Strengthened With Nails

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On Salvation as Deliverance, the Idols We Soldered Ourselves, and the One Who Comes to Set the Captives Free

Semantic Range

When we sing about the Lord being our righteousness, about being saved, about deliverance, *the words mean things*. But over time, words travel. The English language is fluid; the way a word was used in 1611 is often not the way it is used today. If you took an English literature course you would call this *semantic range*, the spread of meanings a single word can carry across history.

Take a small example from the King James Version. Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, *he who now letteth will let until he be taken out of the way*. Now what does *let* mean today? *Allow*. *Let me have the car. Let me explain. Allow* is the default modern meaning. But in 1611, when the King James translators were working, the word *let* meant something almost the opposite: *to hinder, to prevent, to restrain*. Paul is saying *he who now restrains will keep on restraining until he is taken out of the way*. The semantic range of *let* has flipped almost a hundred and eighty degrees over four centuries.

Now apply the same lesson to the words salvation and righteousness and deliverance that we sing about every Sunday. Those words also have semantic range. In contemporary evangelical use, salvation often means the personal happy feeling I get when I am forgiven of my

sins and I know I am going to heaven when I die. That is a real meaning. It is not the only meaning the biblical word carries. When the Old Testament uses salvation, it most often means deliverance from captivity, imprisonment, and enslavement. It is the word used when God saved Israel out of Egypt. It is the word used when God saved Israel out of Babylon. Salvation in its biblical core is deliverance from the oppressor who has had you in chains. It is the cracking-open of the prison door. The personal forgiveness dimension is real, and the personal forgiveness dimension is genuinely part of it. But the deliverance dimension is the bigger frame.

And one of the challenges of the modern church is that we have *retained the language of salvation while shrinking its meaning*. We get a feeling of being saved. We do not always trust God for *ultimate deliverance from the things that are still keeping us bound*. The semantic range of *salvation* has narrowed to a feeling, when the biblical word is *also* about being walked out of a real prison.

Not a Sin Preacher, a Salvation Preacher

Let me say plainly where I stand as a preacher. *I am not a sin preacher.* It is not that I do not believe sin should be preached against. *It is that I do not know what sins you need me to preach on.* You do not want to tell me which ones to address. I do not want to know. *That is not the work of the preacher anyway.* The work of the preacher is to set the gospel in front of people, and the Spirit of God, speaking from the inside of the listener's heart, is the One who does the convicting. Conviction from outside, from a preacher pointing his finger and saying *you need to straighten up, you need to fly right,* occasionally lands. It sometimes does come that way. *Mostly, conviction that actually transforms a life comes from inside, from the Spirit, after the gospel has been planted in good ground.*

So if I am not a sin preacher, what am I? *I am a salvation preacher.* I preach the deliverance of God. The complete liberation from the imprisonment and the power of evil that captivates us. Individual imprisonments. Collective imprisonments, because people-groups can get themselves into echo chambers of self-appreciation and navel-gazing that lead down primrose paths into very dark places. The Pharisees are the textbook example. *You don't even have to say more than the word Pharisees and the listener already understands the diagnosis*. The Pharisees got locked into an idea of God that led them to disbelieve the Son of God when he was standing in front of them. *How disillusioned can a group of people become?* Apparently, pretty disillusioned. I have come to believe that *groups become more disillusioned than individuals*. The herd-effect amplifies what individual conscience might otherwise have caught.

So I preach salvation, *complete deliverance from the imprisonments of evil that captivate us*. And when we see imprisonment in our own lives, or in the lives of people we love, and we throw up our hands and ask *what could we possibly do?*, the answer is: *keep speaking life. Keep speaking deliverance.* The God who delivered Israel out of Egypt and out of Babylon is the same God who delivers individual hearts today. The deliverance ministry of the church is the deliverance of the captivated.

Why the Pharisees Could Not See the Signs

Look at how this plays out in Matthew. The Gospel has been building toward Matthew 13's parables of the kingdom for twelve chapters, and we ought to understand *why* it has been building.

Matthew 5, 6, and 7 are the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preaching the kingdom of God in concentrated form. Matthew 8 through 12 record an extraordinary series of healings: *ten*

mighty signs, in which *twelve people are healed*. Now hold those two numbers. *Ten signs. Twelve people healed.* That is not accidental.

