

Mighty, Merciful, Righteous
Isaiah 42:13-21

What kind of a God do we want? Do we want a mighty God who has the power to give us everything we want and solve all our problems? That sounds pretty good! But what do we have to do to make sure it uses its might the way we want it to? Couldn't it just as easily use its might against us? That doesn't sound good at all.

Maybe the main thing we want in a god is for it to be merciful. Having a lot of power is good, but having a little less power but using it in a kind and loving way seems a lot better. We want our god to be nice to us. But what if this god is a lot nicer to some other people than it is to me? What if nearly everyone else is given better health, a more important job, and more money? That doesn't sound very fair.

Then maybe what we are looking for is a god who is righteous. Everything this god does is just and right. Everything is by the book. Everyone gets exactly what they deserve. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? At first it might. But what if we start thinking about what we really deserve. Would it be a good thing if we truly got what we deserved?

All of this pondering can be a fun mental exercise, but it doesn't really matter does it? Because we don't get to decide what kind of god we get, do we?

There is only one true God, and He has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He has also revealed to us His character. And He is mighty! We see this in the first verses of our reading from Isaiah: *The Lord goes out like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his zeal; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes. For a long time I have held my peace; I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will*

cry out like a woman in labor; I will gasp and pant. I will lay waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn the rivers into islands, and dry up the pools.

The people of Israel could use a God like that, because they weren't in Israel anymore. The Babylonians had invaded their Promised Land. They brought with them death and destruction. And when they returned to Babylon, after their victory, they took most of the Israelite people with them as captives.

That captivity would last for seventy years. For seventy long years it did seem that God had held His peace, kept still and restrained Himself. The people may have even thought that God had forgotten all about them. But now, Isaiah writes, things are going to change! God is going to act. He is going to bring destruction to Babylon's door.

In doing this He is showing that not only is He mighty, but He is also merciful. Babylon's destruction will open the door for His people to return to their homeland.

At first glance, it may not seem like God is being all that nice. He calls them blind, and is going to make them travel an unfamiliar path. Blind people do not like the unfamiliar. In their homes they know exactly where everything is – every piece of furniture, the frying pan, the coffee cup, the can of peas. It would be a really mean thing to go in and move everything around.

God's people are blind, (and I will describe the blindness in a moment) and they are going to walk an unfamiliar path. But God is not behind them shoving them along. He says, *"I will lead... I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them."*

These are great words of comfort. God is being very merciful. He is going to lead them back to the Promised Land.

But there is also a big ouch in these words. When God says that He will not forsake them, it is a reminder that they had forsaken Him. That was their blindness. They are reminded why they had been taken into captivity in the first place.

Isaiah continues: *They are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, "You are our gods."* These words describe the Babylonians who are going to be overthrown. But these words also describe the blindness that had infected the Israelites. It was because they had turned to idols and false gods that they had ended up in Babylon. *The* God would not allow His glory to be given to another, and so He had given His people over to Babylon for a time. These words stand as a present warning against Babylon, and a reminder to Israel of her past.

God wants something so much better for His people: *Hear, you deaf, and look, you blind, that you may see! Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the LORD? He sees many things, but does not observe them; his ears are open, but he does not hear.*

God wants His people to change. But will they? ... Have you? ... Have you really changed since you discovered who God is and what He has done for you in His Son, Jesus Christ? ... You haven't ... and neither have I.

And, so, Isaiah's message about a new path is good news to us. God knows us, His people. He knows we are blind by nature, and cannot change. In His mercy, He will lead us and guide us, and do a new thing: *The LORD was pleased, for his righteousness' sake, to magnify his law and make it glorious.*

God's Law, His Word, is the answer. *[T]he Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth* (John 1:14).

God is mighty, and He is merciful, but it is His righteousness that is displayed in Jesus the Christ which brings us comfort and peace. Jesus' work on the cross is described by St. Paul in this way: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Cor. 5:21).

This is the new thing God promised to Israel – righteousness that is *given*, not earned. The blind are *given* sight. The unrighteous are *declared* righteous through faith in the Messiah.

This promise of God extends to us. Our eyes have been opened to see Jesus as the Messiah – the promised Savior. We are declared righteous because Jesus took our sin on Himself, died for it, rose victoriously from the grave, and gives us His own righteousness.

What a great God we have! In an act that seemed weak, Jesus allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross. But we know that this sacrifice was the mighty act that destroyed the power of sin and death.

In His mercy, He does not give us what we deserve, but gives us the forgiveness of all our sins. His righteousness become our righteousness.

And even now He does not forsake us, but continues to lead us on our path. Walking that path, listening to the Father's voice, we will arrive safely home. We will live in His blessed presence forever. Amen.