

## How to Have a Happy New Year

### Isaiah 41:10

#### Another year gone

The Age newspaper review – 2D v 3D. What does the future hold?

#### *a foundational verse for the new year*

There's a verse in scripture that captured my attention. A good verse for a new year. It's a verse full of hope because the people of God always have a future. Turn with me to Isaiah 41:10 where we find God saying to Israel (slide), "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand".

*A foundational verse for Israel.* Here's a verse of hope for Israel. For the year just gone, 587 B.C., was a year Israel would prefer to forget. It was the year that the Babylonians came sweeping through, the nation was held captive and Jerusalem destroyed, many citizens were exiled in a foreign land. It should have been a year Israel saw coming. Prophet after a prophet gave warnings, men such as Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah. But they didn't listen So God responded as he had promised. 587 B.C. was a bad year. And the people wept.

Of Jerusalem it is written,

Her foes have become her master's, her enemies are at ease. The Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins. Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe ... See, O Lord, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious. Outside the sword bereaves; inside there is only death" (Lam 1:5, 20).

Sin always has forewarned consequences. The psalmist reflects, "The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. (Ps 5:5).

National calamity. Israel found herself in a foreign land, outside the land of promise. They were not deserving of the promise and later they realised and the tears flowed. "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure" (Lam 5:21-22).

Had God done the unthinkable? Had he cast off his people? Through Isaiah God continued to speak and this brings us to the words of comfort in Isaiah 41. Isaiah 41:8–9, “But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, “You are my servant”; I have chosen you and have not rejected you”.

And then the promise of hope, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”. The great words of hope for a suffering nation. The future will be better because God offers his forgiveness. Israel are God’s servant and he will not abandon them.

Even words of assurance are hard to bear. This is when we need the light of God’s word shining into our darkness. And it may take time for the light to roll back the darkness but the light will roll back the darkness. Salvation is fully God’s work and Israel must commit their future to God who has promised to remain with them.

*A foundational verse for us.* It’s been a pretty tough 12 months for many of us. If the Age newspaper were to do a photo review of your past 12 months, what photos would be showing on the screen? And we don’t know what 2020 will bring for any one of us. But we have God’s word and God’s word is true. It gives us perspective because it gives us the backstory to our two-dimensional, sinful, fragmented, world.

But we cannot live according to those promises if we do not know them, or if we do not believe them. And this creates disorientation and despair.

Israel thought they could have it each way with God. A foot in worldly kingdoms. A foot in God’s kingdom. If anyone were to ask you, you would say, “I’m for Christ and his church”. A wonderful declaration but I want to ask you, “Are you for Christ and his church”? Or are you in name only living with and for Christ but the reality might be you are living in exile?

If Isaiah 41.10 is to be your verse then you need to return from exile. Take ownership of the promises of God. Come to God through Christ. There is a new land, a new life, a new place for those who ask for forgiveness. Turn from your rebellion and exchange the darkness of your heart for the light that God’s

Spirit sheds in our hearts. Isaiah 41.10 is not a promise for those outside Christ who have reason to fear the future. But for those with Christ as King, “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”.

Isaiah 41.10 is also for those in Christ who are timid about the future. It is natural that we feel uncertainty and frailty for life is challenging. In the doctor’s surgery, in the cancer clinic, with the heart specialist, in the nursing home—it can be a hard ride. And these are God’s words for you made possible through faith in Christ, ““So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”.

Let’s look a little closer at the content of this verse.

### **God never leaves his people**

*Warnings against unfaithfulness.* The first thing we notice is there are two commands in the form of “nots”: “do *not* fear...” and “do *not* be dismayed....”.

Fear and dismay are the enemies lurking within the shadows to rob us of trust and confidence in our great God. Not the fleeting moments of fear that strike us all. Not instant dismay in uncertain situations. The verse speaks here of fear and dismay which are the common attributes of an unfaithful life. Of a life reliant upon self rather than reliant upon Christ.

The promises that God makes in his Word are our anchor in life. For his words, and his alone, give us the assurance and confidence needed to travel to our heavenly home. With the exile behind us, and our heavenly home before us, we are called to trust God, “do not fear” and “do not be dismayed”.

*Do not fear.* The first command is “do *not* fear....”. Fear of the future is indeed something to fear. Fear and faith are never good companions. Fear is the child of doubt. Faith is a gift from God. Fear ends in failure. Faith leads to victory. To have, then, a year without fear, we do well to keep Ephesians 3:20 in mind, for Paul says that we must have a year of ever-increasing faith in him who is able to do abundantly more than we could ask or think.

As we learn to trust God, fear will be expelled from our lives.

