

Waiting for the King

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[0 : 00] A great section dealing with how God comforts us, how God comforts his people. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low.

The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places are plain, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

A voice says, cry out, and I said, what shall I cry? All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

[1 : 10] The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them.

Surely the people are grass, the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout.

Lift it up, lift it up, do not be afraid. Say to the towns of Judah, here is your God. See, the sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him.

See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms, and carries them close to his heart.

He gently leads those that have young. Okay, we are thinking about preparing and waiting.

[2 : 18] Preparing for the king of grace. But waiting is very much a feature of this time of year, isn't it?

Waiting for the holidays to come. It always feels like a really long term. If you are unfortunate enough to leave your Christmas shopping till late, you will find yourself waiting for a long time in car park queues, and then in shop queues.

It's a time of waiting for family and friends to gather together for joy and celebration. It's a time of waiting for nativity and carols by candlelight.

Anticipation and waiting can be a wonderful thing. You know, when we talk with our kids about Christmas, I still remember my own excitement.

Come Christmas Eve as a kid, waiting for watch night services. We always got to open a present early on Christmas Eve. We always got to watch a Christmas movie. The anticipation of Christmas is a really wonderful thing.

[3 : 26] But anticipation and waiting can be a dreadful thing too, can't it? When time stops, when our thoughts are consumed by that thing that lurks on the horizon, that bad news perhaps, that difficulty in our relationship and the conversation that we know we're going to need to have.

How we wait very much depends on what we're waiting for. If you were to read the whole of Isaiah, in a sense you see that it's a prophecy all about two different kinds of waiting.

Because for God's people Israel, all the way through this prophecy, there is the warning and the stark reality that God's people were to go into exile.

They were about to face punishment from the Lord. But that wasn't the only kind of waiting they were invited to. They were also told that God would be faithful.

That he would return to them and show them grace and bring them back from exile. And so they were to wait also with hope and expectation.

[4 : 34] And as we see, as we read through Isaiah, we've been thinking about it in the morning and in the evening, there is this promise that ties in with the coming of Jesus.

So 700 years before Jesus came, Isaiah, God through Isaiah, was promising hope. Because Jesus, the King of Grace, was coming. But what was true for Israel and what's true for us as well is that only God could transform their waiting.

Only God could allow them to anticipate their future with hope instead of fear because of judgment. And this, in a sense, takes us to the heart of the gospel. And when we think about what's the story of the Bible, we find there is God and God is our creator.

And God is to be our Lord and our King. But we find from the very first human beings till ourselves, we are disloyal rebels.

We are seeking revolution. We would love to, by ourselves, overthrow God's rights to be King. In all of our hearts, there is that inclination, no King but me, no law but my law.

[5 : 48] And because that's true, because that sin is at root in our hearts, what should we be waiting for from God? We should be waiting for his just judgment to fall, just like the people.

We should be waiting for God's judgment, the wages of sin, which are death. Yet, because all of us, by nature, because of our actions, because of our sin nature, we are guilty before God.

But the hope of Christmas is this, that we are invited, because of Jesus, to wait with hope. Because God, in his grace, sends Jesus as a gift of his love.

Jesus takes our place, becomes our substitute, dies as if he were the worst of rebels. Jesus dies taking the sin of his people, with the result that, by God's grace, and through faith and trust in the Lord Jesus, people like us can be forgiven.

People like us can be called children of God. People like us can now wait for the future, anticipating glory, instead of destruction.

[7 : 02] So we're thinking about waiting. Waiting for the promised king. Let's think together about the message, the message of comfort.

And where does that comfort come? You know, verse 1, comfort my people, says your God. That comfort comes from the fact that there is promised grace beyond judgment. This text has a context. In Isaiah chapter 39, and at verse 5 through 7, we get the most clear announcement yet, in the book, of judgment to come. So let's read that together.

Isaiah 39 at verse 5, Isaiah said to Hezekiah, he's the king, hear the word of the Lord Almighty. The time will surely come when everything in your palace and all that your fathers have stored up until this day will be carried off to Babylon.

Nothing will be left, says the Lord. And some of your own descendants, your own flesh and blood, who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.

[8 : 06] Judgment is coming in the form of exile. They're going to be taken away as prisoners to Babylon. For what? You read the book of Isaiah, and you find they were trusting in foreign kings for their security rather than trusting in God.

You find a catalogue of abuse and injustice towards the poor and the needy. You find them polluting pure worship, engaging in idolatry, engaging in wild living.

Basically, the judgment was coming because while they'd been called to be a holy people and to be a kingdom of priests and to be a light to the nations, they were absolutely failing in those roles.

They were in covenant with God. And under the terms of the covenant, there was blessings when God's people walked in obedience to him, but there would be curse when they walked in disobedience.

And so the tone largely of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah is when it's speaking to Israel directly, it's to say, you've been unfaithful, yet God says, I will remain faithful.

