

The Road to Jesus: The Gospel According to Isaiah
God's People are Coming Home!
Isaiah 40
December 9, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

Isaiah 40 makes a decided turning point in Isaiah's preaching. He began preaching during the days of Uzziah, preached through the reign of King Ahaz, and into the reign of King Hezekiah. That means, that Isaiah saw the overthrow of the northern tribes of Israel in 722 B. C. He advised King Hezekiah in spiritual affairs when King Sennacherib threatened to invade Judah in 701 B. C. Chronologically speaking, it won't be long before Isaiah passes away. The message of Isaiah must strengthen, heal, motivate, inspire, and sustain his people until the Messiah comes and releases God's people from the constraints of this wicked world.

We saw last week, in Isaiah 39, that Isaiah foresees the Babylonian exile. That exile will be the worst thing the Israelites have ever seen. Can you imagine being uprooted from your home, your business, your house, your garden, and being led hundreds of miles into a foreign land? The Jews would stay there for 70 years. We normally date that exile at 586 B. C. so that the 70 years, prophesied by Jeremiah, would come to an end in 516 B. C. But Isaiah would not live to see any of that; he would not live to be a personal encouragement to his people. His message would have to do that and, because it was guided by the Holy Spirit, it would continue to live.

Beginning in chapter 40 and through the end of Isaiah's sermons, we see him portraying events related to the Babylonian exile but also the return under the Persian Empire some 70 years later. But, of course, Isaiah's messages will continue to carry his people forward, preparing the "road to Jesus," because He is the only way that Judah will be forgiven of their sins and have the peace with God that can only come through reconciliation.

Chapter 40 begins this new look at the old problem of sin and how to obtain salvation. In short, the message of chapter 40 is that God's people are coming home! Not just home from Babylonian exile but coming home to God through the forgiveness of their sins.

Let's look more closely at Isaiah 40...

COMFORT, COMFORT MY PEOPLE - 40:1-2:

"Comfort! Comfort!" God cries out to the people. Comfort the people, Comfort one another. "Comfort" is used 17 times. "God's ultimate purpose for them is not destruction but redemption, not death but life" (Oswalt, 49). Verse 2 - "Speak kindly" - literally "speak to the heart" of Jerusalem. Observe here that "Jerusalem" is personified; it is not the city of Jerusalem but its *people* over whom God is concerned. "Call out to her," God says.

What are they to call out? What is the message of comfort? Note the three "thats" in the verse... "*That* her warfare has ended - God has brought all the war to a close but please observe the parallel: "*that* her iniquity is removed." Please notice the parallelism: "warfare" is parallel with "iniquity." We're talking about spiritual warfare, then. We're talking about the spiritual war that Israel has waged against God because of her persistent sins. *That* war is over; Israel is now reconciled with God because "her iniquity is removed." The wars that Judah and Israel endured with Assyria and Babylon were only symbols - and a direct result of - the war that they were waging with God.

The third "that" is Israel or Judah has received discipline and instruction from the Lord's hands, "double for all her sins." Again, "sin" is used in Isaiah 22 times, not to mention all of its synonyms. The discipline has been fully completed. God has punished her all He needs to, right now.

So, although Isaiah did not live into the time of the Babylonian exile and certainly not into the Persian return from exile, he pictures the Israelites returning. Those of his generation would not have known what he was talking about but as they read his sermons from year and to year and compared what he said to the events that were happening around them, they would eventually have understood. The exile would occur over a century from the time Isaiah finished preaching and the return would have been nearly two centuries from that time. But, if Abraham taught the Israelites anything, if Abraham teaches us anything, a day with the Lord is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. God does not forget His promises.

GOD WILL PREPARE A WAY - 40:3-5:

This paragraph (3-5) introduces a voice. A voice that cries out, clearing the way for the Lord, the "highway of holiness" we talked about back in 35:8, the highway of holiness that leads to the mountain of the house of the Lord, we talked about back in 2:1-4. It is the spiritual temple of God, embodied in *Immanuel*, "God with us" (7:14). Someone is to come who will clear the way for the Lord, who will make smooth a highway for God. If the return from Babylonian exile is the immediate event in Isaiah's view, clearly he is talking about something much bigger, more grand, far more important, something spiritual.

