



A Passion for Restoration Isaiah 40

This morning we reviewed for ourselves what our 2004 had been like. For some it had been a disappointment and for others it was an encouragement. Sometimes it's difficult to make sense of life isn't it? This morning, we had the challenge to cross over Jordan – whether that is a personal Jordan or a Jordan we cross together as we claim the ground that God is giving us.

This passage gives us another take on it which also deals with the promises of God to a people that had fallen from grace. This message was intended for a people who were in exile. There was a sense in which it was a captivity even though the people were not in prison, chains, or even servitude. Many of the Jews like Daniel found high office in the equivalent of the civil service. However, they were forbidden to return to the land from which they had been removed. They were strangers in a strange land. They were cut off from their heritage. Their temple had been destroyed and they had been separated from the land they held dear – the land as we remembered this morning had been given to them and which they had conquered at great cost. Now as a disobedient people they found themselves out of God's favour. It's an irony isn't it? Had they learned nothing in the intervening centuries. They went through all this kind of stuff in the wilderness before they entered Canaan. Now as verse 2 of Isaiah 40 says, they had paid double for their sins – they were in Babylon for 80 years rather than the 40 in the wilderness.

How did they feel - Ps 137:1 is a song of Babylon:

137:1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. 2 There on the poplars we hung our harps, 3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

But Isaiah 40 brought them promise that their captivity would come to an end. This is a significant passage as we know because not only does it talk of the restoration of the people to the land under Cyrus, but of a future spiritual restoration of the people.

We can learn much here of how God brings restoration amongst a people who have fallen. We can learn because the church in our land is a fallen church; a degraded one that has fallen far from the grace in which it once stood. So what do we learn?

1. God restores a fallen people

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Here were a people that had felt the weight of judgement fall upon them. We read the words later in the passage on how they felt about God: *27 Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"? 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.* They thought that God had forgotten all about them. Yet, they were still His people even though judgement had fallen upon them.

They needed to understand afresh that the God who judges those that disobey Him and who brings down the haughty is also the God who rushes to forgive and to restore those that come in repentance. So the chapter opens with words of comfort. God is a God who redeems, he is a God who forgives. He is a God that comforts those that are weak. But he is a God who restores. So He encourages them that their sin is forgiven, and the term of punishment is over (verses 1-2). Whereas they had thoroughly deserved their captivity in Babylon, there is nothing to suggest in Scripture that they had done anything more laudable in that captivity than repent of their former life. The forgiveness for their sins and their redemption was by the grace of God.

We have much to learn from just these two verses. Maybe we are starting the year from a spiritually low point. That may have been from a result of our sin and going our own way. Maybe we have been hurt in some way. Perhaps others have let us down. We have a God who brings comfort in difficult situations and raises up into something that is new and full of vitality.

Perhaps we may even echo the words that somehow God has forgotten all about us. Not so says the prophet as he gives us these super words: *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. 30 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; 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.*

Let Him raise you up and give you new strength. As we come around the table this evening, let's use this as an opportunity to receive from Him.

But there's more here too for us as a church. We have talked much about revival and restoration in the past two years. We have seen the people of God and the church of God brought low in this nation and one of the saddest feelings I found coming to Norfolk was the way in which there was so little expectation of change. Yet when we are at our lowest, we have a God who comes to us with words of comfort and says "This isn't going to last forever. There is an end to it all". Which takes us nicely to our next point.

2. Our God is coming

3 A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. 5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "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. 8 The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." 9 You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 11 He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

These are familiar verses at the beginning of the gospels because these words refer to John the Baptist. But like all prophecy, a single verse has outworkings in different ways. It had an outworking close to the time it was written, with the promise of restoration to the people at that time. It has a Messianic meaning in referring to John the Baptist. But it has a wider context too as it tells us of the nature of God. He is a God who judges a people that do not follow Him, but who always brings that opportunity of restoration to people that wait for Him and that's the basis of all revivals. He is a God who comes to us anew, bringing restoration and revival. This is the act of a gracious God.

