

On Eagle's Wings

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Date: 27 December 2015

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[0 : 00] Friends, it is the most desolate word perhaps in all human language. It is capable of hurling the heaviest weights that the heart can endure. It plays no favourites.

It ignores all rules of courtesy. It knows no boundaries. It gives no mercy. Crowds only make it worse. An activity simply drives it deeper. It's silent. It's destructive.

It's devastating. There is no word like loneliness is there. There's no hurt like the hurt that it produces. I mean, ask anyone. Ask the person who's just perhaps spent Christmas on their own. Or ask the prisoner in jail. Or the uniformed person who's perhaps thousands of kilometres away from home. Or the one who's just buried his or her life's companion in this last year or so. Or the couple whose arms ache for the child that recently has passed away. Or ask the single career-minded person who finds themselves alone perhaps, goes to bed early, alone.

[1 : 00] Or the person who sits here today for the tenth time who's not had anyone yet perhaps say hello to them, engage them and so on. Or even ask the nation of Israel in Babylon, wondering where God has gotten to.

You see, Israel had been warned time and time again. And God had promised that he would punish them for the way they ignored their relationship with him. He would make a pagan ruler come and rule over them because they'd refuse to accept God as their king.

He'd give them another king. Another king that would be far less generous than God. Isaiah fought his address to the situation after those very promises of judgment had been fulfilled.

Nebuchadnezzar, you see, the king of Babylon had come.

The armies of Israel approached the city of Jerusalem and they raped the women, slaughtered the children, killed the old men. And Isaiah 40 addresses the time when the nation of Israel has now been carted off into Babylon.

It's a time of great questioning where the faith of many Israelites was in pieces. They were confused. They were disillusioned, disillusioned with God, disillusioned with the promises of God.

[2 : 08] In fact, many Jews at that time thought perhaps that God had forsaken them. He'd left them alone. And in fact, their cry of desolation is recorded for us. If you have your Bibles open at Isaiah 40, it's page 718.

I want you to look at verse 27. Here is what the Israelites said. They said, my way, or if you like, our way is hidden from the Lord. My cause is disregarded by my God.

Can you hear the anguish of that? They're saying God has deserted us. He has not done what we expected of him. He has left us alone. He's hidden our way from himself.

And we are desolate. Now, the first part of Isaiah has two, well, no, Isaiah 40 has two parts to it, verses 1 to 11 and verses 12 through to 31.

Verse 1 to 11 could be summarized as you can trust God's word. Second part, 12 to 31, is you can trust God's promises and purposes. And both are, in one sense, a response to that cry of desolation.

[3 : 16] God is responding to their particular moan, if you like. First couple of verses are clear. They're set against the first 39 verses of Isaiah.

The first 39 verses of Isaiah can be summarized in one word repeated three times. Judgment, judgment, judgment. Now, that's what Isaiah said time and time again. But now, in Isaiah 40, a new word comes.

And if the first word was judgment, repeated three times, you could say the second is comfort, repeated three times. Comfort, comfort, comfort. That is what God is going to say from Isaiah 40 right the way through to Isaiah 65.

But look at the opening verses. There they are. Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. You see, their feeling is that God has spoke harshly to them.

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 her sins.

[4 : 17] That is, you've received the judgment that's coming. And now comfort is coming. Now, before looking at what Isaiah says, I want to give you some background. In the Old Testament, the word way or highway was a very emotive word for Israelites.

It was connected with two very emotional experiences for them. The first one was very positive. They had come on a way out of Egypt into the promised land. So very positive experience. The other was not so positive. In fact, was connected with defeat and failure. And that was the experience of their very recent past. You see, they had come on a way from Israel into Babylon. Babylon. So that way had been very harsh. And the last part of it, let me tell you what it would have been like. If you have ever been to the British Museum, you would know just a little snapshot of it. Because in the British Museum, they have these war freezers that the Israelites would have walked past. They are massive things. And they have etched in them the gods and the great ones of Babylon.

