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Introduction

The book of Isaiah is a wonderful book. As one scholar has said, "*NEVER PERHAPS HAS THERE BEEN ANOTHER PROPHET LIKE ISAIAH, WHO STOOD WITH HIS HEAD IN THE CLOUDS AND HIS FEET ON SOLID EARTH, WITH HIS HEART IN THINGS OF ETERNITY AND WITH HIS MOUTH AND HAND IN THE THINGS OF TIME, WITH HIS SPIRIT IN THE ETERNAL COUNSEL OF GOD AND HIS BODY IN A VERY DEFINITE MOMENT OF HISTORY.*"

James Smith in his introductory notes on Isaiah wrote this "*THE BOOK OF ISAIAH HAS BEEN CALLED THE MOUNT EVEREST OF PROPHETIC LITERATURE. THE INTRINSIC GRANDEUR OF THIS BOOK ATTRACTS THOSE WHO ARE CONNOISSEURS OF GREAT LITERATURE. STUDENTS OF THEOLOGY FIND HERE SUBLIME REVELATIONS OF GOD'S CHARACTER. THE EVANGELICAL EMPHASIS OF THE BOOK HAS MADE IT A FAVORITE OF CHRISTIAN PREACHERS THROUGH THE AGES. THOSE WHO DEFEND BIBLICAL REVELATION FIND IN THESE PROPHECIES ABUNDANT EVIDENCE OF SUPERNATURAL REVELATION. AND SIMPLE BELIEVERS REJOICE IN A TREASURE TROVE OF PASSAGES WHICH ENCOURAGE THEM IN THEIR CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE.*"

So over the next month or so we are going to have a dip into the book of Isaiah. I say a dip because it is a long and complex book. A few years ago I attempted to preach on the first 39 chapters and felt like I had only scratched the surface. I went away disappointed, because I thought I didn't do it justice. So now we are back looking at chapters 40 to 66. Back at the base camp of Mount Everest, ready to climb the peaks of God's revelation.

But before we climb, a quick survey of the mountain is needed. The book of Isaiah is divided into two parts. The first 39 chapters deal with impending judgment, and the second part deals with forgiveness and deliverance. The first 39 chapters deal with sin, but the last 27 chapters deal with a Saviour — 66 chapters in all. Many people see Isaiah as a small Bible, for there are 39 chapters in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament — 66 books in all. The Old Testament often deals with the sin of the people of Israel, and the New Testament deals with the Saviour which came from Israel.

So today we reach chapter 40 and so we reach a change over from the first part of the book to the second. The first 39 chapters had warned of the destruction of the nation and the deportment of the people to foreign lands. The people had abandoned their God and he would now abandon them. Now the first part of the book is heavy and difficult, but beginning with this chapter the language soars with majestic eloquence and wondrous hope. As Isaiah wrote the first part of his book, disaster had not yet come to the nation. People had grown tired of Isaiah's warnings and his constant talk of their need of repentance and a return to God.

But now God will provide some comfort to his people. Chapter 40, verse 1. *“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 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 her Lord’s hand double for all her sins”*

Israel had been through the mill. Times had been tough. God had made sure that his people were humbled, their pride had been ripped from them, their self sufficiency had been stripped away from them. Now God would put out His hand to his people, give them another chance, provide them with His comfort.

However, the idea of comfort here is not like the comfort we usually think of. When we think of comfort, we think of sitting on a beach watching the waves, and drinking something cold and delicious while someone rubs oil all over our body. Or if it is winter we see ourselves sitting in a comfortable chair as we sip hot cocoa and read a book, or watch our favourite movie. But the idea of comfort comes from the two Latin words: *com fortis* – literally translated it means “with strength.” God’s way of giving comfort is to give us the strength to do what needs to be done. As his strength comes, grief and sorrow go. The situation may not have changed, but we have a new ability to face it and deal with it.

Isn’t that what we need today? Strength! Bushfires have ravaged the south, floods the north. Economic crises have attacked the whole economy. Superannuation’s are down, interest on deposits are down, anxiety is up. Leading a family in the Christian ways are tough. But today God through the prophet Isaiah offers us comfort, strength, a way forward in the midst of our difficulties. And so how does God give us this comfort? Through...

1. The coming of the Lord (verses 3-5)

For God is not going to leave us all on our own. God is going to leave the comforts of heaven and join his people. There will no longer just be pain and difficulty all around us because the glory of the Lord is about to be revealed. And all mankind will see it and that will give us comfort & strength.

But if God is going to come, preparations need to be made. A straight road needs to be laid through the wilderness, a highway needs to be constructed. Some valleys will need to be raised and some hills will need to be laid low. All the rough patches and the rugged grounds will need to be levelled out. For God is about to come into our midst.

