EBS2 Isa 41-42

**Lesson 2: Isaiah 41-42**

**Title: Hallmark Cards and Jury Duty**

**Objectives:**

1. The student will understand how Isaiah uses history to establish the existence and power of God.
2. The student will learn to identify the sections of hope and reassurance and understand how they function in this section of Isaiah.
3. The student will realize that many exiles did not respond to God.

**Preparation:**

1. Review the passages listed in Lesson 1 regarding the state of mind of the exiles. In short, they are discouraged about their future and doubtful about their God.
2. Review the passages listed in Lesson 1 on the evidence that this material is written to those in Babylonian captivity.
3. Identify the cities of Babylon and Jerusalem on a map. Isaiah writes to the exiles in Babylon telling them of God’s plans to return them to Jerusalem.

**Theme:** The God of hope and history sends a servant.

1. This theme represents the main thrust of Isa 40-55
2. All the elements of this theme are found in Isa 41-42:
   1. In Isa 41:1-7, 21-29 Isaiah stresses how history verifies God’s power and existence.
   2. In Isa 41:8-20 Isaiah stresses how hope is found only in God.
   3. In Isa 42:1-9 God announces that he will send a servant.

**Background:**

1. Israelite history is often divided by which foreign nation threatens or has sovereignty over Israel
   1. From about 750-605 BC Assyria dominated Israel. Isaiah lived in Jerusalem during the first part of that period.
   2. From 605-539 BC Babylon dominated Israel. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC and the people were taken into exile in the city of Babylon. Isaiah 40-55 is addressed to these exiles.
   3. From 539-333 Persia dominated Israel. One of their early rulers, Cyrus, defeated Babylon and authorized the return from exile. Isaiah 56-66 addressed the small group of exiles who returned home.
2. Those who lived in exile had lost all they knew and experienced including: their homes, farms, land, cities, king, nation, temple, worship, and, in general, their way of life.
   1. In their minds, God had not been able to prevent this loss and they now doubted that he could undo it.
   2. Isaiah responds by telling the exiles in Isa 40-55 that God had orchestrated their loss and that he could most certainly undo it.
3. Generally speaking the people in exile took one of three points of view on their situation:
   1. Despair. There had been so much loss and cultural change that some believed things would “never again be the way they used to be.”
   2. Assimilation. Some saw that the past could not be restored so they gradually adopted portions of the Babylonian culture and religion as their own and they ceased to be God-worshipping Israel.
   3. Zion. Some saw that their hope was to trust God to return them to Zion and adapt to a new way of life in the old homeland that was more faithful than the life their predecessor’s lived. The prophet Isaiah and the servant championed this view.
4. The poetry of Isaiah presents numerous barriers to understanding. Note these reading guidelines.
   1. Isaiah uses extended metaphors. Chief among these is the courtroom scene. He does not mean to say that a literal trial is taking place, but only uses the image to make his point.
   2. Isaiah speaks in vivid images. He calls the people blind, but it is not literal blindness, but spiritual sight that is lacking. He speaks of the wilderness, which in a way refers to the rural area between Babylon and Jerusalem, but also refers to a life without God. Each image must be examined and visualized. The prophet did not have power point or a video to show, so he used word pictures to communicate.
   3. Isaiah often uses pronouns without any clear indication of who the pronoun refers to. Sometimes the same pronoun in the same section will refer to two different people. For example, in Isa 42:20 “He sees many things, but does not observe them” the “he” likely refers to Israel. But the next line “for his righteousness’ sake” the “his” refers to God. Typically each section will involve only two or three main characters. The sentences often describe qualities of each character. The reader must decide which character is likely meant by each pronoun.

