

This morning, I am continuing in a sermon series that I am calling “The gospel according to Isaiah” which will take us through much of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah was what was known as a covenant mediator prophet, people who were called by God to be His spokesperson, to call out the sin of the nation and call them to repent of their sin and return to faithfulness to the covenant that God had made with them at Mt. Sinai, after He had led them out of Egypt. Isaiah prophesied to Judah, the southern part of Israel, from about 740-687 BC. The book of Isaiah can be broken up into two parts. Chapters 1-39 are mainly about God’s judgment of Israel and the surrounding nations for their sins. Chapters 40-66 are mainly about the restoration God will bring to His people once their time of discipline is completed. Over the past four weeks, we looked at the three main areas where God through Isaiah was calling the Israelites out for breaking the covenant, areas that we also need God’s exhortation today. Four weeks ago, we looked at Judah’s injustice, their mistreatment of the poor and oppressed. Three weeks ago, we looked at their empty worship, their performative religion. Two weeks ago, we looked at their idolatry, specifically the ways they were trusting in other nations for their protection and security instead of putting their trust in God. And last week, we looked at the Fatherly discipline of God towards His people. Isaiah 39 ends with this word of judgment:

Isaiah 39:5–7 - Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: ⁶The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. ⁷ And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

Because of their sin and rebellion against their God, God will discipline the Israelites, and they will end up in exile in Babylon. But today, I want to transition to part two of Isaiah by looking at Isaiah 40, which addresses the Israelites in captivity in Babylon with words of hope. In exile, the Israelites are naturally wondering why God was allowing this suffering to take place and not saving them. Does he not want to act? Does he not love them or care about them? Or is it that he is unable to act? Is He not strong enough to overcome these foreign nations? The answer, of course is neither. Let’s read Isaiah 40, and as I read, listen for how God addresses their two questions – does he love them enough to save them? And is he powerful enough to save them?:

Isaiah 40:1–31 - Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² 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. 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. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶ 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. ⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." 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!" 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. 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. ¹² Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? ¹³ Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as his counselor? ¹⁴ 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? ¹⁵ Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. ¹⁶ Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. ¹⁷ Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. ¹⁸ With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him? ¹⁹ As for an idol, a metalworker casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. ²⁰ A person too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot; they look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple. ²¹ Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? 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. ²³ He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. ²⁴ No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. ²⁵ "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. ²⁶ Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name.

Because of his great power and mighty strength, **not one of them is missing**.²⁷ Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God”?²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.²⁹ He gives strength to the weary and increases **the power of the weak**.³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;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.

The chapter builds to a crescendo in the final five verses.

Isaiah 40:27-31 - Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God”?²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.²⁹ He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;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.

The questions that Israel is asking are these: **Why is God absent in my suffering? Does he not care? Is He not powerful?** I believe these are relevant questions for us today.

And Isaiah’s response in this passage, and throughout the chapter, is to remind them of four essential truths about God, and then extend them an invitation:

1) God is eternal

Isaiah 40:27-28 - Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God”?²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

Have you forgotten that the Lord is the everlasting God? He is the great I AM, the forever existing one. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He stands outside of time and knows the beginning from the end.

Psalm 90:2,4 - Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God... a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

What does this mean?

God's timing is perfect. He sees the big picture and knows how your circumstances fit. We may think from our limited perspective that we know how things should go, but only God is eternal and has the proper perspective on our situation. The Israelites may have wondered if God had forgotten them, but He had not. He had His perfect timetable, which was not going to be the same as theirs.

2) God is the sovereign Creator

Isaiah 40:27-31 - Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God"? ²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He created everything and therefore is sovereign over it all. He knows how it all works, how everything should go.

Acts 17:24-25 - "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else."

In verses 12-26, Isaiah reflects on creation and how God is sovereign over it all.

Isaiah 40:12-17 - Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?

¹³ Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as his counselor?

¹⁴ 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?

¹⁵ Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. ¹⁶ Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. ¹⁷ Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.

God said similar things to Job when Job complained about his situation.

Isaiah 40:25-26 - “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One. ²⁶ Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.”

God is eternal, and God is the sovereign creator. His timing is perfect, and nothing can thwart His plans.

Isaiah 46:9–10 – “Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. ¹⁰ I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’”

3) God is omnipotent and never tires

Isaiah 40:27-31 - Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God”? ²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

Is he powerful enough to overthrow Babylon or Persia and rescue His people? Yes.

Isaiah 40:6-10 - 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. ⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” 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!” ¹⁰ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.

Even Babylon is a blade of grass before the mighty King. But God’s Word is eternal.

God is mighty, and He is still on His throne.

Isaiah 14:27 - For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?

Mark 10:27 - Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

4) God is all-knowing

Isaiah 40:27-28 - Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God”? ²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

He knows what is best. He is all-wise.

Psalms 139:1-4 - You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. ² You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. ³ You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. ⁴ Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.

