

Christ Our Hope

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[0 : 00] Do you know we chose this series, Held by Hope, last year before anyone had heard of COVID? We're five weeks, we're going to look at Held by Hope and we need a very good dose of hope right now.

Yesterday, the London National Portrait Gallery announced the prize winner of the annual portrait competition, the photographic section, and it's called Lost Summer.

It's a series of absolutely beautiful black and whites of high school leavers dressed for prom, which never happened. Exams were cancelled because of COVID, prom was cancelled because of COVID, and the artist says they represent loss and longing.

In the United States, one of the school districts posted messages from the graduating class asking them what they were hoping for. And you hear the same loss and longing in these hopes.

One said, I hope we can all see the positive side of the change COVID has brought. I hope to have a happy life. I hope we can appreciate health and science and mental health more.

[1 : 14] They're a bit sad, aren't they? And this month, a US Psychology Today magazine had a lead article, We Need a Week of Hope. The author is a researcher and psychologist who's written a number of books about the phenomenon of hope.

And he said this, he says, we have a global shortage of hope. Hope is an essential service. It is humanity's PPE, personal protective equipment.

He says, it's no accident that in Dante's hell, above the gate is a description, is the inscription, leave behind all hope, you who enter here.

And in the article, he warns us about false hopes, giving us the terrible story of the young guy in San Antonio in July who died at 30 years of age after going to a COVID party.

There were a number of COVID parties held to try and say, we don't really believe in this. His dying words were these, I thought this was a hoax.

[2 : 17] Terrible thing to have false hope. When we come to Isaiah 40, it shows us that God is overwhelmingly a God of hope.

But it's a different kind of hope. And the hope in Isaiah 40 is a hope that comes from outside us. It's not something we work up by trying hard to look inside us.

It's not an empty optimism about a brighter future. It's an eternal hope. And it comes from God, down from heaven, into our hearts.

Because at the centre of the passage, in the end of verse 9, the beginning of verse 10, is this. Behold your God. Behold the Lord God comes.

And it was relevant to the first people who read it. It was especially relevant to the people in Jesus' day. And it is particularly relevant to all of us who live between Jesus' first and second coming.

[3 : 16] And we just have time to look at this. What does it teach us about hope? It tells us three things. And the first is this. That hope comes from the gentleness of God.

And you may say, wait a minute. Don't we need vast cosmic power for hope? We need a power that can drive back disease and discrimination and death and all our problems. Well, yes.

But by itself, power will produce fear in us. For true hope, we need to begin with gentleness. And God's people, Israel, were in a complete mess of their own making again.

They'd walked away from God. They'd turned their back on God. They had played at religion in a sort of half-hearted way. And now they were in trouble, in exile, from which they had no power to escape.

Where does God start? He starts with a double message of hope. If you look at verse 1, if you have Isaiah 48 open. Comfort. Comfort, my people, says your God.

[4 : 17] Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her. And he says comfort twice because it's so hard for us to believe in the tenderness and gentleness of God.

It's so hard to believe that he wants friendship with us and the best for us and that he loves us and he's willing to do anything to bring us back to him. And even though they had given up on God, God had not given up on them.

He never gives up on his people. That's why he still calls us my people and we call him our God. And when he says speak tenderly, it's literally speak to the heart.

Tell each other the good news in such a way that it comes down from heaven and rests on our hearts. That the refreshment of hope of God, that he is our God, comes with encouragement and cheer and joy that settles down on our hearts.

It's a beautiful picture of how hope works. Speak to the heart. This language is used of romance. When someone is trying to speak of love to someone else and to win them over and convince them of their affection, it's speaking things to the other that the heart really desires to hear deep down in a way that's going to bring comfort and security and relief and hope and joy and relationship.

[5 : 44] And the reason God says speak tenderly upon the heart here is because of what he's done with our sin. Now, all the hopes that are offered in our culture today all share one thing in common.

They all say there is no such thing as sin. Whether it's economic hope or political hope or technological hope or psychological hope, they're all combined in saying hope comes by discovering your true self and by being true to yourself.

That as humans, we're basically good. And any talk of sin is just negative and self-defeating. But again, I say unless hope comes from outside us, it's not real hope.

Unless our hope can deal with evil and death, it's not real hope. And the Bible says from beginning to end that what afflicts us is not just a temporary loss of hope in a pandemic.

