

Isaiah 40

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Date: 30 October 2016

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[0 : 00] In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen's famous novel, the central story if you don't know it is a romance between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy.

! He comes over as a proud individual and she is not slow to judge him for that pride. However, as you read the book, as you see the TV series or the film, there's a lot going on under the surface through the story.

And it leads to one of the great climax moments in the story where Mr Darcy declares, My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.

They are most unexpected words from Mr Darcy, but just what Elizabeth was wanting to hear. This morning we're in a new section of Isaiah.

And when we left off last week, things were looking pretty bleak for the children of Judah. This is the 8th century before Christ. And because of Judah's rebellion and sin against the Lord God, the prophet Isaiah has come to the king Hezekiah with his own particular version of, well, there may be trouble ahead.

[1 : 14] And here is how it went. Let me read this to you from Isaiah chapter 39 and verse 5. Go and say to Isaiah, Thus says the Lord God of David your father, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears.

Behold, I will have 15 years of your life. I will deliver you in this city out of the hand of the king of Syria. And he will defend the city. And this shall be the sign to you from the Lord.

The Lord will do this thing that he has promised. And he promises to turn back the son. He promises to turn back the life of Hezekiah. But then later on in the chapter, there's this saying of Isaiah that Judah is going to be sent to exile far away.

And Judah is going to be sent into the land of Babylon. And that is where chapter 40 begins. And the exile has now happened in chapter 40. And it's now coming to an end as a jump forward. So when you move from chapter 39 to chapter 40, You fast forward from Judah facing the mighty Assyrians in the 8th century BC, To now they are exiles in Babylon in about the 6th century BC. It's still the same Isaiah. But he's now projecting something into the future. Of what is going to happen. It's almost like a kind of trippy prophetic dream.

[2 : 34] That Isaiah is lifted up into God's heavenly court. And he hears Judah's predicament being discussed. And then in chapter 40, Rip Van Winkle like he wakes up to what is a new historical situation.

And he becomes aware that those who have been sent into exile are despondent and they are discouraged. And they are disillusioned. And here are people for whom it seems there is very, very little hope.

And they have been rebellious. And God has judged them for it. And they have been sent into exile. And now through Isaiah, God is going to speak to them again.

The Lord speaks up. And here is why I started with Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet. Because God's words here are totally unexpected for them. God's word is totally unexpected for them.

And yet it is exactly what they need to hear. And my prayer for us is that these words come to us in an unexpected way. That though they are somewhat familiar, they would come freshly.

[3 : 36] That they would be exactly what we need to hear today and in this coming week. That God brings comfort to those who wait on him. And he brings comfort to those who wait on him by both his power and his tenderness.

And as we work through this chapter, we really want to heed Isaiah's instructions. In verse 9, words which we'll sing later. That is, the purpose of Isaiah 40 is that we would behold our God.

That we would behold our God. That this morning we would take a long look at what God tells us of himself here. And that's why it's important. There's a danger, isn't there, that we define God according to our own terms.

I like to think of God as dot, dot, dot. When I think of God, I think of dot, dot, dot. But we need our eyesight to be sharpened. And we need to see God through God's eyes.

Because when we see God through God's eyes, it changes everything. How we see life. How we see ourselves. How we see our relationships. How we see our struggles.

[4 : 45] And Isaiah will help you and I to see God through God's eyes. And he does so by pointing to three things. The coming king. The powerful Lord. And the tender shepherd. All of which will enable us to see that God is a God who brings comfort to those who wait on him.

By means of both his power and his tenderness. So let's see the coming king. Look at verse 1.

Comforts, comforts by people says your God. The Lord. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

And cry to her. That her warfare is ended. That her iniquity is pardoned. And that she is received from the Lord's hand and done all for all her sins. Now for some of you can't read the start of Isaiah chapter 40.

Comforty, comforty my people without the give hand was for sire. But when you put the verses back into the context. The contrast of these words from what we saw at the end of chapter 39 couldn't be more stark.

Comfort. Comfort when you're just coming out of judgment. You can't tell it in our translations. But the command is issued to a group of people.

[5 : 46] Comforts, comforts my people. Comforts, comforts you lot. Comforts, comforts yous.

