

The Coming Glory - The Glorious Ruler

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you could rise with me as we pray. Father, we thank you for your precious word. And even as we hear it tonight, may it sink into our hearts and may we trust in your word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Please take a seat.

Well, there's a brief outline in your newsletter if you want to have that to follow along. And please have Isaiah chapter 40 open because that's what we're really looking at tonight.

Well, imagine yourself caught up in something like this. Or this. Or this. But imagine living like this, not for weeks or years, but for decades.

It's hard to imagine, is it? Given that we live such comfortable lives in Melbourne. But try talking to someone who's come from Kabul, like our friend tonight, or Syria at the moment.

[1 : 11] Where you're under the constant threat of war. Of enemies coming and plundering your home. No sooner is it built, another lot comes along and destroys it. Taking your children and your women away.

Well, something like this was the fate of those who lived in Jerusalem for long periods over 200 years. Between about 700 and 500 BC. Sure, there were short periods of quiet.

But Jerusalem was a city under constant threat. A city without a king. No strong protector. Whose walls lie in ruin. Where God's temple was ransacked and desecrated.

But imagine in the midst of this suffering that you hear this. 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. How might you react to these words?

[2 : 19] Do you dare hope that at last, perhaps your hardship will end? That your hard service, as the prophet calls it, would be over? Or might you hold back because you've heard it before?

Because as you look around, nothing has changed. All you hear is a voice. Mere words in the wind. Well, let's take a closer look at these words.

Because on the one hand, these words are comforting. For Israel, which Jerusalem has as its capital, hears that God, the creator of the universe, is still their God.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. They are still his people. He has not forgotten them, nor has he disowned them.

No, he's speaking tenderly to Jerusalem, like a father to his daughter, like a lover to his wife. But yet, on the other hand, we are shocked. Because the warfare, the pillage, the death and destruction, is that really coming from the hand of the Lord?

[3 : 31] For she has received from the Lord's hand, yes, the very one who comforts her, the very one who speaks tenderly to her, double for all her sins. What a confronting message.

How does punishment and love go hand in hand? If God loves us, how can he punish us? And what's more, it's not just a single dose we hear.

No, it's double for her sins. A full measure, and then some more. Now, I have to say that these are not the words of a vindictive God.

Rather, he's calling Jerusalem and telling her that her punishment is well and truly paid for. But still, before we rush to think ill of God, let's think even more deeply.

Because even though they're painful, they are really words of great comfort. Why is that? Well, in the first instance, it's comforting because Jerusalem's not at the mercy of evil forces or of malicious enemies.

[4 : 35] No, she's in the hands of a loving God. Yes, he has punished her. But his punishment is measured, given to correct and restore. And once God said it's fully paid, then we can take it that it is fully paid.

We can take God at his word and know that there will be no more. But second, God punishes Israel because he loves her. In the prophecy of Amos 3 and verse 1 and 2, this is what God says to Israel. You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth. Therefore, I will punish you for all your sins. Or as the writer to the Hebrews says, the Lord disciplines those he loves.

As I was growing up, that's what my parents used to tell me all the time. Some of the time. They would say, if we don't care about you, we wouldn't bother punishing you.

And then in a very Asian parent way, they would add, you think we enjoy doing this? You think you've got nothing better to do than to get our blood pressure up? Of course, as a child, you don't really fully appreciate all this.

[5 : 50] Until you become a parent yourself. And see clearly, as I now do, what would become of my daughters if I were not to deal firmly with their wrongdoing.

Ten, twenty years from now, I can imagine where they would end up. Perhaps that's where I would have ended up myself, if not for my parents. So it's a good thing to come under God's conviction for our sin.

To suffer for our rebellion against him. To face up to our stupidity. Because God is giving us a chance to repent. And all these years, God had pleaded to Israel not to turn to idols.

Not to make alliances with the nations around her. God had said to them, and if you read Deuteronomy, it's full of this stuff. God had said, trust in me, and I will protect you from your enemies, no matter how strong they seem.

But they had refused. They had decided to go their own way. And so in punishment, God has withdrawn his hand of protection, and they are left to suffer his consequences so that they can turn back to him and repent.

[6 : 58] Well, God's anger will not remain forever. And so in verse 3, God's word of comfort blossoms into a word of great hope. A voice of one calling, in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised, 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 people will sit together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. God himself is coming back to them.

