

Isaiah 40:1-5 and Matt. 3:1-3 (DHT)

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
That her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned,
That she has received from YHWH’s hand double for all her sins.
A voice cries in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of YHWH;
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of YHWH shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together,
For the mouth of YHWH has spoken.”*

//

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

*“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”*

Introduction

This morning, we are looking at the opening words to section two. In this section we meet a new character, the Servant, who suffers to the point of death for the sins of God’s people. These opening words to section two announce the work of that soon-coming Servant. These opening words begin by letting the audience know they are about to hear comfort. The Jews had become so accustomed to hearing a particular type of message from Isaiah, that before he could shift gears and announce to the good news of this servant, he had to warn them that he was about to make them feel good. Before we dive in, it is important that we go back and consider what brought us to these words of comfort.

In the beginning of Isaiah, we see the image of the people of God who are neck deep in idolatry and pride. Their idolatry—their false worship—was especially offensive to the LORD; the LORD hated it. But shortly after delineating the LORD’s utter hatred for their false worship, Isaiah wrote, “Come now, let us discuss this matter together, says the LORD: though your sins

are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good of the land, but if you refuse and rebel, you will be eaten by the sword. This is the theme passage of Isaiah—all of Isaiah revolves around these words. A promise of great hope intertwined with the rebuke and judgment for egregious sin.

Isaiah then paints the image of a vine-master who did all that could have been done for his vineyard; yet his choice crop, Israel, failed to produce the justice and righteousness the LORD had looked for. So the LORD promised to uproot his failed crop, cutting them down as a people. This is no light judgment. Israel had been chosen by God to be his specially redeemed people, and now he is promising to cut them away; their only source of true protection, gone!

Isaiah was then transported into the temple of the Most High God and commissioned as a prophet by the true King. The LORD told Isaiah that his prophecy would make all who heard it blind and deaf as a form of judgment for offering such offensive, false, and ritualistic worship. His prophecy announced the coming judgment of separation from the LORD; although, the separation would only be temporary, for a day would come when that blindness and deafness would be removed, thus enabling them to understand with their hearts, repent and be healed.

The people of God would be separated from the LORD by the power of a foreign nation. Isaiah again uses language of cutting off in this rebuke, which he also intertwines with a little hope. *Behold, the LORD God of Hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power, the great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low. He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon will fall by the Majestic One. There will come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest upon him* (10:33-11:2).

The LORD’s choice crop would be cut down, but not cut off; it would be reduced to a stump, and out of one stump in a forest of tree stumps, one shoot of hope sprouts; the promise of a Holy Remnant from the line of David. After this judgment is over, this surviving figure—this remnant of David—Isaiah writes, will lead the nations to Zion, the mountain of God, the place of the restored New Jerusalem. These very nations are then judged in a collection of repetitive oracles due to the global plague of sin, with Babylon as the national representative for fallen humanity. If you have ever tried reading through Isaiah, odds are, you have struggled to get through this sub-section, chapters 13-27. This is just fat stacks of judgment. But following these

oracles of judgment against the nations, Isaiah tells us the purpose of this judgment—the purpose of all divine judgment—is to produce righteousness in those on the receiving end. The LORD did not judge these nations simply to judge; there is an intended outcome to judgment; they were judged because the LORD wanted them to be restored to him, and worship him as their true King. The messianic remnant of David will lead these nations to the restored New Jerusalem.

How would this messianic David do this? Isaiah tells us in chapter 30 that after the judgment has ended—*Though the Lord gave you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teacher will not hide himself anymore; your eyes shall see your teacher. When you turn to the right or the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, “This is the way, walk in it.”* (30:20-21 paraphrased; paralleled to Jos. 23:6-8).

How would this messianic David lead these nations to the restored New Jerusalem? When he came, he would remove the blindness and deafness of these people, so they could understand, repent, be healed, and follow him to life. This messianic Teacher would guide them away from their iniquities on the right and away from their transgressions on the left. To borrow from Proverbs, if in all their ways they acknowledge this messianic David and submit to his teachings, he will make their path straight and clear—he will guide them into a new life as the holy remnant of the LORD, a people whose scarlet-stained-sins had been washed white as snow.

Section one ends with the sudden rise and tragic fall of the greatest commander-in-chief of Judah, King Hezekiah. Hezekiah led his people to reject their habitual idolatry and false worship. He tore down all their false altars and committed his idolatrous kingdom to one altar in one temple for one God. When faced with imminent military defeat by a blasphemous nation, Hezekiah did not rely on the physical help of ally kingdoms such as Samaria or Egypt, but instead put his trust in the LORD. And so, the angel of the LORD judged that blasphemous nation, wiping out 185,000 soldiers in a single night, a defeat preserved in ancient Assyrian history on what is called Sennacherib’s Prism, currently held at the Oriental Institute in Chicago. The angel of the LORD wiped out 185,000 enemy soldiers in a single night, the second greatest miracle of God still remembered by Jews to this day, second only to the Exodus out of Egypt.

