

# Behold Our God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, thanks, Jackie, very much for reading. And if you're here, do keep your sheets open with Isaiah chapter 40 there because we're going to look at that together.

And if you're at home, do please have a Bible open at Isaiah chapter 40 or if you don't have a Bible to hand, you could look online. You could look at BibleGateway.com just to look up Isaiah chapter 40 as we spend time together in that.

But let's ask for God's help that we could encounter him and hear him speak to us. Let's pray together. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.

Almighty God and gracious Heavenly Father, as you speak to us this morning, we thank you for your enduring word of truth, truth about you and about us.

And we ask that you will give us ears to hear your word, heads that can understand it, and hearts that are willing to trust and follow you. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

[ 1 : 09 ] So we're looking at Isaiah chapter 40, and the first point is on the sheets or on the screens there, just that God speaks a word of comfort for sinful people. The people who first got this prophecy had lost heart.

And I think, therefore, if we're looking at Isaiah 40 at any time in life or in whatever's going on in the world, it's a chapter to think about and to think, well, when might I lose heart and need this chapter? And, of course, this year, it's just much more proximate, much closer to us, the idea of losing heart. Perhaps just thinking about what's happened to us in Glasgow this week and that restrictions came back on and social engagements, people coming around to our homes had to get cancelled, perhaps places we were going to, other people's homes, because of these restrictions.

And we're thinking it's going to be a long winter if this is how things are going to play out. And we might think of the office worker who's been at home since March and in that time knows that several colleagues have died from the coronavirus, that they'll never see them at their desks again.

Or we might think of our teenagers and youth, how it was just so bizarre for our young people this year to have got to March and suddenly activities all stopped, football stopped, school stopped, having to do things at home, uncertain about exams, what does that mean?

[ 2 : 40 ] Reassurance, or we'll go by what your teachers think and then not. And then that came back and it's just been a very difficult time. And now people heading to university and it looking quite different maybe to how they pictured a year ago starting university would be.

You might think of a man whose relationship has broken down through the pressures of lockdown and who knows he's drinking too much but can't stop. You might think of a woman with health issues who's anxious and still won't leave her flat because of the risks of COVID.

The chef in a restaurant who gets told now that eat out to help out stopped. When the furlough scheme goes they'll lose their jobs because the business is going to be closed down. It's a difficult time.

And it might leave us asking, is God really there? And if God is really there, can he really see my life? Is my way hidden from God?

And the question is where will we put our hope when we might be thinking that? Now in chapter 40 that's exactly how the people were thinking. If you just turn to verse 27 towards the end of the reading.

[ 3 : 52 ] Verse 27 he tells us what they were saying. Israel. He says, So if we might sometimes ask that, why were they asking that?

If you've been with us in the last few weeks in this series we've been in in Isaiah, we have to understand there's quite a long time gap between last week, chapter 39, and what we're looking at today, chapter 40 of Isaiah.

And God's people at this time, they've gone into exile from the promised land. So this is after Moses, who'd rescued, God had rescued the people through Moses, after Joshua into the land, after great King David prospering in the land, and now after king after king, generation after generation, they've rejected God and they've gone into exile from the promised land. And it was a horrible thing. It happened in 587 BC that the Babylonian Empire came, they sacked Jerusalem, and the survivors were taken off into exile, a long way from Jerusalem. It was horrible. And the people in exile would have had far more reason to ask those questions than we might have today. And in their case, their suffering was a direct cause of their own sin, that they rejected God.

[ 5 : 17 ] Now that's not the case specifically for us today. Usually, with suffering we go through, we can't usually point to something we've done wrong and say, well, this is a judgment for my sin.

But we can say that the reason there is suffering in our world generally is because there is sin generally. That's why suffering came into our world. We do suffer and we're all sinful.

We're all people who are not who we should be. So what does God say to sinful, discouraged people? The message is there in verse 1.

Just have a look at that again, verse 1. Comfort. 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.

It's double in the sense of a mirror image. You know, like you might see somebody who looks like a friend of yours and you say to them, I saw your double today. It's that idea. The sin and the judgment.

[ 6 : 24 ] God will count the judgment of exile as having been an exact representation, reflection of the sin. So the message from God to suffering sinful people is not, I told you so.

I told you this would happen. It's not, can I just remind you this is all your fault? No, it's a message of tenderness and comfort. And maybe some of us need to hear that today about God if we feel we're not good enough to ask for God's help.

