

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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[0 : 01] But we're going to turn now to our Bibles, that is always at the heart of what we do as we gather on Sundays, and indeed at other times. And this morning we're going to be reading together in the Old Testament in the prophet Isaiah.

And Fraser, who's one of our ministry trainees, is going to be preaching to us from this very well-known and rather wonderful passage in Isaiah chapter 40.

And we're going to read together Isaiah 40 verses 1 to 11. If you don't have a Bible, there are plenty outside the door. Just go to the door, one of the stewards will be glad to give you one, either now or during the next hymn, so that you can look on and see what we're about and follow on as we read and study this passage together.

But Isaiah chapter 40 then, beginning to read at verse 1. A voice cries.

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low, and uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

[1 : 37] And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

A voice says, cry. And I said, what shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades.

But the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain. O Zion, herald of good news.

Lift up your voice with strength. O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, behold your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might.

[2 : 42] And his arm rules for him. Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd.

He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word, which endures indeed forever and ever. Well, good morning.

And if you do have a Bible there, it would be great if you could open that again to Isaiah chapter 40, so that we can look at that as we go through together. Now, I wonder, what causes you discomfort as a Christian?

In your Christian walk, what is it that makes your feet unsteady? Or when you hit low points in your faith, what was it that drove you there? Maybe it's earnest worries.

[3 : 51] Perhaps you're grieved by your own sinfulness, and you're worrying, have I put myself beyond God's forgiveness? How could God continue to love a wretch like me?

Maybe it's a sense of despair at the state of the church or the state of our society. Can it really be true that God is building his unstoppable kingdom here on earth, when everything around us seems to be heading in the exact opposite direction?

Can I really trust what I read in the Bible when what I see just seems so different? Does God really see my struggle? Does God really love me if he's continuing to allow these things to happen?

Well, these are some of the concerns that the people in Isaiah's day had. We're focusing on the first half of this chapter today, but look quickly over the page at verse 27, where we get a glimpse at what some of God's people were saying.

They said, my way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God. See, Isaiah was ministering in a dark time in Israel's history.

[5 : 03] The first 39 chapters of the book have a major focus on the hard-hearted rejection of God's people of God. They rejected God, compromise on faithfulness to his word, for friendship with the world.

They were seeking security in political powers and alliances rather than in God. And God is rightly angry at this, and he promises to judge it.

Just look back quickly at chapter 39. Hezekiah was the king of Judah at the time. He was a descendant of King David, and he had been on the whole a good king. But here we see him making a costly mistake.

In chapter 38, God had delivered him from the point of death. But after this great deliverance, it's not long before there's a stumble and there's a fall.

And in chapter 39, Hezekiah welcomes envoys from Babylon with open arms. He shows them everything. The riches, the armory, the storehouses, nothing is held back from this foreign nation.

[6 : 10] And this proves to be a costly mistake. As we read in Isaiah's words to him in chapter 39, verse 6, Isaiah says, Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and that which your fathers have stored up to this day shall be carried to Babylon.

Nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And some of your own sons who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.

Babylon. It's hard to overstate just how devastating a blow this is for God's people. God's people are to be carried away from the land of promise, the land God had led them to and promised to bless them in.

The sons of the Davidic king will not rule on the throne of David, but will instead be made eunuchs who serve the king of a foreign nation. And so you can see how Isaiah's, people in Isaiah's day could be led to despair.

What does this mean for God's covenant with his people? God had promised Abraham a land filled with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. He had promised David he would establish his throne forever.

[7 : 27] And now it looks like all of this is falling apart. So how does a faithful person living in Judah at the time respond to this? How does a faithful person go on in this seemingly hopeless situation?

They're outnumbered. They're going to be ruled over politically by rulers who know nothing of their God. Even their spiritual leaders have forgotten God and have compromised on truth to try and win favor with the world.

People who they once thought to be allies have turned their backs on them. There's increasing pressure on them to conform. Faithfulness starts to bring threats of physical violence, even death.

How do you comfort people in this situation? Well, Isaiah's answer here is to behold your God. See that in verse nine?

Say to the cities of Judah, behold your God. Isaiah's big message in this chapter is that there is real comfort for the people of God because of who God is.