But following Hezekiah’s miraculous victory, he became deathly sick, and laying on his deathbed, Hezekiah prayed to the LORD. As a result of Hezekiah’s prayer, the LORD was moved emotionally, and showed mercy to Hezekiah by extending his life. But unfortunately, this miracle of personal healing led to pride and disregard for the LORD’s warnings. Ambassadors

from none other than the kingdom of Babylon came to wish him well in his recovery, aka spy, and Hezekiah showed them all the corners of his kingdom and all the immensity of the temple treasury, much to Isaiah’s disdain, having previously prophesied against Babylon’s imminent treachery. Yet here was Hezekiah, the great king, welcoming the enemy into the gate.

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, will be carried to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, will be taken away, and they will be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.” For he thought, “at least there will be peace and security in my days.”

After the LORD had done so much to protect this man’s kingdom and to protect him from his own failing health, an absolute travesty that he would be satisfied with judgment and consequences that would not affect him. His son, King Manasseh, would reverse all the good Hezekiah did in the Kingdom of Judah. Chronicles describes Manasseh as an evil king who *provoked* the LORD. This cycle continued king after king, one worse than the one before him, with few exceptions, until Babylon ultimately did come and carry off the Jews into exile.

When he was first commissioned as a prophet, the LORD gave Isaiah a message of devastating judgment to give to the people—the faucets of access to the LORD would be shut off. After hearing it, Isaiah exclaimed, *“How long, O Lord?”* And the Lord said, *“until cities lie waste without inhabitant, houses without people, the land is a desolate waste, and the LORD removes people far away.”* The Babylonian exile is that time of desolation; a time of utter judgment for sin. This is a dark time in Israel’s history. They were removed from their Promised Land because of their own sinfulness and provocation against the LORD. To be clear, they were not slaves, but they certainly were not free either.

Message

It is at this time, when all hope seemed lost, that we enter into the next words of Isaiah, the opening words given to the Jews in exile, weary of any further words of judgment from that prophet Isaiah. *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her hardship has ended, that her iniquity has been pardoned, and that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.*” The LORD’s judgment is about to end!

A new phase is coming in Israel’s history. Perhaps now this promised messianic remnant of David will come save God’s people.

A voice cries out in the wilderness, “prepare the way of the LORD.” What is the way of the LORD? Isaiah tells us there are three aspects to the way of the LORD. *Make straight a highway for our God.* All throughout this book, Isaiah uses language of a highway to signify a great act of divine deliverance. There was soon-coming a great act of divine deliverance that the Jews could hope and wait for. *Every valley lifted up, mountain made low, uneven ground made even, and rough places smooth.* Following this great act of divine deliverance, something tremendous is going to happen to alter the geography around them. Isaiah uses language such as this several times elsewhere to signify the coming new creation. *The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, all flesh shall see it together.* There is no escaping what is depicted here; all creation will see the glory of the LORD. And so, to bring comfort to the devastated Jews following decades of judgment by exile, three things were promised to them: soon-coming divine deliverance, new creation, and all would see the glory of the LORD in its rightful place.

This brings us to the Gospel of Matthew: *In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” For this is who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said: “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘prepare the way of the Lord.’* Now why was John the Baptist the one to whom Isaiah was referring? Because the content of his preaching—that the Kingdom of God is at hand—corresponds to the threefold announcement in Isaiah 40.

NT scholar David Nystrom says it like this: “The Kingdom of God is wherever and whenever the plan and will of God is proclaimed, heard, understood, and lived out.”¹ So if the Kingdom of God is wherever and whenever the plan and will of God is proclaimed, heard, understood, and lived out, then what is the plan and will of God? The plan and will of God comes directly from Isaiah 40 and the remainder of Isaiah section two: that there would be a great act of divine deliverance because of the work of this Servant who suffers to the point of death for God’s people, and that following that deliverance, there would be a new creation, and all creation would see the true King on the throne. This plan and will of God was proclaimed by John the Announcer, but it was done by Jesus the Servant. Unlike Isaiah, John was unambiguous when it came to the timing of his message; the time is now, therefore, repent!

¹ Lectures from the course “Gospel of John.” Dr. David Nystrom. Western Seminary.