[9 : 14] A remnant will be saved, not because you deserve it, but because of my grace. It's that same theme that Jesus picks up.

We were reading in family worship this morning, the story of the prodigal son. You know, that younger son who wanted nothing to do with his dad, who took his dad's money and wasted it on wild living.

Going back home, not sure what he was going to receive. And he got back, would he be welcomed? He didn't really expect so. But his dad, full of grace and love, ran to him and welcomed him and through a feast and a celebration for him.

And this is the hope for Old Testament Israel. This is the hope for us today that there is the promise in Jesus of grace beyond judgment. Isaiah chapter 40, it begins a new section in the book going all

the way through to chapter 55.

And the theme is that of comfort and hope and God's gracious provision. So to a people about to go into exile, waiting for that, they're also able to wait with hope.

[10:23] Here is their motivation for them to trust God as they face exile. Here is their one source of hope as their world is about to be turned upside down.

Their hope is in God and his grace. Verse one, who is God speaking to there when he says, comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

He's speaking to three voices or three messengers. Roddy, they read them for us. So you see in verse three, this is the one we're going to focus on, a voice of one calling.

And he has, this voice has a message of comfort and hope. Verse six to eight, there is the second voice. And that voice too speaks hope that God's word, God's word of promise will stand.

And then verses nine to 11, there is this third voice, this third message. And it too speaks hope that your savior king, your powerful shepherd king, will come.

[11:31] So verse one, God is speaking to these three messengers and he's saying, here's your tone. Your tone to rebellious, disobedient people is to be that of comfort, of kindness, of parental care.

Verse two, speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Use a gentle tone. Also the idea of persuading the people to return, to receive this invitation back to the love of God.

It's a message of comfort and it's to be spoken tenderly because there is good news here. Proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed.

So here's the thing, even before they go into exile, so they know in Babylon, they're going to face conditions of slavery. There's going to be hard labor going on there.

But even before that happens, there is this promise it will not be the last word. That time will come to an end and you will return home.

[12:43] Proclaim that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for. This brings to mind the language of sacrifice, that there is an offering that will satisfy God's justice against their moral and spiritual guilt.

Proclaim to her that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. She's received from the Lord's hand. Again, in the context of sacrifice, who is it that sets up the sacrificial system? It's God. God says, here is how you are to worship me. Here is how you are to find a way of forgiveness and atonement for your sins. And God says, I will forgive you and I will welcome you and I will regard you as my own people.

You will receive double. God will deal generously with you. So here is a message of real comfort for unfaithful people if they will turn back to God, if they will receive the grace that he offers.

Here in the Old Testament, we find this wonderful gospel announcement that with God, there is a grace that is greater than all of our sin.

[14:07] How is that possible? Well, remember Isaiah 40 is part of a bigger section, 40 to 55. That section climaxes with the announcement of the suffering servant of Isaiah 52 and 53 and the hope and the joy that he brings in 54 and 55.

So the question for the people then was, who is this suffering servant that we are to wait for, that we are to pin our hopes on? And we know that he is Jesus.

We know that Jesus, the child in the manger, is the man on the cross at Calvary, is the promised suffering servant that we find in the book of Isaiah. He is the one who is wounded for us.

He is the one who is punished for us. He is the one who is killed for our sin and our rebellion. And it's by his wounds, Isaiah says, that we are healed. It's in his death that we die to the power of sin over us.

That we have a new master and his name is Jesus. And in his resurrection life, we enjoy true life and real freedom.

[15:23] There is comfort because there is grace beyond judgment. And because that is true for us, because we receive grace, we are also to be those who extend grace to others.

One of our favorite TV shows is Modern Family. And in Modern Family, there is a Christmas episode. The household that is involved is the Dunphy family and the dad is usually a bit of a soft touch.

But he decides there comes a point where he needs to lay down the law. And so there is this suspicious burn mark that is found on their couch. And he presumes one of the kids has been

smoking.

And so he announces to the family, this usual soft touch guy, he announces Christmas is cancelled. And he drags the Christmas tree out into the garden. And the whole episode is about his angst because Christmas has been cancelled.

And our family joke, we talk about it quite a lot. Let's not be the family that cancels Christmas. Let's not be the family that's so heavy on judgment that we forget to show grace to our children, to the people in our family, in our neighborhood.

[16:37] Because we have received grace, we are to spread the grace of God to others. What do we do with the mistakes and failures of others?

Are we quick to jump on them? To judge and criticize? Do we keep bringing up those mistakes so we never move past and we don't allow others to move past?

Or do we choose to remember that love covers over a multitude of sins? This extension of grace is a great way to be counter-cultural in a really positive way.

In a world where people are quick to jump to, these are my rights that I demand. In a world that's really quick to say that person should pay for that offense or for that wrong, we can dazzle with the grace of God that we find in Jesus Christ.

So there is comfort here because there is this promise of grace beyond judgment. Let's think now about this messenger in verses 3 to 5.