Verse 4 continues that imagery that the valleys will be lifted up and the mountains will be leveled - all in an effort to make things as easy as possible for Jews and Gentiles alike to enter the spiritual house of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and of course, His church. The rough ground will become a plain and the rugged terrain a broad valley. Jerusalem sits about 3,100 feet above the valley of the Jordan, which lies below sea level.

When this way is made smooth, that is, when everything is prepared by this individual, then the glory of the Lord will be revealed (vs 5). The word "glory" is a favorite of Isaiah (37 times). All flesh will see this glory and we know it will happen "for the mouth of the Lord has spoken," the fourth (I believe) reference to the inspiration of his own writings.

Jesus, is, of course, the revelation of the glory of God. The Gospel of John emphasizes that point more than any other. John uses the word "glory" 17 times, beginning with John 1:14: "The Word became flesh [Isa. 7:14] and we beheld His glory, the glory of the own begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." That glory was revealed when Jesus performed His miracles (2:11) and when He returned to heaven, following His resurrection, He would receive the glory that He had with the Father throughout eternity before He came to earth (17:4-5).

The sermon that is Hebrews is also quite clear that Jesus is the glory of the Father (1:3): "He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and ^bupholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high."

Of course, we all understand that John the baptizer was this voice crying in the wilderness - Luke 1:17 (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). And, again, if John was preparing the way for the "Lord," and "Lord" is used as a synonym for "God," then John was preparing the way for "God" and Jesus, therefore is both "Lord" and "God," which is also the confession that Thomas Didymus made in John 20:28.

GOD WILL ENCOURAGE THE DISCOURAGED - 40:6-8:

God is, by nature, a God of perseverance and encouragement (Romans 15:5), a God of hope (Rom. 15:13), and a God of peace (Phil. 4:9). So, He wants to give a word of encouragement as He does here.

A second voice speaks - "Call out!" And another responds, "Call out what?" Flesh is like grass. It's lovely, just like the flowers of the field. But the grass eventually withers and the flower fades when the breath of God blows on it. "Surely people are grass" - a metaphor illustrating how easily and quickly man passes from this life. Indeed, our flesh does easily pass away - our skin changes it its entirety every 27 days!

Verse 8 summarizes the point: Grass withers. Flowers fade. But the word of our God stands forever. That's why you trust the word of God. It will always be there. Peter quotes this passage in 1 Peter 1:24-25 and applies the concept to the Gospel message. John will also say that because the word of God stands forever, then the one who *does* the will of God will also remain forever (1 John 2:17).

Let us never deceive ourselves into believing that God is going to make exceptions to His word on the day of judgment. The word of the Lord stands forever (Psalm 119:89) and it cannot be broken (John 10:35).

God's word of encouragement is based on His word not changing. "Whatever may lie ahead for the Israelites, they may know that God's word of promise will not fail them" (Oswalt, 54).

GOD'S COMING WILL BE AMAZING - 40:9-11:

The voice in verse 3 proclaims that the Lord God is coming. Here, Isaiah calls on Zion (Jerusalem) to go up on a high mountain so that her voice can be heard. She is the bearer of "good news" - the phrase meaning the "Gospel." Seven times Isaiah uses this expression, "good news." Lift up your voice "mightily," he tells them. Do not fear! Say to the cities around Judah, "Here [Behold!] your God!"

"Behold, the Lord God is coming with might. His arm ruling for Him." "Behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him." Remember how Isaiah has emphasized the justice and righteousness of the coming King and His kingdom. Here it is portrayed again, in different words or images.

Here in verse 7, He is pictured as a shepherd, tending His flock. Of course Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, sees the Messiah being born in Bethlehem (5:2) and He would "shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord" (5:4). Without a doubt, Isaiah sees Jesus here. In His arms, He'll gather His lambs and carry them in His bosom. He will gently lead those ewes who are nursing. Isaiah is not talking about physical lambs and ewes, is he? He is portraying the remnant, those faithful to God, as lambs and ewes who need a shepherd - the Good Shepherd. No, John 10 is not based entirely on Psalm 23!