[8 : 37] There is always strength and there is hope for God's people because they are God's people. But this isn't soft and mushy comfort like we perhaps think of when we think of comfort.

It's not self-indulgent creature comforts like soft pillows, hot cups of tea, mashed potatoes. No, this is real comfort. Comfort which brings strength.

Strength to face the troubles of today and bright hope for the future. And all of it, all of it is founded on the nature of our God and on his character.

You'll see this passage is made up of different voices. We start in verses one and two with the voice of God calling his prophets to comfort his people. Then verse three begins, a voice cries.

Again, verse six, a voice says cry. And finally, in verses nine to 11, the call comes for us as the reader to lift up our own voice with strength in response to all that's been said.

[9 : 39] So we'll look at these voices in turn and see how each of them brings us real strength-giving comfort for our weary souls. So firstly, the first voice in verses one and two says, Behold your God.

He is a forgiving God. These words probably are familiar to a lot of us, but I think seeing them in context makes them all the more remarkable, doesn't it?

Yes, God's people had turned their backs on him. Yes, they were deserving of God's judgment. Yes, that judgment is now on the way. But yet God knows that there is a remnant in the midst of his unfaithful people who are faithful.

And to those who have ears to hear, he speaks tenderly to their hearts. Now Isaiah is looking forward in time here from his perspective.

He writes, Before the Babylonian exile has happened, but even before it takes place, while the warning of judgment is still ringing in their ears, the very next chapter brings hope and comfort.

[10 : 44] Comfort, comfort. My people, says your God. Her warfare is ended. Her iniquity is pardoned. She has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

How gracious God is that he would offer these tender words of comfort on the back of just such a stark warning of judgment. These are not words spoken by a distant and abstract power.

These are gentle, loving words spoken by a loving father who intimately knows his people and cares for them. You are still my people, he says.

I am still your God. Your sin has not put you beyond my forgiveness. The relationship between God and his people will continue beyond exile, but how?

This is the tension which runs throughout the Bible. From as early as Eden, we're faced with the question, how can a perfectly holy God continue to dwell and work with the people who have rejected him, whose hearts are full of sin?

[11 : 54] Well, in verse 2, we see something of the answer here. How is it that their warfare is brought to an end? How is it that their iniquity is pardoned? Well, it's only by God's gracious initiative and it's not without payment.

God says here of his people, she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. There has been payment for sin and it was God's initiative. Now, double here does not mean that the punishment is twice as harsh as they deserve because that would be injustice, but rather the idea is that the punishment exactly matches what they have done.

If I saw someone in the street who looked exactly like you, I might say to you, I saw this guy and he was your double or if I take a sheet of paper and if I double it over like this, then the one half exactly matches the other.

So, this is not injustice but it's perfect justice. Now, from when Isaiah was standing, it would be over 100 years before the Babylonian exile took place and take place it did, just as God had promised.

But here, even before the exile has happened, is reassurance that this period of exile would not be forever because God is a forgiving God. And so, there would come a time when their hard labor in exile would be over, when their sin would be atoned for, when they could go to the land of promise.

[13 : 23] Now, they didn't know how long their exile would be but they knew now with certainty that it would not be forever. And sure enough, as we read this now, we can see that this did indeed all pan out as God had said that it would.

There was an exile to Babylon and then in the days of Cyrus of Persia, there was a return from exile just as God had promised there would be. Exile was payment for sin and God's faithful remnant had gone through that period of punishment and so they returned.

God had graciously forgiven them. But there was still a problem. Yes, they could return to the land. Yes, they could rebuild the temple.

But the exile hadn't removed the problem of sin from the hearts of God's people. When the people returned, they fell back into the same patterns of sin and there was a need for something more permanent.

But again, for us reading now with our New Testament specs on, we can see in technicolor what Isaiah's readers were squinting at in shadow form. They knew there needed to be payment for their sin.

[14 : 40] They trusted God's promise to do that but they were still waiting for it to happen. But now we can look back and see that that payment was in fact a person, Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, God became flesh and came to be the double for all of our sin. To die and bring us pardon for our iniquity. To bring us peace that endures forever.

And so if you are here today as someone who trusts God then these words are wonderfully true for us today. God is a forgiving God and he is your God.