Why ten? Because *ten was the number of plagues God brought on Pharaoh* in Exodus 7–12, attempting to break open the hardness of Pharaoh's heart and force him to release Israel. And what does Exodus tell us about Pharaoh's response? Pharaoh would *partially repent* (*I have sinned this time; pray for me* (Exodus 9:27)) and then his heart would harden again. The text alternates between *Pharaoh hardened his heart* and *the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart*, two sides of the same coin. *Whenever God's signs land on us, we have a choice. We can receive them and soften, or we can resist them and harden.* The same encounter with God can become either deliverance or further bondage, depending on the response.

Why twelve? Because *twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel*. The twelve people Jesus heals in those five chapters are a *sign to the religious leaders that the deliverance of Israel itself is now in progress*. Ten signs (the Exodus pattern, the pattern of confronting the oppressor) merged with twelve healings (the Israel pattern, the pattern of restoring the people God called), *to say to Israel's leaders, this is your moment. This is for you.*

And what does Matthew 12 close with? *The Pharisees and Sadducees coming to Jesus and demanding a sign* (Matthew 12:38). After ten signs and twelve healings. After the lame walked, the blind saw, the deaf heard, the mute spoke, the demonized were delivered, and the dead were raised. *They demand a sign.* The hardness of heart that ten plagues could not break in Pharaoh is now operating in the leaders of Israel itself. *They cannot see what is in front of them, because what is in front of them does not fit the kingdom they were expecting.*

And Jesus' diagnosis is sharp:

"An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matthew 12:39).

The only sign they will get is the sign that the Messiah is going to go down into the deep and come back up again, extending mercy to nations they would not have chosen to share a meal with. The Jonah-sign is a Gentile-mission sign, and it is the only sign their hardened hearts will be permitted to see.

Hidden From the Wise, Revealed to Infants

There is a beautiful line tucked into Matthew 11 that captures the paradox precisely:

> At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight." (Matthew 11:25–26)

Hidden from the wise. Revealed to infants. What a paradox. Why is it that infants can perceive the work of God in the earth while the wise and prudent cannot? Because the wise have committed themselves to a framework that does not have room for what God is actually doing. The infants have no such framework yet. The infants come empty-handed. The wise come with a model. The infants come with a question. And the kingdom always reveals itself more readily to the question than to the model.

And right before this paradox, Matthew 11 records John the Baptist sending messengers from his prison cell to ask: *are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?* (Matthew 11:3). John has been imprisoned by Herod. John was the forerunner who had identified Jesus as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). And now, sitting in chains, John is wondering whether he got it right. The messianic prophecies he had grown up with promised *deliverance from the captivity of Babylon, a Messiah who would break the jaw of the oppressor*

and restore the kingdom to Israel. And here is Jesus, walking around saying things like *love your enemies* and *if a Roman soldier compels you to carry his load one mile, carry it two*. *That is not breaking jaws.* John is in prison wondering whether the Messiah he announced is actually the Messiah Israel had been promised.

> Jesus' answer to John is one of the most pastorally generous moments in the Gospels:
>
> Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me. (Matthew 11:4–6)

Go tell John what you see. The kingdom is arriving exactly the way Isaiah said it would: Isaiah 35, Isaiah 61. Just not the way Israel had grown to expect it. The poor have the gospel preached to them. The lame walk. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. The kingdom is arriving in mercy, not in jaw-breaking. Blessed are those who can accept the difference. And when John heard that, sitting in his cell, he could die. Herod could do his worst. The kingdom was real, and John had announced the right Messiah even if the Messiah was not following the script John had been holding.

"Not by Might, nor by Power"

That gentler kingdom, the one whose Messiah does not break the jaw of the oppressor by force, is the kingdom God had been pointing toward all along. Listen to Zechariah's word to a rebuilding remnant under Zerubbabel:

> "'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6).

Zechariah was speaking to a tiny band of returnees from Babylonian exile, trying to rebuild a temple that was nothing compared to Solomon's, in a city whose walls were rubble,

surrounded by neighboring peoples who actively opposed the rebuilding. And God told them: get your hands busy. Start the work. Do not worry about your enemies. The work is going to be accomplished not by your military might or your political power but by My Spirit.

