THE MESSIAH’S REIGN OF HOPE

Isaiah 40:1–31

Key Verse: 40:31

“…but they 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.”

What are you waiting for? We may be waiting finally to be done with something, or waiting for a special day to come or for a special person to appear in our lives. But today’s passage tells us about waiting for the Lord. It was a message for the Israelites living in captivity in Babylon. But it became a message for all God’s people waiting for God to fulfill his promises. In Luke 2 we find the elderly Simeon and Anna who were waiting for the Lord’s coming (Lk2:25,38). Today it’s still a powerful message for those who believe in Jesus. We learn in this chapter who Jesus our Messiah really is, what he came to do for us, and how and why he’s our only source of hope. We especially want to learn what it means to wait for him, and how we can live out this faith in our practical lives. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

In Isaiah 39 God told his people that they would be deported to Babylon (6,7). It was one of the major turning points in the history of Israel (Mt1:11,12). The prophet Jeremiah also predicted it. God had warned his people many times that he would punish them if they would not repent of their sins, and at last he finally did it (Jer25:1–11). The Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and the city and took the people to Babylon as captives. It was a time of great humiliation, suffering and confusion for God’s people. It seemed that their nation and kingdom were over. Psalm 137 tells us how God’s people mourned and wept when they were in Babylon. They were surrounded by a godless and idolatrous culture and felt like God had finally given up on them.

But God had a different plan. Read verses 1,2. This was God’s message to his people when their 70 years of captivity were over. God had punished them for their sins, but now he wanted to comfort them. God’s comfort is the main theme of the second half of the Book of Isaiah (chapters 40–66). God had given his people many a harsh warning through his prophets, but now he wanted to “speak tenderly” and even “cry” to them. God’s message of comfort was that all their struggles were over and their sins were all forgiven. Actually, their sins against God were unforgivable. But God would put all their sins and iniquities on his suffering servant (53:6). Ultimately it was a prophecy of the coming of Jesus, who brought us all God’s forgiveness, something we could never earn by trying to obey all the laws of Moses (Ac13:38,39). We all look for various forms of comfort, but our greatest comfort is the assurance of forgiveness in our Messiah Jesus.

How would God make this happen for his people? Read verses 3,4. This is about preparing for the coming of a king, like rolling out the red carpet. But in this place there’s a “wilderness,” a “desert.” It has valleys and mountains, uneven and rough ground. It’s not an easy place to travel. But God says to build a “highway” there. A highway was mentioned in last week’s passage (Isa35:8); it’s also mentioned several other times in Isaiah (11:16; 19:23; 43:19; 49:11; 62:10). In all those places the highway is for God’s people to travel on. But here in chapter 40 it’s for God himself to use. It’s called “a highway for our God.” God himself is promising to come for his people. They were humiliated and abandoned captives in an overpowering, worldly culture. But God himself was coming to save them.

This is another prophecy that points to the coming of Jesus. John the Baptist, his forerunner, would prepare his way through telling people to repent of their sins (Lk3:2–6). It was really hard work, harder than constructing a highway in a landscape of mountains, valleys and many rough and uneven ways. These are metaphors for people who are too proud, or too humble, or too crooked and rebellious. By leveling and straightening all these places through repentance, people can become ready spiritually for Jesus.

Read verse 5. The word “glory” in Isaiah is repeated 39 times. Many things, places and people in this world seem to have glory. But God wants us to see *his* glory. In fact this whole chapter is about the glory of God, meaning God’s greatness. Here in verse 5 it has a specific meaning. It’s the very special glory of when God’s promised Messiah would finally come to this world. Jesus himself uniquely would reveal it (Jn1:14; 12:41). This glory can be seen both in God’s great power and in his great love to save. In the Bible God has many kinds of glory. But his power and love to save sinful human beings is his greatest glory. When Jesus came first to this world, only his disciples really saw his glory (Jn2:11). But when he comes again, all flesh, meaning all human beings, will see it (Rev1:7). It’s part of the great hope Jesus gives us. It’s easy for us to get engrossed in the things of this world, or in our own problems and struggles. As we recently studied, we all need to take the time to really contemplate the glory of Jesus until we really see it and it transforms us (2Co3:18).

Then Isaiah turns his eyes from the glory of God to human glory. Read verses 6–8. In our very visual culture we all can get caught up in looking at human glory. If we do, eventually we become greatly disappointed. The most gorgeous young celebrities eventually become so old and wrinkled that nobody wants to look at them anymore. But there’s another meaning here. In verse 6b the word “beauty” can also be translated as constancy or faithfulness. It means not only in appearance but also in character even the best human beings are not really reliable. Like grass or a flower, human glory is here today and gone tomorrow. The glory of David, the glory of Solomon, the glory of Jerusalem and its temple, were all gone now. The city of Babylon was the largest in the world at this time, with one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. But with one breath from God, it would all be blown away. If human appearances, character or achievements are so temporary, what can be trusted? Verse 8b says, “…but the word of our God will stand forever.” To receive God’s comfort and see his glory, we need to hold onto his word.

Isaiah turns again to inspire his people to anticipate that God himself really is coming to them. Read verse 9. These places had been decimated by the Babylonian invasion. People were so broken, so crushed. It was hard to believe there was any kind of good news anymore. It was hard to believe they had any purpose anymore. But God, in his great hope and vision, still saw his people as the heralds of good news to the whole world. They needed repeated encouragement to lift up their voices with strength and without any fear. They needed to boldly proclaim God’s message, “Behold your God!” But who’s he really talking about? He’s talking about the coming of the Messiah Jesus, who is God Incarnate. God himself was coming to this world in human form to be with his people as Immanuel (7:14; 9:6). It’s so exciting we should shout about it!