It's not at root economic or social or medical or psychological. It's far deeper. It's far more radical, far more reaching and far more impossible for us to deal with.

[6 : 55] That we've tried to play God, that we've pushed God away, and that our sins have created this chasm between us and God, which is impossible for us to bridge.

And I want to remind you that Isaiah 40 is speaking inside the people of God. In other words, we start to imagine that God doesn't really see us or care about us or what I want.

We say, my way seems hidden from you, O God. You're not taking care of me. And here is the tender news that we need to allow to come down from heaven into our hearts.

Our hard time is ended. Our iniquity is completely pardoned. And we have received from the Lord's hand the most perfect possible forgiveness for all our sins.

If you look down at verse 2, that's a tricky phrase. In the ESV it says, she's received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. But it doesn't mean that I've punished you twice as much as you deserve and that's enough, as though we deal with our sin and separation from God by the quantity of our suffering.

[8 : 04] The word double is an interesting word. It means folded in half. Two sides that exactly match each other. And one of those sides is invisible to us.

We can't see it. So when it comes to the forgiveness of our sins, we see less than half of what God has done to deal with them.

And God has dealt with our sins in such a way that it perfectly matches all that we've done against him. So the comfort that comes down from heaven into our hearts is that he has completely taken all our sins onto himself.

And this is where hope begins. It begins with the gentleness of God. Speaking this word of comfort to us. Though you have wandered from me, I am still your God.

Though you have sinned against me, I have provided perfect forgiveness. Comfort, comfort my people. Hope begins with the gentleness of God. But secondly, it takes more than gentleness, doesn't it?

[9 : 09] Hope also comes from the greatness of God. And in verses 3 to 8, we move on to more positive ground. I mean, forgiveness is dealing with what we've done in the past, covering our sin, taking them away.

And it's essentially a negative. But forgiveness is not the final goal. It's not the final purpose. Now that we've begun to hear the word of comfort that God's dealt with our wrongs, in verses 3 to 5, God himself comes to us in all his glory.

It's massively positive. So when he says, when the voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, listen to this. It's not we go to God.

It's prepare the way of the Lord so that he comes to us. Our job is to clear away the obstacles. Of course, God can do that. He can do with mountains and valleys, whatever he wants.

But this is a picture of what we're meant to do. Because the best response to the news of forgiveness is to repent. It's to take every part of our lives and line them up with God's will.

[10:17] It's exactly how John the Baptist understood these words, as we remember on this Sunday. He was the voice in the wilderness. But here in Isaiah, the wilderness and the desert are pictures of the devastation and damage that we have created by our own sin in our own lives and in the lives of others.

It's a picture of twistedness and perverseness of our own human nature. That's why repentance isn't just a once-off that we do when we first come to faith in God. It's an ongoing, growing recognition of all those things that block and impose the work of God in us.

The valleys of resentment and bitterness filled with the waters of envy and long habit. Or the mountains of pride of being right and feeling self-righteous or comparing yourself to others.

Or the uneven ground, the rough places. You know, the ongoing change which comes from the power of God facing the things that we're doing and we're thinking that are against the will of God and dealing with them.

Verse 5, See, repentance is really the response to, the true response to seeing the greatness and gentleness of God together.

[11:39] And it moves us from being spectators to being participants and it brings hope and joy. Because the greatness of God is a particular kind of greatness.

It's not just muscle and force. It's the power of God to promise the future to us. This is the point of verses 6 to 8.

Unless we have this hope outside us, we're lost. Unless we put our hope in God, everything else we hope in will expire.

You can see this contrast in verses 6 and 7. All flesh, not just humanity, all flesh is grass and all its beauty like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people is grass. Yesterday I watched a funeral for one of my close friends in Australia.

[12:40] He and I went to seminary together. He and his wife lived next door to Bron and I for four years. We're very close. He's a year or two older than I and he and his wife had just bought a retirement townhouse and suddenly last week he died.

It's a powerful reminder to me that we're grass. We wither and we fade. The most beautiful young woman that you can imagine right now is a flower that fades.

The strength and ability of young men, it withers. And all that we normally hope in in this life, beauty and success and ability and comfort and money and family, as great as they are in themselves, they're all temporary.

They're all transient. They grow and they flower for a moment and then they decline and degenerate and decay and droop and die.

