

Hope in the Midst of Despair

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[0 : 0 0] For comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice of one calling. In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low.

The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed. And all people will see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

A voice says, cry out. And I said, what shall I cry? All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our Lord endures forever.

[1 : 1 0] You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout.

Lift it up, do not be afraid. Say to the towns of Judah, here is your God. See, the sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.

He gently leads those that have young. Amen. I'm Martin Ayers.

I'm the senior pastor here at St Silas. And if you're here as a visitor, thanks for being willing to try church this evening. But what we're trying to do in try church is run things in a similar way to how we normally would, but a shorter, more accessible service that we hope will be helpful for you.

[2 : 1 7] And we're just going to look together at that section of Isaiah, that chapter 40. So if your Bible's fallen closed, it would be a big help to me if you could open it at page 725, just the Bible's in front of you, and we can have a look at that together at St Silas.

We believe, as James mentioned, that the God who made us has spoken to us about who he is and how we relate to him in the Bible. And so that's why we look at it week by week together.

And so what's much more important than what I say for the next 20 minutes or so is that we actually have an encounter with the living God. So I'm going to ask God to meet with us now.

I'm going to say a prayer. Let's bow our heads and I'll pray. Almighty God and loving Heavenly Father, we gather this evening because we are a group of people seeking truth.

We pray that you will make yourself known to us, that you will help us to engage with you, to meet with you, as you speak to us now through your word.

[3 : 20] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, I put out those questions at the beginning about hope for us to have a ponder, and hopefully you can talk a bit more about hope and despair after our meeting.

But it is fundamental to our lives that we have hope, that we can put our hope in something. To be in despair is a horrible thing. And yet there are lots of ways that in our times today we can feel hopeless.

We can feel it when we look at the world news, the great political divide in America, how divided America is today. There's the ongoing threat of terrorism that kind of falls quiet and maybe we don't think about, and then things happen like the Manchester bombing and it's horrific.

It's so discouraging to see that people can be radicalized like that, that they can be made to think that there's a God who wants them to commit acts of terror against other people.

It's a horrible thing. Some people feel hopeless about Brexit. Other people are looking forward to it, but some people feel quite hopeless about it. And last week, Panasonic was a latest company in the UK saying we're going to move our headquarters out of the UK because of Brexit.

[4 : 37] People feel hopeless about migration, the migration crisis. As we see, the boats just don't stop coming across the Mediterranean. People are so desperate for a different life that they will risk drowning and people are drowning.

If you're somebody who is connected with church, we can feel hopeless about the church. If you think about the visible church in Scotland today, the mainline denominations that represent the church, what do we mainly see in the news?

We see sex abuse scandals. It's a terrible thing. We see churches that apparently have no regard for the Bible. Churches in catastrophic decline, selling off their buildings to become bars or mosques or anything else that could make use of the space, can feel hopeless.

We can feel hopeless as individuals because we feel lonely or alone, or we're afraid that we'll feel alone in the future. We might be unwell physically and we can't get better.

We might be unemployed and we can't see a way out of that. We feel hopeless about stressful situations, about grief when you lose somebody, about feelings of shame, about feelings of guilt, feelings of regret.

[5 : 56] So where do you turn when you feel hopeless? And when you think about that, when you think about what you fear and what you worry about, what do you think about God in that?

Do you think of a God who is good and for you? Or do you think about a God who is distant and kind of disconnected from the things that really make you anxious and in despair?

Well, what does God say? 700 years before Jesus came, so we're sort of 2,700 years ago, there was this man, Isaiah, and he was given messages from God to give to God's people.

And that's what we have in this book, Isaiah, in the Old Testament. He was a prophet for the people at the time. And tonight we start a new series looking at this section of Isaiah's prophecies that have been kept for us, chapters 40 to 48.

We're just going to work through them section by section in the weeks to come. And it is an absolutely magnificent section of the Bible. It's mind-blowing what we hear here.