One the traditions at Harvard University is Senior Class Chapel for people leaving the university, and the minister offers words of consolation and encouragement. In 1998, Rev Peter Gnomes took no prisoners as he began, "You are going to be sent out of here for good, and most of you aren't ready to go. The president is about to bid you into the fellowship of educated men and women and," - and here he paused and spoke each word slowly for emphasis - "you - know - just - how - dumb - you - really - are."

The senior class cheered in agreement.

"And worse than that," Rev Gomes continued, "the world, and your parents in particular, are going to expect that you will be among the brightest and best. But you know that you can no longer fool all the people even some of the time. By noontime today, you will be out of here. By tomorrow you will be history. By Saturday, you will be toast. That's a fact, no exceptions, no extensions".

"Nevertheless, there is reason to hope," Rev Gnomes promised. "The future is God's gift to you. God will not let you stumble or fall. God has not brought you this far to this place to abandon you or leave you here alone and afraid. The God of Israel never stumbles, never sleeps, never goes on sabbatical. Thus, my beloved and bewildered young friends, do not be afraid."

God has not brought you this far in your lives to let you stumble and fall. Do not fear. Put your trust in him.

*Do not be dismayed.* The second command is "do *not* be dismayed.....". Now there are many ways we can become dismayed, whether it be looking at the world around us, or at our own past, or even looking within us as we examine our own character.

When we look at the world around us it is easy to become perplexed. There are disheartening things always happening around us. Internationally, it's conflict and more conflict and a failure to resolve conflict.

Well known people are dying, not just on the world stage but on the stage of our everyday lives. Australia is experiencing droughts and bushfires, water shortages and storms that stress families and

increase prices. Many young lives are needlessly lost on the road.

We can also become dismayed when we look back over our own past failings. It's so easy to churn up past sins and failures and feel inadequate and depressed. The past too easily comes back to haunt us. But as guilty as perhaps we may have been at times, these failings have been dealt with on the cross, and we must learn to leave them there for we have been forgiven.

God has not brought you this far to let you stumble and fall. Do not be dismayed – put your trust in him.

*Reasons for changed living.* On what grounds does God says to us, “do not fear”, and, “do not be dismayed”? How can he say this? What do we substitute for “fear” and “dismay”? What do you do when life overwhelms you? The answer is there in Isaiah 41.10, “Do not fear, *for I am with you*”. “Do not be dismayed, *for I am your God*”.

We do not fear because we know that God promises to be with us. We do not give into dismay because God is *our* God, and he will see us through the rough times. So convinced is the Apostle Paul of God's caring presence that he says, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

We do not fear and we are not dismayed because the God who loves us is ever present with us.

*Reasons for faithfulness.* Then Isaiah tells us how God stands beside us. Verse 10 contains three “I wills”, “I will strengthen you and I will help you; I will uphold you with my righteous hand”. Here are three promises that God makes to us: I will strengthen you, help you, and uphold you. These are not promises that life will be prosperous and happy and not without challenge. These are promises that God is with us and especially in our pain and suffering.

The cross disarms powers and principalities. We have nothing to fear for there is nothing left to fear. There is nothing more that can overthrow us. At the cross, death was rendered powerless. Christ gave us his Spirit to be our Comforter, our Helper and our Strength. He will uphold us until the last trumpet sounds. The Spirit strengthens us and Paul prays in Ephesians 3.16, “I pray that out of his glorious riches

he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith".

A little girl and her father were returning from the funeral of their dearly loved mother and wife. Some kind neighbours invited them to spend a few days with them so they wouldn't be alone in the house with all its sad memories. However, the father decided it would be best to go home. That night the father placed the little girl's bed next to his, but neither could fall asleep.

Finally the child said, "Daddy, it's dark, I can't see you. But you're there, aren't you"? "Yes, dear, Daddy's here right next to you. Go to sleep". The little one finally dropped off to sleep.

In the darkness and the depth of sorrow, the father in tears said aloud, "O Heavenly Father, it's so dark, and my heart is overflowing with sorrow. But You're there, aren't You"? And immediately there came to him a passage from the prophet Isaiah, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

## **Conclusion**

There's only 361 days to Christmas. In the meantime, the Lord says, "do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous hand".

To have a year without fear or dismay we should not look around us, nor dwell on the past, nor navel gaze within. Rather we should look up to the cross of Christ. For only through Christ can we know a God who is the source of all strength and comfort.

Look up—for God reigns, and he will lead us into deeper experiences of his love and power.

Look up—for in our storms he will be there to sustain us with his peace.

Look up—for our salvation is secure in the one who died for us. Jesus reigns and death has been conquered.

Happy New Year.