**Learning Experiences:**

1. Context
   1. Review
      1. Isa 40 announces the coming of God to deliver his people from Babylonian captivity.
      2. In Isa 40:1-11 three voices express that Israel is as undependable as grass, but God is dependable, powerful, gentle and coming.
      3. To counter objections from the exiles that God cannot and will not rescue them, the prophet asserts that God is incomprehensible (they do not understand his plan), incomparable (he is not like the Babylonian gods) and inexhaustible (he will not get tired and overlook them).
   2. Preview
      1. In Isa 41-42 the prophet continues his presentation of God’s ability to bring them home in three ways:
         1. Uses two courtroom scenes to show God’s superiority as the God of history.
         2. Offers words of hope to reassure the exiles that God cares about them.
         3. Promises a servant who will make things right.
      2. At the end of Isa 42, the prophet shows that Israel remains blind and deaf both to the reason for their captivity and the power to end it.
2. Jury duty—Isa 41:1-7: Isaiah stresses how history verifies God’s power and existence.
   1. The coastlands do jury duty in this trial as God presents his case. The jury is assembled in Isa 41:1 and once they see the evidence they tremble at God’s power in Isa 41:5.
   2. God presents the evidence (God is the “me” in v1, the “who” in vv 2, 4 and the “I” in v 4).
   3. The evidence is that somebody has summoned a warrior from the east to overthrow the oppressive power that holds Israel captive.
      1. The warrior’s name is unimportant here but will be identified in Isa 44:28 as Cyrus.
      2. The critical issue is that God claims responsibility for what is about to happen. The political upheaval on the horizon is by God’s power.
   4. God’s ability to announce events before they happen shows his power and justifies his claim that not only did he know the events in advance, but he caused them to happen.
   5. When the Babylonians hear the evidence they frantically encouraged each other to consult their idols which are so fixed they cannot move. The Babylonians’ attempt to keep their gods from falling illustrates their inability to protect themselves let alone their people.
   6. Compare the use of “dust” here and in 40:15.
   7. Compare the view of kings here with 40:23-24.
   8. Consider why Isaiah repeats the line “renew their strength” in Isa 40:31 and 41:1.
3. Three Hallmark cards—Isa 41:8-20: Isaiah stresses how hope is found only in God.
   1. Some 11 different passages in Isa 40-55 are called “salvation oracles” by scholars. These are sections that tell the people not to be afraid because God will deliver or redeem them. Three such oracles appear almost as encouraging greeting cards from Hallmark.
   2. Salvation in the past—Isa 41:8-13: Isaiah affirms that because God has chosen Israel, they have no reason to fear.
      1. Isa 41:8-9 gives at least 10 different descriptions of Israel (Israel, my servant, Jacob, I chose, Abraham’s offspring, friend, taken from ends of earth (Ur?), from its farthest corners (Egypt?), etc.).
         1. Isaiah wants Israel to know it is them that he reassures, giving the equivalent of their name, address, social security number and computer password.
         2. Identify passages in the Old Testament where these points of identity originate.
      2. Because of God’s past association with Israel, current promises can be trusted.
         1. Isaiah makes many promises to the people. Make a list.
         2. Discuss the response of those listening to Isaiah.
      3. Isa 41:10 may be one of the most reassuring passages in the entire Bible. Use this simplistic memory device: When faced with a medical emergency, we call 911. When faced with a spiritual emergency, call Isa 411-0 (Isa 41:10).
   3. Salvation in the present—Isa41:14-16. Isaiah informs Israel that God will enable them to face the Babylonians.
      1. In Isa 40 the prophet called the people “grass.” Here he calls them a “worm” which was a tiny caterpillar. The point is not to degrade Israel, but to stress that it was not Israel’s ability or strength that would save them, but God working on their behalf.
      2. In God’s hands the worm would become a powerful tool cutting through the oppressor’s power. The images of Isa 41:15 refer to farm implements that cut the hard soil.
      3. God is Israel’s redeemer.
         1. See the social use of redeemer in Ruth. Boaz is Naomi’s redeemer.
         2. See the spiritual use of redeemer in the Exodus out of Egypt: Ex 6:6; 15:13; Psa 74:2; 77:16
         3. God’s role as redeemer here includes
            1. The physical restoration of Jerusalem including rebuilding the temple.
            2. The social restoration of the nation to its homeland and culture.
            3. The spiritual restoration of Israel to the worship of God.
         4. The New Testament will use the term redeemer to stress the spiritual restoration of humankind to God by Jesus Christ.
   4. Salvation in the future—Isa 41:17-20. Isaiah tells Israel that God will take care of them.
      1. Using vivid imagery, Isaiah offers assurance to Israel
      2. Israel is like a poor man that God will sustain
      3. Israel is like a wilderness that God will turn into a garden.