Comforts, yous if you're from North Island.

Comforts, comforts you all if you're from the South of America. It's plural. It is to comfort a group of people. And there's repetition isn't it? It isn't just comfort.

It's comforts comforts. You'd still understand the meaning wouldn't you if it was only there once. But it's there twice for the purpose of comfort. It's like when you say to a loved one.

They're there. And you gently pat them on the back. And God wants to bring his exiled people comforts you. And just in case you miss the tenderness with the repeated command.

The idea is repeated in the second command. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Speak to the core of their being. Speak to where they make their decisions and their choices.

[6 : 45] Speak and tell them their exile is over. That their sin has been paid for. Once at this point someone needs instruction to speak in verses 3-5.

The 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. Every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level. And the rough places plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together.

For the mouth of the Lord is spoken. Here's the reason that the people can be comforted. Because God is returning his people from exile. And God is returning his people with them.

Coming out of exile. God is the answer to their people's needs. To their promise. To their promise. He's not just going to send them. Some blessings by air mail. To them he says.

[7 : 44] I'm going to bring the blessings to you. As I come out with you out of exile. So the voice says you need to get ready. Now we need a little bit of background. To get the sense of the input of what Isaiah is saying.

In Isaiah's day there's no department of transport. There's no roads and highway maintenance. In those days there were simply no paved roads.

There wasn't the equipment. There wasn't the money. Roads were simply tracks that you drove your wagon on. And they kept on using. Tracks on which people and animals went.

And they kept on walking. And as such there were ruts. And there were cracks on the hard baked ground. So if there's a boulder on your journey. You get out of your wagon and you have to move the boulder.

If the track went down into a gully. You just had to take your wagon slowly down into the gully. And back out again. No one built roads then. Unless you were a king. And not just any run of the mill vanilla king.

[8 : 45] But a real heavyweight king. An emperor. Because when that kind of king went on a journey. They couldn't just decide. Right let's go out for an afternoon run. The roads wouldn't have been able to bear them.

Their entourage wouldn't have been able to fit on the roads. So when a king was going on a journey. He would send his heralds. And his engineers. Ahead into the locales. Into the villages. Into the towns.

And they would plant. And the heralds and engineers would gather in the village together. And say okay listen. The king wants to come to your town. It's a huge honour to come through your town. But you've got to get ready.

You need to prepare the way. You've got to take those boulders away. You've got to fill the gullies in. And in that way. They would prepare for the king's coming.

But look at the language here. It's not just boulders that need to be taken down. Is it? Can you see that? It's mountains. First of all. It's not just gullies that need to be filled in.

[9 : 41] It is valleys. Because this is God the king who is coming. And he intends to be noticed. He intends for everyone to see his glory. And everyone to see his majesty and his splendour.

He has come. And Isaiah says the mouth of the Lord has spoken. This is what is going to happen. And when the mouth of the Lord has spoken. It's as good as sealed. In verse 8.

So the grass withers and the flowers fade. But the word of our God will stand forever. You can bet your bottom dollar that this is going to happen. The king is going to come. And now obviously this is a pretty big deal.

So more instructions are given in verse 9. 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. Shout loud. Say to the cities of Judah. Behold your God. Here is your God. It's almost as if Isaiah anticipates a few shouts of objections.

[10 : 43] The exiles have probably been offered empty hope in the past. Which has failed. They've got no stomach for false hope here. So it seems that there are two unspoken questions that Isaiah thinks he's got to answer.

Number one. The first question is. Does God really have the power to do it? Does God have the power to come in such a majestic way? And number two. Does God care enough to do it?

And to answer those questions. Isaiah shows them exactly who this is. He says behold your God. Here is your God. He is the powerful Lord. And verses 10 and 11.

They are like a symphony. An overture. A symphony in the whole chapter. Because they give us a taste of the rest of the chapter. He's going to describe. Look at verse 10. Behold the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules.

Behold his reward is with him and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. They have gathered the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom. Gently lead those who are with you.

[11 : 43] Isaiah highlights the two aspects of God that he wants them to behold. And you to behold. That God is powerful. And that God is tender.