And he wants everyone to know and everyone to see. God is going to show to everyone that he is faithful to his promises. God will keep his word even when his people have not.

And in anticipation, the entire landscape will be transformed to prepare for his arrival. If you've traveled to Switzerland, you will know that it's a mountainous country.

[8 : 03] And everywhere you can see the marvel of Swiss engineering, where they've built highways, crisscrossing the country. But I have to say that even with their expertise, the Swiss have not managed, have only managed to build highways through mountains.

But the picture here is wholly different. Here, the mountains will be leveled and the valleys lifted up. And the result is that everyone will be able to see the Lord coming from afar.

Just like the sun rising on the horizon, so it will be with the Lord's coming. The glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people will see it together. On that day, everyone from far and wide will stop whatever they are doing and they will look on in amazement.

Perhaps even shielding their eyes from God's glory. Well, even as the people see God's glory, they will be reminded of who they are. And so, in verses 6 to 8, a voice says, Cry out.

And I said, What shall I cry? All people are like grass, and all of their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers, and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them.

[9 : 17] Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, and the flowers fall. But the word of our Lord endures forever. All people are like grass.

And that was what Israel failed to realize. So they had seen the Egyptians coming up from the south, the Syrians and the Babylonians coming from the north, and they had fallen for their promises of peace.

They had joined their alliances and trusted in them instead of God's word. Only for these people to then fail them. For they turned out to be like grass.

Their faithfulness, their dependability, like the flowers of the field. Yes, they appeared strong. But where are they now? Where are they when Israel needed them?

Just mere empty promises is what they got. And the Lord has but to breathe on them, and they have fallen away. Now over and against that, God reminds them of his constancy, that his word endures forever.

[10:23] For the one who speaks is not like grass or flower, here today and gone tomorrow. No, the one that speaks is the creator of all that is, who was here at the beginning of time and will still be here at the end.

Just listen with me to some of the verses that follow our passage tonight. Verse 12, Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breath of his hand marked off the heavens?

Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales, and the hills in a balance? Who can fathom the spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding? And it just goes on and on to tell us of who God is.

He is without peer. There is none like him. God's word endures because the Lord himself endures. And all through this chapter, this is the contrast between God and humans.

[11:31] God is constant and trustworthy. Humans are frail and faltering. But the response of fail and faltering humans is not to despair or to rebel, but to entrust ourselves to God.

And that begins by trusting in the word of the Lord, taking God at his word. And for Jerusalem, this means believing in her restoration even before it had come to pass.

Believing not because they have seen it with their own eyes, but because they have heard the word of the Lord. That is what faith is, taking God at his word, hearing and believing before we can see. And that, friends, is the only way we can relate to God. And as for Jerusalem, what that means is that she is now to announce it to the rest of the land. It will be a measure of her faith and courage that she will announce his coming even before it happens.

So see here with me in verse 9, and here I actually prefer the translation that's in the footnotes. It says, Go up on a high mountain, O Zion, that's Jerusalem. Bring out good news.

[12:41] Lift up your voice with a shout, O Jerusalem, bring out good news. Lift it up. Do not be afraid. Say to the towns of Judah, here is your God. And so now in verses 10 and 11, our vision of God's glory, which we read in verse 3, is expanded, and we see the details of what this means.

And so it goes on to say, See, the sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd.

He gathers the lamb in his arms and carries them close to his heart. He gently leads those that have young. So yes, the sovereign Lord will come with power like a returning king, and when he does, justice will be restored, and everyone will get their just desserts, whether good or evil.

But at the same time, he will return to care for his flock. That is the other side of God's glory. Like a shepherd, he will gather them into his arms and carry them close to his heart.

Yes, God will protect them from their enemies, but actually, God will also protect them from his judgment, his final and awesome judgment. You see, to see the glory of the Lord is an awesome thing, and one day, everyone will see it, but it will not be a welcome sight for everyone.

[14:15] Friends, I hope you've got a sense of the glory and comfort of this passage. But do you know what? For a long time, nothing came of this word.

For a long time, the glory of the Lord was not revealed, and the mighty arm of the Lord was hardly seen. Sure, some Israelites did return from exile, but Jerusalem never actually returned to its former glory.

The broken walls took a long time to be built with much opposition, and the same went with the temple. Other empires still continued to rule over them, first the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans.