That is the operating principle. The kingdom advances by Spirit. The kingdom does not advance by force. *Every time the church has tried to advance by force, the church has corrupted itself.* Every time the church has advanced by Spirit (in apparent weakness, in prayer, in costly love, in patient endurance under pressure) the church has actually grown. *Cyrus the Great, as we will see, conquered most of his empire without leaving home, because the cities ahead of him kept opening their gates rather than fighting.* The kingdom of God moves the same way. The Spirit goes ahead. The gates open. *Not by might. Not by power. By My Spirit.*

Healing on the Sabbath

Now look at the climactic confrontation in Matthew 12. Jesus enters a synagogue. There is a man there with a withered hand. The Pharisees are watching to see what Jesus will do, because *it is the Sabbath*. And Jesus, knowing exactly what they are watching for, asks them a question they cannot answer:

> What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. (Matthew 12:11–12)

And he heals the man. *His hand was restored as whole as the other* (Matthew 12:13). A man who could not work was now able to work. A father who could not lift his children was now able to lift them. A worker who had been disqualified from his trade was now restored to his trade. *Real, embodied, life-changing deliverance.*

And what is the Pharisees' response?

"Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him" (Matthew 12:14).

They went out and plotted to kill him. That is the response of religious hardness when it is confronted with a deliverance it cannot fit into its categories. Someone who restores life, who restores motor function, who restores sense capabilities, who restores eyes and ears and mouths and feet and hands, someone who is restoring people to their created potential, and the religious authorities are decrying it and want to take the life of the One who does it. That is a perverted religiosity. We have seen it over and over again in history. We have seen it in institutional religion when forms have started to outstrip and crowd out the substance. When form becomes more important than substance, we have a problem.

And every one of us has to ask the diagnostic question: Where am I caught in the same pattern? What imprisonments am I currently part of? What idols am I currently serving, that have come in and started to possess me?

Everybody Is Going to Serve Somebody

Because here is the truth Bob Dylan caught in his old gospel-period song: *everybody is going to serve somebody*. *Everybody is going to be filled with some spirit*. The metaphor that runs all through the New Testament is *we are houses*: receiving vessels, places where some spirit will eventually take up residence. *We do not get to be empty.* We will be filled with something. The only question is *what*.

From the day we are born we are receiving vessels. Our actions and reactions through childhood are mostly about *getting filled with the attention and approval of the important people in our lives*. The pattern continues into adulthood. We seek attention, validation, recognition,

status, connection. And whatever we orient toward, we eventually become. *That is the law of formation.*

And Jesus closes Matthew 12 with a sobering picture of what happens to a religious community that has been emptied of one possession but not filled with the right one:

> When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation. (Matthew 12:43–45)

That is Jesus' diagnosis of first-century Israel. The unclean spirit had gone out, the idolatry of the pre-exilic period had been swept away by Babylon, and the house had been put in order through the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah and the rebuilding under Zerubbabel. But the house was empty. The Spirit of God had not yet taken up residence in it. And in that empty, swept-clean condition, seven other spirits more wicked than the first had moved in. The hyper-religiosity of the Pharisees. The compromising secularism of the Sadducees. The political militarism of the Zealots. The withdrawal-purity of the Essenes. Each of these movements was a spirit that had filled the house Israel left empty. And the last state of that house was worse than the first.

And so it is for any individual or community that empties itself of one corruption without being filled with the Spirit of God. *Stopping a bad habit is not enough. Renouncing a sin is not enough. The house must be filled with the Spirit, or seven worse spirits will move in.* Jesus' warning is structural. Empty spiritual real estate gets occupied. The only question is by whom.

And what happens to a spirit-filled person? *The opposite*. Look at the quotation Matthew applies to Jesus right in the middle of the same chapter:

> Behold! My Servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved in whom My soul is well pleased! I will put My Spirit upon Him, and He will declare justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, till He sends forth justice to victory; and in His name Gentiles will trust. (Matthew 12:18–21, quoting Isaiah 42:1–4)

Now look at what that passage promises. The Servant has the Spirit upon him. And the result is gentleness toward the bruised and the smoldering. A bruised reed he will not break. If you are weak, do not expect this King to snap you off. A smoking flax he will not quench. If your faith is just a flicker, barely a wisp of smoke from the wick, do not expect this King to step on it and put it out. Expect him to fan it into a fire. That is the manner of the Spirit-filled King. The one filled with God's Spirit is also the one whose gentleness becomes the medicine for the wounds the world has inflicted.

