

Isaiah 40

To understand this passage we first need to go back a little bit to see why God's people needed to be comforted. Fortunately, we do not need to go back too far as the answer lies in the previous chapter (Isaiah 39 – also in 2 Kings 20) although it would be helpful to go back as far as chapter 38. Chapter 38 starts:

¹ In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover."

² Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, ³ "Remember, O LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: ⁵ "Go and tell Hezekiah, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. ⁶ And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.

(Isaiah 38:1-6)

Notice here that Hezekiah, king of Judah had been ill and was going to die but after pleading with God, God granted Hezekiah a further 15 years and also promised that He would deliver the city from the hand of the king of Assyria (see Isaiah 36).

In Chapter 39 we are told that Marduk-Baladan, king of Babylon sent letters to Hezekiah and a gift. We are not told what the letters said but we can make an educated guess by Hezekiah's actions. Hezekiah welcomes the king's messengers and proudly shows them his wealth and resources, being sure to point out that Judah has a wealth of treasures and a wealth of weapons. In other words, they would make a good ally if for example, the king of Babylon was planning an attack on, let's say, the Assyrians.

It's a bit like Dragon's Den. If you've not seen the program, it's a T.V. program where budding entrepreneurs pitch their ideas in front of five multi-millionaires asking them to invest in their business. Each of the entrepreneurs try to persuade the 'dragons' that their business would be good to invest in on the basis of the profits, etc. they already have and the potential the business has if they team up with one of the 'dragons'. In a sense, Hezekiah is doing the same here. It is a business presentation, designed to impress Marduk-Baladan's messengers.

When they had gone, Isaiah asked Hezekiah, “who were those men and what did they want?” Hezekiah, obviously proud of the presentation he had given said “they had come all the way from Babylon, just to see me!”. At this, alarm bells ring for Isaiah and he asks, “what did you show them?”. The king proudly replies, “Everything! I pulled out all the stops, showed them all the treasure, all the weapons, a grand tour of the palace, I think we’ve got this deal in the bag!”.

But Isaiah gives the king some crushing news. This king is one dragon that is not to be trusted.

⁵ Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD Almighty: ⁶ The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. ⁷ And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

(Isaiah 39:5-7)

This is bad news. Judah will be delivered from the hand of the Assyrians only to be delivered into the hand of the Babylonians. It feels like out of the frying pan, into the fire! It’s a bit like saying “Don’t worry, Gordon Brown is no longer going to be in charge of the countries finances... he’s going to be in charge of the country!”

The people of Judah needed some words of comfort, and they got them. In our Bible’s this is the beginning of a new chapter but when this passage was found as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls (a document called Q^a), the start of chapter 40 is at the bottom of the column with no indication that this is separate from chapter 39. Normally, I wouldn’t draw your attention to that sort of detail, but it is striking that the message of doom is immediately followed by a message of hope. The Message puts it like this:

"Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem,
but also make it very clear
That she has served her sentence,
that her sin is taken care of—forgiven!
She's been punished enough and more than enough,
and now it's over and done with."

(Isaiah 40:2 MSG)

There will come a time when Jerusalem’s sentence is over, when enough is enough, a time when it is finished! They are told to prepare for the Lord’s coming. The words here are later used by John the Baptist when he told people to prepare for the coming Messiah (Matthew 3:3). The wilderness and the desert

are hard places to live in. God's people are not immune from suffering and hardship but Isaiah encouraged the people to hang onto their faith in these times and to prepare to see God work because the glory of the Lord was about to be revealed (v5).

The idea of preparing a straight, smooth road is about removing any obstacles. To make sure they are ready for when the Lord comes. The idea is not purely spiritual. It used to physically happen and to a point, it still does. There was an ancient Babylonian hymn that said:

“Make [Nabu's] way good, renew his road. Make straight his path.”¹

This referred to the preparing of roads before special festivals where there would be a procession in which images of the gods were carried along the freshly prepared road. It wasn't only the Babylonians that did this, often in ancient times when a monarch visited a city, people were sent ahead of them to prepare the way and the road leading to the city would be made good. Apparently this happened some years ago when the Queen visited the Bahamas. The people who prepared for her visit decided to resurface the entire road along her route around the island.² Even here in London, often when the Queen goes to or from the palace, she gets a police escort. So for you or me at the moment, if we were to drive down the A12 towards London, it would take us about half an hour just to get past Gants Hill roundabout, and another half an hour to get through all the traffic lights between there and Redbridge roundabout. Not so for the Queen. She doesn't realise that it takes a long time to get across London. She doesn't understand what a traffic jam is or why we have these multi-coloured lights at cross-roads. Wherever the Queen goes, people go ahead of her to prepare the way. Apparently the Queen doesn't even know what it's like to sit on a cold toilet seat because it is warmed for her. Actually I don't think that's because someone goes before her, I think it's electrically heated.

Anyway, God's people were told to prepare for His coming and to prepare for the glory of the Lord to be revealed. But the people of Judah must have wondered in all seriousness, what hope did they really have. If they were going to be captured by the Babylonians, how could they ever hope to be free from them again? The Babylonians were a very powerful nation; a glorious people.