His power. The sovereign Lord comes with power. And his arm rules for him. He says would you look at those biceps. You've never seen anything like it.

You've not seen muscles like this before. And he says look at his tenderness. He comes as a shepherd. Who gathers lambs in his arms. Bringing them close to his heart. This is God in his. In God's eyes. And this is how God wants you and me. To understand who he is. He is the sovereign God. And the God who is tender.

Who is tender. So first of all. Through the bulk of it. He is going to tell us of God's incomparably great power. We are not going to read it all again. But let me give you the whistle stop tour as it were.

[12 : 40] Through what Isaiah tells us. Look at verse 12. Do you realise that God's incomparably great power. Is such that all the waters of the oceans. And the lakes. And the rivers of this world.

Are held in a tiny pool. In God's catch hands. That God marks out the universe. The galaxies. By the span of his outstretched thumb.

And his little finger. And the mountains of the world. Fit on his domestic scales. In his kitchen. Isaiah takes a glance.

At the whole of creation. And he asks. Who else but God. Who else but God. Could weigh this. Could measure it. And determine it. With perfect precision and ease. Behold your God. In verses 13 to 14. There are more questions. About God's wisdom and goodness. And God says. I want you to see God's absolute. Self sufficiency. He doesn't need you. He doesn't need anyone. And when he created everything.

[13:41] He needed nothing. The ideas were his. Every tropical fish. Every function of gravity. The complexity of the galaxies.

The galaxies. This was not how the pagan gods operated. The pagan gods. In Isaiah's day. They always worked by committee. No one could do it by themselves. But God the creator.

Did it all by himself. Needing no one else. Isaiah says. Behold your God. This is your God.

God. In verse 15. Here is God's incomparable great power. To the nations. In comparative terms. They are like drops. In a bucket. Full of water.

They are like dust. That a chemist might wipe off the scales. Before measuring a new substance.

Isaiah picks up the theme of the nations. Again in verse 17. And he says.

[14:38] All the nations. They are as nothing before God. It's not an assessment of our value. To God. But of our comparative status. God is not contemptuous of the nations. But they are so small.

They are so insignificant compared with him. That he is not in the least overawed. Or intimidated by them. It's a reminder of the asymmetrical relationship.

Between God and us. He moves on a completely different plane. To you and me. In verse 16. He moves on to humanity's religious efforts.

And he says. There is nothing that you and I can do in our worship. That would even come close to matching the greatness. Of the creator. Even if you were to cut down all the trees. Of the forest of Lebanon.

And you were to build an inferno. With all the animals of Lebanon thrown on top. It would be a sacrifice that would still be too puny. Too little compared to the greatness of God.

[15:36] Here is the death now. To do it yourself religion. Here is the death now. To your efforts to say. I am going to impress God by what I do here. I am going to meet his demands.

I am going to climb into God's good books. Isaiah gathers all those efforts up. And he takes on a big red stamp. And he stamps. Never enough. Never enough.

And here too. Is a reminder. That we should never let the greatness of the God we worship. Slip in our thinking.

To the greatness of our worship of God. What I mean by that is. We should never leave here on a Sunday morning. Or at a Christian meeting. Thinking wasn't that worship wonderful. Great as it is. Isn't the God we worship wonderful. That's the way we get it. Behold your God. Not your worship. Behold your God. Not your sermons. Behold your God.

[16:40] Not your services. Behold your God. Verse 21 to 24. Contrast God's incomparably great power. To the power of the princes and the rulers of the world. The rulers of the world. In verse 22.

God is sitting enthroned over the world. Exercising his total rule and authority. And in his rule. He raises up leaders. And he brings them down again. According to the purposes of his glory.

And you and I. We look at the power brokers of the world. And we think they're pretty formidable.

They're pretty hot stuff. But God says they are like little seedlings. Scarcely planted.

And with zero effort on God's part. He merely blows. And with that puff of air. Becomes this raging tempest.

That drives him into oblivion. Behold your God. God is incomparably great in his power. And if some of us. And I include myself here.

[17:39] Had God. This God. At the centre of my being all the time. You and I would never be as concerned. Or as stressed. Or as overwhelmed with life.