Cyrus, and the Idols Soldered With Nails

Now follow the Isaiah quotation back to its context, because Isaiah 41 sets up Isaiah 42 in a way that catches the chapter's whole pastoral point. When Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1–4 about *the Servant with the Spirit upon him*, Matthew is reaching back into a passage that is *first* about the rise of a Persian king named Cyrus.

Isaiah 41 is addressed to the Jews who have been scattered into Babylonian exile. They have lost their nation. They have lost their temple. They have been displaced, broken, separated from one another. Some of their loved ones have been killed; others have been scattered into distant cities. *And then a rumor begins to reach them*. A rumor of a new emperor rising in the

east: *Cyrus the Persian*, who has overthrown his Median overlords and is now sweeping westward.

Listen to what Isaiah 41 says about Cyrus:

> Who raised up one from the east? Who in righteousness called him to His feet? Who gave the nations before him, and made him rule over kings? Who gave them as the dust to his sword, as driven stubble to his bow? Who pursued them, and passed safely by the way that he had not gone with his feet? (Isaiah 41:2–3)

Did you hear the final phrase? *He pursued them, and passed safely by the way that he had not gone with his feet.* Cyrus the Great, historically, is remembered for one of the most remarkable conquest patterns in ancient history. *He won most of his empire without fighting most of the battles.* He defeated the Medes, his Median overlords, and then the vassal-states of the Median empire were so glad to see the Medes overthrown that they simply *opened their gates to Cyrus* and joined his coalition. Cities fell without sieges. Nations transferred allegiance without combat. *Cyrus's reputation for clemency went ahead of him,* and the resistance dissolved before he arrived. Isaiah captures it precisely: *he pursued them, and passed safely by the way he had not gone with his feet*.

And then Isaiah pivots immediately to the question of *who is actually accomplishing this*:

> "Who has performed and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? 'I, the Lord, am the first; and with the last I am He'" (Isaiah 41:4).

I, the Lord. Not Cyrus's wisdom. Not Cyrus's military might. Yahweh is the One who has gone ahead of the Persian armies and opened the gates. I with the first and with the last. I was with the first Persian soldier who left the city of Persepolis, and I will be with the last

Persian soldier who enters Babylon. Cyrus is the visible agent. Yahweh is the invisible Mover behind him.

And now look at what the Babylonians and the other nations of the coastlands do as they hear the rumor of Cyrus approaching:

> The coastlands saw it and feared; the ends of the earth were afraid; they drew near and came. Everyone helped his neighbor, and said to his brother, "Be of good courage!" So the craftsman encouraged the goldsmith; he who smooths with the hammer inspired him who strikes the anvil, saying, "It is ready for the soldering"; then he fastened it with pegs, that it might not totter. (Isaiah 41:5–7)

This is one of the most withering pieces of prophetic irony in the entire Old Testament. The nations are terrified. They huddle together. They reassure one another: be strong, be of good courage. And what is their plan? To build a god strong enough to withstand the coming threat.

Watch the manufacture. The craftsman encourages the goldsmith. *Make it well.* The smoother of metal encourages the anvil-striker. *Hit it harder.* They evaluate the soldering. *Yes, that joint looks good.* And then, and this is the line that lands the irony, *then he fastened it with pegs, that it might not totter*. *They are nailing their gods down so they will not fall over.* That is the picture. The terrified nations of the coastlands are *strengthening their idols with nails*.

And the question the prophet wants us to ask is: what kind of god is it that has to be nailed down to keep him from falling over? What kind of god requires my hammer to hold him in place against a rising Persian threat? Compare such a god to the Yahweh who set the front and the back of Cyrus's armies and opened the gates of every city ahead of him. The contrast is total. The God of Israel is moving across the world; the gods of Babylon are being nailed to their pedestals so they will not tip over.

This is religious religiosity 101. Doubling down on something you suspect is not going to work. Strengthening the soldering with extra nails. Adding incantations on top of incantations. Multiplying the rituals on top of rituals that have already proven inadequate. It is the behavior of a community that has lost confidence in its gods but cannot bring itself to abandon them. And the prophet is pointing at the entire pantheon of the ancient Near East and saying: the nails will not save you. The God who is actually moving the armies is the One who is going to deliver his people, with or without the nails you are driving into your idols.

