

*Prophecies of Christmas, Pt. 3*  
***Leveling the Field***  
*Isaiah 40: 1-5*

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This Advent season, we're considering Prophecies of Christmas. We're looking at Old Testament passages that point the way to the coming of a Champion. We're tracing the hope for a great Redeemer who will save God's people and set the world right. We've discovered that these prophecies only come into clear focus with the arrival of Jesus Christ. He's the one who solves the puzzle. He gathers the threads. He solves the mystery.

Today we have one of the most famous prophecies of Christmas. It has clear links to the New Testament. And once Handel set Isaiah 40 to music, English speakers for nearly 300 years have known this passage is definitely about Christ. These are words originally spoken to a people going through exile. Isaiah foresaw that in 586BC, the Temple would be pillaged, Jerusalem burned, and the people carried away to Babylon. Their exile would last 70 years. A long time, but not forever. After 70 years, they would return. So these words of Isaiah gave them hope:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
And cry to her that her warfare is ended,  
That her iniquity is pardoned.

Prophetic news: times will become desperate. The LORD has warned you, even begged you to repent of worshipping idols and neglecting your poor. But you would not. So you have triggered this exile. Babylon will rule you. But not forever. The LORD's promises will be strained, but they will not break. In due time, God will bring you back home. He will forgive your sin and remind you that forever he is your God and you are his people.

This passage is so helpful to us even today. Isaiah reminds us to take the long view. He tells us that suffering, persecution or even devastation does not mean that God has lost control. No amount of national upheaval means that evil will rule forever. Look forward, maybe beyond your own lifetime, to the promises of God. He will not forget his people. He will make things right.

The second part of our passage today looks past the event of Israel's return from exile to a time when the Messiah, the Champion, would come to them. Listen to it again:

A voice cries:  
In the wilderness  
Prepare the way of the LORD.  
Make straight in the desert  
A highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up.  
Every mountain made low.  
The uneven ground become level,  
And the rough places a plain.

And the glory of the LORD  
Shall be revealed.  
And all flesh shall see it together.

Now an interesting quality of Biblical prophecies is that they often come true in waves. They have multiple levels. Prophecies of Scripture are not like magic fortune cookies. You don't open a page of the Bible and read, "On Thursday you will take a walk. A squirrel will fall from a tree branch. Follow that squirrel, and that squirrel only, and you will find a pot of gold." That's silly stuff. Generally, prophecies like those of Isaiah are fulfilled in waves through the centuries. They come true in the short term, the far term, and the very far term. For instance, the people did return from exile after 70 years. The prophecy came true in, historically speaking, not a very long time. But much of what Isaiah wrote did not get fulfilled just when Israel came home from Babylon. It would take another 500 years to find fulfillment in Jesus. And then some of the prophecies have yet to be fully fulfilled: they await Christ's return. It's always helpful when reading Scripture prophecies to keep this in mind. To ask: how did this get fulfilled soon? How did it have to wait for Jesus? How is it yet to come in all its fullness?

Isaiah prophesied that God himself would come in person to visit and redeem his people. It would be of earth shaking significance. The LORD's glory would be revealed in splendor to all the earth. So God's people waited for this great day of the LORD, the day when God would come personally, powerfully and visibly to make the world right.

So Isaiah 40 reminded them to get ready for a royal visit. The King is on the way, so let's spiff up the town. In fact, let's do all we can to smooth out all the rough places. Let's level the road so the King's entourage can travel smoothly. Let's clean up the houses and the cities. Let's look like we're waiting eagerly, ready to receive the King.

That all makes sense. The prophecy says the King is coming. So let's get the nation ready. After we get back from exile, let's rebuild the temple. Let's rededicate ourselves to keeping the law. Let's offer the right sacrifices. Let's take care of the poor in our midst. Let's put away foreign gods. Let's get ready for the King to come. They tried to do all those things. But the King did not return. In fact times got hard again. The worship didn't seem to be working. The years seemed to be dragging. When will the Day of the LORD arrive? When will our Champion appear? They had the hope, but they could not see how it would be fulfilled.

Very few Old Testament passages are quoted in all four gospels, the parts of the New Testament that tell the story of Jesus. But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all include Isaiah 40. And they each connect this passage to the man named John the Baptist. John was the older cousin of Jesus. He is known as the forerunner. John was the herald of the Messiah. John was the advance man, preparing people for the Champion to step onto the stage. He was to put the fulfillment of Isaiah 40 into motion.

Luke tells it this way: John went into the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

The voice of one crying in the wilderness,  
Prepare the way of the Lord.  
Make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled,  
Every mountain made low...  
And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Luke makes our passage from Isaiah 40 to be directly about John the Baptist in his role of preparing the way for Jesus. John was to get the people ready, by raising the valleys, lowering the mountains, straightening the roads and smoothing out the rough paths.