[7 : 07] But we have to understand, to make sense of it, what was going on with the original people that Isaiah is actually being given this message for. So this is before Jesus, and God's people at that time, they were a group of people chosen by God and given a land to live in, the promised land in the Middle East, what is the land that is Israel today, roughly, the Palestinian land.

God gave his people at that time the land. Out of all the peoples and nations in the world, God had chosen one group of people to represent him in the world.

The idea was they would live differently for God and the nations would learn about God through them. By the time Isaiah is given this message, the people have completely failed to do that.

They've turned their back on God and they just live like all the nations around them. They worship other gods instead of the living God of the Bible. And that grieves God.

It offends God enormously. And he sends Isaiah, this prophet, to warn the people to turn back to him, to stop rejecting him because he's a just God. And if they keep rejecting him like that, he'll have to treat them like the other nations and send them out of the land.

[8 : 25] And at the time Isaiah is given that message, the people have the chance to turn back, but Isaiah is already showing them that they won't do that. He's predicting they will end up in exile.

And one of the reasons we know that Isaiah was an authentic messenger from God is that exactly what he predicted in 700 BC happened to Israel.

In 587 BC, so 120 years later or so, the empire at the time, the Babylonian Empire, invaded Israel. They sacked Jerusalem under King Nebuchadnezzar.

They took people into exile away from the Promised Land and it was utterly horrific for the people. It was a brutal event. The people at that time were in complete despair as they were carted off into exile and left the land, knowing that God had turned his back on them because they turned their back on him.

And that's what Isaiah 40 speaks into. Isaiah is looking ahead to that time. The people are in abject despair. They've been moved out of the land. And this message in chapter 40 is given for them.

[9 : 33] So just a heads up about the biggest challenge for us when we look at a prophecy like that in Glasgow in 2018 is that there are different time references for us as we look at it.

The first time reference as we look at this prophecy is the people at that time, 2,500 years ago, living in a foreign land in exile.

The next time reference for them is looking ahead to a rescuer who is being promised and that's Jesus who's coming. And we look back to that in Glasgow today.

We look back at those promises fulfilled in Jesus' coming. But Isaiah also makes promises from God about the future that haven't happened yet. So we also look ahead as we read Isaiah to promises that we're still waiting to be fulfilled.

We just have to bear that in mind. But the reason this is so valuable to us is that it's a message of hope from God for people in despair. And when we're feeling hopeless today, we need to hear exactly the same truths that they needed to hear at that time.

[10 : 38] Truths about God and his character, about promises he makes. They can give you hope even in the blackest of times. So we have to focus on them. And if we do that, they are life transforming for us today.

If you just have a look with me at verse 1, you can see this is a message for people in despair. Verse 1 says, Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Now when we think of the word comfort, we think of fabric conditioner, don't we? Or we think of woolly blankets. But the word comfort is a much stronger word than that in the Bible.

It's about coming alongside and giving strength to somebody who's lost their strength. It's literally about giving them new breath. The people are so desperate, they can't breathe anymore.

And God comes and he gives them a message that will help them breathe again. How will he do that? Well, verse 2, Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. It's literally, speak to the heart of Jerusalem, of the people.

[11 : 40] Because when we are in despair, we don't just need facts for our head. We need a message that will stir our hearts, stir our very souls, when we're grieved, when we're hurt, when we're hopeless.

And the message is that their hard service, as it's described, that is the exile for their rebellion against God, is over. Their rejection of God, it's been forgiven.

God wants to strengthen the hearts of these people by giving them promises about what he will do for them, for them to put their hope in. And each of us is invited to do the same. So we've got three points this evening.

And the first is, Put your hope in God because he reveals his glory. Points are on the handout, the notice sheet, if that would help you. Put your hope in God because he reveals his glory.

So if you look at Isaiah 40, verse 3, a herald arrives with some stunning news. Verse 3, A voice of one calling, In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.

