

Isaiah 40:1-11 AM

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[0 : 00] As you turn back to Isaiah 40 on page 599, thank you so much for your warm welcome. It is, I think 6 degrees is a bit easier than 40 degrees actually, so it's nice to be back.

So the theme chosen for this season of Advent in Isaiah is the weary world rejoices. And it's a great choice, not just because it comes from a great Christmas carol, but because it captures what's going on for all of us, I think.

We are weary. We're weary of war. We're weary of suffering, our own and others. We're weary of violence and injustice.

We're weary of lurching from crisis to crisis. We're weary of the fighting and biting and polarizations that we all fall into. We're weary of the cheap political solutions.

And we're weary of ourselves, if we're honest. I find myself weary holding back from cynicism and despair. And I think sometimes being a Christian believer doesn't make this any better, it makes it worse.

[1 : 21] Because we ask, where is God? What is he doing? Why does he take so long to act? And then we come to a passage like Isaiah 40, which is read this Sunday in Advent.

And it's almost impossible to take the sheer goodness and hopefulness and joy of this message in. And we wonder, could these promises really be for us?

It was first written to a people who had a steady record of backsliding and were under distress, thick darkness and the gloom of anguish.

And if you don't remember anything else this morning, this is the key message. It comes in verse 9. It is, behold your God. Look, he is near.

It is God himself come to us. That's the heart of it. And it's so important that in verse 1, God himself speaks with emotional intensity.

[2 : 29] When something's repeated twice, it's emotionally intense. He says, comfort, comfort, my people, says your God. There's passion in the heart of God that we hear this.

Though you have consistently turned away, he says to his people, I've never stopped loving you. My commitment stands. You are my people. I am your God.

Says, means he keeps saying it over and over and over because we need to hear this over and over. Because we've sinned and we've wandered and the comfort for us is that he wants to take us back in love again.

And the little phrase where he says, speak tenderly to Jerusalem is literally, speak to the heart of Jerusalem. So this is from God's heart to our heart seeking to win us back to him.

Asking us, inviting us to allow it to sink deep into our hearts so that we might grasp his love and respond with love. Now what possible reason could there be to exchange our weariness for joy?

[3 : 44] Well, verse 2, her warfare is ended. Literally a hard time has come to an end. Why?

Because her iniquities have been dealt with. And then this phrase that is, it's hard to translate, it's badly translated.

She has received from the Lord's hand double for all the sins. It sounds like she's paid, like God's people have atoned for their sins. We know that can't be true. What it literally means is that God has done something that not only perfectly deals with her sins, but doubly deals with them.

And I think it is a picture of what God has done through Jesus Christ on the cross. Not only does he take our sins far away, but he grants us the full righteousness of Jesus Christ.

So that when we come to Jesus Christ, it's not that we just have our slates wiped clean and then begin to build our righteousness again. We are forgiven and we're clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

And all the negative is taken away and all the infinite blessing of his righteousness is given to us. That is the double we have received from the Lord's hand.

[4 : 58] And this is a prophecy in Isaiah of the blessing of God in Jesus Christ. This is what God does when he comes near. He brings this double blessing, healing in his wings, more than we could ask or imagine.

So that's the introduction. That's the prelude to the passage. And then there are three human voices that speak God's words.

Just look down. Verse 3, a voice cries. Verse 6, a voice says cry and I say what shall I cry? And then verse 9, go up to a high mountain, O Zion, a herald of good news.

Lift up your voice with strength, etc. We don't know the names of any of these human speakers except John the Baptist in verses 3 and 4. And the reason for that is because what's important is not who is speaking, but that God's words come through human words.

God's voice comes through human speech. As different speakers listen carefully to the word of God and then speak the word of God to others.

[6 : 13] And that's why we come here week by week. The way God brings us hope and change and transformation, the way he brings comfort into our hearts is as we hear the word of God being spoken by humans and then we speak the word of God to each other.

And each of these human voices tells us about a massive change, huge transformation. And I just want to spend the remainder of our time looking at these three transformations.

The first, in verses 3 to 5, the first transformation is the transformation of a desert to a highway. So the first human voice in verse 3 speaks, but by the end of verse 5 it is the mouth of the Lord who has spoken, because as I said, God speaks through humans.

But what the voice is to speak here is that the God of all heaven is leaving heaven and coming to us and bringing his glory with him and therefore we need to build a highway to get ready.

China has built a network of highways that now exceeds 150,000 kilometres. This is bigger. This means making massive preparations.

[7 : 34] This is larger excavations than anyone could possibly imagine. It's not just digging and scooping and backfilling. This is raising whole valleys. This is lowering mountains.

