

My Favorite Chapter

Isaiah 40:1-20

OK, it's my favorite chapter. For a lot of reasons, from beginning to end, this is my favorite chapter in the Bible. It has been since way back when, when I first became a Christian. It started with a plaque or a poster I received, containing the last two verses, "Even the youths shall faint and be weary, And the young men shall utterly fall, But those who wait on 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."

Then I began to read and study and understand the rest of the chapter, with its glorious definition of God and his word contrasted to the appropriately humbling description of man.

v.6 "All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever."

Similarly, that penetrating rhetorical question,

v.21 "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? 22 It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. 23 He brings the princes to nothing; He makes the judges of the earth useless."

This chapter is one I have often read on pastoral visits, from the time years ago when I was a prison chaplain, to much more recent occasions when I had opportunity to give someone some sort of encouragement in the midst of the struggles of life. There

is so much here, beginning with the gospel itself. Indeed, as the way for Jesus was prepared by John the Baptist, it was the words of this chapter he used,

Luke 3:1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, 2 while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. 3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; 6 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

And so we begin this afternoon with,

I. A DECLARATION OF SALVATION.

Please remember the overall structure of this great book of prophecy. Chapter 40 begins what some people call Second Isaiah. They believe this must be a new book, with a new author, because everything is so new and different. The first 39 chapters are, in general terms, a description of the warning of God's judgment upon his stubborn and rebellious people of Judah. A warning of exile. And it would come. But the subject changes in chapter 40. The subject changes from a warning of judgment to the promise of the gospel. And there aren't two authors. There aren't two books. Just a progression, in the revelation of God, from the righteous judgment of God to the glorious promise of salvation.

The warning is clear,

Is. 38:5 “Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: 6 ‘Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and what your fathers have accumulated until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,’ says the Lord. 7 ‘And they shall take away some of your sons who will descend from you, whom you will beget; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.’” 8 So Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good!” For he said, “At least there will be peace and truth in my days.”

Then comes the gospel. In the stark contrast and in the plainness of the words. And the gospel is, above all else,

A. A word of comfort.

v.1

And what is that comfort? What is the comfort needed when faced with the threat of God’s judgment and condemnation? The comfort of peace. Specifically, the peace that means your enmity with God is put aside, ended. The peace that means your sins are forgiven. And beloved, that’s peace! Peace with God.

v.2

Now, what does that mean, “double for all her sins?” It could have reference to the double captivity of the nation, first to Assyria then to Babylon. But more generally, I believe the reference is to the fullness of judgment, in the sense that it is ended. God’s judgment is ended. The suffering of the nation of Israel was enough. It was complete. And it was over.

The idea is not that God has exacted a great and terrible judgment upon his people, but that the suffering of judgment is over. One commentator puts it this way in clear and easy to

understand words, “The turning-point from wrath to love has arrived. The wrath has gone forth in double measure. With what intensity, therefore, will the love break forth, which has been so long restrained!”

“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says your God.” The gospel brings comfort, and Jesus brings the gospel. Jesus brings an end to the warfare between God and mankind. Jesus brings the pardon for sins that we all so desperately need. And that is peace!

Rom. 5:1 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

This is the comfort of the gospel, that God takes those who are dead, dead in their sins, and makes them alive. That’s peace. That’s the end of warfare. This is how Paul describes it,

Eph. 2:1 “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

You were by nature, children of wrath. Enemies of God. But Jesus brings and end to that warfare.

Eph 2:14 “For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, 16 and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. 17 And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. 18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.”

It is so helpful to understand the gospel as a word of comfort. Comfort that comes to those whose sins are forgiven, whose iniquities are pardoned.

Is. 53:5 “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

Peace with God, through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the greatest comfort anyone could every experience. And so Isaiah prepares the way.

v.3-4

Likely, those words are familiar to you. They describe and define the coming of Jesus in the flesh. Everything shall be made right. Isaiah 40 speaks of a highway in the desert that must be made straight. It speaks of the mountains being brought low and the valleys raised up. In other words, all obstacles that would separate man and God must be removed. All sin must be turned away from and cast off. Those crooked paths, on which we often

travel, and on which the people of Israel literally stumbled through their experiences in the desert, through crooked ways need to be straightened out.

We still use that expression to mean the same thing, don't we? “He really needs to get his life straightened out.” “She needs to learn to think straight.”

Those sentences are very clear in their meaning, I believe. To make straight the way for the Lord is to turn from sin in repentance. And that is a call that we must keep before us all the time. So let me ask you, let me challenge you, what are the crooked paths in your life? What are the mountains that form a barrier between you and God. What are the valleys that would be the pitfalls of sin into which you stumble and fall? What is the sin in your life that is an obstacle in your relationship to God? Whatever it is, hear this word of preparation.

Please don't let this message pass you by this morning. If there is an obstacle, a sin, that stands between you and God, then turn away from that sin. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight the way of the Lord! And receive the comfort of the gospel, even as you recognize the glory of God in that promise of the gospel.

v.5

This comfort of Isaiah 40 is, therefore,

B. A word of glory.

And in Jesus, surely the glory of the Lord was revealed!

