

## The Topography of the Heart

Isaiah 40:1-8

By Billy Dempsey

This evening I'd like to think a bit, though I'm not a merchant, I'd like to think a bit about Christmas. I know you don't like to think about Christmas right now, but it's upon us. And pardon the expression, but I'd like to not see us belly-flop into Christmas. You know how to belly-flop into Christmas? All of a sudden Christmas Day is upon you and you realize, "I've not even thought about the truths that surround this great event." Well, tonight I'd like us to think some about the truths that surround the great event of the incarnation and particularly about what it means to prepare our hearts. To do so, I'd like us to look at Isaiah chapter 40 verses 1 through 11. It's a deep well of a passage that we won't mine the depths of this evening, but maybe it will peak your appetite to think in terms of mining it for yourself some and letting it cast its own glow on your own heart preparation for the holiday, the celebration of the incarnation of Christ to come. Before we read, let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Father, thank You for speaking to us from Your Word. Thank You for sending to us Your Word in the person of Your Son. You spoke to us by the prophets. In the last days You have spoken to us by Your Son who is the exact representation of Your being and the radiance of Your glory. Speak to us now from Your Word through the prophet. Father, guard our hearts and feed our souls by Your Word this evening. We make our prayer in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.*

From Isaiah chapter 40 verses 1 through 11. The prophet writes:

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, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

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, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

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. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

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!" Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 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.

Indeed the grass withers and the flower fades but the Word of our God stands forever.

### **The Background of Isaiah 40**

Let's think for a bit in large terms what's happening here before we think about what Isaiah's saying. What's happening here is that chapter 40 of Isaiah represents a turning point in Isaiah's prophetic ministry. As early as the early 700s, perhaps as much as twenty years before His death, Isaiah could see the Babylonian exile was coming. He said so to Hezekiah as Hezekiah arrogantly showed the envoys of Babylon all his treasures and all that was of beauty in his kingdom. And Isaiah says, "All of these things and your own sons will be carried away captive to Babylon." He saw the Babylonian exile coming. It's likely, then, during the latter part of his ministry God calls Isaiah to a new ministry, a ministry of comfort to His people in words and images, words and images that His disciples would cherish and preserve in the very dark days of Hezekiah's reign and those that followed Him until Israel was at last ready to hear them. These first eleven verses of Isaiah 40 then sound the major themes that the following chapters and messages of Isaiah will develop. They're powerfully introduced here with a message of comfort, the message of atonement, the theme of the way of the Lord, the glory of the Lord, the power of the Word of God, the city of God, the might and the tenderness of Zion's Savior. It leaves us with a full expectation that a whole new movement is afoot in God's dealing with His people. A whole new way of God's dealing with His people is about to unfold.

### **The Message of Isaiah**

Well let's think about what's Isaiah saying and then we'll talk about the fullness of his message and what it means for us right now. What's Isaiah saying? As

chapter 39 would indicate, Isaiah sees a time when Hezekiah's descendants and all his stored treasures, not to mention his people, are carried away to Babylon. It's a frightful vision and Israel's persistent hardness of heart and disobedience to the demands of the covenant, the requirements of the covenant, make that vision a reality. And their lot, as we know from reading their history, is a bitter one in captivity indeed. But God calls for His people to be comforted. The Hebrew word actually means, literally "to cause to breathe again." Do you remember hearing shocking bad news or maybe overwhelmingly good news? It takes your breath away and it is comfort that causes us to breathe again. God's people have been shocked by the outpouring of His wrath, not in Isaiah's time but certainly a hundred years from then as they experienced the horrors of conquest and captivity and exile. God calls for their comfort. He calls them to breathe again. It's repetition. "Comfort, comfort my people," emphasizes Yahweh's intent to bring His people comfort in their time of deepest need, even though their obstinacy has created that need.