That actually God looks on us in our suffering no matter what we've done, no matter what we've said about him or thought of him and he offers us a message of comfort and tenderness. So what is the message?

Well, that's our first point this morning. Put your hope in the rescuing God. He is coming. God makes a promise here and he wants us to know it's reliable. So if we just look at verses 6 to 8, if we go down to those verses, he says, look at the people you trust in in your life.

Look at yourselves if you back yourself in life. Compared with people, my word stands forever. So verse 6, a voice says, cry out, and I said, what shall I cry?

[ 7 : 38 ] 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. We grew a sunflower this summer in our garden and we went away for holiday and it was reasonably high but good weather while we were on holiday.

We came back and it had shot up above the fence much taller than me and it was radiant. You know, it was just spectacular, this sunflower. And already now, it just has completely withered.

It just looks very sad in our garden. A dying, well, a dead flower. And that's what we are all like.

That's the reality. The first minister of Scotland, the prime minister in Westminster, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, they look so powerful and influential but in 50 years' time, what will they be?

There'll be an answer in a pub quiz somewhere for anyone who might vaguely remember that person from back in the day, from history. They'll be obscure. Your boss at work, you might think of a boss who's the guy you want to be with the life you want to have.

[ 8 : 54 ] He's flourishing, yes, like a flower. Flowers don't last very long. The wind will blow over them and they will be gone. So we compare that in verse 8 with God's word.

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever. It's so important to be reminded of that, isn't it? Because it seems so foolish just to keep trusting words in a book.

But it's the word of the everlasting God. So it's unshakable truth and it will last forever. Heaven and earth is going to pass away and God's words will not pass away.

It's the truth to build your life on. And what is that word? Well, in verse 4, we get this huge demolition project going on. It's like when I imagine when the tenements were pulled down in Glasgow to put the M8 through, to stick a motorway right through our city.

Or when, at the moment with the HS2 railway project, they're knocking down houses all the way up England as they build this fast railway. Well, look at verse 4. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low.

[10:05] The rough ground shall become level. The rugged places are plain. Why? Well, not for a new motorway or a rail track, but for the Lord God himself.

If you look at verse 3, a voice of one calling, in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

And verse 5, over the page, the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people will see it together. It's an astonishing promise, isn't it? It's an astonishing promise, isn't it? The God of all this coming to be among his people.

And the message continues in verse 9. 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. God is going to come. So why will he come? Well, in verse 10, he does the equivalent of rolling up his sleeve to show off his biceps.

[11:12] I don't know whether you've ever seen someone do that, maybe in a threatening way.

Verse 10, see, the sovereign Lord comes with power and he rules with a mighty arm.

This is God coming to rescue. It's God saying, look at the muscle here. I mean, don't look at mine, you know, but get the idea. Look at the muscle. I'm going to rescue you and bring you back to the promised land.

And with all that power, with all that muscle, he's a gentle shepherd. So verse 10, he tends, sorry, 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. We were in the Lake District in the summer and we saw a shepherd.

We were on a walk and we saw a shepherd with his sheepdog rounding up the sheep. It was really terrific to see. But it's striking. Sheep are incredibly stupid. They really don't have a clue where they're meant to go.

[12:11] They kept running off, going the wrong way. They run the wrong way and hurt themselves. They eat the wrong things and they get sick. They fall over and they can't get up again. It's pretty embarrassing that how often in the Bible we are referred to as sheep.

But when the shepherd is there, the one we saw happen to be on a quad bike which is the modern way to do it. But when the shepherd is there, the sheep will be alright because he cares for them. They're all precious to him and he knows exactly where they need to go. And so it is with the Lord and us as his people if we trust him that he is saying here he will come to rescue his people powerfully but gently.

Now we have to do a bit of work to think about what that promise is referring to. Prophecies like this they have several things they're referring to in history. There's an initial reference and there was this initial fulfillment in history of these promises.

Seventy years after the people went into exile in Babylon a new emperor arose who actually let them all go back to the promised land.

[13:22] So just as God had promised for the people they were allowed back into the promised land where they remained until Jesus came. And yet the Lord didn't actually show up at that time in the way being described here in chapter 40.

If you were one of God's people who returned to the land with this promise you would still have been thinking I wonder when the rest of this is going to get fulfilled. We didn't actually see the Lord come and the valleys lifted and the mountains come down for him.