So for 500 years, the mouth of the Lord had spoken, but it seemed the glory of the Lord was not revealed. Until one night in the town of Bethlehem, a child was born to a woman called Mary.

That night, some lowly shepherds saw the glory of the Lord, for in the fields nearby, a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared, with the angel praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those whom his favor rests.

[15 : 33] But not all people saw his glory together, just a few shepherds, a few wise men, and lots of sheep and cattle. And then, nothing much happened for 30 years.

Israel remained under Roman rule, and that baby became a carpenter in the town of Nazareth. Until one day, a man walks into the river Jordan, and being baptized, the heavens opened again.

Now a voice cries out, not from the wilderness, but from heaven, You are my son, whom I love. With you, I am well pleased. And then, for three years, the disciples saw the glory of the Lord, as Jesus taught and healed and turned Jerusalem upside down.

The kingdom is near, he said. Prepare for the king. Repent and believe the good news. And then it ended, not in glory, so it seemed, but in shame, when this man hung from the cloth.

Very few people who saw Jesus that day saw the glory of the Lord hanging on the cross. Even though it was actually the hour of his glory. Remember, Jesus had prayed, glorify me, Father, even as I glorified you the night before.

[16 : 56] When Jesus died on the cross, he was that shepherd in Isaiah 40 to his flock, laying down his life for them, paying double for their sins, carrying them close to his heart, protecting them from the judgment to come.

Well, three days later, the glory of the Lord was again revealed when Jesus rose from the dead.

And for 40 days, again, those who saw the risen Lord saw the glory of the Lord. But again, no sooner had it been revealed, the glory of the Lord departs from the naked eye back into heaven.

And so today, some 2,000 years later, we are tempted to ask again, where is the glory of the Lord? Why is it not plain for all to see? Why is there so much injustice, so much wrong that goes

unpunished, so much suffering by the innocent?

How long will it be before the Lord comes with power? At the same time, the Egyptians and the Assyrians gather at our borders, and we hear their voices through the media, through our friends, our colleagues, and even our family, telling us to join them, not to trust in something we cannot see. Where is your God, they say? Where is his protection and security? Look instead at our success, the security that we've built with our houses and wealth.

[18 : 25] Look at the comfort we have been able to buy for ourselves. See what power there is in our popularity, in our status in society. Why believe, they say, in the word of the Lord?

Friends, every Christmas, Christians look back not just to celebrate the coming of the Lord Jesus who came to save the world. We also look back to remind ourselves that God is true to his word. Because long before Jesus came, God had promised to send a Savior and to save us from our sins. Every important thing that God has done in this world, God has actually told us before it is done.

He always speaks before he acts because he wants us to know that he is faithful so that we can take him at his word. And so every Christmas, we remind ourselves also that the Lord will come again.

Jesus will return just as he promised. And so we are told to prepare and wait for his coming, to hear his voice and to continue to trust him, to live our lives in obedience to him.

[19 : 42] For God cares for us even now as his flock. Not to follow the other voices in the world, for we will have our reward when he comes again.

A passage tonight also tells us that we are then also to announce his coming to the world. Perhaps not go up to a high mountain. There's not many around in Melbourne.

But certainly to lift up our voice and to say to our towns of Judah, whoever they may be, here is your God. Friends, there are still many around us that need to hear that the Lord will come again.

That when he comes, he will rule with a mighty arm and everyone will get their just desserts, whether good or evil. They need to hear that now is the time to turn to him, to entrust themselves into the arms of their shepherd, Jesus Christ.

True comfort only comes for those who are God's people. It comes to those who hear the word and put their faith in him, who take God at his word. And so friends, if there's any among us tonight, that have not done that with your life, then can I urge you to do so tonight, to take God at his word and to put your trust in his son, Jesus.

[21 : 01] Jesus will protect us and he will bring justice to our lives. The mouth of the Lord has spoken. The word of the Lord endures forever.

The glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people will see it together. we need to take God at his word and announce the same to others.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you are a faithful God, that all your promises are yes in Jesus Christ, that you have spoken and it has come to pass. And so, Lord, now, even as we wait between the first and the second coming of your son, Jesus, help us not to lose sight of that. Help us not to drown out your voice with the voices of this world. But help us to listen to your word, to trust in it and to wait for the day of your son's coming. We pray this in Jesus' name.
[22 : 08] Amen.