### **An Old Testament Gospel Picture: The Justice of God is Satisfied**

It's also interesting to note that the Hebrew verb form here is in the plural, which means that God is calling for numerous comforters to seek His people in the days to come. Think of the ministries of Daniel. Think of the ministry of Zechariah as David preached through that book several months ago. Think of the ministry of Ezra, among many others, separated from Isaiah's time by two hundred years or more but yet they're ministers of comfort to the destitute people of God. God tells the comforters to speak tenderly to Jerusalem. She's bruised. She's battered. Speak to her heart a message to comfort her beyond her wildest dreams. Cry to her. Make it unmistakably clear. Don't let anyone miss the message. Make it heard. And what's the message? That her warfare has ended. Who would have imagined that kind of mercy? The one who's carried away captive by her own disobedience is free. The doors of her prison house have flung wide open and she is delivered. Her warfare has ended. The term, the metaphor is taken from the discharge of soldiers once their victory is won. The end of their forced isolation from their families, their homelands, and all they hold dear, the harshness of the captivity in the terms that they will experience warfare. Her warfare is done. God will not harass her continually. He sets a limit to her afflictions. Her iniquity is pardoned. The justice of God is satisfied. He's gracious with them. He's unwilling to treat them with the utmost severity because that would consume them. He even says it this way - that she has received from the Lord's hand double for her sins. I don't use that language to charge God with cruelty or being over the top in His punishment of His people. A better translation might be "ample," that she has received from the Lord's hand "ample" for her sins. You can't imagine that her punishment, the punishment of God's rebellious, disobedient people, has exceeded their offenses or even been equal to them. The language reminds us of the mercy of God, who by setting a limit to His people's punishment, makes plain that He is unwilling to continue their misery.

God sustains the character of a father. Remember what David says about a father. God is a Father in Psalm 103. "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." He says to His people, "You have received from My hand ample for all your sins."

Let's let that soak in just for a second. Think of the gods of the pagan Babylonians, think of the gods of the pagan Assyrians, think of the gods of the Egyptians and join me in saying with Micah, "Who is a God like you who pardons iniquity and who passes over the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance? He does not retain His anger forever because He delights in steadfast love. Who is a God created by man who delights in pardoning and passing over transgression? Who is a God invented by man who delights in compassion? He will again have compassion on us. He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show a faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham as you have sworn to our fathers from days of old." Hear the wonder in that statement and understand the amazing nature of the message the comforters bring to the daughter of Zion. Your warfare has ended, your sin is atoned for, you have received from the Lord ample for all your sins.

### **God's People: Returned and Restored**

And what follows next in verses 3 to 5 I think is logical. God has pardoned His people. What's He going to do? He's going to return them to the land. Look at those verses about the valleys being lifted up in the wilderness. "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley lifted up. Every mountain and hill made low, the rough places a plain." God is saying, "I will bring you back." And it's even as though He might be saying to Cyrus, "Let My people go! Send My people back! Let there be no obstacle in the return of My people to the land I promised to their fathers." It's not just enough that Yahweh forgives, but He restores. He restores. And what He restores is even called "the way of the Lord, the highway of our God." God doesn't need a highway. God doesn't need to travel along a way to get from one place to another. God is everywhere! His people need that highway. His people need a way. His people need a way of return. And why is it called "the way of the Lord"? Why is it called "the highway of our God"? Because He will go with them. He will return with them. They will not return without Him because He is the great Emmanuel - God with us. Yes, He has been with them in their captivity; He will be with them in their return and in their restoration.

### **God Glorified**

And it will be that men will see and glorify them. Do you see that? Do you see

that in verses 6 through 8? Verse 5 - "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed." Where's the glory of the Lord going to be revealed? Well one of the places is right here. As He restores His people that He has forgiven, His people who have wandered from Him, His people who have rebelled against Him, as He restores them after their brokenness, after their repentance, after their return to Him, He returns them to the land. The glory of the Lord will be revealed in His mercy, in His grace, in His return of His people. And their return of the worship of God, Israel again becomes a light to the nations. The glory of the Lord, not only in His mercy to them but in their obedience and faithfulness to Him as they begin the worship of God again in the land of Israel.

### **Not By Might, Nor By Power: Deliverance by The Word of God**

What's one to say? Well maybe one's to say, "Grab your sword and grab your spear. Get ready to return. Get ready to throw off the bands of the captors." No, because God's very plain as He speaks to the prophet Isaiah. Look again at verses 6 to 8. "Cry," a voice says. "What shall I cry?" Isaiah says. "All flesh is grass and all its beauty like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD breathes on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." God has promised a deliverance that His people cannot accomplish for themselves. He's promised them a future in a place that He has marked out for them, that they cannot achieve for themselves. God has promised them that they will be there not because of what they accomplish but because of what He accomplishes because they are grass and the best of them is a flower. And as soon as the breath of the Lord breathes on it it's gone; it's consumed. It withers away. They are not sufficient to accomplish for themselves what God intends and promises to accomplish for them. That's the message they need to hear. It won't be by their might, it won't be by their power that they find themselves in the place that God has prepared for them. It will be by His might and by His power and by His everlasting Word, by His everlasting promise and His faithfulness to it. It will be His work and it will be His glory. It won't be the arm of flesh that saves them. It will be the Word of God and His faithfulness to it that saves them.