You are his people. Your iniquity is pardoned. Your sin has not permanently and irreversibly broken that relationship between you and God because God is a forgiving God.

Behold your God. He is a forgiving God. And secondly look at verses three to five with me. The voice in these verses says behold your God. He is a rescuing God.

[15 : 50] Now although as Christians we know the forgiveness we have in Christ. We know the relationship we have with God. Isn't it true that often the reality on the ground can feel quite different.

the theology can feel quite detached from the reality that we're living. We can feel distant from God. We can feel like his plan maybe isn't for our good.

We can doubt his kingdom really is being built here on earth. And again we can see how this would be a concern for the people in Isaiah's day too. They were living in the land of promise.

They had the temple to go and worship God but soon they're set to be carried off away from the land. Away from God's presence in the temple. But this voice cries out with another message of comfort.

The image here is of preparing the way for a royal visitation. It was the practice in those days that if you were due a visit from a neighbouring king you would build a highway to make their path straight and easy as they came.

[16 : 55] And we still do similar things today. And when we're due royal visitation somehow the council find money to finally fill in the potholes and we roll out the carpet for their arrival. This is a picture of an altogether more impressive visitation.

This isn't just a case of filling in a few potholes, rolling out the red carpet and dusting off the good plates for a nice dinner. This is a supernatural visitation. God's own rescuing presence is coming and nothing, nothing can stand in his way.

Mountains bow down submissively before him as they dare not stand in his way while the valleys are lifted up hoping to get a glimpse of his glory. These are marvelous words of messianic hope for God's people in Messiah's day.

Hope that their God was coming to bring them home. They knew that God had led his people through the wilderness before and here he promises he will do so again. But when did this happen?

biblical prophecy can be something like a mountain range with multiple peaks. When you look at a mountain range from a distance it looks like all the peaks are the same distance away from you doesn't it?

[18 : 10] But then it's not until you get to the top of that first peak that you realize that the next peak is actually still far on the horizon. And in one sense these words are a bit like that.

These words were fulfilled as the exiles returned to Jerusalem. But that was not the final fulfillment of these words. That was just the first peak in this mountain range.

Many of you I'm sure recognize these words from where they're picked up in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life. John the Baptist heralds the coming of Jesus into the world calling people to prepare a way for the Lord who was coming in glory.

And as he did these words which had been promised centuries earlier were coming to glorious fulfillment in the person of Jesus. Jesus did come in the flesh.

He died on the cross taking the payment for our iniquity. He rose in triumph. He ascended into the heavens and he reigns there now interceding for us.

[19 : 13] But the gospel message doesn't end there either because as God's people now we too are awaiting people. These words pointed people in Isaiah's day forwards to a return from exile.

Forwards again to the coming of Jesus. But they point us forward still today to Jesus' second coming in glory. Because we too long for an end to our struggles in exile, don't we?

The apostle Peter says we are citizens of heaven, living here as elect exiles. And so just as did believers in Isaiah's day, we too long for the day when we'll no longer be ridiculed, mocked, silenced, or beaten for our faith, for speaking of our Savior.

And Isaiah says to us now, that day is surely coming. In Peter's second letter, he tells of how scoffers will come saying, where is the promise of his coming?

Jesus isn't really coming back. He said that 2,000 years ago and he still hasn't come. He's obviously not coming at all. Anyway, all that stuff about judgment and hell, it's just symbolic, just trying to prod you into living a good life.

[20 : 33] I'm sure we've heard things like that before. But not so, says Isaiah. That day is coming and no one is going to be able to stop it.

Mountains will be brought low. Valleys will be exalted. Skies roll up. The knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea and every eye will see it together.

As people needing fresh strength in our spines, is it not wonderful to know that our God is coming to bring us home? He's not just sending blessing from afar, but he's coming himself to bring it about.

yes, we live in exile here on earth, longing to be in our home, in the new creation.

But as Christians today, we can look back and see the return from exile. We can look back and see the coming of the Lord Jesus as a certain fulfillment of these words that Isaiah spoke.

[21 : 36] And so with the very same certainty, we can be sure that he's coming again in glory, and all flesh shall see it together. So trust in God.

Take comfort. Behold your God. He is a forgiving God and he is a rescuing God. Well, the third voice in our passage in verses six to eight reinforces this message that we can indeed trust God.