When John called those in earshot to repentance, he was calling them to live out the reality of the Kingdom of God. Don’t just say words with your mouth—live them. Don’t just confess things in your mind—live them. Repent because! Repent because the Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent, which means to turn away from sin and turn toward the LORD. Repentance is all about turning toward something to replace what you are turning against. If you are avoiding sin but not replacing it with the LORD, you have incomplete repentance. We are not actors, for the LORD invites us to participate in the transformative process in ourselves and in others. The LORD invites us to participate in our own transformation through repentance; through living out our faith. If you submit your life to Jesus as your master and believe the Father raised him from the dead, then there are real implications on your life; how you interact with God; how you interact with others; how you view yourself. Easier said than done, right?

One of my friends moved away about a year ago to finish the final leg of his college career. As his time in Northern California came to a close, I got to go bowling with him and two of his friends from his church. One of these two other guys was raised in the Church and had been a believer for many years. He knew his stuff. The other, though, had only been a believer for, at most, a few months. But what a testimony he has. Prior to the Spring of 2018, this young man was neck-deep in bondage to drugs, alcohol, and sexual promiscuity.²

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6 to not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor the drunkards, nor this nor that, will inherit the Kingdom of God. And such was this young man. Now does anyone know what word comes next in that passage? But! What a glorious word! Not inheriting the kingdom of God does not have to be your final verdict. Neither the sexually immoral, nor drunkards will inherit the Kingdom of God. And such was this young man, *but* this young man was washed, symbolized through the waters of his baptism. He was and continues to be sanctified through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And he was justified—which means to be declared righteous—in the name of his Lord Jesus Christ, who carried away his guilt and bore his sin on the cross. Paul is right to tell us not to be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor the drunkards, nor this nor that, will inherit the kingdom of God, and such *was* this young man, *but* he is those things no more.

That night, after he finished telling me his story, I asked him how the few months had been since his conversion, and he admitted in intense language that it had been very difficult.

² I wrote this message in Summer 2019.

Every day he was learning things about himself—attitudes, behaviors, habits—that he did not know he had, and he felt ashamed of those things; things he was not even aware had joined themselves together to him overtime; things that had become so engrained to his identity. But he now knew those things were wrong, and he also knew that he was no longer defined or identified by those things. And so, from that assurance, he is empowered by the Spirit to turn away from temptation and sin, and turn toward the one who delivered him into freedom.

In the months following that night, this young man and I met regularly and became friends. Despite the difficult transition to freedom, he continues to live a life of repentance; he is still repenting with each day and still progressing in his still new faith. And he still messes up, as do we all, but each day is a new opportunity to repent and live the life Christ called him to live. He was transformed by the LORD’s initiative, and he continues to be transformed with each new day through his willingness to participate alongside the Spirit. Living out your faith may be easier said than done, but it is done. Done through praying for the Spirit to reveal those impurities that remain in us. Done through confessing those sins with our words. Done through repenting of those sins with our actions; through turning away from those sins and turning toward your divine deliverer. Through living out the reality that the Kingdom of God has arrived in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Conclusion

This comforting good news—the arrival of the Kingdom of God—is not just about having knowledge; it is about living in freedom *because* of that knowledge. The fact the Holy Spirit who lives within you is convicting you of sin is evidence of the Spirit’s active work in your life right now. The fact temptation seemingly increases with every day is evidence you are actively living against the will of Satan. Have you ever thought about it that way? If you submit your life to Jesus as your master and believe the Father raised Jesus from the dead, then you have renounced your allegiance to the chief authority of the ways of this world and flesh. You are the enemy of Satan and he will do all he can to take you out: to make you stray from your deliverer, to discourage you with grief, shame, and guilt, to diminish your effectiveness to spread the Gospel to those placed in your orbit, and restrain your ability to be a light in this dark world.

All the more reason to cling to the comfort of Jesus, our good teacher, for whom John the Baptist prepared the way, whose work on the cross is that great divine deliverance Isaiah

foresaw. Jesus, who takes your scarlet-stained-sins and makes them white as snow. Jesus, who is making all things new. Jesus, who does not just unlock the shackles on your hands and feet and leave you where you are to wander to the right or to the left, but who leads you along the right path *in that freedom* if only you acknowledge and submit to him alone.

If you are saved, then like my new friend, you also have been transformed and you are being transformed. When you submit your life to Jesus as your master and believe the Father raised him from the dead, that moment your life is transformed! Scripture says you will receive a new heart, which essentially means a new worldview, a new value system. You will receive the complete forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life, and the Holy Spirit now as your divine Helper along the way.

And so, Christian, willingly participate with the Spirit through daily repentance; turn away from sin and turn toward your messianic deliverer every day—every day!—until the day of perfection when you enter into the glory of the LORD, in the restored New Jerusalem, as a completed new creation, where you will see the true King together with all the saints and all creation. Through daily repentance, like my new friend, you will learn the truth of who you once were, but you also will be assured and sustained by the truth that you are those things no more.

Let’s pray.