And when we come to the New Testament, this human voice is John the Baptist and the central message is the need for repentance for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So the picture of the wilderness here is a picture of our hearts, our souls. And the high hills and the valleys and the rough places are all the things in our hearts and souls that are barriers to the welcome of Jesus Christ.

And the excavation work that we're meant to be doing is the work of repentance. Tearing down our arrogance and our pride and our superiority.

Building up the valleys and holes of love and humility and kindness. Filling in those dark places of bitterness and envy. Blasting out those rocks, you know, the need to control everyone around us.

[8 : 46] And this is Advent, you see. It's a season of preparing for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I think this is one of the most beautiful pictures of repentance in the whole Bible.

The Lord himself is coming to us with the glory of forgiveness, the double blessing in his hands and his grace. And our lives are filled with so many things that we have collected that block the experience of his grace.

And our task in this season is to come to him and ask him for transformation. To bring every barrier we know of in our own hearts into the light of his glory.

To tear down my favourite sins and idols again. So that we might move from being spectators of glory to participants in glory. So that our hearts move from being a desert to a highway through repentance.

That's the first transformation from a desert to a highway. The second voice speaks about a transformation from death to life.

[9 : 49] Verses 6 to 8. And it begins in verse 6. A voice says cry and I say what shall I cry? Very helpful. Because the true Christian preacher has no message of their own.

They're not a person with strong convictions who needs a platform to speak. They get their message from God. God what should I cry? And what is this second message? And I'm going to read it to you.

And I want to ask you how does it impress you? How does it strike you? But just look again. Verse 6. All flesh is grass and all the beauty like the flower of the field. The grass withers and the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it.

That's the first half. Then he goes back again. He says surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flower fades. But the word of our God will stand forever. So how does that strike you?

I confess that when I was working on it this week I'm a little bit disappointed with this second voice. You know I can see the first voice in verses 3 to 5 announcing the coming of the Lord making a highway in the wilderness.

[10:59] And I can see the voice in verses 9 to 11 the third voice calling out that behold your God has come. But between the two this seems like a bit of an anti-climax doesn't it?

Is it just me? Maybe it's just me. Why this message about the shortness and uncertainty of human life? Why is it so crucial here? What's it doing in Isaiah 40?

I mean isn't the brevity of human life so obvious even to pagan philosophers? The musicians that sing pop songs? We know that the Bible never just mirrors what we already know.

The Bible always reveals what no human could ever invent or imagine. And so I want to look back at the details of this a little bit with you. There are two halves to this voice.

And each half speaks about the word of God. It ends with the word of God. So look at the first half of this is 6 to 7. He says the grass and flowers spring up in beauty.

[12:01] Then they wither and fade. Why? The breath of the Lord blows on it. Second half again. People are grass. They wither and fade. But the word of God stands forever.

Do you understand? Part A says we wither and fade because the breath of the Lord, the spirit of the Lord blows on us. Part B.

We wither and fade but the word of the Lord lasts forever. So we look at the world and the crises and the chaos and we grow weary.

And we wonder what can we do and we wonder what is God doing. And Part A tells us that the reason that the world is like it is, is because we are all under the judgment of God.

See, yes, there is real beauty and glory in human achievements, art and literature and science and music and technology. But it's all withering and it will all fade because God's breath blows on it.

[13:09] It's completely remarkable. This is astonishing. The breath of the Lord or the spirit of God, it's the same word. And in the Bible, the spirit of God is almost always the giver of life.

But here, he brings death. God blows on civilizations in our pride and our arrogance as we try to play God.

And entire civilizations are blown away. And I am aware this is very uncomfortable teaching for us. We do not like the fact that we have to be reminded that we will all soon die.

And we will do almost anything to put it out of our minds. And even though we know it, it seems to take us by surprise. And we find ourselves completely unready, shocked by the fact that our bodies are falling apart.

I just can't believe I'm mortal. So I'm not going to prepare. I'm going to keep on pretending. And the words of the preacher here cut through our pretending and warn us about how short-lived all the blessings of this life really are.

[14:23] And that what looks like the normal circle of commonplace time is, in fact, the spirit of God intimately at work, bringing to an end all the things that we so highly value.

I've had a salutary couple of weeks in Australia, dealing with the death of my father-in-law. Thank you so much to those of you who prayed for Bronnie and I. And as we went through the files to sort through all that they were, what do you do with all the awards from the business community that this man earned?

A highly trusted accountant and financial advisor. Records from many whom he helped, most of whom have died now.

We found a most beautiful and thorough stamp collection begun when he was a boy fleeing the war in England.

And I could not help thinking as I was touching all these things that these are flowers that are faded. They're grass that has withered. Because there's so much more to mortality than simply human weakness.

[15 : 41] There is the breath of God, which gives life and gives death. And it's part of God's work of judgment that is at work in our world right now.