And then in about 30 AD there really was a voice in the wilderness out in the desert by the Jordan River John the Baptist the most dynamic preacher for generations preaching to people that they should turn back to God repent because the kingdom of heaven has drawn near that was his message.

And when people went to meet him by the river Jordan they went into the river and got baptized they asked him are you Elijah from history or are you the prophet who was promised? And he replied with these words from Isaiah 40 that he is the one he was the one in the wilderness preparing the way for the Lord making straight the way for his coming.

Not flattening the hills and lifting up the valleys but preparing hearts for people to receive him when he came. And then the day when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming out to get baptized and he said to the crowd look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[14:53] Here is why the kingdom of heaven has drawn near. In Jesus God really has come to rescue his people. And that means that Isaiah 40 is ultimately a word for us today because we look back at that first coming of Jesus but we're waiting for him to come again and he's promised he will come again in glory to fully and finally rescue us.

and so in a very real sense the reason we find life hard today is because we're in exile from the land we're meant to be in when we're home with God. That Jesus is going to come back he's going to bring a new heaven and a new earth and he will put everything right.

He'll take away all the sickness and all the sadness. He'll take away all of the sin and all of the death. He's promised it in the enduring word that stands forever.

And so if you put your hope in him he's saying here to you in Isaiah 40 my mighty arm will come to rescue you and I will lead you like a shepherd.

I'll lead you and gather you in my arms to carry you home. Now those promises might seem today to us quite far-fetched. We're living in a world of pandemics and Indy Ref 2 and Black Lives Matter and refugees in their crises.

[16:15] And so in the rest of the chapter God assures us that we can trust him. So our second point put your hope in the creator God he knows what he's doing.

This is great stuff. In verses 12 to 14 we get a list of questions that get that across and it's worth saying it's picture language. God is spirit but because he's so beyond our understanding there are these pictures to help us kind of grasp something of how big he is.

How right it is to put our hope in him. So in verse 12 how much water could we measure in the hollow of our hands? So I've got some water with me and I was just going to try and measure it. That's just a bit of your hand there. Okay so I haven't got much capacity in the hollow of my hand. It's pretty lame. And it says there in verse 12 that God measured the oceans of our planet like that. He could just pour them out. The Pacific Ocean I found out this week because Google knows. 700 million cubic kilometers of water in the Pacific Ocean. And God just measured it out.

[17:29] And then verse 12 who with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens. Now the breadth of his hand it's the span. So measuring from your thumb to the little finger at the end of your hand.

Like we might measure the space for a new TV or a cupboard that we're trying to fit in our home. And it's saying that God used the span of his hand to mark the space between the galaxies.

And then I've got some dust here. This is from Henry Hoover. If you can't see it that's kind of the point really. It's just yesterday's dust from hoovering.

Just so insignificant. And in verse 12 it says God weighed the mountains on scales as he made everything. So that that's the cairngorms to him.

It's the Himalayas to him. Verse 15 he says surely the nations are like a drop in the bucket. China Russia the United States they're regarded as dust on the scales.

[18:37] Now the dust on the scales was when they were measuring things in the market it was the bit you had to count for because it was so insignificant or there'll be a bit of dust on the scales. That's what the nations are to God.

So by the end of verse 17 he says before him all the nations are as nothing. They're regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. And because he's the maker of all of this we can trust that he knows what he's doing.

That's the point of the questions if you look at verse 13 who can fathom the spirit of the Lord or instruct the Lord as his counsellor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him and who taught him the right way?

Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? How long does it take us to lose our nerve about this? For me it takes seconds for me to forget this.

When something goes wrong it doesn't go how I'd hoped it would go. You know we're due on holiday and I realise this did happen a few days before we go on holiday that one of my kids passports has expired or I'm cycling home and my bag flies off my bike and my laptop gets dented and I find myself thinking how on earth could a good God allow this to happen to me?

[ 19 : 57 ] How could he have planned this? And that's before the important stuff you know that actually we get a genuine setback in our church or we hit opposition in our mission to make disciples people oppose us or somebody in our church drifts away spiritually or we run a Christianity Explored course and people don't come and we think how can this be part of the plan?