### **God's People: A Herald of Good News**

Finally in verses 9 to 11, Isaiah shows them something of the character of God their Savior. Look at those verses. First of all I want you to notice that God is making His own people the herald. He's called for comforters here in the first part of chapter 40 and now He turns to the people of Zion, to the people of Jerusalem, and He says, "You are the herald. You are the heralds of good news." And what's the news going to be? What's the good news going to be? It's going to be what God has done and who God is. Who is He? Isaiah says, as God calls him to, "Behold, your God." Here is your God. What's He like? This is what He's like. He

comes with might and His arm rules for Him. He's a sovereign powerful ruler who accomplishes all His holy will. There's nothing that He intends to do that's left undone. His reward is with Him. His recompense is before Him. He's just and He rewards those, as the writer of Hebrews says, "who diligently seek Him." He rewards those who seek Him, who call upon Him, who serve Him.

### **God's People: Restored and Tended by their Good Shepherd**

And how will He deal with His people? Look at verse 10. "He will tend his flock like a shepherd." What does a shepherd do? He protects, he guards, he guides, he provides for the sheep under his care. He notices each one and those who have need he gathers into his arms. If they're weak, if they're lame, if they're falling behind, he'll gather them into his arms. He'll carry them in his bosom. His care, his gentleness, his patience. It's no wonder that Jesus, in His ministry, takes the shepherding image as His own, calling Himself in John chapter 10 the Good Shepherd who gives His life for His sheep. That's who the Savior of God's people is. That's His character. That's His action. That's how He saves His people. That's a sweet, comforting word because it's not the word that they would have imagined at the beginning of their exile. But here's the word of comfort because His people are broken, His people are weary, His people are consumed almost by His wrath and He brings them restoration.

### **The Fullness of Isaiah's Message**

Well what's the fullness of Isaiah's message? David made the comment this morning in his sermon on Exodus that the land, he was talking about the land and the land is but a dim promise, the land that God is delivering His people out of captivity to take, the land of Palestine, of Canaan, the land that God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It's a dim promise of what it means to be with God where He is, at peace and at rest from our enemies; it's a dim promise of heaven. Well there's a fullness here that doesn't come in Isaiah's day. What Isaiah says causes us to look ahead. It's a foreshadowing. You know it's no accident that all four Gospel writers take these verses, especially verses 3 and 4, as a description of John the Baptist's ministry as forerunner. "A voice calling in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley lifted up, every mountain and hill brought low." That's the way all four Gospel writers describe the ministry of John the Baptist. All recognize him as the forerunner who was to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. We see in his ministry and in his message the call to the people of God to prepare themselves for the coming of the Savior. What does it mean for them to prepare themselves? Is it like removing every obstacle and making the way plain for the people of God to return to the land? Perhaps, but it's definitely a spiritual preparation because the people had waited long for the promise of God to be fulfilled, they had waited long for a Savior. In fact, many of them had quit

looking. Many of them had thought, "There's no Savior as we thought to expect him. We don't know what those promises mean." And John comes to say, "Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand." And preaching a baptism of repentance. What are they repenting of? They're repenting of unbelief; they're repenting of hardness of heart. They've stopped believing God's promises. And because they've stopped believing God's promises they've quit living in obedience to God's law. He's calling them to repent. "Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand. Be baptized and bring forth fruit," he says, "in keeping with your repentance. Live like a person of God. Live like a man of God. Live like a woman of God. Live like you expect Messiah to come because He's coming." That's the preaching of John. The preaching of preparation. The Messiah's coming.

### **A Greater Captivity and Greater Deliverance**

What's their captivity? Their captivity is worse than the captivity of the Israelites because their captivity is to sin, death, and the devil. Surely it was the Israelite's captivity as well but their vision was marred by living in an actual captivity. Here's the captivity of the people of God. It's far worse as John sees it because he recognizes the deliverance that had to come was the deliverance from sin and from the devil and from the fear of death. The return that Isaiah is talking about is a shadow of the greater deliverance and the prophecy of the Savior like a shepherd is a shadow of the fullness of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Calvin says this. He says, "the depravity of our nature and the windings of a crooked mind and obstinacy of heart shut up the way of the Lord and hinder them from preparing to yield obedience." That's why John is preaching preparation. That's why John is preaching preparation because they've failed to see, they've failed to continue to believe God's promises. They've failed to continue to remember that God's promises make a difference and now on the cusp of the coming of Messiah, John is saying, "Get ready. He's coming. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is here."