[5 : 21] And if you walked past them, you would have seen them. And you would have felt dwarfed by them. And then on top of that, the processional way that they had been paraded through had many other things.

It had the words, it had the names of the gods of Babylon scratched, or not scratched, but bold there for you to see. And you would have felt very small in that world.

And Isaiah is told to cry to the Israelites who are living in that world. And it's a voice that says this.

Let me summarize. I think what is being said in the first few verses of Isaiah is this.

Take heart, my people. Be comforted. God's about to act. He'll make a new way, a new way out of Babylon. Just as there was a way into Babylon, there'll be a way out.

And that way will be a way for God, a highway for God. It is his power that will be paraded, not those of the nations. His majesty, his glory will be displayed.

[6 : 23] He is going to intervene in history. He's going to act as no God has acted. The whole world will see it. You will see it. God, the Lord of history, has spoken. It will surely happen. And with that, you come to verse 6.

So follow it with me. In this verse, a fresh command rings out. A voice urges Isaiah the prophet to cry out. And imagine Isaiah, he's told, yell out.

And Isaiah's words come back with brief and charged emotion. And they sum up Israel's great feeling of desolation. Have a look at them there. The prophet yells back to the God of all history. What shall I cry? What on earth can I say to people in such a helpless situation as this? And his voice rings with despair. And let me read you a literal translation as to what he says.

He says, all humanity is like grass. All their steadfast love is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers. The flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them.

[7 : 21] Surely the people are as grass. Now, God, you've blown heat on these people. And they're withered and gone. The message is clear. You see, humanity is short-lived. Israel should not trust or depend upon them because humanity is frail, just as they feel frail.

And then the prophet ushers another source of hope. Look at verse 8. He acknowledges the truth. Yes. Yes. Grass withers, flowers fall. But God is different. The word of our God endures forever.

God's word, you see, doesn't wither. It doesn't fade. It stays. It persists. And nothing in the world can stop it. The word of our God stands forever. Now, notice what's being said here.

God's making the point through Isaiah that Israel may have lost her land, her statehood, her temple, her dignity, her former glory. But what Israel has not lost is God's word.

God has given many promises and he will stand by them. Not one of them will fall to the ground for when the God of Israel speaks, things happen. What he says comes to pass.

[8 : 26] Israel is to be comforted. Yes, the grass may wither, flowers may fade, but the word of our God stands forever. That brings us to verse 9 where the prophet is given another instruction to cry out.

Zion, the city of Jerusalem, is to cry out. Sorry, not the prophet. Zion is. In other words, the whole nation of God's people, having heard this, are to lift up their voices and announce the great news.

Here is your God. Israel, your God is coming. Start the party. He's spoken. He's promised that he'll do it. And he surely will. It's as good as done. Let me see if I can just summarize the first half of this chapter.

I think we could summarize it in one sentence. It goes like this. The grass withers. The flowers fall. But the word of our God endures forever. Now, let me say that I think you could summarize the next 15 chapters with the very same verse.

And if you flip through to chapter 55, 15 chapters on from this, you will hear that the word of God does not return to him void. He keeps it. Isaiah, the prophet, is a prophet of the word of God.

[9:30] He dwells on it, perhaps like no other Old Testament prophet. He clings to it because he knows that God's word is invincible power, full of invincible power. He knows that God's word means God's action. God's speaking means God's doing.

When God, the Lord of history, speaks, the world shudders and what he says will happen. Let me tell you the end of this particular story. This first half of the chapter, these predictions.

You see, what Isaiah said in these verses did actually happen. It was fulfilled. The Jews did return back across the wilderness. They did rebuild Jerusalem.

They did reconstruct their temple. But when they did, you know, just didn't quite measure up to these prophetic pronouncements. Somehow it wasn't quite as glorious and dramatic as Isaiah had pictured it.

And so what they began to do was look for another fulfillment that might come. And it came when it did from the strangest of places. For one day, a strange man appeared by the River Jordan.

