

20.02.2021 COMFORT MY PEOPLE

“Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, you who bring good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, be not afraid; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’ ” Isaiah 40:9

This week we begin the study of the last part of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is divided into 3 parts:

1. Prophecies of condemnation: Isaiah 1-34
2. Historical section: Isaiah 35-39
3. Prophecies of comfort and consolation: Isaiah 40-66

In this last section, we find the great prophecies of Israel’s deliverance, of Israel’s Deliverer and the prophecies of the glorious future of God’s people.

Isaiah 40 is our study for this week. In it we see God’s promises to the nation of Israel and God’s promises to the world.

‘To Isaiah it was given to make very plain to Judah the truth that among the Israel of God were to be numbered many who were not descendants of Abraham after the flesh. This teaching was not in harmony with the theology of his age, yet he fearlessly proclaimed the messages given him of God and brought hope to many a longing heart reaching out after the spiritual blessings promised to the seed of Abraham.

The apostle to the Gentiles, in his letter to the believers in Rome, calls attention to this characteristic of Isaiah's teaching. "Isaiah is very bold," Paul declares, "and said, I was found of them that sought Me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after Me." Romans 10:20. *Prophets and Kings p. 367*

Comfort for the Future (From Desolation to Consolation)

“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” says your God. “Speak comfort to (literally, ‘speak to the heart of’) Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” Isaiah 40:1, 2

The preceding chapter ends by foretelling disaster for Judah. Chapter 40 immediately begins with a message of comfort from God. This word from God includes other voices (verses 2, 3 and 9) and suggests that this message is coming from the throne room of God (similar to chapter 6).

*“Comfort, yes, comfort **My** people!” says your God. God has not forsaken His people. They are still His covenant people. This is an emotionally intense statement. ‘Says your God’ is in the imperfect tense and gives the idea that God ‘keeps saying’.*

When God led Israel to the Promised Land and gave them rest from their enemies, He had told them that unfaithfulness and disobedience to Him would lead to warfare and defeat. Isaiah makes clear to Israel that they would be conquered by Assyria and Babylon.

But since He is a gracious God He would deliver them from captivity, pardon their iniquity and make payment for their sin (see Deuteronomy 29, 30 and Nehemiah 9:28-31).

This promise of comfort is not just to the nation of Israel. It has a world-wide application. God has comfort to offer mankind, enslaved in sin, unfaithful and disobedient to Him. The reason He can offer comfort to mankind is because:

1. Her warfare is ended.
Christ has defeated the great Enemy of mankind, Satan and his works (1 John 3:8)
2. Her iniquity is pardoned.
By His death, He has brought pardon for all mankind (Hebrews 9:22).
3. She has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.
Christ has paid the wages of sin and this is accounted to mankind (Romans 6:23).

Presence, Word and Roadwork

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." Isaiah 40:3-5

This alludes to the return of the exiles (Isaiah 45:1, 2). The highway through the desert runs from Babylon to Judah. Such elevated roads were not uncommon in the ancient Near East as processions for kings. In its wider fulfillment, the king will be God as He leads His people home, an event that all humankind will note and therein give glory to Jehovah. 'Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the LORD shall be revealed' indicates that it will be a supernatural event.

This prophecy was re-enacted spiritually in the preparation by John the Baptist for the coming of the Christ, who continues to lead His people into freedom. Before Christ's coming in glory, His people will prepare the way before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah.

A highway shall be there, and a road and it shall be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be for others. Whoever walks the road, although a fool, shall not go astray. Isaiah 35:8

The Frailty of Man and the Permanence of God:

The voice said, "Cry out!" And he said, "What shall I cry?"

"All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because 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 stands forever." Isaiah 40:6-8

Despite man's frailty due to sin and selfishness, God's purposes will not be thwarted. His word endures forever. In Christ, the living Word, all the promises of God are 'Yes' and 'Amen' to the glory of God. 2 Corinthians 1:20

The Apostle Peter connects this passage in Isaiah with the gospel and its fruit of love in those who accept the word of the Lord.

Seeing you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned (sincere) love of the brethren, see that you love one another with a pure heart fervently: being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which lives and abides forever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower thereof falls away: But the word of the Lord endures forever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you. 1 Peter 1:22-25

The Birth of Evangelism

O Zion, You who bring good tidings, get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, you who bring good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, be not afraid; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

A herald now calls upon God's people to get up to the top of a high mountain and invite people to 'Behold their God'. The message must be heard by as many as possible, hence the proclamation from a high mountain and with a loud voice. The message is 'Behold your God'. Man's only hope lies in beholding and knowing God.

We are called to behold God as the returning King and the Good Shepherd.

Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young." Isaiah 40:9-11

This passage is sometimes called the passage of the Warrior- Shepherd.