John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

And the writer of Hebrews describes Jesus this way,
Heb. 1:3 "...who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high."

So the declaration of salvation is the declaration of the coming of Jesus, in whom was "the glory as of the only begotten of the Father."

Then comes,

II. A DESCRIPTION OF MANKIND.

Such a contrast to the glory of God.

v.6-8

I've always appreciated those sorts of stark comparisons, because it keeps us as human beings in the right state of mind. "All flesh is as grass." You just can't get too excited about that, because it's going to fade. Just like the flowers.

v.6 "And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of the Lord blows upon it."

That's our existence, in the flesh.

A. Our human existence is temporary.

The sooner you come to terms with that, the better. James uses that idea as a warning against taking pride in your riches,

James 1:9 "Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, 10 but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. 11 For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits."

And Peter uses this idea to cause us to focus not upon the things of this world but upon the spiritual riches of what it means to be born again,

1 Peter 2:22 "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, 23 having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, 24 because "All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away, 25 But the word of the Lord endures forever." Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you."

Please recognize that the goal of life must not be connected with the temporary elements of life in this world. The things of this world, temporary as they are, fade in importance to your relationship with the Lord. "The grass withers, And its flower falls away, But the word of the Lord endures forever."

Isaiah returns to this theme of the insignificance of mankind in, v.15-17

B. Our human life is insignificant.

One of the great errors of the modern, unbelieving mind has been the quest for human significance apart from God. It is the religion of humanism, with man at the center. It is the danger of looking at our own lives as if, ultimately, we are actually important. And we make ourselves, as human beings, into gods. We deny the exalted glory of God in order to exalt the centrality of our own glory. And that is just plain backwards.

When we come face to face with the reality of God, this is the truth,

v.15 "Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, And are

counted as the small dust on the scales.”

v.17 “All nations before Him are as nothing, And they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless.”

The modern self-esteem movement doesn't like that language very much, but that is who we are, in relation to God. Life is not about us. It's not about you. It's not about me. Everything is all about God.

Rom. 11:36 "For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.”

And that, of course, brings us to,

III. A DEFINITION OF GOD.

Compare all that we have focused on with regard to mankind, and now consider God.

v.12-14

There is an obvious answer, isn't there? It is a rhetorical question, with the answer so clearly implied that you don't even need to say it. No one! No one has done what God has done. No man has measured the waters to make sure they fit in the ocean! No one has weight the dirt on a mountain, to make sure it's just the right amount. None of us gave our own good advice to the Holy Spirit, in order to teach him something that he needs to learn. None of us helped God in his work as God.

Remember the Lord's rebuke to Job,

Job 38:4 “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. 5 Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6 To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, 7 When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy? 8 “Or who shut in the sea with

doors, When it burst forth and issued from the womb; 9 When I made the clouds its garment, And thick darkness its swaddling band; 10 When I fixed My limit for it, And set bars and doors; 11 When I said, ‘This far you may come, but no farther, And here your proud waves must stop!’”

That's the point, isn't it? “Here your proud waves must stop!” When we compare ourselves with God, we are left with nothing but the awareness of his,

A. Eternal wisdom.

Compared, of course, to our finite and humble humanity. That is also make obvious by this description of God's,

B. Eternal power.

v.18-20

So compare God to one of your idols. Compare God and his power to something in creation that you rely upon for strength or help. Will some piece of gold be of help to you in these days of trouble? Will some carved image made of wood actually last long enough to give you any hope of life?

This is the answer the Lord gives to his people through the prophet Habakkuk, people who think themselves strong and powerful.

Hab. 2:18 “What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it, The molded image, a teacher of lies, That the maker of its mold should trust in it, To make mute idols? 19 Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Awake!’ To silent stone, ‘Arise! It shall teach!’ Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, Yet in it there is no breath at all. 20 “But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him.”

So that's the right application, isn't it? "But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him." It is the silence of reverence, the silence of honor before God in his eternal power and wisdom.

Now, one final point. One final emphasis, that paints the right and proper picture of Isaiah 40. The picture is not simply one of God's eternal glory and power. The picture is not simply of God's exalted glory as the creator of all things. But to add one hugely important element to that picture, Isaiah enables us to see God as,

C. A gentle shepherd.

It almost doesn't make logical sense, does it? God the almighty, God the powerful, God the creator and ruler of all things. And we read this about that great God,
v.9-11

So Jesus comes to earth. Prepare the way of the Lord. Jesus comes to reveal the glory of God. And what does he do?

John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep...14 I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. 15 As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep...27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. 28 And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. 30 I and My Father are one."

Jesus is that gentle shepherd Isaiah so plainly identifies. As does David when he writes,

Ps. 23:1 "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He

makes me to lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake."

That's peace. That's comfort. That's salvation. That's the promise of God.

And so the gospel comes to you as weak and fragile men and women, lowly and insignificant in our humanity, full of trouble and affliction. The gospel comes to you, and it comes to me, with Jesus' own words as the good shepherd,

Mat. 11:28 "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

We all need that comfort, don't we? Right here. Right now. "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" Says your God."

If you believe in Jesus, your warfare is ended, and your iniquity, your sin, is pardoned.