[10:28] His clothes were made of camel's hair. He was shot on by some sort of a shoddy leather belt. He ate grasshoppers mixed with honey. And one day the religious leaders sort of cornered him and they pestered him and they asked him straight out.

Who are you anyway? And John the Baptist answered and he came back without hesitation using the words of Isaiah 40. He said, I am the voice of one in the wilderness crying. Make straight the way of the Lord.

So this highway was another highway. Not the one from Babylon, but from somewhere else. No physical highways. You see, there were no valleys that were heaved out of the ground. No mountains were bulldozed to the ground.

But in a very real way, this man, John the Baptist, was preparing the way of the Lord. And the very next day, the Lord came. On the very next day, John saw a man walking toward him.

And he stopped, stared, pointed and said. Look at that were you. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Yahweh, the Lord of history, you see, had spoken so long ago.

[11:32] And he had brought it to pass. Much grass, let me tell you, had withered. Many flowers had faded. But God's word had stood firm. And it will continue to stand firm.

For the word of our God stands forever. Now, that brings us to the first part, to the end of the first part of God's answer. Like I said at the beginning, you could summarize verses 1 to 11 under the heading, You can trust God's word.

Second part is verses 12 to 31. Now, before we look at it, I want you to remember verse 27. See it there? Verse 27. It records the complaint of Israel to God.

And it says to God, Surely God, my way is hidden from you. My cause is disregarded by you. And the last half of this chapter is God's specific response to that charge.

And basically it is, you are wrong. Let's have a look at each of the arguments that are put forward. First response from God is that Israel is wrong because he, God, is the creator and lord of history.

[12:34] Look at verses 12 to 14. Verse 12 tells us of God's greatness as a creator. Who has measured, says the prophet, the waters in the hollow of his hand or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?

Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket or weighed out the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Verse 13 and 14 tells us no person, no thing can compare to this one. Who can fathom the spirit of the Lord?

Or instruct the Lord as his counselor? Who did the Lord consult to enlighten him? Who has taught him the right way? Who has taught him knowledge? Who's showed him the path of understanding? Can you hear the incomparable nature of God?

Who can be compared to this one? Message is clear. No one gives God advice. No one dictates to God what shall happen. For this is the God who controls the world.

And I love this. Many of you will love it as well. The way that Isaiah exalts in God, the creator and lord in verses 21 to 24. Can you see it? Don't you know? Haven't you heard?

[13:36] Hasn't it been told you from the beginning? Haven't you understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth and its people are just like grasshoppers.

He stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted. No sooner are they sown.

No sooner do they take root in the ground and he blows on them and they wither. And a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. Now, eight o'clock service.

There are people who, when I preached this sermon to them at 745, they have in their lifetime seen exactly this happen. And ruler after ruler just wither and die and be blown away.

And that's the God of Israel. That's the God that Israel is dealing with. In her depression, you see, Israel feels very much alone like we often do. In her great confusion, she might think God's forgotten me.

[14:39] But nothing could be further from the truth. Israel is very wrong. Very wrong. And that brings us to the second point in his argument on God's behalf.

Israel is wrong about God because no one stops God's purposes for his people. You see, when the Israelites looked around Babylon, they saw plenty of things that made them doubt God's purposes for them.

They saw the mighty nation of Babylon. They witnessed the power of Babylon. Babylon, they watched its rulers and princes. And they knew that these leaders were great and impressive men. More than that, they knew that their own leader was blind and feeding off the scraps from the table of the king of Babylon. If not then, he had been. And then they saw the gods of Babylon.

Every street corner bore the name of Babylonian deities. The stars in the sky reminded them of Babylonian star gods. Temples and idols told them of Babylonian superiority.

[15:42] And they couldn't help thinking their god was a puny god. You see, I think when Israel crossed from Israel out into Babylon, I think they thought that their god was a has-been in a new world of super gods.

He had had it. He had been overwhelmed by gods greater than him. And surely he'd been beaten and gone home to lick his wounds if he even survived the onslaught.