[12 : 42] Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. And then the way is opened up for God to come. No obstacle can stop him on his journey.

It says, Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low. The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places are plain. And then the great climax and the glory of the Lord will be revealed.

And all people will see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. The glory of God is like the brilliance of God. And if you were the God of all this, if you're the God who made us and the God who's made the universe, you think, How might you display how brilliant you are?

I guess one of the most obvious things to do, if you were God, is to display your brilliance through the cosmos, through the stars. Because they are extraordinary, aren't they?

And the further we delve into astrophysics, the smaller we realize that we are, compared with the God who made the universe, who made the galaxies, who made the nebula that make the stars, and then who made the black holes as the stars demise.

[13 : 55] It's extraordinary. And God shows us how brilliant he is, compared with how small we are, by how vast he made the universe. That's how he displays his glory.

But here we see that God supremely reveals his glory to humankind by coming to be with his people. He says, Make straight the way.

Send a herald. God is coming. And his glory will be revealed. In their brokenness and despair, he comes to meet them so that he can rescue them. And that reveals something remarkable about God.

If we're interested in God, often we become interested in God because we're interested in what he might give us. The idea that there's a supremely powerful being is pretty attractive to me because there are some things I can't get in life that he would be able to get me.

But what we find out when we look at something like Isaiah 40 is that the greatest gift that God could really give us is himself. So we might want blessing from God, but the truth about God is that he never sends blessings.

[15 : 08] He brings blessings. He comes. So when was this fulfilled? Well, 70 years after they go into exile, they end up back in the promised land.

It's an extraordinary thing happens. A new emperor comes into control, Cyrus, and he gives permission for the people to return to the land. And God has predicted that they'll be able to go back to their promised land.

But when that happened, it's not really as if God showed up among the people in this kind of way. If you look at that promise in verse 5, it says, the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people will see it together.

And the fulfillment of that promise came seven centuries later. There are all sorts of competing truth claims out there, aren't there, about God or whether or not there is a God.

How do we know these words are words of truth about God? Well, we know because God in his kindness gave us specific signposts so that we can know with confidence through history that this was a real revelation from God.

[16 : 14] We're told in verse 3 to watch for a herald who shouts that we should prepare the way for the Lord coming. And then around 30 AD, so 700 years after this, there was a man called John the Baptist and he appeared to the people in Israel.

He was the most dynamic religious leader that had been seen for generations. And people flocked to hear him and to be baptized by him as a symbol of being ready for God coming.

But he told the people to get ready to prepare their hearts because somebody was coming after him and he wasn't even worthy to untie the sandals of this one who was coming.

And then one day, amidst the crowds, the man Jesus emerged from the crowd to be baptized. And it might even have been at that very moment that God revealed to John, the baptizer, that this was the one who he'd been preparing people for.

And John turned to him in front of the crowds and he said, look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is the one I meant when I said, a man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.

[17 : 24] Jesus was God revealing his glory by coming to be with his people and all mankind saw it. So that one of the closest eyewitnesses to Jesus, John, who wrote one of the books we have in the Bible, John's account of Jesus' life, he says this at the very beginning of his account.

He says, we have seen God's glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth. In other words, as we were walking with Jesus, as we could hold his life up to the closest scrutiny, we saw the glory of God revealed among his people, just as Isaiah had promised.

So for us today, we read Isaiah the prophet and when we're tempted to despair, we're told, look to Jesus because he came having been promised for centuries and when we see him, we see a God who came to be among us so that we could know him and be rescued by him.

So that's our first point. And secondly, we're told, put your hope in God because his word endures. We get a contrast in verses six to eight of the passage between the transience of human life and the permanence of God and his everlasting word.

So look at verse six. A voice says, cry out. And I said, what shall I cry? All people are like grass and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

[18 : 50] The grass withers and the flowers fall because of the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall. But the word of our God endures forever.