The prophet compares human glory with God's glory.

"All men are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the LORD blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.

¹ Motyer, A., Isaiah: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, p244

² Kuhatschek, J., Beholding God's Majesty: Knowing God Bible Studies, p27

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God stands forever."

(Isaiah 40:6-8)

Human glory is like a flower in the field. It lasts just a short moment and then it is gone with the wind. But the word of our God stands forever.

Peter picks these words up in his first letter:

²³For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴For,
"All men are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
²⁵but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.

(1 Peter 1:23-25)

So we need not be concerned about people, however powerful or important they seem, God is far greater and far more powerful than they are. Their glory is only relative. You may have a managing director of a company who has the best seat in the office, a string of people running round after them to make sure that everything around them runs like clockwork. Inside their own company, they are respected and honoured, but if they catch the tube home, no one knows or cares who they are and they become an equal with everyone else. Other people will push them out of the way, just as they do you or me. But God has authority everywhere, he tells the planets what to do and they do as they're told. If you want the proof of that just flick back to chapter 38 again and in verse 8 we see that as a sign to Hezekiah, God made the sun's shadow reverse its direction so as the shadow went back up ten steps that it had already come down. That baffles scientists to this day. God is more powerful than any human being and his power is real power.

But what about a lot of powerful people joined together. Babylon not only had a powerful king, but an impressive army.

¹⁵ Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket;
they are regarded as dust on the scales;
he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.

¹⁶ Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires,
nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.

¹⁷ Before him all the nations are as nothing;
they are regarded by him as worthless
and less than nothing.

(Isaiah 40:15-17)

Compared to God the armies of nations are puny. In this passage we get a picture of a great big God. If we look at verse 12 we begin to get a glimpse of how big God is:

- Measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
- Marked off the heavens with the breadth of his hand (hand span)
- Holds the dust of the earth in a basket
- Weighs the mountains and hills on his scales

Compared to God, the nations are nothing so the people of God have nothing to worry about when it comes to other people; God is in control.

But what about other gods? This was a time when it was considered that whichever nation was the most powerful, had the most powerful gods. The name of the capital city, Babylon means “gate of the gods” So if Judah ended up being conquered by the Babylonians, did it mean that their gods were more powerful than God?

¹⁹ As for an idol, a craftsman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold
and fashions silver chains for it.

²⁰ A man too poor to present such an offering
selects wood that will not rot.
He looks for a skilled craftsman
to set up an idol that will not topple.

(Isaiah 40:19-20)

Isaiah reminds us that man-made gods are just that, man made. They have no life of their own, they are created by people. Surely if they are created by people, then the people who created them are more powerful than the gods they have created. And as we have already said, God is much more powerful than people. Therefore, God must be more powerful than any man-made god.

So we don't need to worry about other people, and we don't need to worry about other gods. God is above all of those by a long way. But what evidence is there of all of this? If the people of Judah needed something concrete, a visible sign of God's power and his glory, what did they have?

²⁶ Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one,
and calls them each by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.

(Isaiah 40:26)

The psalmist wrote:

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

(Psalm 119:1)

And they do don't they? Have you ever looked out and seen a magnificent sunset when the sky looks as though it's on fire? I think that is the sort of thing the psalmist is talking about.

And it gets even better at night. In the city it's difficult to appreciate the stars but I'm sure most of us have been out in the countryside and seen the stars on a clear night. Have you ever stopped to see what you can see, to see if you can work out the different constellations? On a very clear night, if you stop to look for a while, it's stunning. Abraham had an experience like that when God told him about the offspring he would have.

⁵ [The Lord] took him outside [the tent] and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

(Genesis 15:5)

I heard someone recently talking about a time when they had camped in the desert overnight (as Abraham was). He said that as he went outside the tent at night, the sky was awesome, like he'd never seen it. With no other lights around, the stars shone brightly. He said that it was not only up above him, but all around him too. As he looked on the horizon, there were stars at eye level in every direction. He could see clusters of stars, looking like sparkling patches of mist. And beyond the stars there were more stars that seemed to go on forever. This must have been a similar experience to the one Abraham had. We cannot really tell how big the sky is by seeing all the stars, but we know for sure, however big it is, it's massive! How much bigger and greater must God be who created all of this? Who put all the stars in place and can name them all.

Of course, when we think of the majesty and awesomeness of God, it can have the effect of making us feel small and puny and a bit insignificant. If we are like a little speck to God then does he even notice us? Does God actually care?

²⁸ Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

(Isaiah 40:28-29)

In the same way that his power and might is beyond our understanding, so his understanding is beyond our understanding. If you understand. He knows everything about us. He knows us intimately. It's amazing isn't it? God knows how many stars there are in the sky and he knows how many hairs are on your head. That's how well he knows you. And yes, he does care about you. What hope do Judah have? What hope do any of us have? No hope if our hope is in men, other gods or ourselves. All the hope in the world if our hope is in the Lord.

³¹ but 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.

(Isaiah 40:31)

This has been likened to different stages of humanity. When you are young, you soar and fly. When you are a bit older, you run and when you are older still, you walk. And at each stage God is there to give us strength if our hope is in him.

What a glorious God we have.