As I have said on a number of occasions, words like these heralded what was later to be a revival spiritually for the Jews. No longer do we read of idolatry and rejection but of God's people re-establishing themselves in the land. And that pertained strongly into the time immediately before the coming of Jesus when their leaders started to slip into too comfortable a relationship with their gentile overlords. There was no real scripture written after Malachi until the NT. There were plenty of religious writings and a cracking translation of the OT into Greek and the Jews had an influence in the Greek and then Roman empires that far exceeded their physical numbers. Part of that was the way in which they had become spread in the empires they were part of, but also by a desire to spread Judaism – it was evangelical in one sense and we can see pictures in prophetic books like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel where God brings blessing to the nations. This was the post-exilic vision of the Jews and it was made perfect in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation was indeed through the Jews – through Christ in particular and through Him all nations of the earth have been blessed. And all started with the calamity of the Exile.

These are words of encouragement. God can take the worst situation and bring glory to Himself.

Out of disobedience and judgement came an enduring faith. Many of us believe that these last few years that the church of God has come under judgement in this land because of our own hardness of heart, our lack of vision, our inward looking attitudes, our divisiveness, our willingness to tolerate idolatry. We now live in a society that will soon cease to allow freedom of religion – because we shall no longer be able to state that other religions are wrong, lest we offend them. How far do we have to go? And the church continues to shrink and haemorrhage people to the world.

We should expect an end. This prophecy was written as an expectation of revival. Expect it. This is a principle of the word of God. I don't know when that is going to happen but the revival is coming, but we have as we said this morning, got to be willing, ready and courageous to march where God leads us. There will be restoration. There will be renewal. There will be revival. God is coming - our God is a God of revival - his desire is to come in power.

As we look down to verses 6-8 we see that people are mortal and finite. We have our trends and our latest way of thinking and whether that is to tolerate homosexuality, or allow ourselves to be bullied by religious extremists, or allow our laws to be dictated by the godless. Whether we allow our churches to be come polluted with the world and allow the church of God to fall into disrepute. As people we have our own seasons but God never changes. He brings revival, not because He changes, but because we do and He brings revival out of our own weakness and failure.

There is a saying "what goes around comes around". The people of Israel committed the same sins over and over and the result was much the same - judgement then restoration. Nothing has changed in thousands of years and the same patterns runs around.

So what does God want to do: *You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 11 He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.*

He wants to come in power and we can see from these verses that his desire is to bring benefit - to give reward and recompense and to care for His sheep.

Times are changing. We don't know when or where revival is going to happen. We only know that it does. All we have to do is be people who are prepared for it to happen. So are we doubtful of what God can do? Has it be a long time since we have seen a move of His Spirit. Maybe never? Maybe the people were rather like that to so the prophecy here in Isaiah here MOSTLY contains statements of how great God is!

3. The Greatness of God

There is a long section from verses 11 to 24 on how great God is. Let me give you a few verses to give you the flavour.

25 "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. 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.

There are some who say to people like me "I've heard your talk of revival before. it's all pie in the sky. It's false hope". I'll say this: first of all, cycles of decline and revival are both spoken of in scripture. This passage in Isaiah 40 is typical. They are a fact of church history too.

Secondly, I believe in a God who is great. I have read the very few verses about God's people tonight. I haven't dwelt on the bulk of the chapter which simply are based around the phrase "To whom will you compare me?" Take them home and meditate on them because this is a passage on the greatness of God. How dare we ever say "My way is hidden from the Lord" or "God has forgotten me" or "God can't/won't work in power today". Because that isn't what is aid here. We have a powerful God and it's time we trusted Him and His ways in a much deeper way than we ever have done. He is a God of great power and mighty strength - let's start believing it and living by it.

As we come around the table tonight, let's come worshipping a mighty God, who changes lives and

changes societies as He moves in them. Let' s take thēexample of the past and come before Him as the people of Israel did, to mourn our own situation but to recognise the comfort and encouragement that He brings and the promise of a God who comes in power because of His great might. Let' s hold on to His word as we enter another year and see Him do new things in Swaffham. let me finish with the key verses: *29 He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. 30 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; 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.*



*Preached by Mark Reid
Swaffham Baptist Church
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