But John's work was not just about road maintenance or national infrastructure improvements. John preached *renovation of the heart!* He called for

repentance. That word literally means to change your mind. To develop a whole new way of thinking. It means to change your mind in such a way that you change your actions. For instance, I no longer steal not just because I don't want to get caught. But because my mind is changed. I now see that working creates reward by which I can bless others by sharing, and that's much better than taking from them. John called people to change their minds, to turn from self-focus, to leave off sin in expectation of something better to come.

The people asked him what repentance would like in practical terms. Tell us what to do! OK, John said. Do you have two coats? Give one to the poor. Today. Tax collectors wanted to know what to do? Pretty simple: don't charge more than you are authorized to collect. Start being fair. Today. Soldiers asked what to do. Pretty simple. Don't intimidate by force. Don't extort because you can. Be content with your wage.

Repentance was necessary to receiving the coming King. All were called to repent, but the specific actions were unique to their lives and occupations. For some, it meant "Extend yourselves. Move outwards. Give things away." For others it meant, "Restrain yourselves. Pull back your power of control to let people flourish." For others, it meant "Be fair. Just do what is right for each person without favoritism." For others it meant, "Just be content. Give thanks. Be who and where you are without envy or theft or bitterness."

Do we want to get ready for the best Christmas ever? Do we want to be aware of the arrival of our King? The prophecy tells us to straighten the roads and smooth out the rough places. John the Baptist tells us that means repentance. Changing our minds which leads to change of action. Be different to see differently so you can see the glory of the LORD that is revealed in Christ.

I've been talking with a friend for a while about this whole subject. We realize we both desire more of Christ's reality in our lives. But we are afraid that it might cost us comfort and familiarity. I asked her if she would write me a few lines of her thoughts about repentance. Listen to this extraordinary reply:

I repent of wanting only what God gives that blesses me with happiness and comfort (for my benefit), but wanting little of what He truly wants me to have - transformation, kingdom work, His reign in my heart, HIMSELF. To make it worse, I ask for very little then complain that God never shows up in "big ways." (Big ways that that might also "explode my sleep" or "disturb my soul").

We each have comfort zones and dis-comfort zones. "I don't want enough of God to..." could be filled in uniquely for each of us. I want to know God more, but only if it doesn't involve experiencing loss or sickness to get there. I want to be more Christlike, but only if I don't have to be like him in suffering or befriending people who betray me. I want to experience the Holy Spirit, but only if He doesn't ask me to spend much time meditating on scripture.

I want more of God, but only for my benefit; not for His glory.  
I want to be used of God, but only on my timetable.  
I want to rely on God, but don't take away my money or my health or my family.

But what if God's best - what if the thing that brings Him the most glory (and as His creation, bring me the most satisfaction) is that I ask for ALL of Him. That I bow the knee of my heart to His sovereignty and His will in all things. That I trust whether my life is like Joseph or Job or David or Paul, God is indeed sufficient. What if I gave Him all of me?

This both terrifies me and makes me excited. But if I'm honest, it is only the idea of more of God that makes me excited. When I ask for more of God and He "answers" or Satan pushes back, it gets hard. And then I'm pretty content to settle for only a bit of God again. And so Lord, I acknowledge that I don't even truly want to repent.

To use a British phrase, I think she's spot on. I want more of God, but only for my benefit. There's the heart of repentance for me: to offer myself fully to the King. To release my idols of comfort, admiration, security, popularity or safety. To release into the adventure, the sometimes dangerous adventure, of being part of the King's massive mission to the world.

Finally, then, let's turn this one more way. Let's focus on the phrase from Isaiah 40, "And the glory of the LORD will be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together." How did this prophecy get fulfilled? Near term, the people of God miraculously got to return to their own land and rebuild their Temple: the nations saw the glory of their God who restored them. Far, far term, we know that the Day of the LORD will come when all things are set right. But what about the meantime, the middle term, the right now? How is the glory of the Lord revealed to all flesh?

Once again, Luke takes us to the heart of the matter. You remember the cherished story of the first Christmas. Think of it again in terms of Isaiah's prophecy. We know Luke had it in mind.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, an angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, "Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2: 8-14).

The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. How did they happen? It happened when a multitude of angelic beings performed a stunning worship concert before a handful of lowly, unsuspecting shepherds. It happened when those shepherds found the baby lying in the straw of an animals' feeding trough. It happened when the Lord of Glory wrapped himself in human skin and entered the world in a lonely, dark night on the outskirts of a village. It happened when the news of the King's arrival was made known one to one, heart to heart, to the shepherds who let their lives be changed.

They left their flocks, their usual life, and made haste to Bethlehem. Because they repented. They changed their minds about the comfort of a settled life and went to kneel before the unlikely infant King. And then they told everyone. So it goes around the world and through the centuries. One to one, heart to heart. The glory of God has been revealed in a helpless child lying in a manger. Repent, turn from yourself, and you will be enabled to see that this child is the King, the fulfillment of all our hopes. The joy of all our desiring.