

Study Notes: Isaiah 40:1-11

December 11, 2011

¹ **Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.**
² **Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.**

- God commands an unnamed band to bring comfort to those God calls “my people”.
- “double” means ‘to fold over, fold in half’; divine wisdom is ‘two-sided’ in the sense that it always includes hidden realities beyond the reach of the human mind. The thought is not of an excessive punishment but of a dealing with sin that includes realities beyond our comprehension. (Motyer, 244)
- The three unnamed voices obey the call. (It is the message, not the messenger that is important) The first voice says that our God is coming to reveal his glory worldwide; the third voice brings this message to bear on Zion (the coming Lord is the shepherd who will gather his people and lead them home); the second voice affirms the enduring quality of God’s word: he has promised that he will reveal himself to the world and that he will bring good news to Zion and his Word will not fail. This summarizes the message of 40-55.
- This is the Lord’s long-term plan. God *will* bring his Word and Salvation to the whole world by means of his “servant” (Israel/Jesus).
 - Isaiah 42:1-4: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ² He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴ He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.
 - Isaiah 49:6: “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
 - Isaiah 55:1-11: “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³ Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. ⁴ Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵ Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. ⁶ “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; ⁷ let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will

abundantly pardon. ⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰ "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

- Even while the short-term plan is to send them off into captivity: Isaiah 43:14: "Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "For your sake I send to Babylon and bring them all down as fugitives..."

³ **A voice cries:**

**"In the wilderness prepare
the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.**

⁴ **Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.**

⁵ **And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."**

- This is a reference to the creation of special processional routes along which the images of the gods were carried on festivals. The creation of a road that is *straight*, *unmistakable*, *level* and *smooth* pictures a journey made without difficulty and therefore with certainty of arrival. (Motyer, 244)
- *the glory of the LORD* means 'the LORD in all His glory' that is, in the fullness of His personal presence.
- *for the mouth* emphasizing both the origin of the Word coming from the LORD's own mouth and the identification of what the prophet said with what the LORD said.

⁶ **A voice says, "Cry!"**

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

**All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.**

⁷ **The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.**

⁸ **The grass withers, the flower fades,**

but the word of our God will stand forever.

- Here is the vast difference between humanity and God—human transience and divine permanence. The voice speaks, not of our physical transience, but of our moral and spiritual unreliability. Just as a flower fades in adverse conditions so our moral and spiritual constitution suffers under testing.
- *Why even the people are grass* That is, even those of whom more might be expected, the people of God!
 - Hosea 6:4: “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.
 - Mark 4:16-19: “¹⁶ And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while. Then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸ And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.
- Yet, in spite of our fickleness, there is a changeless factor at work in the world—the Word of our God!
 - Numbers 23:19: “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?”
 - Psalm 119:89: “Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.”

⁹ **Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!"**

¹⁰ **Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.**

¹¹ **He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.**

- While exile is coming, it is not the last word for the Lord’s people. The revealing of the coming Lord (vv. 3-4) will not be in vain—whether in Babylon or in the continuing exile of his scattered people, the homecoming is certain.

- The NT writers viewed the church as “scattered among the nations” (James 1:1), and “elect exiles of the dispersion...” (1 Pet. 1:1), and “sojourners and exiles” (1 Pet. 2:11).
 - See also Hebrews 11:13-16 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

- *You who bring* A feminine verb drawing on the occasion when Miriam took her tambourine and sang of the LORD’s great victory. It evokes the image of a celebratory company of singing women being led out of Zion to meet the returning Victor-Shepherd.
 - Exodus 15:20-21 ²⁰ Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. ²¹ And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea."
 - Psalm 68:11 ¹ The Lord gives the word; the women who announce the news are a great host:

- The Lord’s *arm* makes its debut here in 40-55. It is the symbol of personal strength in action.

- *his reward... his recompense* The image is of the victor gaining the fruits of victory. The Lord has received the fruits of his victory, and the *recompense* which *accompanies him*’ is before him’ ‘in his presence’ is the flock of his people which his victory has won.

- Sovereign as a Shepherd Motif in David:
 - 2 Samuel 5:1 Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Behold, we are your bone and flesh. ² In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.'"
 - 2 Samuel 7:7 ⁷ In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"
 - Micah 5:2-4 ² But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.
 - Ezekiel 34:2-4 ² "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds

feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

- “Here he leaves out nothing that belongs to the office of a good shepherd; for the shepherd ought to observe every sheep, so as to treat it according to its capacity; and especially they ought to be supported, if they are exceedingly weak.” (Calvin) No shepherd worth his salt would ever drive a sheep harder than they are able to bear!
- He carries them *in his bosom* or close to his heart.
 - In Time magazine, Jeffrey Kluger pointed out how newborn babies display the need for affection we all feel.
 - Of all the urges that drive us, it's the passion to be held that makes itself known first. If a baby is startled fresh from the womb, German pediatrician Ernst Moro discovered in 1918, its arms will fly up and out, then come together in a desperate clutch.
 - Holding is good, and floating free is bad—a lesson that's not so much learned after birth as preloaded at the factory. In fact, doctors have long known that babies who aren't held simply fail to thrive.
 - Not surprisingly, it's a need we never outgrow. In one way or another, we spend the rest of our lives in a sort of sustained Moro clinch. (*Jeffrey Kluger, "The Power of Love," Time (1-19-04), p. 63; submitted by Ted De Hass, Bedford, Iowa*)
- Though He comes with might and his arm rules for him he comes with the gentleness that makes provision for the weak lambs and caters for particular needs those that have young. The ‘ruling arm’ is the ‘gathering arm’; the ‘strong one’ is the shepherd.

Who is your shepherd?

- I own a marvelous little book written nearly a quarter of a century ago by a former shepherd, Philip Keller. He titled the book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm Twenty-Three*. He tells about his experience as a shepherd in east Africa. The land adjacent to his was rented out to a tenant shepherd who didn't take very good care of his sheep: his land was overgrazed, eaten down to the ground; the sheep were thin, diseased by parasites, and attacked by wild animals. Keller especially remembered how the neighbor's sheep would line up at the fence and blankly stare in the direction of his green grass and his healthy sheep, almost as if they yearned to be delivered from their abusive shepherd. They longed to come to the other side of the fence and belong to him.
- Christians understand that the identity of the shepherd is everything. It is wonderful to be able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd."
 - *Leith Anderson, "The Lord Is My Shepherd," Preaching Today, Tape 136.*

- **Psalm 23:** The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.