HOPE IN THE LORD

Isaiah 40:1–31

Key Verse: 40:31

“…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.”

What’s the best way to comfort someone? With a hug? Yummy food? Today’s passage tells us another way: it’s to give people hope. The theme of the book of Isaiah is the hope of God. This world always seems to have no hope. Even God’s people are hopelessly sick with sin. But God is the God of hope. Despite all our sins, he never gave up the hope to send his Son to this world. The book of Isaiah is full of predictions of the coming of Jesus. Today we’re going to be thinking about chapter 40. It’s one of the most vivid passages in the Bible that shows us who Jesus is and the great hope his coming gives us. This past year we all have had our struggles. Some of them may have been pretty intense. Our struggles can cause us to lose hope. May God comfort each of us this Christmas by renewing his great hope in Jesus in our hearts.

In chapter 39 the prophet Isaiah had predicted that the people of Judah would be taken into Babylonian Captivity due to their sins (39:6,7). But in today’s passage he announces the good news that God would bring them back home. Read verses 1,2. Previously, Isaiah had prophesied against the people of Judah and Jerusalem (1:1; 3:1,8; 5:3,7). He said their words and deeds were “against the Lord, defying his glorious presence” (3:8). God had been warning them to repent, but they had stubbornly refused. So God had allowed the Assyrians to put them in bronze shackles with hooks in their noses and drag them off to Babylon (2Ch33:11). Now, however, God wants to comfort and speak tenderly to them, telling them that the painful time of their divine discipline is over. This tells us something about God. God didn’t hate his people on account of their sins; though he was punishing them, God longed to restore them. Psalm 103:8–10 says, “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities.” How amazing God is!

Read verse 3. Babylon was about 900 miles from Jerusalem, and in between them was a huge desert wilderness, with mountains, valleys and treacherous terrain. It seemed impossible to get back home. Moreover, Babylon was the most powerful empire in the world at the time, whereas the people of Judah living there now were powerless captives. How could they be released? But God wanted to inspire them with hope that he would certainly make a way for them. It would be hard to bring their cows and donkeys, as well as children and possessions, through a wilderness, going up mountains, down into valleys, and over twisting, rugged ways. But God is announcing he’s going to make it happen. It’s a prediction not of literal highway construction, but that God would make their way home as easy as traveling on a highway. The highway would be for *them* to travel on, but it actually says it’s a highway for *God*, because God himself would be traveling with his people. Without God, everything is so hard. But when God is with us, everything becomes easy.

Read verse 4. This is also a metaphor for personal repentance (Lk3:3–6). There are things in our hearts displeasing to God. The mountains represent pride, the valleys, depression or inferiority, the rough, rugged places, rebellion. If God is going to help us, restore us and give us hope, we’ve got to repent. It’s the only way the holy God can come into our lives and show us who he really is.

Read verse 5. Through the restoration of the people of Judah to their homeland God was planning to reveal his glory. God’s glory is that he can overthrow even the most powerful people or nations. God’s glory is that he can always make a way even in situations where there is no way. God’s glory is his great redemptive love for the people he has chosen. God’s glory is to forgive their sins and restore them. God’s glory would ultimately be revealed in Jesus’ coming to be the Savior of all peoples.

Read verses 6–8. Vast areas of green grass are so gorgeous, and so are blossoming flowers, such as roses. Sadly, they don’t last long. They turn an ugly brown and die. The same is true for human beings and their achievements. The Babylonians were glorious people. It was the place where the Tower of Babel had been built, where people gathered to make a name for themselves. Around Isaiah’s time, the city of Babylon and its empire were at the height of their power and glory. Their city was encircled by gorgeous deep blue walls, covered with images of dragons, bulls and lions. They built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which was called one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Later, the glory of Greek civilization would give birth to democracy, Western philosophy and literature. Then the glory of the Roman Empire absorbed all the nations around the Mediterranean Sea and was probably the longest lasting empire of any in history. Later, the glorious kingdoms of Europe would colonize the whole world. Russia has been a glorious world empire, and so has the United States. China is quickly becoming a great world power. But in God’s sight, all people are like grass, and all their faithfulness or glory is like the flowers of the field. Today many people think that God and his word in the Bible are old-fashioned and out of step with the times. But only God and his word endure forever. Why does God want us to know this? It’s so that we won’t be mesmerized by glorious people or worldly powers, but truly put our hope in God and in his words of promise to us.