Romans 11:33-34 - Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ³⁴ “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”

Israel is complaining, questioning whether God cares for them and whether He is powerful enough to save. And in response, Isaiah asks them, ‘have you forgotten who God is? Have you forgotten that He is eternal, that He is sovereign, that He is all-powerful, that He is all-knowing?’ And then He extends an invitation:

Isaiah 40:27-31 - Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God”? ²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. ²⁹ He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. ³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; 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.

Come to the Lord for strength when you are weary, when you are weak. Put your hope in the Lord. Wait on Him while you are suffering, while you are doubting, while you are questioning. And He will renew your strength.

Psalm 27:14 - Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

Even the most vigorous human is mortal and gets exhausted. To wait on him is to admit that we have no other help, either in ourselves or in another. We are helpless until he acts. But to wait is to declare our confidence in his eventual action on our behalf. Not killing time but a life of confident expectation. Complete dependence on God and a willingness to allow him to decide the terms. Give up your own frantic efforts to save yourself, turn expectantly to God to replace or exchange their worn-out strength for new strength.

The Lord is the everlasting God. He is the sovereign creator over everything. He is all-powerful and all-knowing. And so, if you find yourself in a situation that feels too hard to endure, come to Him. Put your hope in Him, trust in Him, and you will receive strength.

Zechariah 4:6 - So he said to me, “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

Isaiah 40 is not a promise that if you come to the Lord, He will immediately relieve your suffering or turn things around. Sometimes we soar, sometimes we run, and sometimes we get strength enough to walk. That is the climax. It is a promise for strength to endure the challenges of life, trusting that God is still on His throne and that His ways and timing is perfect. And let’s be honest, sometimes it can be hard to wait for the Lord’s timing.

The great New England preacher Phillip Brooks was known for his calm demeanor, but even he could have his patience tried at times. One day a friend observed him pacing the floor like a caged lion.

“What’s the trouble, Dr. Brooks?” Asked the friend.

“The trouble is that I am in a hurry,” he replied, “but God isn’t.”

We may think that God should work like a microwave, or like an ATM, that if we just pray the right prayer then the healing will come, the deliverance will come. But it wasn’t the case for the Israelites, and it will not necessarily be the case for you today either. God gives this word through Isaiah, but they will be in exile for

70 years before they are brought back to Jerusalem. And the prophecies about God coming won't happen for another 500 or so years, when Jesus comes to His people.

Isaiah 40:3-5 - A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together."

This prophecy encourages the Israelites that their King is coming to save them, that His glory will be revealed. And 500 or so years later, it happens.

John 1:22-23 - Finally they said [to John the Baptist], "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

The King is coming to save. But it would happen in God's perfect timing, which was most definitely NOT their timing.

Think of Jeremiah, who wrote to the exiles about God's plans for them.

Jeremiah 29:1-14 - This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ² (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into **exile from Jerusalem**.) ³ He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said: ⁴ This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have **sons and daughters**. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." ⁸ Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," **declares the Lord**. ¹⁰ This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years

are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me **with all your heart**. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

People love Jeremiah 29:11, but when you take it out of its context, it gets terribly misinterpreted. This is Joyce Meyer’s interpretation of what it means:

Jeremiah 29:11 - I prosper in everything I put my hand to. I have prosperity in all areas of my life—spiritually, financially, mentally, and socially.

That translation sounds more like the false prophets that God alludes to in verse 8, who have been telling the Israelites to not get comfortable, because God was going to overthrow the Babylonians and bring them back to Israel.

But when you put the verse in its context, God is telling the exiles that they will be slaves for the next 70 years. But they will increase in number and be protected there. And after 70 years, He will bring the Israelites back to their homeland. Now, does that sound like prosperity to you?

You need to understand that God’s timing is not yours, and His ways are not your ways.

Isaiah 55:8–9 – “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. ⁹ As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Many people today, if they’re honest, think that if they can’t think of a good reason why God would allow something, then there can’t be one. But, if we’re honest, underneath that perspective is a very high view of our own knowledge and perspective, and a lack of humility about all that we do not know.

If you have a hard time trusting that God cares in your suffering, the best place you can go is to the cross.

God never seemed more unloving or absent than He did there, as His innocent Son cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And yet now we see that God was never more loving or present than He was on that day, as the eternal Son of God died in our place to save us from sin and death and restore us to the Father, giving us eternal life. Let the cross encourage you that just because you can’t think of a good reason why God would allow suffering does not mean that He does not have a good reason.

God loves His people, despite their sin and despite His discipline:

Isaiah 40:1-2 - Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² 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.

This is covenant language - my people, not this people. The time of discipline is over and it’s time for restoration. They have received double from the Lord’s hand - not just forgiveness but righteousness, a right relationship with Him.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That is what we have because of Jesus.

Isaiah 40:10-11 - 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. 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.

He rules with a mighty arm and also gathers the lambs in His arms. He is mighty and compassionate. And His reward is the redeemed people. His reward is you. He loves you and proved it on the cross.

So put your hope in the Lord. He has an abundance of energy and strength to give to those who admit their weakness and ask Him for strength.