

“AND THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHALL BE REVEALED”

Isaiah 40:1–11

Key Verse: 40:5

“And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

On the first Sunday of Advent, many Christians around the world meditate on the hope that Jesus brings. For you, is Christmastime *hopeful*? Wouldn't you like to end this year and begin the new one with real hope in your heart? It may sound too good to be true. But Christmas is the perfect time to be renewed in hope. Why? It's because the birth of Jesus accomplished God's hope for the world. Today we'll be thinking about Isaiah 40, a famous chapter in the Bible about hope. In just the first eleven verses there are four prophetic words from God, all woven together into a powerful message of hope. These prophecies were fulfilled partly when God brought his people out of Babylonian Exile. They were fulfilled even more when Jesus came to the world. They will be fulfilled most fully when he comes again. Today, as we meditate on these words, let's see how Jesus' coming reveals the glory of the Lord, and why this glory is the hope of all the earth. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his life-giving word.

First, “Comfort my people” (1–2). Read verses 1–2. “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 the LORD's hand double for all her sins.” Here God is speaking to his servant, first of all to Isaiah himself. The words “Speak tenderly” literally mean to speak to the heart of a woman, to win her over; so in verse 2 God repeats the words “her” and “she.” God tells his servant to “cry” to her his message of comfort. This word “cry” is repeated in verses 2, 3 and 6. God's messenger needs to cry with empathy, and with urgency. In verse 9 God tells the herald of his good news to lift up his voice with strength and without fear. Why so much emphasis in this passage on how the message is given? “Tenderly,” crying, yet with a strong voice, without fear. Such a tone is needed because his people have been so crushed.

Due to their stubborn pride and rebellion, God punished his people in Judah and Jerusalem with a devastating invasion, then sent them to Babylonian Captivity for 70 years. Their temple was destroyed, their nation ended, and they became slaves in a foreign land. Soon they lost their language, culture, and religious practices. Even their royal sons became royal eunuchs to a foreign king (39:7). It was the utmost humiliation. The Bible says that by the waters of Babylon, there they sat down and wept (Psalm 137:1a). It would seem that God had abandoned them. But through his servant, God now comforts them.

This word “comfort” is repeated in the Book of Isaiah 16 times, more than in any other book of the Bible. Earlier, God had predicted that his people would one day say to him, “...your anger turned away, that you might comfort me” (12:1). Now he tells these humiliated people, “I'm

still your God” and calls them “my people.” Though he punished them severely, God never gave up on them. It’s like, after receiving a life sentence to hard labor, they’re being released early. Basically, God is telling them, with great tenderness, “It’s over. You can come out now.” They totally don’t deserve it, but God, by his grace, is calling them back to himself. He’s pardoning all their sins. The news is so good, it’s stunning.

Verses 1–2 point to the coming of Jesus. One day, God would send his Son into this cursed, sinsick world to “comfort all who mourn.”¹ What is his comfort? Through Jesus, God is telling us that our captivity to sin is over, done. How can this happen? Jesus, the suffering servant, would be pierced, crushed, and wounded in our places so that we might be healed of all our sins (53:5). All we have to do is forsake our wicked ways and thoughts and return to God through him.² By faith in Jesus, we can come out of our dungeon of sin right now and into real freedom and hope. The Bible tells us that Jesus the Son came to set us free (John 8:36). By faith in him, anyone can receive God’s forgiveness.³ In his forgiveness, anyone has hope. This hope is the deepest comfort from God.

Second, “the glory of the LORD shall be revealed” (3–5). But how can these exiled people get out of their helpless situation practically? Read verse 3. “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” Here Isaiah is telling them to get ready because God himself is coming, in person, all the way out to this place of exile. To reach them, God is ready to travel through a wilderness, a desert. It’s like when he brought the Israelite slaves out of Egypt.⁴ This wilderness is a metaphor for the godless world around us. Spiritually, it’s a desert, so dry, with nothing to eat or drink. It’s too hard to live in, too hard to get around, too hard to travel through. But even the worst spiritual conditions are no problem for God.

Already Isaiah has mentioned a “highway” for God, called “the Way of holiness” (35:8). He’ll mention this highway again later (62:10). Here Isaiah describes the construction of the highway. Read verse 4. “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.” It seems too big a job for mere human beings. How can such wild terrain become a smooth highway? But God himself does it! The Mighty God becomes our “Great Earthmover,” our “Way-Maker.” When he comes to our rescue, he can help even the most hardened, helpless person repent. Through his word and his Spirit, he shows us what our problems are: the valleys of our despair and inferiority; the mountains and hills of our pride; the uneven ground and rough places of rebellion in our hearts. When God gives us the spirit of repentance, all the obstacles to him within us are removed (Ezek.36:26). God reaches us, wherever we are, and takes us back to himself on this holy highway. It’s a metaphor for Jesus the way (John 14:6). When God brings us back to himself through Jesus our Lord, everything becomes smooth and clear.