And that means none of the things, the good things in life which God has given us, none of them can bear our hopes. In fact, they ought to make us long for what is lasting.

[13:53] And the greatness of God, you see in the scriptures, is never simply put in contrast to human vulnerability. The contrast is drawn in such a way that we might have hope.

Let me put it this way. The very transience of human beauty and all the good things in this life points beyond itself to the eternal God.

And the place of connection between God that he has chosen to have with us in his greatness is by his word. That's the point of verse 8. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

God comes to us in his word not to mock our fading beauty, but to cure it. Not to cast us away as temporary, but to draw us near to him.

Not to make us feel small and trivial, but to offer us what is real and eternal. Something that we can rest the weights of our deepest hopes on. Something more desirable, more joyful, more hopeful than anything that can pass away.

[15:03] Which means that real hope comes not just from the gentleness of God, but from the greatness of God as well. And thirdly and finally, hope also comes from the grace of God, verses 9 to 11.

You might ask the question, okay, but why does God even bother? I mean, why does he bother working so hard for our forgiveness? Why does he use his power to come to be with us? And in these verses, the answer is simply his love. Verses 9 to 11 are a command for us to call out the good news of great joy, the gospel.

And what is that news? Simply, behold your God. Stop what you are doing and look at God. See him before your eyes. At last, he comes.

That's why this reading is always set on the first Sunday of the four weeks of Advent before Christmas. Because the totality of our hope and our happiness is God himself, who came to us as a child to be God with us.

[16:13] And if we don't have God, we don't really have anything. But if we have God, we have everything. And his greatness and his gentleness come together in his grace.

Just look at the way it's put. Look at his greatness again in verse 10. Behold, the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him. Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before him. God's arm in the Bible is his irresistible power of the creator to whom the cosmos is a drop in the bucket. He rules in unapproachable majesty. But what does he do with that arm?

The answer is he brings his reward. And look at it carefully. The reward is not for us. It's for him.

And what is the reward and recompense for God, for making the world, for his eternal patience and kindness and power and gentleness, or for sending his son to die and rise for us?

It is his people. It's his flock, his sheep. The reward that God is working for is us. It's hard to believe, isn't it?

[17:20] He brings us with him. He carries us in his arms. This is what God's been working for. He loves us. He desires to be with us and for us to be with him.

That's why we can place all our hopes in him. In verse 11, He will tend his flock like a shepherd, feeding us by his word. He will gather the lambs in his arms.

He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young. It's a beautiful picture of sacrifice and care and power. It's a picture of grace. He deals with everything that threatens us.

He gathers the little sheep, the lambs, the weak, the vulnerable sheep, the ones who when we get frightened, we race off and get lost and get tangled.

He goes out and he finds us and he puts us on his shoulders and he brings us home. And then it says he carries us in his bosom, close to his heart. Literally, it's a curved out space, folding himself around us.

[18:24] And he tends us by feeding us with the promise of his word. It's just amazing, this passage. And I want to leave you with two things today as we take Isaiah 40 with us.

Number one has to do with Jesus. When we see Jesus, we see God in the flesh. What do we see? Well, in all the four Gospels, there is only one place where Jesus describes his heart.

Do you remember that? It's when he says, Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart.

And you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. In a new book, Dane Ortland points out, In the one place in the Bible where the Son of God pulls back the veil and lets us peer down into the core of who he is, we are not told that he is not austere and demanding in heart.

We're not told that he is exalted and dignified in heart. We're not even told that he's joyful and generous in heart. Letting Jesus set the terms, his surprising claim is that he is gentle and lowly in heart.

[19:51] Not harsh, reactionary, easily exasperated. He is the most understanding person in the universe. He is accessible.

And this is our hope. He was happy to come and reach out and die in our places. This is our God, brothers and sisters. And secondly, I just want to encourage you with this.

This is a hope that can hold us all the way through life and to heaven itself. And I'm going to finish this message just by reading the last five verses of Isaiah 40.

Look how full they are of hope. They overflow with hope. And we're going to get in verse 27. God says, Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel?

My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God. He says, Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. [21 : 01] He doesn't faint nor grow weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might, he increases strength.

Even youths shall faint and be weary, and they are. And young men shall fall exhausted. But they who wait for the Lord, and the word wait there is the word hope. Those who hope for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint. We have no reason not to, and every reason to, place our entire hopes on God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.