"Be Strong"

And there is a tender side to this that I do not want to miss. Notice how it began: *everyone helped his neighbor, and said to his brother, be of good courage. Be strong.* That is what people whisper to each other when things are falling apart and they secretly suspect there is no way out. *Get down in the trenches with each other. Encourage each other. Be strong, guys. Be strong.* And underneath the encouragement, *they were losing it*. They had no real basis for the courage they were urging on each other. So they turned to the only thing they knew how to turn to. *Their idols.* And the idols, in turn, had to be nailed down to keep from falling over.

Are we so different? When we sense that things are slipping (culturally, politically, ecclesiastically, personally) *we turn to whatever has historically given us a sense of strength*. We add nails to it. We solder it tighter. We pile our hammer-work on top of the existing structure and try to fortify ourselves against whatever we sense is coming. *And the more we have to nail it down, the more obvious it should become that we have been trusting in a god who cannot stand without our nails.*

The remedy is what Isaiah names in the very next verse, the pivot from the terrified coastlands to the people of God:

> But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham My friend. You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest regions, and said to you, 'You are My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away': Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:8–10)

Fear not, for I am with you. That is the answer. Not strengthen the nails. Not double down on the soldering. Fear not, for I am with you. The God of Abraham is not an idol that needs to be propped up. He is the One who upholds his people with his righteous right hand. And the right response in the trembling moment is not to nail down the false gods but to lift our eyes to the true God who is already moving across the world ahead of us.

"I, the Lord"

Now hold a small but striking grammatical feature of Isaiah 41–48. Across these eight chapters, the heart of the Isaianic prophecies of deliverance from Babylon, God speaks directly, in the first person, more intensively than almost anywhere else in the Old Testament. I, Yahweh. I have called you. I will strengthen you. I will uphold you. Fear not, for I am with you. I will be with you. I am he.

It is as though, in the darkest moment of Israel's exile, the prophet is taken out of the middle, and *God himself speaks directly to the displaced and the broken*. *No intermediary. No 'thus saith the Lord.' Just I.* That is how close God comes when his people are in the dark. *He speaks first-person.*

And then look at what the chapter does with those who war against the people of God:

> Behold, all those who were incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; they shall be as nothing, and those who strive with you shall perish. You shall seek them and not find them, those who contended with you. Those who war against you shall be as nothing, as a nonexistent thing. For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.' (Isaiah 41:11–13)

Those who war against you shall be as nothing. Why will they be as nothing? Because they have nailed themselves to idols that cannot save them. They have become like the gods they have soldered down. They have eyes that cannot see, ears that cannot hear, mouths that cannot speak, feet that cannot walk. The Psalm 115 diagnosis applies. You become what you worship. The Babylonians have become like the gods they have nailed to the pedestals. And against the moving God of Israel, the nailed-down gods are nothing.

And the chapter goes on to make the diagnostic explicit:

> Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; yes, do good or do evil, that we may be dismayed and see it together. Indeed you are nothing, and your work is nothing; he who chooses you is an abomination. (Isaiah 41:23–24)

He who chooses you is an abomination. That is the warning. The Pharisees of first-century Jerusalem were not actually serving the God of Abraham. They were serving a religious idol they had constructed themselves, and they had become like it. Hyper-religious, dead to the work of the living God who was healing on the Sabbath right in front of them. Idolatry of the religious sort is no less idolatry than idolatry of the secular sort. And it requires the same deliverance. We can be perfectly confirmed in our doctrinal positions and still be serving an idol we have nailed down ourselves.

Babylon Fell in One Night

And here is the gospel of the chapter, the gospel I want to leave you with: *Babylon fell in one night*.

The mighty empire of Babylon, the empire that had held the Jews captive for seventy years, was historically taken by Cyrus's forces in *a single night*. The Persian engineers diverted the Euphrates river that ran under Babylon's massive defensive walls, lowered the water level, and *walked into the city under the walls along the riverbed*. The defenders, behind their fortified walls, never saw it coming. *By morning, the empire had changed hands.*

Daniel 5 records the night from inside Babylon. King Belshazzar is throwing a feast. He calls for the holy vessels stolen from the temple in Jerusalem and uses them to drink wine in honor of the gods of gold and silver, *the gods nailed to their pedestals*. In the middle of the revelry, a hand appears and writes on the wall: *MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN*, *numbered, numbered, weighed, divided* (Daniel 5:25). Daniel interprets:

> This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. (Daniel 5:26–28)

"That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom . . " (Daniel 5:30–31).