I suppose the picture here is that of the Queen coming to our shores. Whenever she comes, there’s all the fuss and pomp and ceremony. But behind the scenes there is the logistics, the preparations, the security. They work out every street that she will drive along and they check it out. They fill in the potholes & resurfaced it. Just because the Queen is coming.

But this is just picture language. Because when John the Baptist picks up this passage, he starts telling the people that now God is indeed coming to his people. A man Jesus, who is the Son of God will soon be in our midst. And it’s not just about straightening up a few roads, its time to straighten up some **lives**.

If we want God's comfort, if we want God's strength, if we want to experience the coming of the Lord into our lives, then we need to do what John the Baptist encouraged us to do. Repent. Believe. Live fruitful and productive lives.

As he goes on to say... *"The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."* ¹²*Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"* ¹³*"Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.* ¹⁴*Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"*

He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

God is coming, Isaiah and John the Baptist preach. Get yourselves ready. So are we ready for the coming of the Lord? So often we are so consumed by what is happening all around us, by the busyness and the difficulties that we fail to properly prepare. Every Christmas we remember the coming of the Lord and we buy our presents and send out our cards and have our family gatherings and so often we forget to prepare for Jesus second coming. God has not abandoned His world. We should gain strength and comfort from the fact that he has come in the form of his Son Jesus. He is here in the form of His Holy Spirit. He will come again soon, in all his glory and majesty.

A little boy was afraid of the thunder storm outside. He didn't like being in his room all alone. His father told him that he wasn't alone, that God was always with him. "Sure Dad I know that", the boy responded, "it's just that sometimes I need someone with skin on." God knows that we sometimes need someone with skin on and so he comforts his people by talking about the coming of the Lord and then in verses 6 to 8, he also talks about

2. The Word of the Lord.

Isaiah explains, *"all men are like grass and their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers, the flowers fall, but the Word of the Lord stands forever."* Yes what we accumulate all around us is temporary. Our homes and our belongings, even our photos can be destroyed by fire or flood. Our savings, our superannuation, our investments can be devastated by a stock market collapse. Our friends, our family they grow up and grow apart from us. Our closest companions will not live forever.

Nothing lasts forever, except God and His word. Other things come and go, He remains the same. It reminds me of a story of a young musician who once went to see his old music teacher. During the visit, his elderly mentor took a tuning fork and struck it on the end of the table. He said. "That is 'A.'" From the floor above them they could hear the voice of a singer rehearsing. "She sings sharp," the old teacher said with a smile. He struck the tuning fork again and paused as he lifted it and said, "She is sharp, but this 'A' — always has been, always will be — 440 vibrations per second. It will still be 'A' 5,000 years from now."

This is God's Word. It was God's Word yesterday; it will be God's word 5,000 years from now. Opinions come and go. Morals go in and out of fashion. But God's word stands forever. And that gives us comfort, that gives us strength. We can build our lives on the bed rock of

God's word. His ways are the right ways. His guidance can always be trusted. Sure we have to apply them to our changing situations but the principles and laws embedded in the word of God will no change by one dot or one tittle! God comforts His people through the coming of the Lord, by the word of the Lord and then through

3. The Ways of the Lord (verses 9-14)

For just as God's word doesn't change, the way that God relates to His people doesn't change either. Look at verse 10 "*See the Sovereign Lord comes with power and his arm rules for him. See his reward is with him and his recompense accompanies him.*" God is all powerful. God is painted here as our hero. Not with a shining cape or a batman mask, but with the power to look after his world. With the ability to reward the good and to punish the bad.

But not only is he a hero type figure he is also a shepherd. He is not a jackaroo with his whips and his horses and his helicopters driving thousands of sheep toward the stock yards. He spends time with his flock. He gathers the little ones in his arms. He leads them beside quiet waters. He makes them lie down in green pastures. He protects the sheep from robbers and wild animals. Sure there is power here in our God but there is also a tenderness, a compassion about our Lord's ways as well.

He is also like a craftsman, who has measured out the dimensions of not just the rivers, but the lakes and the oceans as well. He weighs the mountains, why he even marked out the heavens, the galaxies, the solar systems with his own hands. He is also a counsellor, for he knows all things and no one can teach him anything he currently doesn't know.

Doesn't that give us a sense of comfort, of strength? Our God is majestic, all powerful, all knowing, all good. He made the heavens. He knows the dimensions of the earth. And yet he cares. Surely then he will not forget about us his people! Surely he can help us to cope with the dark nights of the soul we may be currently struggling with. Surely anything that happens in this world, doesn't catch him by surprise, somehow it is all part of his plan and purpose for our lives.