And Isaiah 40 says to people like me who are forgetful how could I doubt that this God a God this big how could I doubt that he could have a wise plan that over billions of people over generation after generation across the world enables him to build his church until there is a great multitude of people from every tribe and tongue and nation ready to gather around him in the new heaven and the new earth and of course if it's this kind of God with that kind of plan my perception of what he's doing is always going to be wrong isn't it?

I'm always going to miss what he's doing if he's that big and his plan is that good nobody gave him these ideas you know our best scientists spend their careers seeing how God did what he did we don't give him the ideas nobody gave him the idea for the big bang nobody had to teach him how to get life on earth how to make human skin porous so that sweat and oils can get out but harmful things can't get in our skin is amazing nobody told God how to do that he designed it all and he didn't need any help from anybody and so the message is trust him he knows what he's doing he's not just a bigger version of us that's the message he's not just a bigger person like us in the sky no he's beyond our imagination and his plans are not going to get derailed by anything or anyone trust him trust his promise so that's our second point put your hope in the creator God he knows what he's doing and if we don't put our hope in him we will put our hope in something else in our lives and so that's our third point put your hope in the mighty God he is beyond compare twice God asks in this chapter through Isaiah who will you compare God to so in verse 18 with whom then will you compare God to what image will you liken him and then down in verse 25 to whom will you compare me or who is my equal and in between Isaiah calls us to compare God with idols things that we would trust and worship and build our lives on instead of God so in verse 19 it's a statue that a metal worker has cast for someone to have in their home and bow down to and worship but for us it would be anything that we choose to trust and put our hopes on instead of God to give us what we need and this is important for us because compared with God we tend to think day by day that other things are much more important and much more useful David Wells wrote this he says it is one of the defining marks of our time that God is now weightless and what he means by weightless the weightlessness of God isn't that God is kind of evil he means that God is not important to us his words carry less authority in our lives than our own desires for pleasure now we find the thought that he's coming back to judge the world presses less heavily on us than what other people think of us we find what he tells us about himself less interesting than what we can watch on Netflix or Amazon Prime and we have to recover the weightiness of God in our times in verse 20 Isaiah describes the person who is already poor spending what little they have in false hope giving it to a skilled worker because they want an idol that looks steady that isn't just going to fall over they're giving what they have in false hope to an idol and just compare that pitiful picture with verse 22 about God do you not know have you not heard verse 22 he sits enthroned above the circle of the earth and its people are like grasshoppers he stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent to live in that's the galaxies it's talking about people think there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on every beach in the world isn't that absolutely amazing

[ 25 : 02 ] I was thinking about that on the beach this summer all those grains of sand on the beach in front of me more stars in the universe than all these grains of sand on every beach and as easily as we might close the curtains in our bedroom at night God does that with the stars with the galaxies he just draws them making them was like pitching a tent for him verse 23 he brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing no sooner are they planted no sooner are they sown no sooner do they take root in the ground then he blows on them and they wither and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff Donald Trump Vladimir Putin Xi Jinping they might look unstoppable in our lives God just has to blow on them and they're gone it's the same in Syria in Iran in Afghanistan so in verse 26 he asks us to stop looking at the obstacles in our lives instead verse 26 lift up your eyes and look to the heavens who created all these no one else is worth entrusting your life to and nothing can stand in God's way so folks this is God's word of comfort for sinful people he's got a promise of rescue and he is wise and powerful beyond compare and the question is will we put our hope in him will we wait for him and unlike

Isaiah's first hearers we have more confidence because he has already stepped into our world once God did come and in Jesus ministry people caught a glimpse of the world that he's promised to bring a place where the lame will walk and the blind will see and sinners will be welcome to be with him and it's a wonderful thing to be able to trust the living God with confidence it's wonderful to be able to trust God like that lots about life is frustrating and disheartening what a great relief to know that God is so much bigger than anything we can think of that would get in his way and when we trust God it gives us the strength to flourish in our lives today so look at how verse 31 ends it says 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 we can embrace life with energy with confidence with positivity with joy soaring and running and pressing forward not because we're strong in ourselves but because in all our weaknesses our hopes are in the Lord and his certain promise to come and rescue his people behold our God let's pray together just a moment of quiet to reflect on God's word Father God we thank you for this magnificent revelation of who you are would you fix our eyes on you in your majesty your glory your sheer weightiness that we would trust your promise of rescue that we would hear your words of comfort that we would put our hope in you so that we can renew our strength in Jesus name we pray amen you and you you you you you