As we easily become. But what do we do? Well we think we can come up with some alternative.

We think that we can come up with some alternative. That is less threatening. That might do a little bit more of our bidding. That might meet our needs. As we define them. And the Bible has a word for those alternatives.

That we come up with. And it is the word idols. And Isaiah is going to have a lot more to say about idols. In the coming chapters. But look what he says in verses 18 to 20. Verse 20. To whom will you liken God?

Or what likeness? Compare with him. An idol? A craftsman casts it. And a goldsmith overlays it with gold. And casts for it silver chains.

[18 : 38] He who is too impoverished for an offering. Tooth his wood that will not rot. He seeks on a skillful craftsman. To set up an idol that will not move. Topple. Isaiah here is very clever.

He doesn't so much criticise idol making. He really just describes it. It could have been in a caption. Sort of photograph. Of an idol manufacturing factory.

And the caption is there. This is 18 to 20. But that doesn't mean that it doesn't come dripping with sarcasm. Because I think it does. Isaiah says when you make your idol. Make sure that you put some gold on it.

If you put gold on your idol. It will really add to it some energy value. And you really want to put some silver chains on it. People love jewellery. So surely God would love jewellery. Wouldn't he? Or you're poor. You can't afford that. You can't afford gold or silver. Well you want to be making a wooden idol then. But make sure you choose your wood very carefully. Go MDF. And look over your wood that you buy.

[19 : 39] Very carefully. Because certain people have gone and selected their wood. And the next thing is their God has gone woodwork. That's never a good thing is if you're God to have woodwork.

And make sure you get a good craftsman. Because some people couldn't make a God if their life depended on it. And don't forget to nail it down. It's very embarrassing when you get up in the morning and your idol has fallen over.

It's all Isaiah's way of saying. Do you have any notion? Do you have any idea how stupid it is when you look for alternatives to the living God? You look to your relationships.

As an idol for the living God. You look to your self esteem. Your achievements. As an idol to the self. To the living God. Do you realise how ridiculous that is?

Isaiah says behold the living God. Don't be so foolish to think that anyone or anything will ever come close. This is God in God's eyes. And this is the way God says I want you to see me.

[20 : 41] And so here is Isaiah's answer to the first question about God comforting his people by coming as a king. Does God have the power to do it? Well of course he does. But from Isaiah here there's a second unspoken question that Isaiah wants us to address.

Does God care enough to bring the comfort? Does he care enough? Does he care enough? And Isaiah started that question in the overture of verses 10 and 11. Yes he does care because he is the tender shepherd. He is the tender shepherd.

It's in this last section that he fleshes. It says so. In verses 25 to 27. Isaiah says to whom then will you compare me? And I shall be like him says the Holy One. Yes have your eyes on high and see who created these.

He who brings out their host by number calling them all by name. By the greatness of his might. And because he is strong in power not one is missing. Why do you say O Jacob and speak of Israel?

My way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God. Isaiah is asking if God is so great. Well does he bother with people like you and me?

[21 : 47] Is our relationship such that if we put a call out to him. It's like calling BT or the internet company. Where you are put on hold and you listen to music. The difference being with God you get him.

Is that what he is saying? The Isaiah answer is no. That is not the God we are talking about. This is the God who brings out the stars. And he gives every single one of them a name.

And he says think about it. Are there more stars than people? Yes. Why would you even think that? You don't count. Why do you think that he doesn't know you intimately and know your name?

And know your circumstances and know your street. And know your family and your neighborhood and your housemates. And your workplace. And still we complain. Verse 27 should really be read in a mopey voice.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak of Israel. My way is hidden from the Lord. And my right is disregarded by my God. It's not fair. You would think that after all we've read about God here.

[22 : 55] He would be totally justified in saying, just stop whining. Stop moping about. But he doesn't. He doesn't remove himself from his complaining people.

But he moves towards them with compassion and commitment. So these final verses. Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God. The creator of the gods of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary.

His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint. The God of incomparable power and strength condescends. He comes down.

To give you strength. To you and to me. To the weary and the tired and to the weak. In an incomparable tenderness. You and I lack innate strength in and of ourselves.