4. The Power of the Lord

And yet if that is not enough, Isaiah widens our vision of God that much further by talking about the power of the Lord, in verses 15 to 26. The nations with their military might are just like a drop in the bucket. The resources of even the wealthiest countries are not sufficient for a gift that will give God something he doesn't already have. You can't compare God to an idol, a statue, even a gold Buddha. They are mute. They are lifeless. They are just the work of a craftsman!

But God's throne is where the real power lies. God is the only one who has been there from the beginning and will be there at the end. He looks down out of the heavens and sees men and women are just like ants, like grasshoppers. Even the kings, the princes, the Presidents, the Prime Ministers come and go, they are here for a few years and then the whirlwind of life sweeps them away like chaff. Only God is eternal. Only he has the power over the heavens and the earth.

And that's important for us to remember when things are tough. For the burdens we carry are at times too heavy for us to carry. And we can't just dump these burdens onto others, or blame the government or the people around us for not taking their fair share of the weight off us. Only God can do something about it.

What did Jesus say in Matthew 11? *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

For God does make demands about how to live life. But he also gives the power we need to help us live the life that he requires of us. Ludwig Nommensen, a pioneer missionary to the Batak people of Indonesia, spent two years living with them and studying their traditions. At the end of that time, the chief asked him if the Christian faith differed from Batak traditions. The chief said, "We, too, have laws that say we must not steal, nor take our neighbour's wife, nor bear false witness."

The missionary answered, "But my Master gives the power to keep His laws." The chief was startled. "Can you teach my people that?" Nommensen said, "God can give them that power if they ask for it and listen to His word." So for six months Nommensen taught the Batak about the power of God. At the end of that time the chief said, "Stay, your law is better than ours. Ours tells us what we ought to do. Your God says, 'Come, I will walk with you and give you strength to do the good thing.'"

5. The Help of the Lord

Yes in our times of difficulty we are comforted by the coming of the Lord, the word of the Lord, the ways of the Lord, the power of the Lord and lastly the help of the Lord. Because God knows that we at times get weary. He knows that at other times in our life, you and I are weak. We do stumble. We do fall. We don't always understand.

And that's where God steps in and helps us. He opens up for us, out of the warehouses of his resources, strength to the weary, power for the weak, the ability to soar on wings like eagles, to run and not grow weary, to walk and not grow faint.

We would all like to mount up with wings like eagles, but as someone has said, "It's hard to soar with the eagles when you are surrounded by turkeys." Actually, that is just a cop out. No matter what is around you, no matter who is with you, God can renew our hope. Those whose hope is in the Lord, those who are willing to lift their eyes and look to Him, those who wait upon our God will be able to soar on wings like eagles. They will be given the strength to endure any situation. They will receive the comfort they need to cope with anything, anything this world throws at us!

The problem is that we don't like to wait, do we? We hate waiting for the lights to turn green, for the queue at the grocery store to move. We don't like waiting for tradesmen to come, or for the bus or train or plane to finally arrive. And we don't want to wait for God either, we want him to hear our cry and do something. And do it now!

But listen to the Scriptures. Psalm 27:14, "WAIT FOR THE LORD; BE STRONG AND TAKE HEART AND WAIT FOR THE LORD..." Psalm 37:7, "BE STILL BEFORE THE LORD AND WAIT PATIENTLY FOR HIM; DO NOT FRET WHEN MEN SUCCEED IN THEIR WAYS, WHEN THEY CARRY OUT THEIR WICKED SCHEMES..." Habakkuk 2:3, "AT THE TIME I HAVE DECIDED, MY WORDS WILL COME TRUE. YOU CAN TRUST WHAT I SAY ABOUT THE FUTURE. IT MAY TAKE A LONG TIME, BUT KEEP ON WAITING - IT WILL HAPPEN."

Wait. Put your hope in the Lord. Remember His Help, His Power, His Ways, His Words, His Coming. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Many of you will recall the story of Eric Liddell whose story was told in the film "Chariots of Fire." Liddell was one of the favourites to win the gold medal for the 100 m in the Paris Olympics in 1924. However the heats for the 100 m were scheduled to be run on a Sunday and Liddell made it a principle never to run on a Sunday. So he pulled out.

But God gave him his gold medal in a totally unexpected way. One of the British runners in the 400 metres gave Liddell his place in the Final. Liddell was not the favourite – indeed he had never run the 400 m before. But he won the final against the odds with a world record and that day transformed the way the 400 m was run.

The commentators said he ran like a man inspired. Indeed one of them said that: Liddell seemed to gather strength from somewhere to keep going. Let us not forget, that you and I can be like Liddell if we put our trust in the Lord. We too will gather strength, comfort, power, help from Him to keep going, no matter what is on our paths!