Surely he'd forgotten his people. Surely he'd left them alone. But what God does here is speak to their fears. Point by point, he's answering. Isaiah is answering on God's behalf.

And we might paraphrase it like this. He says, so you think the nations are great and you're impressed by them, are you? Well, let me tell you a little secret. And the secret is outlined in verses 15 to 17.

And it goes like this. Surely the nations are, well, a drop in the bucket. They regarded as dust on the scales. He weighs the islands. You understand what that means, dust on the scales.

[16:43] So there are the scales. And you've got something weighty over here. And you've got a few just specks of dust here. He weighs the islands as though they find dust. Before him, verse 17, the nations are nothing.

They're regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. God also gives his view on the rulers of the nations. He opens Israel's eyes and gives them a proper perspective on things. By the way, these verses could come to us in our day, couldn't they?

When we think that, you know, terrorist organizations can never be overcome, that they're just running rife through the world.

You know, that agencies like ISIS, you know. But friends, let me tell you, they've been seen before in the history of the world. These are different, but they're of the same ilk.

And what God does is gives his view. He opens the eyes of Israel and gives them a proper perspective. Verses 23 and 24, he brings princes to naught. He reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

[17:42] No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, and he blows on them, and they wither. And a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. ISIS and the others will have their day.

As for the star gods of Babylon, well, Israel should not kid themselves. Look at verse 26, it's lovely. He says, lift your eyes to the heavens. Who created them?

He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

You see, he's saying, Israel, you shouldn't worry. The gods of Babylon are merely the work of human craftsmen. Verses 19 and 20. You see, God's answer is very clear.

Israel's very wrong. It's he, the creator and lord of history, who controls the world. And he has a purpose for his people. A purpose that no one can stop. No nation, no prince, no king, no God.

[18:39] God has a purpose for his people. And he has not forgotten them. And that brings us to the third point in the argument. Israel is wrong because God never gets tired or gives up on his commitments.

You see, as Israel sat there in Babylon, they were tempted to think, well, God's great promises had been given up on. Been overwhelmed by history. God had forgotten his great promise to Abraham, to Moses, to David.

He'd grown tired. He'd decided to cop out. The sinfulness of Israel had become too much for him. And Isaiah responds again on God's behalf. And his reply is clear. Israel is wrong.

Look at verses 28 and 29. Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth.

He doesn't grow tired and weary. His understanding no one can fathom. And he gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

[19:33] It's a very strong message, isn't it? God does not grow tired. He does not forget his promises. His commitments don't slip his mind. He sticks by his people.

He's faithful to his word. He's trustworthy. He can be depended on. Therefore, his people should trust him. They should hope in him. In all their aloneness, their depression, their weakness, they should hope in him.

And that's the point of verse 30. And the surrounding verses show what will happen if they do. You see, the God whose word means action promises something. He gives another word.

He will rescue his people. And they will rise above the present situation. And the possibilities that will open up for them will outstrip their wildest dreams. The future will be theirs.

Look at verse 29, 31. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall. But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength and they will soar on wings like eagles.

[20:35] They'll run and not be weary. They'll walk and not be faint. So, summing up the chapter, Israel's got this dispute which she brings to God. She complains God's forgotten, left alone, disregarded her cause.

And God answers. The answer is this. One, you have my word. Two, your complaints are wrong anyway. Wrong because I'm the creator and lord of history. Wrong because no one stops my purposes.

Wrong because I never grow tired. In short, Israel, I can be trusted to fulfill my word. Put your trust in me and if you do, you will rise above your present situation and your future will outstrip your past. Now friends, 500 years later, a man, the same man we were introduced to before, hung on a cross in the darkness and was alone. His friends had left him.

One of his friends had betrayed him. Another had denied even knowing him. And that friend had done it not once but three times. But that wasn't the worst of it.