¹ Isa.61:1–2; cf. Luke 4:18–19; 2 Cor.1:3; Matt.5:4

² 55:7; Eph.1:7; 1 Pet.2:25

³ Acts 10:43; 13:38; 26:18

⁴ Ex.16:10; 19:1–2

Why does God want to come to us? Read verse 5. “And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” By coming to his sinful people, God wants to reveal his glory. And he wants “all flesh,” all people to see it. What is his “glory”? The glory of the LORD is a combination of two things: God’s saving power, and his love. God’s glory is his power to save us, but also his love to save us. Isaiah repeatedly calls God “the Holy One of Israel.” That this Holy God wants to save sinners like us is his greatest glory.

Honestly speaking, saving sinful people is like “Mission Impossible.” It’s impossible for us to get out of our sin and condemnation. But it’s not too hard for God. From the beginning, God always has had hope to save sinful human beings (Gen.3:15). But it’s not just a hope: God has the power to save and the love to save. What’s more, God’s way of saving sinners is the glory of the LORD. This glory was revealed in the birth of Jesus. So, on the night he was born, a multitude of the heavenly host were praising him: “Glory to God in the highest!” (Luke 2:13–14a) The Gospel writer Luke quotes Isaiah 40:5, saying, “...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6). This prophecy is fulfilled today when Jesus’ witnesses go to unreached places and new people believe in him. But ultimately, “all flesh shall see” points to the day when the whole world will see the glory of Jesus when he comes again (Rev.1:7). This is our true hope.

And how is God’s glory revealed today? It’s not through blasting people with great power or might. God revealed his glory in this fallen world by sending his Son as a helpless, vulnerable baby in a manger (Luke 2:7). God still saves through such meekness and humility. God still spreads his good news through weak, low, despised people, so that no human being might boast in his presence (1 Cor.1:27–29). Why does God reveal his glory like this? Later, Isaiah writes, “...a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench...” (42:3) It’s God’s glory that he saves the most fragile, broken person through the tender voice of his Servant Jesus (40:2). Our Lord Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt.11:29). Because God works through meekness and humility, he gets all the glory. He just wants us to quietly trust him.⁵

Third, “the word of our God will stand forever” (6–8). Look at verses 6–8. “A voice says, ‘Cry!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” These words are familiar to many of us (1 Pet.1:24–25). But why does God want them spoken so urgently here? God has just mentioned the glory of the LORD that will be seen in the coming of the Messiah. Now he contrasts his glory with the nature of human glory. Compared to God’s glory, all human glory combined is nothing but withering grass and a fading flower—brown and shriveled. Human glory may steal the limelight for now, but it’s no hope at all. We shouldn’t be fooled by it. Only God’s word of good news to us in Jesus “will stand forever.” When we hold onto the word of our God, we can see Jesus’ glory and have real hope.

⁵ 30:15; 32:17–18

Fourth, “behold your God!” (9–11). This last part of the passage may be the most beautiful. Look at verse 9. “Go up on a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’” The people of Judah had been beaten down, crushed, and had lost all hope. But God is announcing to them the good news that he himself is coming in person as their God. It’s another prophecy of the coming of Jesus. Jesus’ birth is God coming personally to be with us.⁶ Only his coming to us gives us hope. Because of this one simple, historical fact—he came—we have hope. This good news is not just for us. We all need God’s strength to be a herald of his good news to the people around us.

Who is this God? The rest of the chapter describes him (12–29). But we’ll just look at the first two verses here. Look at verse 10. “Behold, the LORD God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.” It’s yet another prophecy of Jesus. He’s the Sovereign, Almighty, Righteous God, coming to judge. But he has another side to him. Read verse 11. “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.” Jesus came to be our good shepherd (John 10:11). He’s so gentle and tender, because he really cares for us. He’s willing to carry those too young or too weak to walk. He’s mindful of those who have young ones with them. He’s not impulsive or hot-headed, but patient and nurturing. It’s another revelation of his glory. Jesus our Shepherd is the real hope for all people.

At Christmas, we all need to see the glory of the LORD in the birth of Jesus. His coming gives us God’s hope. And receiving God’s hope in him refreshes our souls. It’s like pressing a spiritual reset button. In this world it’s hard to have hope. In the news we hear about vicious wars, disturbing climate change, greed, hatred, abuse of technology, and a lack of healthy leadership. It’s frightening. The future can look dark. What’s more, our own sins can make us feel trapped, hopeless and condemned. Sometimes it feels like we’re living in a valley of depression (4a). Life seems so fleeting (7). We feel insignificant, overlooked (27), and grow weak and weary (29–30). But in verse 31 Isaiah writes: “...but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” Here, “wait for the LORD” also means “hope in the LORD.” Receiving God’s hope in Jesus renews our strength and enables us to fly like an eagle, run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

Today we’ve learned how the glory of the LORD in Jesus gives us hope. His glory brings us the comfort of God’s forgiveness. His glory helps us repent. His glory is that he came to save sinners like us, in a most humble way. His glory is the sure promise of his word. His glory is that he is our God and our Shepherd. His glory is that even though the world looks so dark and chaotic, he will surely come again.

This Christmas, may God help us experience the glory of the LORD in Jesus. May God renew us in his great hope, both for us and for the world.

⁶ 7:14; 8:8,10; Matt. 1:23