Say to those who are fearful-hearted, "Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you." Isaiah 35:4

Christ is the returning King. He calls Himself the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-15). He is the Great Shepherd of His sheep (Hebrews 13:20) and He is the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4) who will appear at the Second Coming.

At the Second Coming, as Shepherd, He will do a work of Judgment. He will divide the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31-33).

Merciful and Incomparable Creator

“To whom then will you liken Me, or to whom shall I be equal?” says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and see Who has created these things, Who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name, by the greatness of His might and the strength of His power; not one is missing.” Isaiah 40:25, 26

He has authority over all creation (Isaiah 40:12).

He is the God of all wisdom (40:13, 14).

His greatness surpasses all the nations (40:15-17).

His greatness in Creation is evident; He has power over nature and over mankind (40:21-26).

God calls us to have confidence in His creative power and wisdom (40:27, 28).

God calls us to receive strength from Him; the Omnipotent Creator (40:29-31).

The Problem with Idolatry

To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him? The workman moulds an image, the goldsmith overspreads it with gold, and the silversmith casts silver chains. Whoever is too impoverished for such a contribution chooses a tree that will not rot. He seeks for himself a skilful workman to prepare a carved image that will not totter. Isaiah 40:18-20

I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images. Isaiah 42:8

Today, as Christians, we do not worship idols of wood and stone. No, the idols we worship are much more dangerous... they are the idols of the soul. We need to be reminded that these idols are the most deadly of idols because they are idols set up in the mind and far more difficult to get rid of than images of wood and stone. When we read the First commandment, the god that we must fear most to put ahead of Jehovah, is the god of ‘self’ and the spirit of self-exaltation.

When ‘*what I want, what I need, what I have achieved, the riches I possess, the power I have*’ becomes the highest priority of my life, there I have raised ‘an image to the beast’ – the idols of my soul.

Not for nothing is our society called the ‘Me’ generation. It is alive and well in the church. Whenever we find dissension and discontent in the church, self is always at the root of it. Sometimes we put the group identity above Jehovah – we fight for the rights of ‘the group’ since it sounds better than demanding for myself or boasting of myself. So within the church of God (which is supposed to be the Body of Christ and one body in Christ) we find members divided along class lines, ethnicities, nationalities, colour, and minorities, each either boasting of their group achievements or demanding their group rights.

The sin which is indulged to the greatest extent, which separates us from God and produces so many spiritual disorders, and which are contagious, is selfishness. EG White: Maranatha p. 109

“Maybe we are not as crude as the ancient Israelites, though some nations are. However, some people worship a crucifix, others will worship the church, or idolize the preacher. Some people will bow before the gods of materialism, ambition, sex, even home and loved ones, and will substitute anything if only they can escape having to get down to the basic need of facing why it is that God does not guide or deliver.” *A. Redpath*

'We live in an age of lost faith and lost hope and empty hearts. Today the Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me," must include, "Thou shalt have Me (or 'Behold Me, your God')". The ancient image worshippers were, at least, worshipping something not themselves, a Power greater than themselves; they were trying in their limited way to make an image of God, and when the image proved faulty they could break it and make a better one, until the day came when they needed no image at all. But the false gods of today are things of the spirit, and as hard to pluck forth as it is hard for a man to pluck out his right eye. The beast in the heart is always the self.

In the last analysis there are only two things to worship the true power and the false power; God or devil; God or self. The primitive mumbo-jumbo worshipper was often serving God in intention. The modern monotheist is frequently adoring his own image in the mirror.' *Joy Davidman: God Comes First.*

'Little children, keep yourselves from idols.' 1 John 5:21

Conclusion:

To ancient Israel, caught up in idolatry and rebellion, God comes with a message of comfort. This message encompasses the world – all mankind in all times and all places. In Christ we are restored to all that was lost by sin and rebellion if we will only turn and behold our God.

'Heaven's plan of salvation is broad enough to embrace the whole world. God longs to breathe into prostrate humanity the breath of life. And He will not permit any soul to be disappointed who is sincere in his longing for something higher and nobler than anything the world can offer. Constantly He is sending His angels to those who, while surrounded by circumstances the most discouraging, pray in faith for some power higher than themselves to take possession of them and bring deliverance and peace. In various ways God will reveal Himself to them and will place them in touch with providences that will establish their confidence in the One who has given Himself a ransom for all, "that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments." Psalm 78:7.' *Prophets and Kings. p 377, 378*

This will be written for the generation to come, that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD. For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary; from heaven the LORD viewed the earth, to hear the groaning of the prisoner, to release those appointed to death, to declare the name of the LORD in Zion, and His praise in Jerusalem, when the peoples are gathered together, and the kingdoms, to serve the LORD. Psalm 102:18-22
