivals cannot give answers, nor can their works accomplish anything (28-29).
  3. The effect of this message.
    - a) The Israelite community hears testimony that shows that the threats of their overlords are empty.
    - b) A picture of God is presented that reminds us that, whatever their claims, the ideologies and belief systems around us are impotent before Yahweh and offer no resolution to life's problems.

## II. We Should Follow God Because of His Unique Capability (Three Reasons Elaborated).

- A. **God's power:** all of chapters 40-41 (our study so far) show that only God is powerful enough to supply our needs.
1. The great questions and affirmations of 40.12-14, 21-22, 25-26 remind us of the power of our creating and sustaining God.
  2. The review of Israelite history in 41.8-10, to which we can add additional evidence that includes the return from captivity and the ministry of Jesus (see Rom 1.4; 1 Cor 15.51-58), show that his power is infinite; nothing is too hard for the Lord (see Gen 18.14; Matt 19.26).
  3. I once heard a speaker say that perhaps the best word to describe what God is about is "mission." He cited another speaker who challenged his hearers to find any stretch of 10 consecutive chapters in the Bible where God is not involved in advancing his mission.
- B. **God's knowledge:** Isaiah's main point of emphasis in our text is on the infinite knowledge of God.
1. He knows all and so what to us is the future is no mystery to him (41.26-27), in contrast with his competitors (41.21-23)—and us (see Jeremiah 10.23).
  2. Indeed, this text points to one of the reasons for believing the word that Yahweh has revealed—his ability to successfully predict specific events in the future.
  3. We can know, therefore, that:
    - a) When God promises things will work out a certain way, they will.

- b) When he tells us to live a certain way, he knows the ways well enough to tell us.
- C. **God's love:** this text also reminds us of something else about God that compels belief.
1. He is not only able, and knowledgeable, traits that make him superior to other powers, but not necessarily one that we would *want* to follow.
  2. Isaiah reminds us that God wants what is best for us (the definition of biblical love); the point of the entire section is to reassure the people about God's care (see 40.10-11, 27-31; 41.10, 13, 15-20).
  3. From our vantage point later in the story, we know that Judah experienced a foretaste of God's matchless *love* (see John 3.16; 1 John 4.8).

#### *Conclusion*

1. 1 Peter 5.6-7. Our world continues to challenge us verbally and otherwise not to take verses like these at face value and rely on God alone. It offers many alternatives, including the one that says we can treat him as one, or even the best, god among many.
2. The names of God's competitors differ now, and we must be candid about them: "To look outside the dominant system [we experience] for future prospects is not an easy or obvious thing to do" (Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion, 41).
3. As we consider the mission we have as God's people, let us remain firm in the conviction that only he will prevail. Let us continue to follow because he can.

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