      4. God’s care for Israel is not for Israel, but to give God glory.
   5. In these three oracles God speaks in the first person (“I”) frequently, perhaps more often than anywhere in Scripture.
      1. Note the verbs used with God as subject
      2. Discuss what all this means about the nature of God.
4. Jury duty—Isa 41:21-29: Isaiah stresses how history verifies God’s power and existence.
   1. Using the imagery of a trial, God’s voice dominates as he first challenges the Babylonian gods (the “them” in v 22) to reveal how they have announced events in advance or orchestrated history. God challenges the Babylonian gods (they have names, see Isa 46:1f) to do something, either good or bad, to show they exist. Then God concludes, “Behold, you are nothing.”
   2. God repeats that he has called one from the north (in Isa 41:2 he came from the east, Cyrus actually came from the northeast, so both are correct). Through Isaiah the prophet God has been announcing events in advance, having his prophet write and seal the prophecy only to produce the written document after the events occur.
   3. The claim that Cyrus will “call on my name” in Isa 41:25 has generated considerable discussion especially in light of Isa 45:3-5. For more on Cyrus see 2 Chr. 36:22f; Ezr. 1:1f, 7f; 3:7; 4:3, 5; 5:13f, 17; 6:3, 14; Isa. 44:28; 45:1; Dan. 1:21; 6:28; 10:1.
5. Servant—In Isa 42:1-9: Isaiah announces the coming of God’s servant to set things right.
   1. The Babylonian gods do nothing (Isa 41:29), but God sends his servant.
   2. Make up the following lists
      1. What is God’s relationship to the servant? (list at least 8 items).
      2. What does the servant not do? (list 7 items).
      3. List the role he will play with justice (list 3 items).
      4. What will the servant do? (list at least 4 items).
   3. Some see the fact that he will not be discouraged (v 4) as an anticipation of his suffering which will be expanded on later.
   4. In Isa 42:5-9 God addresses the servant (the “you”) in which he promises to sustain the servant’s work.
   5. Isa 42:9 refers to the point of the two courtroom scenes in Isa 41 that God has announced the former things and is now announcing the new things. See Isa. 41:22; 42:9; 43:9, 18; 46:9; 48:3; 65:17; Rev. 21:4.
   6. The phrase “light to the nations” is the foundation of the world wide mission of Christianity.
      1. God’s interest in the nations goes back to Gen 12:1-3 and Ex 19:6.
      2. This phrase is used in the NT: Lk 2:32; Act 13:47; 26:23.
   7. One of the major areas of discussion in Isaiah is the identity of the servant.
      1. Among the suggestions are: Isaiah, Isaiah’s disciples, Cyrus, Zerubbabel, Israel.
      2. Matt 12 and 8 indicate that the servant finds fulfillment in Jesus.
      3. Jesus is the only one who fulfills all the expectations of the servant.
      4. Isaiah’s announcement that God would send a servant (or later in Isa 55-66 it is servants) might have multiple fulfillments as do many of his prophecies even though no servant in exilic and post exilic times would be as perfect a servant as Jesus. Jesus calls all Christians to be servants although none measure up to the kind of service he provided.
6. Worship—Isa 42:10-13: Isaiah praises the God of hope and history who sends a servant.
   1. Hymns often mark the end of a section in Isaiah (see how Isa 12 summarizes and points to the worship of God after the long discussion of oppression, judgment and hope in Isa 1-11).
   2. Hymns in Isa 40-55 include:
      1. 40:10-13
      2. 44:23
      3. 45:24-25
      4. 48:20-21
      5. 49:13
      6. 52:9-10
      7. 55:12-13
   3. Several groups are invited to join the worship. List them (find at least 9).
   4. God is often pictured as a military warrior (first appearing in Ex 15) in which he sets out to do justice. This picture will be used as a major illustration in Isa 59:17 and used by Paul in Eph 6.
7. Blind and Deaf—Isa 42:14-25: Israel does not understand the purpose of captivity or the potential of return.
   1. God explains his role in the lives of the exiles by the frequent use of the first person pronoun “I” as subject of the verbs.
   2. In a striking illustration God compares his patience with the exiles to a pregnant woman’s patience with the pregnancy and his current outburst with the child’s birth. Isaiah uses every available image to explain the nature of God. Just as Isaiah’s comparison of God to a potter (Isa 46:9) does not mean God has dirty hands, so his comparison of God to a mother does not mean God is feminine.
   3. God claims responsibility for the exile (“lay waste” “a way they know not”) and the return (“darkness …into light”).
   4. God speaks directly to Israel (the “you” in Isa 42:18, the “servant” [paralleling the use in Isa 41:8 but not 42:1] in Isa 42:19, the “he” in Isa 42:20, “people” in Isa 42:22, “Jacob” in Isa 42:24, and “him” in Isa 42:25).
   5. The exiles did not live in caves or holes, but are metaphors for captivity.
   6. Israel did not understand that their sin sent them into exile and that their God was powerful enough and caring enough to refine them in exile and restore them to Jerusalem.
   7. Isaiah identifies the cause of God’s frustration.
      1. Israel depends on idols—42:17.
      2. Israel does not listen—42:23.
      3. Israel does not understand the purpose of the exile—42:25.

