

# Isaiah 40 Sermon

Church on the Corner  
Reading 1-8 & 28-31

- 1 Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.  
3 A voice cries out:  
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
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.  
5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'  
6 A voice says, 'Cry out!'  
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'  
All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.  
7 The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.  
8 The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand for ever.  
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28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.  
29 He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.  
30 Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;  
31 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.

## Introduction

Have you known what it is like to be voiceless, to be part of a society that is heading in a direction that horrifies you? I suspect you do. If you know what that feels like, then you can relate to the people that Isaiah is talking to. The phrase "a voice crying in the wilderness" in v 3 has entered our language to mean someone standing outside the establishment speaking truth even if it isn't heard. It is the identity adopted by John the Baptist who said "Prepare the way of the Lord."

## Context.

Isaiah 40 is the beginning of the second half of Isaiah. So distinct are these two halves that it has been suggested that there should actually be 2 books of Isaiah. Isaiah 1 & Isaiah 2 - distinct in its purpose and its scope - with a much greater vision of the Kingdom of God.

And there it seems a significant time gap between Ch39 & 40 - perhaps 20 years. If you were with us last week you will remember the story of Hezekiah. Superficially a good king but more concerned about his status own reputation than about the purposes of God.

But any hesitations we might have had about Hezekiah pale into insignificance compared to his Son. Only 12 years old when he took the throne (Son born in those 15 years extra that Hezekiah pleaded for). It is slightly difficult to piece together what went wrong - because the text of the chronicles of the kings is a litany going from bad to worse.

2 Kings 21: *Manasseh did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, following the abominable practices of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. 3 He rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he erected altars for Baal, and served him. 4 He built altars in the house of the Lord, and He practiced child sacrifice and shed very much innocent blood, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another.*

**And you think you have it bad!** - this is an awful picture. Remember that these religious practices are the practices of the pagan tribes around Israel. We always feel uncomfortable when the Old Testament insists that the people of God keep themselves apart from the customs and religion of the surrounding nations. But this is why.

**As a consequence Isaiah and those gathered around him find themselves pushed out of the story**, marginalised, voiceless. No longer does the King consult the prophet. And the innocent blood that Manasseh spilt would have certainly included those who spoke up against him. So the word of God goes quiet. And Isaiah's community come to see themselves as a remnant of Israel. And they watch in horror as their society slides away from God, into unthinkable evil and towards exile.

## Passage.

So Isaiah 40 takes the form of a vision of comfort for these people. It is a beautiful piece of writing -

**Things to remember when times are hard.**

### a) v6 The fleeting nature of man

v6 A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; All human projects - good and bad will come to an end. Evil regimes crumble, corruption is its own undoing. their power fades.

### b) v8 God and his word never fail.

8 *The grass withers, the flower fades;*

*but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

God's promises do not fail. Though sometimes it will seem like a long wait (remember Isaiah was written in 700BC) As Peter says "But do not ignore this one fact, that with the Lord a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but rather is patient."

Trust in the word of the Lord. It is the rock that we build on that will weather the storm.

c) **v12 The Majesty of God** *12 Who has measured the oceans in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span,*  
God is incomprehensibly great. Humanity is infinitesimal in comparison. As the children's song says "Our God is a great big God"

d) **And he holds us in his hand. v11** *"He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms"*

Now these themes are flags - they will all be explored in the coming chapters. But they function as a song of hope.

**So in times of darkness sing songs of Hope.**

You know how sometimes all you can do is sing. Like the cage bird singing of freedom. Like slaves singing of God carrying them home. Like REM in everybody hurts singing 'So Hold on. When you feel like letting go - hold on."

We sing because we remember how things should be, how things will be. So that we can keep our friends close. A chord of many strands is not easily broken. We sing to remember the promises of God.

**But there is also in this passage a specific picture** - and that is the one in the opening verses.

A picture of the time when Jerusalem has paid her penalty v2. A time when there will be a highway in the wilderness v3 .

What is this a picture of? It is an odd picture if you think about it. Why does God need a road?

**But if you put those two things together and you can work out what the picture** is pointing towards.

The end of Jerusalem's punishment. A road through the desert.

Because it speaks of a return to Jerusalem - that is why there is a highway - it is not **from** Jerusalem it is **to** it. And it isn't God that needs a road it is us.

This word of comfort is looking forward to a time when Exile is over. Exile is now inevitable - there is nothing you can do about that now. You will be taken to Babylon. You will sit by the rivers and weep as you remember Zion. All that you have built here will be lost.

But as much as it might seem like it - that will not be the end of your story.

**And so you will need to hold on to hope.**

For after 70 years there will be a return. Joyful, hopeful people travelling through the desert back towards Zion. New beginnings. Hope will dawn.

**But there is another layer to this picture.** And we know this because John the Baptist uses it. And this is where we come in.

He is the voice crying in the wilderness. And who is it that he is preparing the way for?

For Christ. In who the price is paid, the ransom given. The captives set free.

And the road in the desert is not just post exilic Israelites. It is for all of us.

He throws open the doors of the kingdom of God.

Jesus invites people of every nation, tribe and tongue to become part of the people of God.

And each of us are those travelling that road in the wilderness towards the new Jerusalem.

What a majestic picture that is!

**So hold on to hope no matter what happens.**

*28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?*

*The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

*He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.*

*29 He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.*

And on our Church day of Prayer this is timely.

*31 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.*

Look to him and he will sustain you, renew your strength and even as you walk this desert road you shall do so with a sense of joy in your heart and songs of hope on your lips.