[17:44] What's his message? His message is prepare because the king of glory and grace is coming. Let's read those verses.

A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low.

The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind together will see it for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Here's the picture. It's the picture of a royal procession that's on the move. And when royalty was on the move in this day then the route had to be made ready.

You had to do your best to level the ground so when the king went through and his horses he had smooth passage. That was still the thinking when Jesus on his donkey made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

[18:47] What did the crowds do for their king? They put their cloaks and their palm branches on the ground to make the way smooth because royalty was coming.

On a much lesser level I used to work as a school boy and then as a student in the co-op in Port Tree and one summer the national boss of the co-op was coming all the way from Manchester to visit our store.

And so what came next was a frenzy of just ridiculous artificial activity. So there was loads of repainting that was done loads of cleaning we all had to do extra hours to make sure all the stuff on the shelves was like nice and straightened up for those few minutes when he'd come and have a quick chat and disappear and it was all to really no much purpose at all.

But somebody really important was coming and so we had to prepare the way. Someone important is coming here and so it's time to prepare.

The road must be straight and smooth and free of obstacles. It's a way of saying this king this king that Isaiah has been told to speak about he's coming he'll come quickly he won't be delayed.

[20:03] So the question for us again is which king is coming? Who are we preparing for? As Isaiah brings this message who's coming verse 3 prepare the way for the Lord.

The personal powerful covenant making God is coming for his people. This is verse 3 God's highway.

He is on his way to bring grace beyond judgment and he will not be stopped. This will be a powerful revelation. Verse 5 the glory of the Lord will be revealed because whenever God is acting to save people we inevitably see his glory.

You think about it through the Bible. You think about how God saved Noah and he receives glory for providing for Noah in the ark. God gets glory for the way he rescues his people from slavery in Egypt because he delivers those plagues and he opens the Red Sea so Israel can travel through safely.

So often in the Old Testament God gets glory for saving his people because he fights the battles for them. The people wait and see the deliverance of God and when God comes in human form as the

Lord Jesus Christ he gets glory as he dies for our sin on the cross.

[21 : 39] That's what Jesus prayed for. That he would be glorified, that his father would be glorified and there is glory there as he accomplishes the plan of salvation, as he opens the way for men and women, boys and girls, back to God.

There is glory whenever any of us individually come to faith in the Lord Jesus. He's worked the miracle of grace and glory in our hearts.

There is the glory that comes because the Lord is present. Here's another way of Isaiah saying prepare for Emmanuel, prepare for God to be with you, God in his glory to be with you.

And notice that this won't just be for a few. Remember the extent of God's generous grace. This isn't now just for a remnant, a small portion of Israel.

When this king comes, when this king of glory and grace is revealed, verse 5, all mankind together will see it. Jesus and his glory is to stand as a universal revelation of God's grace for the world.

[23 : 01] So this king is coming. We are invited to prepare and this visit is certain. Verse 5, the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

So this voice that speaks tender comfort is saying to people about to go into exile, people living in moral and spiritual darkness, saying God himself is coming.

He will come revealing his glory to the world. He has come to bring freedom. He has come announcing sins will be forgiven. Do we see where this is heading?

Do we see why 700 years later, as Mark and Matthew were writing their gospels, they saw John the Baptist as this messenger?

As they reflected on the life of Jesus and his ministry and his saving work on the cross where they thought, well, obviously, John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for King Jesus.

[24 : 07] And it helps us to understand why John, when he's writing his gospel, said the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth because this king, King Jesus, he's the Lord.

So for Israel, then here is a hope for them to hold on to. Here is something worth waiting for. Yes, they're waiting for exile, but yes, they're also promised that there is grace beyond that.

judgment and for us, well, we know that Jesus has come. We know that his grace and his glory have appeared. We have come to know grace beyond the judgment that we deserve because that's the message that the cross speaks to us.

We look at the cross and we realize that's what my sin deserves. And we look at the cross and we say, that's God's grace so that I don't have to receive the punishment that my sin deserves.

So when days seem dumb, when we mess up, when we fail and when we sin, we have this message of comfort that our King has come and he is for us.

[25 : 26] And it's a message for us to share also. for the people that we know who seem to lack hope, who live with fear and uncertainty, who are looking for something solid to hold on to.

We can say to people, did you know that our God offers comfort and hope? And he's shown us that by giving us Jesus. So as we await our King's return, so this first group, they're waiting for the King to come, our King has already come, now we're waiting for his return.

We can be involved in this work of preparing the way, preparing the way so that others might see and respond to the glory of King Jesus.

We can prepare the way by perhaps inviting people to come to nativity or to carols by candlelight.

We can prepare the way by sharing our faith with our colleagues and our family members.

we can prepare the way by inviting someone to read the Bible with us and all so that people would see the glory of the Lord as we find it in Jesus.

[26 : 41] Let's pray together. together.