Isaiah goes on to describe what this God is like. Read verses 10,11. He’s the God of power, the God of justice, but also, the God of great love. God’s “arm” is repeated 15 times in Isaiah (30:30,32; 33:2; 40:10,11; 48:14; 51:5,9; 52:10; 53:1; 59:16; 62:8; 63:5,12). It’s imagery for God’s strength and power to save. But here it’s also used to picture his tender arm to love and protect the weakest and most vulnerable and keep them close to his heart. The way God uses his arm reveals that he’s our shepherd—not to hurt but to embrace. This verse is another prophecy of our Messiah Jesus, who’s called the good shepherd, “that great shepherd of the sheep,” the “Shepherd and Overseer of our souls” and the “chief Shepherd” (Jn10:11; Heb13:20; 1Pe2:25; 5:4). Many false shepherds pretend to care, but they’re really out to use people. Only our Messiah Jesus came to be our true Shepherd, if we would just open our hearts to him.

In verses 12–26 Isaiah goes on to describe more clearly who God is. Read verses 12–14. These rhetorical questions tell us that God is so much more vast and so much more wise than any human being could ever be. The Babylonians had a god called Marduk who was the chief creator god, but even he needed the counsel of other gods to help him. It was nothing but a fantasy. Even the greatest human beings need counsel, but the true God needs no such counsel. Read verses 15–17. After living abroad in the teeming city of Babylon God’s people had seen many impressive nations come there. But to God, all these people “are as nothing before him.” Even all the grand cedar forests and all the animals of Lebanon all put together would not be enough for making a proper sacrifice to such a great God. Read verses 18–20. Here, using comedy, Isaiah compares God to the idols that people make. People spend so much money on gold and silver and expensive wood for their idols. But these are all just desperate human attempts to create something magnificent and stable that people can be in awe of. When we believe in the living God himself, we need none of any such things. Read verses 21,22. All human beings have inborn knowledge of God. He’s so far above this world that all its people are like grasshoppers, and to him, even the great heavens are nothing but a curtain or a tent. Read verses 23,24. The princes and rulers of this world can be so powerful and intimidating, sometimes even infuriating. But God brings them to nothing and makes them as emptiness. God has to just blow on them once, and they wither and are carried off by the wind like stubble. Read verses 25,26. Babylon was famous for its astronomers and astrologers, aka star-gazers. They even worshipped the heavenly bodies and stars. But Isaiah proclaims here that God is sovereign over them all, sustains them all, and knows each one by name. Verses 12–26 are, in a sense, another prophecy of our Messiah Jesus. Colossians 1:15–17 reads, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Read verse 27. These were things God’s people were saying to themselves after 70 years of captivity. They felt like God no longer was watching out for them or cared for them. Even though their sins were so chronic, so exhausting, God was not worn out by them at all. Read verses 28,29. This is the climax of Isaiah’s stunning poetry about God. He is “the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” And what’s even more amazing about him is that he doesn’t faint or grow weary. It reminds us of the famous words of a psalm: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps121:1–4). God never falls asleep on the job, even on the night shift. He’s completely reliable.

Isaiah adds in verse 28b, “…his understanding is unsearchable.” Life can sometimes be so confusing, and we may not even understand ourselves, not to mention how to help others. We may seek the counsel of wise people in our lives. But really God is the one we should be asking for wisdom (Jas1:5). This great God cannot be depleted at all. No matter how many times we may fail, no matter how exhausted we may be, we can keep coming to God, and he always keeps giving us power and increasing our strength.

Read verse 30. In Hebrew, these “youths” or “young men” are like the most choice athletes, like olympians. But even they faint, get weary and fall, exhausted. Why? Because they’re relying on their own strength, not on God. In fact, this is what happens to all of us spiritually when we try to live our lives without God. We faint, get weary and fall, exhausted.

Let’s read our key verse, verse 31. This is Isaiah’s summary and practical application of what he’s been saying in this chapter about God coming to his people. It’s a very famous Bible verse that’s given countless people real hope. We find true hope when we “wait for the LORD.” But what does that mean? Sometimes waiting can seem like a waste of time. We can spend time waiting for people who never show up. We can wait for something that never happens. But when we wait for the LORD, it means we know that for now he may seem to be “hiding his face,” but that doesn’t make us doubt him at all (Isa8:17). When we wait for the LORD, we eventually experience his salvation, and great joy (Isa25:9). Waiting for the LORD means waiting for him to show both his mercy and his justice (Isa30:18).

But this waiting is not a static thing. Psalm 25:5 reads, “Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.” The waiting period God gives us is a time for us to let God teach us and lead us in his truth. We’re willing to wait all day long for him because we love and trust him so much. And there’s another aspect to waiting for the LORD. Lamentations 3:25,26 reads, “The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.” Waiting for the Lord means actively seeking him yet remaining quiet, no matter what we may be going through. Ultimately, waiting for the Lord means looking forward to the second coming of our Lord Jesus. Titus 2:13 says, “…waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ…”

What happens when we wait for the Lord? Read verse 31 again. Our strength is renewed. Spiritually speaking, we can keep on walking, running, and even fly! We can go way beyond where our human strength could ever take us. At the end of the year we tend to review our lives and where we’re headed. Often we find ourselves weary and tired after struggling to live in this fallen world. We can be weary and tired in our relationships, and even in ministry. But the coming of our Messiah Jesus gives us real hope, because under his gracious reign we can renew our strength. This Christmas may we open our hearts to Jesus, our mighty God, our true Shepherd, and the one who restores our souls (Ps23:3a).