**Continuities:**

1. Consider the argument from history that Isaiah makes for the existence and power of God. Does it help establish belief in God? Compare this argument with the ones current apologists make based on human reasoning.
2. What are the most hopeful words in these two chapters? Who in contemporary society might benefit from these words?
3. Make a list of the attributes of God that are taught in these two chapters. What is unique about this presentation? Do any of Isaiah’s images for God trouble you? Why are they troubling?
4. Is God justified in being frustrated with Israel? Are there any people who respond to God today in a way that parallels Israel’s response?
5. List a time when you might need to dial Isaiah 4110.

**Assignment:** Read Isa 43-45.

**Additional Study:**

1. Study the flow of this section by using this outline of Isa 40-55. The theme of 40-55 is God takes idols out of Israel.
   1. 40:1-11—deliverance coming
   2. 40:12-31—God is better than idols
   3. 41:1-7—deliverance coming
   4. 41:8-20—Israel need not be afraid
   5. 41:21-29—God is better than idols
   6. 42:1-12—deliverance coming
   7. 42:13-17—deliverance coming
   8. 42:18-25—God addresses Israel’s sin
   9. 43:1-7—Israel need not be afraid
   10. 43:8-13—God is better than idols
   11. 43:14-21—deliverance coming
   12. 43:22-28—God addresses Israel’s sin
   13. 44:1-5—Israel need not be afraid
   14. 44:6-20—God is better than idols
   15. 44:21-23—deliverance coming
   16. 44:24-45:8—deliverance coming
   17. 45:9-19—God is better than idols
   18. 45:20-25—God is better than idols
2. Dig deeper into the history behind this section. Not all agree that the historical setting is exile.
   1. The judgment threatened in Isa 1-39 has taken place—42:21-25; 50:1.
   2. Isa 40-55 is written to those in Babylonian Captivity (586-38 BC)—49:21; 28:20; 51:11.
   3. The people are despondent—40:27; 41:14, 17; 42:22.
   4. Cyrus is coming—41:1-5, 25; 44:48; 45:1; 46:11; 48:15.
   5. God will take his people home—46:1-4.
   6. Jerusalem and Judah to be rebuilt—44:26-45:1.
3. Compare the teaching about creation in Isaiah with Gen 1-2.
   1. 40:12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?
   2. 42:5 Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:
4. Note the Two Arguments for God in Isa 40-55
   1. 1--He is superior to the idols: 40:12-20; 41:1-10; 42:8-9, 17; 44:6-22; 45:16, 20; 46:1-13; 48:5
   2. 2--He is the creator and sustainer of history: 41:22-23; 42:9; 44:7; 46:9; 48:3-6, 14-16.
5. Survey the servant passages
   1. The word servant appears in: 41:8f; 42:1, 19; 43:10; 44:1f, 21, 26; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3, 5ff; 50:10; 52:13; 53:11.
   2. The classical Servant Passages
      1. 42:1-4—Israel a light to nations
      2. 49:1-7—called from womb
      3. 50:4-9—trusting teacher
      4. 52:13-53:12—suffering servant
   3. Consult commentaries about the identity of the servant.