[21:40] You see, the worst of it was he felt isolated from his father. His own father felt distant. And so in the bottomless agony of that moment, Jesus cried, as life ebbed from his body, he said, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And the loneliness of those dark moments, I think, cannot adequately be described in words. And yet, you know, in such loneliness, at the very moment when God seemed to have deserted, at least, you know, he felt distant from God.

He did not despair, did he? Do you know what his last words were? Even at that moment, he trusted. With his last breath, he cried out to God another time.

And he said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. You see, in his moment of agony, Jesus remembered what I think we often forget in lesser moments.

He remembered who God was. And he remembered that God was the creator and Lord of history, that he had a will for his world and a promise for his world. And he remembered that even now, in his death, he was working out his purposes in history.

[22 : 48] And he knew no one would stop them. And he knew that God had given his word of rescue and vindication. And as Israel had been instructed to do, he did. He put his confidence in God, hoped in God, put his hands in God.

And his trust was upheld. Because as you know, three days later, he was raised from the dead by his father. Fifty days later, he ascended to his father. Forever to be seated at his right hand in his company.

He hadn't been forsaken at all by him. As Isaiah had promised, he had risen above the situation. Isaiah was right, you see. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ gives strength to the weary. And he increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall. But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. And they will soar on wings like eagles. And run and not be weary.

Walk and not be faint. Friends, these are the dying days of 2015. And I thought it would be a good passage to remind us of good things. And the good thing is that the God of Israel, the God of Isaiah, the God of Jesus is our God.

[24 : 00] And his word never changes. It is the same now as it was then. How do you feel alone? Let me tell you, in this last year or so, I've read a book which I identified with.

It was a book that spoke about a concept called Deus Absconditus. That is, God absent. I love the term absconditus. It seems to say, you know, God absconding.

It's that feeling that many of God's people throughout history, that God has left us alone. It is common amongst the people of God.

Maybe you feel it at times. I've felt it in my life. I wonder if you've felt it. Have you felt alone? That God has forgotten you, left you alone? Are you under the impression that he's perhaps ducked out of his commitment to you, that he's disregarded your cause?

Well, if so, you're with the people of Israel. Isaiah then can speak to you today, and he does. And his answer is clear.

[25 : 05] He says, you're wrong. It's what you may feel, but it is wrong. You see, our God is the creator of this world, and our God is a God who keeps his world going. He alone is the Lord of history.

And because of this, no one's going to stop his plans or his purposes. No one's going to stop our God. And it's this God who has given his word about Jesus. He's a God who's working out things in his world to bring about his purposes, to accomplish his great promises and purposes in his world. And he is also the God who is at work in you and in me, working in our lives to accomplish what he wills. You see, don't think that this God forgets. He doesn't.

He doesn't grow weary. He doesn't get tired and take holidays. Not yet. He will, as it were. He doesn't cop out on his commitments. You may not always understand this God, but he's there. He is here. He can be trusted. Hope in him. And when you do, be assured you will rise above it. It may not happen immediately, but it will happen eventually.

[26 : 16] He will. You will. Eventually. As you trust in him, overcome. For our God is a God who gives strength to the weary. Increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary.

And young men stumble and fall. So what happens to older men? But those who hope in the Lord, well, they'll renew their strength. They will rise with wings like eagles. They'll run and not grow weary.

They will walk and not be faint. It's a great word, isn't it? Let's pray. Father, there are times in our lives when we feel like Israel. Perhaps we feel your absence.

Perhaps we feel that you're not fulfilling your word. Perhaps we feel as though you've just left us for a time.

Father, please help us to hear your word through Isaiah the prophet, that you can be trusted. And help us to continue to put our trust in you and hope in you.

[27 : 18] And Father, we thank you that we don't know exactly when, but we know that in and because of Jesus and your word in him, you will give strength to the weary and increase the power of the weak.

And even though youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall, that we who hope in you will renew our strength and will soar on wings like eagles and will run and not be weary and walk and not be faint.

Father, please help us to take this into this coming year and to not let it go. We pray in the name of Jesus, in whom all the promises of God have their yes and their amen.
Amen.