And I've laboured it because I just think we find it hard to believe. But that's not the point. It's not the point of this passage. The voice here in Isaiah is not trying to leave us in doom and despair. But it reveals the most amazing reversal and transformation. So if the first part of this voice reveals the reality that we ignore, part B tells us about the word of God, which is far more wonderful than we can imagine.

Because here is the one thing in the universe that will never, never, never pass away. And as that word of God comes to us, the New Testament tells us, it plants an eternal seed in our hearts. And as we hear it and believe it, we are given new life. A life from God, which is eternal, immortal and glorious.

[16 : 51] So you see, it's not that the eternal word of God is just in contrast to human brevity. The word of God is the cure for human brevity.

Our culture preaches a message of life to death. But the gospel preaches a message of death to life. And that is the greatest reversal and transformation possible.

And the voice tells us the first, the truth that we are mortal, we are under the judgment of God. And then comes the imperishable and eternal joy offering us a new life, a new hope, a new comfort forever.

Which is why we try and make straight the way in the desert, the highway for our God. But I have to move on. So first, the transformation from the desert to the highway. Second, the transformation from death to life.

And the third and final transformation, which is in verses 9 to 11, is the biggest change of all. And that's from God's absence to his presence.

[17 : 57] Here is the great comfort. This is where we've been going since the start of the passage. And the message is pretty simple, really. Behold, behold, behold.

Three times. Look, look, look. God himself has come. And it has to be simple because there's an army of messengers needed. Get up on a high mountain.

Jerusalem, Zion. The message is not left with a special cast of priests or preachers. This is meant to be every believer getting up on a high mountain.

And lifting up our voices without fear. Saying to every place we can, look. It's God himself. Stop what you're doing. There's nothing more important than this.

It's God himself who has come. And this is our joy at Christmas. This is the heart of our comfort and joy. Because if we have God, we have everything.

[18 : 54] And if we don't have God, we have nothing. But notice, please, in verse 10, God comes with power. Behold, the Lord God comes with might. And his arm rules for him.

This is the sovereign Lord. He doesn't lean on anyone for support. He doesn't need any help. He doesn't depend on anyone for strength but himself. His power and his strength are matchless and supreme and unconquerable.

But again, we see this pattern again and again in the life of Jesus. What does God do with his divine power? He gives it away to us and for us.

Verse 11. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. The same arms that rule with might pick up the most vulnerable, the weakest ones, the little lambies.

The simplest, the youngest Sunday school child. And he carries us when we're too weak to walk or to run or to carry ourselves.

[20 : 02] And then he gathers us to his heart. He will carry them in his bosom. Gently lead those that are with young. It is an astonishing combination of greatness and gentleness, isn't it?

Isn't it part of God's greatness that he is so gentle? He takes his infinite and eternal power and draws close to each of us. He treats every single sheep with care and kindness.

And the lambs, the little lambies, the small sheep, the little ones, those who are defenceless and exposed, and many of you I know feel that way. He gathers them into his arms with power.

And all his sheep, he bears us up to himself and holds us in love and embraces us right next to his heart in his bosom. There's no burden that's too great for him.

And we're so tempted by what fades and what withers, the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, the desire for other things that threaten to choke the word.

[21 : 04] And he draws beside us. And the moment we call on to him, he picks us up and puts us on a shoulder and carries us home. I mean, it's so good.

Just one more thing before we complete the picture. In verse 10, we read, When he comes to us, he brings his reward and recompense.

But here's the thing. He's not bringing a reward to us. He's not bringing our reward to us. He's not paying us back for anything. The reward he brings is God's own reward that he gives himself for all his faithful work of carrying and providing and caring and protecting, and his saving power of defeating death and sin, etc.

You know what God's reward is? It's us. It's his flock. It's his people. This is how God looks at us. He has made a way for himself. We wander away. He takes us. He takes his power and he comes and saves us. He carries us next to his home, next to his heart, sorry, all the way to his eternal home.

[22 : 27] Because we are his reward. That's why it's steadily repeated through the passage again and again and again. You are my people.

I am your God. This is the gospel. This is what we celebrate this season. It's the coming of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. God himself has come for us with forgiveness and blessing and life and presence.

And the coming of Jesus shows us that he is committed to us. And that when my commitment goes up and down, I know you know our commitment to God is pretty flimsy really. But his commitment to us is everlasting, everlasting.

See verse 1? He is your God. Verse 3? He is our God. Verse 8? He is our God. Verse 9? He is your God.

He's the God who belongs to us. He wants us to call him our God. Amen. And we grow weary. But he does not faint.

[23 : 29] He does not grow weary. He gives joy, it says. He gives power to the faint. And they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles.

They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint. Amen. Bless Allah