Now a few weeks ago at our evening service, it was relevant, okay, to the talk I was giving. I shared the joy I've had this summer of my vegetable patch, right? And I showed a photo of the sunflowers in our garden at the time.

One of them was about twice as tall as me. We were just bowled over by these sunflowers. They were extraordinary. It was just a few weeks ago, right? Already now, our sunflowers, they look terrible. They've wilted.

They're kind of bowed low. The bees have gone. They're just dead and waiting to be chopped down. Just a few weeks ago, they looked so amazing. It's amazing how quickly they have disappeared.

And today, we see people all around us who look beautiful, glorious, and invincible. But if you just zoom out a few decades, they will wither and die.

[19 : 57] And the thing is, even if we're very hopeful people ourselves, even if we're very optimistic people, without God, there is nothing that you can live for today that death will not spoil.

There's nothing you can live for today that death will not spoil. And the truth is that in my 20s, I hardly ever thought about death at all. We'd rather ignore death, wouldn't we?

But as a minister, I now have the privilege of being involved in people's lives around the time of death. And I've stood by the graveside as we say these words from Isaiah 40 at funerals.

We say, as for man, his days are like grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall. And the reality is that death kills hope. You can't have hope in your life without meaning.

They go together. If you feel your life has no significance at all, you will not be a hopeful person. It's key that you have something that gives your life meaning and purpose if you're going to have hope.

[21 : 00] But I think if you don't believe in God, then the only way to have meaning and hope in your life is to live irrationally. That's quite a provocative thing to say, isn't it? If you don't agree with that, I'd love to talk to you about it.

I think if you don't think there's a God, the only way to live your life as though there is meaning and hope is to live irrationally. What I mean by that is to ignore what you really believe about ultimate reality.

Let me explain why. It's because you only have meaning in your life if you think that what you do has some actual ability to make a difference.

It has to make some kind of difference what you're alive for. But if you build meaning and hope in your life on your relationships, the people will eventually die and you will eventually die.

And if you say, well, that's bad, but there's still hope in that because your acts of goodness and kindness to those people will kind of reverberate on in future people, future generations, if you kind of help the planet or you're just kind to people and it's kind of infectious, all those meanings will pass away as well.

[22 : 16] There was an atheist philosopher, Thomas Nagel. He spent most of his, he's actually very late in life. He stopped being an atheist. Okay. But he wrote this when he was still firmly an atheist.

He was kind of the Richard Dawkins of his day. And he said this, even if you produce a great work of literature which continues to be read thousands of years from now, eventually the solar system will cool or the universe will wind down and collapse and all trace of your effort will vanish.

Ultimately, he says, it wouldn't matter if you had never existed and after you have gone out of existence it will not matter that you did exist. That's the reality if there's no God.

It won't ultimately matter if there's no God whether you spent your life as a great philanthropist and gave away everything you had or whether you committed acts of genocide. It will not matter.

Because of death, human death and the eventual death of our world and the cooling of the universe, everything we do is radically insignificant. It just does not matter what we do.

[23 : 20] So how do you live as though life has any meaning at all? Only by ignoring the truth if you're an atheist. You have to live irrationally. If you live rationally, you realize life isn't really worth living.

If you examine life. And Isaiah wants us to contrast that way of life with what the Bible affirms that there is an eternal God with everlasting words of promise.

If you just think about the contrast, there was a great American Supreme Court judge, I don't think he was a Christian, he was an atheist, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. And he once wrote to a friend about this problem in his life.

It's a Supreme Court judge in America. He said, if one thinks coldly, that was his expression, if one thinks coldly, there's no reason to treat a human being as any more significant than a baboon or a grain of sand.

But then he said, when he starts to think like that, it's time to go downstairs and play solitaire. You see what he's saying? What he's describing as thinking coldly is just examining life without God.

[24 : 25] What is life really about? Being rational. Facing up to the implications of an atheist worldview. And what he's really saying is the only way to avoid despair as an atheist is to distract yourself from thinking too deeply.