In the next section of this chapter God announces his coming to his people. Read verse 9. The good news is that God was returning with his people to Jerusalem and Judah. But it was only a shadow of the coming of Jesus, who is the true good news to all people. The few lonely people who remained in the land during the Babylonian Exile had become so discouraged. All the best people and their wealth had been taken away and the land was ruined and ravaged. They felt abandoned and had lost all hope. But God had not given up hope. God was returning to them. Just like the messenger who was supposed to announce God’s coming to those discouraged people, we all need wholehearted confidence to announce the good news of Jesus’ coming to people today.

Next, God wants his people to know who this God is who is coming to them. Read verses 10,11. God is the King who rules this world with great power. God is the Judge who knows exactly what’s going on in each human heart and life and rewards us accordingly. God is also the Shepherd who is tender, loving and so patient with the weak and vulnerable. All of these images of God would be fully manifested in Jesus. Jesus is our King, Judge and Shepherd.

Read verses 12–14. Isaiah asks a series of rhetorical questions to get us thinking about the greatness of God. The vastness of the sky, the waters, the dust and the mountains are only a tiny glimpse into the Creator God who made them. God’s wisdom and understanding are far superior to even the wisest person on earth. It’s this great God who’s reaching out to each one of us. Read verses 15–17. Nations always seem so impressive. But not to God. When we turn our eyes to God, we too begin to see people and the world from his point of view. Read verses 18–20. Human beings foolishly create idols to give them some kind of security. Today, it’s not literal little statues representing gods, but possessions like houses and investments. We really try our best so that they’ll look glorious and won’t rot or topple over. In light of who God is, it’s such a foolish waste of time and energy. Read verses 21–24. People spend so much time worrying about leaders—how to establish them, and then, how to get rid of them! But all it takes is one breath from God, and they’re gone. Then Isaiah asks us to look at one last thing to help us see God’s greatness. Read verses 25,26. God who knows each star, even the tiniest ones, and sustains them, is the God who knows each living human being and sustains our lives, no matter how small or insignificant we may seem.

Read verse 27. This was the sentiment both of the few people remaining in Judah, and of all the exiles in Babylon. It’s painful to realize that actually very few people are actually paying attention to me, care about what happens to me, or understand me. Sometimes it may even seem that God doesn’t notice, care or understand. But he does. God our Shepherd is watching everything in our lives. Psalm 121:4 says, “…indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” Sometimes when we’re struggling it seems God isn’t listening to our cries, that he’s fallen deep asleep. But he hasn’t. God hears, sees and understands everything, and he doesn’t give up on us because of his great hope.

Read verse 28. Our everlasting God, our Creator, is still there, and he sees and knows all (Heb4:13). What does knowing this God do for us? Read verse 29. It isn’t talking about just physically tired people or those with weak muscles. We get worn out with people who seem so demanding and never changing. We get discouraged with our own chronic problems and sins. Sometimes we feel so weary and weak that we want to give up. But when we turn to God, he gives us spiritual strength and increases our power. Read verse 30. Being spiritually strong has nothing to do with being physically strong or young. Even youths and young men can be so weak spiritually. How can we be spiritually strong? Read verse 31. The key is to hope in the Lord.

Literally, in Hebrew it means to twisted together like a rope, “waiting for” or expecting. God promised to come to his people as King, Judge and Shepherd. He promised to send the Messiah Jesus to save us. This all already happened a long time ago. But we’re still waiting for God to fulfill his promises to us. We’re waiting for Jesus to change us. We’re waiting for God to answer our prayers. We’re waiting for the hope of his second coming and his kingdom. How can we keep on waiting and hoping, even amidst ever-increasing discouragements? It’s because of who God is. We can be sure that our great God will keep all his promises, so we need to be holding onto his promises and waiting. Sometimes it means doing nothing but waiting patiently in confident faith. Isaiah 26:3,4 says, “You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD himself, is the Rock eternal.” Isaiah 30:15 says, “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength…” Isaiah 32:17 says that waiting on the Lord gives us “quietness and confidence forever.” Are we inwardly noisy, or quiet?

This tells us why we get so tired and worn out. It’s because we’re hoping in the wrong things. At Christmas children are hoping for presents. Many adults are hoping to see and spend time with those they love. In life we can be hoping for success, for marriage, children, grandchildren, or for fruitful ministry. But when we hope in the Lord, we never get tired. What kind of life do you want to live? Full of tiredness and discouragement, or quiet despair? Read verse 31 again. This Christmas may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Ro15:13).