

Isaiah 40:1-8

Isaiah 40 is a great Messianic prophecy that we hear quoted in the lyrics of Handel's Messiah usually performed at this time of year.

We're going to look at the first part of this chapter - verses 1 thru 8.

Isaiah 40:1-2 - "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins."

"her warfare is accomplished" = the word can also refer to hard labor or service.

In the previous chapter, God told King Hezekiah that they would be sent into captivity in Babylon.

Now, this is God directing Isaiah to comfort and console Jerusalem and His people generally with a word of hope.

The Messianic age would be a time of peace, of rest and forgiveness of sin.

In Hebrew, the word for comfort or console is *nāham* - it comes from the root *NHM* which means primarily to breathe deeply, to sigh; or to make breathe, to take a deep breath in times of suffering or fear.

Consoling means to help a person catch his breath when he is depressed, oppressed or crushed breathless. The Hebrew etymology emphasizes the physical and psychological aspect of consolation: to help someone to breathe, to bring relief.

Jesus through his Spirit gives us breathing room and rest in the midst of a crazy and convoluted world.

The prophets declared that Israel's comfort and consolation would only come with the Messianic age, which we see in this chapter.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Jews were aware that the prophetic timeline given in Daniel for the coming of Messiah was upon them.

Daniel had said:

- **Daniel 9:24-27** - "Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy."

"Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and

threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times."

"And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined."

"And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate."

The 70 "weeks of years" had passed, and there was widespread expectation of Messiah's appearance. Josephus explained this was one reason for the Jewish revolt against Rome, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

One such pious Jew was Simeon, who was at the Temple when Jesus' parents brought him to be presented.

- **Luke 2:25** - "And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him."

He was waiting for the "consolation of Israel" i.e. the Messiah.

- **Luke 2:28-32** - "Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel."

- **Luke 33-35** - "And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him. And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

Blessing often come with attendant pain and suffering.

Back to Isaiah 40 -

Next there is mention of John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. Matthew 3:3, John 1:23.

Isaiah 40:3 - "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

John, coming out of the desert wilderness where he lived, taught the doctrine of repentance, which is the only highway, or door or "key" into the kingdom of God.

Repentance is turning away from self toward God. It's letting go of yourself, leaving yourself behind. Not vowing to be a better person or striving to reach some spiritual level or learning the right words or fixing yourself. We can't be fixed.

Repentance removes all hinderances to our entry into the kingdom.

This is reflected in the next verse.

Isaiah 40:4-5 - "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it."

But there's more going on here. Only God is his sovereignty over his creation could accomplish this.

But it also hints at the upside down aspect of God's values as opposed to our own. Our way of life will be transformed.

He exalts a valley - a low place - but brings down the High Places where we used to worship idols. Nobody wants to live in a low place, a place of depression or lowly esteem. We want to be in a high place where we can think we're in control.

The crooked (*āqōb*) or difficult steep path with many twists and turns will be made straight. The word is also used to mean fraudulent or deceitful. Our deceptive mind will be made straight.

"The rough places" = *rekes* - an impassable mountain chain, or a path that would bind you up - would be changed into a flat plain.

And by transforming each of these, God shows that they each served a purpose. Because the contrast now gives glory to God. Hardship, illness, trouble and failure in our lives glorifies God when He transforms us - removing us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

i.e. suffering has meaning. We may encounter difficulties and stumbling blocks, but God will go with us and transform them into stepping stones in ways we can't imagine.

Crushed

This is all very similar to Mary's magnificat where she says

- **Luke 1:52-53** - "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty

away."

The low places are exalted and the high places are brought low.

David saw this:

- **Psalm 34:18-19** - "The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite (crushed) spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the LORD delivereth him out of them all."

That psalm relates to the time when David had to humiliate himself among the Philistines by pretending he was mentally deranged.

But "every valley shall be exalted!" His experience resulted in a psalm that has given comfort to many generations.

We give gifts during the Christmas season because God gave us the gift of His Son.

But giving is really the core and life of Christian faith.

And sometimes we have a hand in "exalting the valleys" in our world.

It's the mind of Christ described in **Philippians 2:7-8**

"But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

It's the same mindset that God commands for Israel when He says 'Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy in thy land.'
(Deuteronomy 15:11)

Isaiah 40:6-8 - "The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever."

Flesh is temporary, humanity is in slavery to sin and destined for death, but Jesus through his incarnation became one of us, to go through what we all go through, yet without sin, and to set us free and save all those who would believe.

Don't despise the "day of small things" (**Zechariah 4:10**) or the fiery trials that will come upon us as believers.