We're constantly stumbling under the pressures of life. We feel like failures. But we so much of the time. We've not achieved our goals.

[24 : 00] God doesn't test our strength. Before he gives us strength. Rather he gives his strength to those who admit how weak they are. And how often they fail. And he gives it to Isaiah.

Isaiah says to those who wait on the Lord. It's one of Isaiah's favourite phrases in the whole book. It's the correct response of God's people to him. We wait on the Lord.

That is we wait patiently. And we trust restfully. And we hope expectantly. We are people who don't live by explanations.

We are people who live by the promises of God. We are people who do not have to figure God out by our brains. But we submit to him by our faith.

We wait on him because he is our strength. He is our confidence. And he is our hope. But look again how verse 31 finishes. Look at how verse 31 finishes.

[25 : 07] They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not be faint. What is odd about that? It's backwards isn't it?

Isn't it backwards? Don't you think it would be much better if Isaiah were written, we will walk and not grow faint. We will run and not grow weary. We will soar with wings like eagles.

That's the kind of combination. You're writing a speech. That's how you do it. There is the victorious Christian life right there isn't it? But that isn't what Isaiah wrote.

He is a much better writer than I am. Because you see the greatest evidence in your life of God being at work in your life is the daily perseverance of faith and obedience.

There are times in the Christian life aren't there of running and soaring. But the greatest evidence that God is in your life is when you put one foot in front of another today, tomorrow and for the rest of the week.

[26 : 15] It's to live life as Eugene Peterson put it, of long obedience in the same direction. It's to keep trusting God and obeying Him in the mundane details of life with your kids, with your co-workers, with your marriage, with your singleness.

And out of the tenderness of a shepherd's heart, God is promising here that He will give you strength to do that. God announces to the people in exile, here is your comfort. I am coming. The king to bring you out of exile. And you can be sure that I will do it because of my incomparable power and my incomparable tenderness. And the question is, does God bring them out of Babylon? Does He bring them out of exile? And the answer is yes. This is the interesting thing. That deliverance from the exile from Babylon, it certainly brought some comfort. But it wasn't on the scale that's pictured here.

And so it is that centuries later in Luke chapter 2, we find the old man Simeon. And Simeon is in the temple. And we're told by Luke what Simeon was waiting for.

[27 : 25] Do you remember what he's waiting for? He's waiting for the consolation of Israel. That's another word for comfort. And then Mary and Joseph roll up in the temple with baby Jesus.

And Simeon takes Jesus in his arms. And he basically says, here it is. Here it is. Here is the comfort.

And just in case you missed it, look what Luke writes in the very next chapter. Chapter 3. He says, During the high priest of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, repair the way of the Lord.

Make his path straight. Every valley shall be filled. Every mountain and hill shall be made low. And the crooked shall become straight. And the rough places shall become level ways. And all flesh will see the salvation of our God.

[28 : 26] Do you see what Luke is doing? You want to know who is the coming king? Ultimately it's Jesus. Jesus. Jesus is the one who is coming the world needed to prepare for.

Jesus coming is the one that would reveal God's glory to the world. God's salvation to the nations. But can you see Jesus is the one who is the deliverer from the ultimate exile. The true exile. The Bible's message is that without God and without intervention you and I are in exile from God. You and I have been cut off from God.

Because we made the same mistake. The same mistake as the people of Israel did. We've created our own idols. Through which we try to find comfort in life.

Whether it's money or family or sex or sport or work or power. We look to those things. But the king has come. The king has come to deliver me to you.

[29 : 26] And the king has come to bring comfort and restoration and forgiveness. He came to do that. Not just by coming as the king.

I will flesh that out in the coming weeks. He came as the servant who will suffer. And die in our place for our rebellion and for our ideology. He would in essence suffer exile from God on the cross. Cut off completely from him. So that you and I could come home. So that we could be brought home. And here are words for the people who received them were most unexpected.

But they were exactly what they needed to hear. And here is real comfort for rebellious and repentant people. So brothers and sisters. Behold your God.

Behold the coming king. Behold the powerful Lord. And behold the tender shepherd. Behold your God.

[30 : 31] Who brings you comfort. Let's pray.