That very night. Sometimes we think the enslavement we are in will never end. We think the loved one who has been bound for so long will never be delivered. There is a Cyrus sitting on his throne, and he knows how to send his troops. And in one night the God of heaven can deliver us from the bondage we are in. We will go to bed one night, and we will wake up the next morning to find that the chains are lying on the floor beside our bed. We will not necessarily

know what did it. We will not know exactly why we have been delivered. We will not know precisely why our mindset is suddenly different: why we do not want to watch that show anymore, why we no longer want to listen to that music, why we are no longer enamored by that politician or entertainer. *The chains will simply be on the floor*. That is how the deliverance comes.

And the Persian Cyrus, the moment he conquered Babylon, issued the decree that ended Israel's exile:

> 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, saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: 'All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem.'" (Ezra 1:1–3)

Return to Jerusalem and build the house of God. The gold is mine. The silver is mine. All that you need to build the house of God is at your disposal. That is the proclamation of the Cyrus God raised up to deliver his people. And our deliverance, in its own way, comes the same way. Go to bed every night expecting that God will do something in the morning. The chains may be on the floor when you wake up. Cyrus is on his throne, and he knows how to send his troops.

Do Not Fear

And the recurring word across these Isaianic chapters is *do not fear*. Look at how Isaiah 41:10 puts it:

"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

And then how the chapter's pastoral word reaches its tenderest point:

"'Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I will help you,' says the Lord and your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 41:14).

You worm Jacob. That is a tender phrase: almost insulting in translation, but pastorally precise. God is addressing a people who feel like *worms*. Crushed, displaced, insignificant. *And the God who is moving Cyrus's armies across the world says to the worm Jacob: I will help you. I will be your Redeemer.* The same God who is conquering empires through Persian armies is bending down to address the smallest member of the exilic community by a tender, slightly self-deprecating name. *He is not too big to comfort the worm.*

And the same word, *do not fear,* comes through Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 10:

> Therefore do not fear them. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. (Matthew 10:26–28)

Do not fear them. The kingdom is going to come into your community whether or not the surrounding powers approve. The deliverance is going to be accomplished. *Do not fear* the people who can kill the body. *Do not fear* the political pressures or the cultural movements. *Do not fear* the loss of comfort, the loss of position, the loss of approval. *Fear the One who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell,* and even that, in the context of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his disciples' commission, is more a call to reverent trust than to terror. *The fear that*

gives us courage is not the fear of the powerful in this world. It is the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10).

Delivered From the Idols We Built Ourselves

So here is where this all lands. *The salvation we are preaching is the deliverance from whatever idol we have constructed and nailed down for ourselves.* Whatever pegs we have driven into our soldering. Whatever god we have hammered together to give ourselves a sense of strength in a moment of fear.

Maybe the idol is religious, the carefully constructed doctrinal position that has become more important than the living God it was meant to honor. Maybe the idol is political, the figure or movement whose triumph we have so over-identified with the kingdom that we cannot tell where the kingdom ends and the figure begins. Maybe the idol is personal: the addiction, the relationship, the habit, the self-image that we have soldered together so many times we cannot imagine our identity apart from it. Maybe the idol is cultural: the song that took us to a dark place at a particular point in life, that we cannot listen to anymore because it would catch us again. *Whatever it is, the King who has the Spirit of God upon him comes to deliver us from it.*

And as soon as we think we need *no* deliverance, as soon as we conclude that we have outgrown the need for salvation, *we have made an idol of our own maturity*. *That* idol is now sitting nailed down on the pedestal of our self-confidence, and we are starting to look like it. Eyes that cannot see our actual condition. Ears that cannot hear the prophet's word. Mouth that cannot confess what needs to be confessed. *Self-sufficiency is its own kind of soldered god.* And the deliverance from self-sufficiency is itself one of the kinder works of grace God does in a person's life.

So let us be done with the nails. Let us let the idols fall over. Let us not bother to solder them tighter. Let us trust the God who moves Cyrus across the world without leaving home, who pursues his enemies, passing safely by the way he had not gone with his feet. He has gone ahead of us. The gates are opening. The chains will be on the floor when we wake up. That is the salvation we are preaching. That is the deliverance the kingdom has come to bring. Receive it.