This voice says to us, behold your God. He is an eternal God. And these words really put things into perspective for us, don't they? All flesh is grass.

All its beauty is like the flower of the field. We're coming into summer now and there's great beauty around us in our gardens and parks as we see the green lush grass, the flowers blooming in technicolor beauty.

And there is real beauty and goodness in all of this. But there's always that lurking knowledge, isn't there, at the back of our minds that this isn't going to last. Because with every day of summer that goes by, autumn is marching inevitably closer and winter hot on its tail.

[22 : 49] And soon these beautiful flowers will be gone. They'll die and perish and break down to become next year's compost. And Isaiah says that's what we are like.

Human beings, all flesh, we're just like grass, like the flowers of the field. So as I look out at all of you this morning, it's like I'm looking out over a meadow of flowers.

And it's a bit more like a wildflower meadow than anything that might make it into the Chelsea Flower Show. But anyway, there's real beauty and goodness here. But yet we know that we're not lasting.

We're not permanent. We think we're the ones that are solid and lasting, but we're just grass. It's God's breath which animates us and gives us life, but our life is as fragile as a flower, which a stiff breeze could bring to an end in a moment.

The French philosopher Voltaire during his life wrote much in critique of God's word. He said it was an irrelevance. We don't need it. In fact, in his arrogance, he is believed to proclaim that 100 years from my day, there will not be a Bible on earth.

[24 : 01] Except one that is looked upon by an antiquarian curiosity seeker. Well, in a beautifully ironic turn of God's providence, 100 years after Voltaire's death, the very house in which Voltaire lived was home to what?

The Geneva Bible Society. And it was being used to distribute Bibles and tracts all across France. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

All of us, from the greatest to the least, from world rulers to the tiniest infants, we're just like grass. So Isaiah's message here is don't put your trust in men. Don't stake your life upon the security that is offered you by people whose lives are so temporary, whose power is so limited.

that's what people in Isaiah's day had done. Their kings and rulers set over them by God to administer order and justice. They sold out.

They went in for political gain. And look where it ended up, in hopeless captivity in Babylon.

[25 : 16] Babylon. And are our politicians really any better? Whichever party you're backing in the upcoming election, are they really any better?

And even if they were, well, they're not going to last. How long does any politician last now in one of the top jobs in government these days? Liz Truss couldn't even outlast a lettuce.

But you see, that's exactly Isaiah's point. All flesh is grass. Our lives are but a walking shadow. We strut and fret our hour on the stage and then are heard no more.

But not so the Lord. He is an eternal God. Our lives are 70 years, perhaps 80 by reason of strength.

But for the Lord, a thousand years are but as yesterday when it's passed. He is from everlasting to everlasting. He formed the mountains. He brought forth rivers.

[26 : 16] He made the flowers of the field and he made us. He does not wilt or grow weary and therefore he is to be trusted.

His word will stand forever. And so we can trust it. We can trust all this that we are reading this morning. They're true.

Your iniquity is pardoned. You are his children. Your God is coming in glory. Think once again to those people Isaiah was ministering to.

To the faithful people promised with the prospect of exile. Yes, you're going to be carried off. Yes, you'll be persecuted there.

You're going to be humiliated. Would it not just be the easiest thing, the easiest thing in the world in this situation to give up on the Lord and to throw your lot in with Babylon?

[27 : 17] It's Babylon that looks powerful. It's Babylon that seems to be the decider of destinies. It's friendship with Babylon which would bring you peace. That would stop the mocking.

That would stop the violence. safeguard the lives of your children. Give them a chance of a good future. Again, is it so different for us today?

Would our lives not be made much, much easier if we were to compromise and throw our lot in with the world? If you didn't stick your neck out in the workplace and say, you know what, I'm not going to participate in Pride Month.

Wouldn't that make your life easier? If you didn't make a bit of a fuss at your children's school to find out what's actually on the curriculum and to take them out of certain classes or out of that school if necessary, wouldn't that be less hassle for you?

For our brothers and sisters across the world facing violent persecution, wouldn't it just be much easier if they were to back down and be quiet? Friends, the easiest thing in the world is to compromise.

[28 : 29] It's the easiest thing for us to doubt God's word and to listen to what's being shouted at us all around us by a world which hates God. No one will hate us that way.