TEN RHETORICAL QUESTIONS - 40:12-14:

God is coming with His arm of strength? Can He really save us? Can He really work marvels? In a series of ten rhetorical questions, much like God did to Job, Isaiah asks the Jew if they have the strength or power to do what God can do. Or, does any idol have the strength or power to do what God can do?

Verse 13 is quoted by Paul in Romans 11:34 for the same purpose. Man does not hold a shining light to the power and wisdom of God. In fact, in 41:14, Isaiah will picture man as a “worm” in contrast to God. How very appropriate!

GOD’S POWER DWARFS THE NATIONS’ POWER - 40:15-17:

We have the fourth “behold” here in verse 15 as Isaiah reminds the Jews that there is no nation that holds a shining light to the God of heaven. Notice how minuscule these nations are, compared to God - verse 17 - they are “less than nothing.” Even the great United States of America is less than nothing compared to the God of heaven. It only exists to serve God’s purposes. He is in control. Notice the power of these negative words here in verse 17: Nothing, less than nothing, meaningless.

What can the US of A, the *government* of the US of A do to the church of Christ? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Kill me for preaching the Gospel? So what? To live is Christ, to die is gain. In the words of the apostle Paul from Acts 21:13, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Smith writes: “the world does not actually revolve around the great nations of the earth and is not determined by personal wishes, human accomplishments, or national goals. What goes on in this world is actually centered on God and his plans” (113).

GOD IS BEYOND COMPARISON - 40:18-20:

So, to whom will you compare the God of heaven? There is no comparison. Men make gods of gold and silver or, if they don’t have the money, out of wood. Then they give these materials to craftsmen to make an idol that - please observe: “will not totter.” Oh, too bad, your god fell down (Do you remember Dagon in 1 Samuel 5?). “Idols were fashioned from things God had created by people God had created!” (Beyer, 167).

In chapter 41:6-7, 44:9-20, and 46:5-7, Isaiah will say more - and speak more sarcastically - about idol worship.

GOD IS SOVEREIGN - 40:21-26:

In verse 21, Isaiah asks more rhetorical questions. Do you not know? Have you not heard? If they had been reading the Bible, they would not be ignorant and immoral. Who is the one who has accomplished all these events? The one who stands outside of earth’s atmosphere. Its inhabitants are like grasshoppers compared to Him. The heavens are like a curtain to Him, like a tent.

He raises up rulers and He takes down rulers - vs 23. Human beings hold their positions very tenuously. Notice the repetition of the adverb “scarcely” in verse 24. God can simply blow against a ruler and remove him from power. So, who is like God?

Take a look into the sky, into space and see the stars (vs 26). Who put them there? Who sustains them? Who calls them by name? Not the idol you created. The God of heaven.

JACOB HAS FORGOTTEN GOD’S STRENGTH - 40:27:

In verse 27, Isaiah specifically directs his attention to his own people - Why do you say to yourself, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God?” Justice is used 43 times in Isaiah! God will *always* do what is right.

With all the power and knowledge, and we might add “love,” that God has, why do we let ourselves fall into the pit of doubt and allow ourselves to believe that God does not care?

GOD NEVER TIRES - 40:28-29:

So in verse 28, Isaiah answers that worry, doubt, or concern that the Jews have/might have about God’s behavior: The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the earth *does not become tired or weary*. His understanding is inscrutable. When you have doubts, you must remind yourself of the nature of God. Solely in verse 28, we are told that God is: eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient.

Because of that, He gives strength to the weary, and power to the one who lacks might.

ISRAEL MUST HOPE IN THE LORD - 40:30-31:

Isaiah pictures humans in the prime of life: young people grow tired and weary. Vigorous young men even stumble badly.

But in contrast with those who rely on human strength, those who “wait” (present participle - continuous action”) on the Lord will gain new strength. Trust. Rely. Depend on God, staying faithful to His word and watch Him act in your life. If you wait on the Lord, you will mount up with wings like eagles. You will run and not get tired. You will walk and not become weary.

Waiting - or hope - from a biblical perspective is a life of confident expectation. It is similar to being engaged.

Next week:
The Proclamation of Deliverance and Restoration
Isaiah 41 & 42