Go and play solitaire for a bit. Stop thinking about that because it's desperate. Whereas on the other hand, here we have Isaiah. And Isaiah is saying, if you're a Christian, the way to avoid despair is not to think less about what you believe, it's to think more about what you believe.

If you fix your eyes on God and his promises, then no matter how much brokenness and pain and death you see all around you, you will have a hope that nothing can crush because the word of God stands forever.

So the word is everlasting. What does that word actually promise? That's our third point. So we've seen, put your hope in God because he reveals his glory. Then put your hope in God because his word endures.

And thirdly, put your hope in God because he shepherds his people. God's arrival is announced in verse 9 as good news. Is he powerful to keep his promises?

[25 : 35] Well, look at verse 10. See, the sovereign Lord comes with power and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him and his recompense accompanies him.

The mighty sovereign comes. So what will salvation look like from this mighty God? Verse 11, He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.

He gently leads those that have young. It's a picture of God's character that he cares for those who trust in him. Those first hearers, they're living in captivity in a strange land.

God is describing the journey he'll take them on back to the land. That such is his care for them. He's like a shepherd and he comes to lead them back like sheep. And where the ewes have young with them, he'll lead them gently.

And where the lambs run out of energy and can't go any further, he'll take them up and carry them in his arms close to his heart. He'll do all that it takes to lead the people he loves back to where they belong.

[26 : 42] In other words, God is mighty but he is tender. He brings justice but he looks after people. And the Bible talks about how that promised land that he was going to take them back to in history, that was just a picture of the future God promises for our whole world.

For everyone who trusts in his promises. That one day God is going to renew the world and there'll be no more sickness and there'll be no more sadness anymore. He'll wipe every tear from every eye.

We're not there yet but we live in a world of brokenness and God offers to be your shepherd in that world. That is, he will lead you on the journey that you're in on life until he takes you into that new creation that's coming.

It's an everyday promise of a God who is with you, a God leading you into good pasture, providing for your needs. It's an extraordinary thing. I have a friend who became a Christian from a Muslim background, Muslim family.

I asked him how he became a Christian. He described searching, soul searching for something to satisfy what he felt he needed and he first heard about how the God of the Bible promises to be a shepherd and he said, all this searching was over.

[27 : 57] He said, that's what I've been needing in my whole life was a God who could be my shepherd. So folks, thanks for being with us this evening as we do this first time of Tri-Church.

I don't know what you think about what I've said but I hope you've heard enough to resolve that this needs more of your time. We're going to continue in Isaiah in the coming weeks. We've heard of a God whose word is everlasting.

That without God when you really examine your life it is ultimately one of meaninglessness and therefore despair. But here is a God with an everlasting word of promise for you to cling on to.

We've heard of a God who offers to be your shepherd. That life's not going to be totally sorted with God in it but you will have a shepherd who is mighty and compassionate so that he is right there with you and leading you to a perfect future.

And how do we know we can trust this God? Where do we go to know him better? Well he revealed his glory in the person of Jesus Christ when God the Son came into our world and that man Jesus told us that he is the fulfillment of this shepherd promise as well.

[29 : 08] He said I am the good shepherd the one who lays down his life for his sheep. That is for God to make these promises and fulfill them Jesus had to come and die on the cross to deal with the brokenness that we could follow him as our shepherd.

I'm going to say a prayer now if you don't want to pray along that's fine but let's bow our heads have a moment of quiet and I'll say a prayer before we sing again. Father God we praise you for your promises that though our days are like grass your word stands forever that even though our glory is like the flowers of a field your glory is everlasting and was seen supremely in the coming of Jesus.

So we thank you for this offer that you could be a shepherd to us. May you continue to give us a greater grasp of who you are that we would understand more clearly who we are and respond rightly to you in Jesus name Amen.

I'm going to hand back to the band to lead us.