But Isaiah urges us, do not compromise. You can trust God, you can trust his words, you can build your life upon the solid rock of his promises because he doesn't change and so they don't change.

What could be more comforting than that? In a world so full of change and uncertainty, there is something we can be certain of. That God is unchanging, he is eternal, and his word stands forever.

As a Christian, you are forgiven. He is going to come again in glory. And you know that's true, you know it, because you read it in his word, and his word stands forever.

God is eternal, and he is faithful to his word. Well, the final voice in this section of this chapter, in verses 9 to 11, says, Behold your God, he is mighty, and he is gentle.

- [29 : 47] And as I said earlier, the final voice in verses 9 to 11 is really calling on us to lift up our own voices in response. Go up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news.

Lift it up. Fear not. See, when we are lacking in confidence and assurance, when we are lacking in hope and comfort, all of our creaturely instincts yell at us to withdraw, to back down and find the most comfortable path of least resistance, to get the slippers on and the blankets out and just lay low until it blows over.

But Isaiah won't have it. He tells us to do the exact opposite of that. We are told to get up to the most conspicuous place we can find and to herald the good news of the gospel without fear.

The good news that there is forgiveness in Christ for those who will repent. The good news that God is returning to make his glory known to every tribe and tongue and nation across the face of the earth.

The good news that God is faithful to his word and it stands forever. And when our hearts are filled with this joyous news then our lips will just inevitably overflow with it.

- [31 : 02] We'll remind each other of it regularly and we'll tell our friends and our loved ones who don't yet know this to be good news. So this passage is full of wonderful comfort.

It's amazing news. But here's the rub. It's only good news if you know the forgiveness that God offers us in Christ.

If your iniquity is not pardoned then the news of God's coming is not good news at all. It's terrifying news.

If there hasn't been payment for your sins then God's faithfulness to his word is not an encouragement but a warning. God is faithful to his word.

He will keep his promises. But that includes his promises to judge unrighteousness as well as his promises to save his faithful people.

- [32 : 08] Verse 10 says the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him. This is wonderful news if you're one of his people but if you're not this is terrifying because this God is not to be trifled with.

He is not a puny weak little God. No he comes with might and his arm rules for him. In Luke chapter 3 when John the Baptist came onto the scene we're told he's proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And what does he say in that proclamation? He says as it is written in the words of Isaiah the prophet the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight.

John takes these words of Isaiah and he applies them to us all. Make straight the way of the Lord's coming. But the way we do that is not by smoothing out the roads and rolling out the red carpet.

It's by repenting. It's by preparing the way for the Lord in our hearts. Our hearts are naturally sinful.

- [33 : 26] They're hard, rocky, rugged places. Marred by sin. But as we turn away from that sin and turn back to God in humble repentance, that rugged place is made plain.

And then we too can know the joy of forgiveness and relationship with God. The hope of looking forward to the day when he comes again.

The certainty of building our lives upon the solid rock that is the Lord's word. Friends, if you haven't yet done so, then I would urge you today, if you hear his voice, not to harden your hearts, but to prepare the way of the Lord by repenting of your sin.

Jesus said, my sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish.

And no one will snatch them out of my hand. Behold, the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him.

[34 : 42] Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms.

He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young. Brothers and sisters, behold your God. This is what he is like.

This is the nature of our shepherd king, the Lord Jesus. He is mighty and powerful. His arm rules for him. But with those very same arms which fight for us and defend us, he will gently lead and gather his flock.

He will carry us home and nobody, nobody can snatch us from his hand. How do you comfort Christians who feel like they're beyond hope?

What can give them real strength for today? Bright hope for tomorrow. Peace that endures forever. Well, this is it. There is real comfort for God's people because of who our God is.

[35 : 58] Your God is a forgiving God. He is a rescuing God. He is an eternal promise-keeping God. He is mighty and powerful. He is mighty and powerful.

And he is gentle and lowly in heart. Behold your God. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you are our comforter.

That you give us strength when we are at our weakest. Thank you that you are our loving Father. A God who is forgiving. A God who comes down to rescue us.

A God who is eternally faithful to his word. And a God who is mighty to conquer. And gentle to carry us home. Amen. B