

He Shall Feed His Flock

Isaiah's message in today's study is a dramatic contrast to Jeremiah's writings we studied last week. Isaiah's "book"



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can be divided in half: the first 39 chapters are called "first Isaiah" and the last 27 chapters are called "second Isaiah." Chapter 40 marks a profound difference with a word of comfort and hope. Has God changed his mind about these selfish people? Is their past tragedy no longer relevant? Or, have the people finally faced their failures and substitution of empty religion for God? Has the darkness of exile — not just from the land of Israel but from God presence — finally been overcome by the hope of God's grace?

From 587-539 BC the exiles were lost in the empire of Babylon, forcibly removed from everything familiar, including everything that marked their identity as God's people. But when the Persian king Cyrus soundly defeated the Babylonians, the policy of relocating people from their homeland was reversed. This is the historic point at which Isaiah 40 begins. But to anticipate that everything will be "normal" once more is to believe there will be no scars from the past, that Jerusalem and the Temple will be easily rebuilt and that the selfishness of the human heart, so endemic to rebellion against God, will suddenly vanish. As we study Israel's history we continue to learn that faith in God is not a free pass from the challenges of living, but the blessing of living with the promise of God's companionship today and beyond the obstacles of the world.

As Christians we read Isaiah from a more enlightened perspective because we know the Old Testament history and we know the ultimate revelation of God's promise through Jesus. In Handel's "Messiah" the composer focuses on this particular passage with its graphic imagery. Israel sees God as the shepherd who protects and cares for his flock as if they are his children. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). In his letter to the Christians of Ephesus Paul uses

the image of exile when he describes believers in Christ: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens (as the Jews were in Babylon), but you are fellow-citizens with the saints, and are of God's household" (Ephesian 2:19).

Isaiah uses four powerful images to describe God's gracious deliverance of his exiled people:

Sins are forgiven. "O comfort my people, says your God ... she has served her term ... her penalty is paid" (vv. 1-2). The Israel who considered herself favored by God and untouchable by the world had learned the consequences of pride, the danger of a theology of privilege. To be "chosen" entails a life of generosity and compassion, and the understanding that you view the world through the eyes of God's grace. The exiles had learned the difference between blessing and pride and God was giving them a new beginning.

A road home through the wilderness. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (vv. 3-5). The exiles had been herded like animals through a bitter wilderness; everything about their world was a denial of the green pastures of God's provision and blessings. There were no highway systems or convenient bridges in that day. Travel was hard and marked by danger. But the prophet announces that Israel is going home! Their journey will be so joyous that it will be as though the Lord has gone before them, leveling the mountains, filling the valleys and opening a smooth road home, where they will once more be free to live in God's love and grace. The question always remains: "What do you do with a new beginning when you get there?"

"The word of God will stand forever" (vv. 5-8). What happens after God's forgiveness? "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed." Life is like grass that withers. Challenges will always abound. But when you make your choices based on God's word, when you truly love God and seek to serve him, life has an eternal dimension and meaning. What will Israel do with this new beginning? Will they turn again to the promises of a dying world or will they become living proof of God's grace?

Formations

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Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11

"O Zion, herald of good tidings" (vv. 9-11). The world needed good news in Isaiah's day, as does our world. The prophet describes God, "who comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him ... he will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep" (vv. 10-11). This is not a picture of a vengeful god who will ravage Babylonians or build a holy army to wreak vengeance on the world. This is a picture of God, beyond majesty and might, who is compassionate, loving and forgiving. This is God's invitation, once again, for Israel to show the world who God is and to offer an alternate view of life with radically different values and purpose. For two generations the Jews had lived in exile; now they are given a new beginning, but would they understand and discern the blessings God was offering?

What do we take away from this epic story of a people God loved, a people who chose to go their own way and threw away God's blessings? The church, the followers of Jesus, has repeated the tragic tale of Israel. We have copied the world's flawed values, built organizations that resemble our culture rather than God's calling to compassion and failed to confront the selfishness and violence that destroys human lives.

Christmas is a season of hope and celebration, a time when we can share the miracle of Jesus coming into our world as one with us. God is no longer a far-away mystery, a prop for political and material success or an optional philosophy. We celebrate the God who chooses to love us, the God who has returned again and again to people who failed him — the God who ultimately becomes one with us in the person of Jesus Christ. From a humble cradle in Bethlehem, to a dying Savior on a criminal's cross, to the Jesus who walked out of a borrowed tomb, we discover life eternal. God's love is not an abstract idea. God's love is Jesus Christ who invites us to believe and live every day as the children of God. When we choose to believe and act on that believing, "God will feed his flock."