### **What Isaiah's Message Means for Us**

Think about us. Because that Lamb has come we have comfort from God. We don't have condemnation from God; we have comfort from God. He speaks a kind word to us if our trust is in Christ and in Christ alone, not a word of condemnation. He speaks comfort to us. He tells us, "Your warfare has ended. Your sin has been atoned for. Your sin has been paid for amply by your Shepherd who gave His life for you." Just like the Israelites who could not deliver themselves from captivity, our deliverance from sin and death and the devil is wholly accomplished by God in Christ. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 5 God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself - rather that's 2 Corinthians 5. We don't contribute to our rescue. We are grass. We are like the flowers of the field. The Word of God stands forever accomplishing all that God intends.

## **Topography of the Heart**

I do a little bit of hiking and I look at those topographical maps - some of you are very good at reading those topographical maps. I'm not very good at reading the topographical maps. I just know that when there are lots of squiggly lines I've got to do a lot of climbing and I like to find the maps that don't have so many squiggly lines on those topographical maps. I don't mind going downhill so much but I don't want to go uphill so much. I look for those places that don't have so many squiggly lines because those squiggly lines talk to me about the topography, the lay of the land. What's the topography of our hearts this evening? As we prepare to head into yet another season of preparation for the incarnation and the celebration of the coming of Christ as Man, is it going to be a preparation only of what's around the tree or what's on the dinner table for Christmas or who's coming to eat and who's not coming? Is it going to be something else also? John would call us to prepare. What's the topography of our heart this evening? What's the lay of the land there? What are the obstacles? And where has unbelief, the worst of the obstacles, the most persistent, the most pernicious of the obstacles rooted itself and planted itself? Are we willing to look at the squiggly lines of our own unbelief and determine how to lower it, how to make the rough places a plain?

## **The Incarnation and the Daily Living of the Christian Life**

What are you talking about preacher? Speak plainly! Here's a plain question. Do we believe that the incarnation, the coming of Christ as Man, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, a Man who has come by God to bear our sins and bear our transgressions, who was crushed for our iniquity, do we believe it really matters? Well we would say, "Yeah, right now it really matters. I'm sitting here in church on Sunday night. Most of my neighbors are not; I think it matters to me because I'm here." Will the coming of Christ as a Man, will the incarnation matter in the morning? In the morning when you're trying to close the deal of a lifetime and just a few niggling details stand between you and success, will you grab the bottom line and forsake everything else or will you be asking the character questions that are important at a time like this? "God's eye is upon me. I need to do the right thing. I need to make a just deal." Will we remember that Jesus called two tax collectors to follow Him, Levi and Zacchaeus. One left his table and all the gain associated with it. One restored everything he stole in his crooked business dealings as a tax collector. Both emerged from their contact with Jesus changed men. Are we willing for the incarnation to change us and maybe cost us money?

Will the incarnation matter as we sit waiting for a doctor's report? We might fear the worst. Will we know that Jesus came to bear all our sorrows and came to



know all our griefs? Will we remember that Jesus came so that God might say, "Behold, I make all things new"? That God Himself might wipe away every tear and say, "Death and suffering and pain and mourning are no more"? Are we willing to say, to believe, that Jesus means us, if we trust in Him and Him alone, when He says to His disciples, "Let not your heart be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms and I go to prepare a place for you that you may be with Me where I am"? Do you believe, that because of the incarnation, as our bodies fall apart, Jesus is preparing a place for us where we will be whole and complete and with Him? It doesn't mean that we want to hear bad news from the doctor, but it does mean that we have something to do if we hear it. There's something to hold us and there's something to hold on to. Will the incarnation matter to you tonight if you can't sleep because you're worried about a family member, a child or parent or another loved one? Will you remember that because Jesus came God counts your tossings and puts your tears in His bottle? That your worries and your anxieties are not unnoticed, not uncared for, but He's numbered the hair on your head, He's called you by name, you're His because Jesus has come?

### **Clearing Away the Obstacles of the Heart**

What's the upshot for us? We clear away the obstacles. Let's ask ourselves the questions, "Do I believe? Do I believe the incarnation really matters? Do I believe that Jesus came for me and I celebrate the beauty of it, the glory of it, not just at Christmas but every day?" I celebrate the beauty of it, the wonder of it, everyday. It makes everything different; everything changes because Jesus came for you and me. And we live life in two lights - the light of the first coming and the light of the coming we await when He comes to call us to Himself. Does it really matter? Can we check the topography of our heart, clear away the obstacles, and enjoy the sweetness of believing that God has done what He promised He would do?

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Father, make Your way plain to us. Make us a people looking to You, hungry for You, clinging to You. Make us a people believing You. And make us a people who sees our hearts and the obstacles there - the distraction, the business, the carelessness of your ways and your words. Make us a people prepared to celebrate not just on one day but in some fashion every day the beauty of the incarnation and anticipate hungrily your return in glory and majesty. Lord Jesus, hear us as we make our prayer in Your name. Amen.*

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