

Our God Saves: Believe

Behold Your God

Isaiah 40

Mark Vroegop

“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. Go on 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” (Isa. 40:1–11).

There are some statements that summarize biblical truth in a way that’s really helpful. What makes them particularly impactful is the combination of truth and hope. When truth and hope combine, they become a powerful tool for thinking correctly and living righteously—especially when life is hard.

I think my last sermon series at my previous church was on the book of Galatians. And in my study, I found the following statement by Phil Ryken who is now the president of Wheaton College. He said, **“Christians live by promise, not performance.”** It’s a distillation of Galatians 2:20-21, which says:

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

“Promise not performance” means that the Christian life is lived practically out of the promise of what God tells us about himself, ourselves, and how we are accepted through the work of Christ. It means that our true value, identity, and deepest security come from being “in Christ,” not from any achievement, human measurement, or earthly determination of success. Every Sunday, we come out of a world filled with performance, and we realign ourselves with who God is and who we really are.

This is so important because performance-failure naturally leads to hiding and blame. In the Garden of Eden, we not only see the sin of Adam and Eve, but we also see their response. They hide from God. Adam blames God and Eve while Eve blames the serpent. It's really their attempt to control the situation. Their rebellion led to despair and disillusionment.

Retreating and resenting rather than living in promise is a perpetual challenge for us. It began in the Garden, and it's what the gospel seeks to fundamentally change in us. Living in "promise" is what Isaiah 40 is all about. It's a chapter that sets the tone for part two of our study of this historic, Old Testament book. Isaiah 40 is an invitation to see the healing combination of promise, assurance, and hope.

These words could also help you know how to live in the next week. Isaiah 40 is a timeless text. Let's explore this progression

1. Promise (vv. 1-11)

This first section introduces what God is going to do for his people because he loves them. What you are going to see here is the connection between God's love for his people and who he is as God. Think of it this way: promise is the path between God's power and our need.

The first two verses of chapter 40 are filled with compassion:

- "Comfort, comfort my people. . ."
- "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. . ."

Why was Isaiah writing this way? Well, a lot happened between chapters 39 and 40. This chapter marks the beginning of a new section in our study. We're moving from "turn" to "believe." And circumstances have changed. The first thirty-nine chapters called Israel and Judah to turn from trusting in the idols and living disobediently as the pressure from Assyria grew. Both kingdoms failed. God used Assyria to bring divine discipline upon Israel in 722 BC. The southern kingdom fell to Babylon in 586 BC. Perhaps you'll remember that Isaiah 39 ended with a warning from the prophet to the king about his foolishness in providing a gold-key tour to a group of Babylonian ambassadors. That was the eighth century.

This section, chapters 40-55, is written about the sixth century—well after Isaiah died. Some scholars believe chapters 40-55 are written by another author. Others believe that Isaiah's disciples collected and edited his writings. It seems to me that Isaiah is still the one writing and that it's prophetic in nature.

Prior to Isaiah 40, many key events took place: the invasion of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the exile of the people. These were the darkest days in Israel's history. For seventy years, the people of God were displaced. But even more, they were disillusioned. It seemed that their God had lost and the god of Babylon had won. The painful and disappointing circumstances of their lives and the nation raised deeply troubling questions—even a crisis of faith. We see this clearly in 40:27.

"O Jacob, how can you say the LORD does not see your troubles? O Israel, how can you say God ignores your rights?" (Isa. 40:27, NLT)

I'm sure you relate to this. Every Christian faces moments when they feel spiritually defeated, disillusioned, or even bitter toward God. It's not right. But it's common. Maybe you are there right now with some issue in your life; you wonder what God is doing or if he's even real. I hope Isaiah 40 helps encourage you and give you a sense of direction.

Back to verses 1-2. Take note that God comes to his people with the promise of comfort and that their discipline will not last forever. Here is the announcement that God's purposes are being fulfilled.

In verses 3-5, we find the promise of glorious transformation. Luke 3 cites this text in reference to the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist. It refers to the spiritual restoration connected to the reign of Christ. Valleys are lifted up. Mountains are made low. Everything hard and broken and challenging will be changed. And the glory of God will be on full display. Ray Ortlund says, "He's talking about depression being relieved, pride being flattened, troubled personalities becoming placid, and difficult people become easy to get along with."¹ In other words: the world being the way it should be when the glory of God covers the earth like the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14).

That's a day yet to come, but we get glimpses of it now. John described it in his gospel as seeing Jesus "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). But we also get a taste of it when the church gathers together. It's as close to heaven as we get right now!

In verses 6-11, we find another promise: That the Word of our God will stand forever (40:8). While everything else is unstable, fleeting, temporary, and frail, God's Word is not. But there's even more here.

Chapter 40 highlights the nature of God. It shows us the character, strength, and the power of God. Understanding and heralding this news about God is important and it's a recipe to address our fear (v. 9). Isaiah commands God's people to boldly say: "Behold, your God!" (v. 9). Verse 10 gives us the following promises:

- God will come with might
- God will rule
- God will bring justice
- God will guide his people
- God will have compassion

These are the promises of God. Can I ask you which of these do you need today? Which of these promises have you not believed this week? Which of these promises do you need to rehearse? Let me ask you to physically respond by raising your hand when I review them again. Just look around. We all need these promises. The Christian life is lived by promise.

¹ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 236.

2. Assurance (vv. 12-26)

Promises are great but they are only as good as the power of the one making them. If I say, “I promise you that the Colts are going to the Super Bowl” that’s one kind of promise. If I say, “I promise that this sermon will not go beyond thirty-five minutes,” that’s a different kind. I have no power to control the Colts. I do have power to control the length of my sermon. And that makes a huge difference.

Isaiah’s point in this section is to remind the people of God about the power of their Creator. He aims to elevate their view of God so that they can feel some level of assurance. They need reminders. You and I need reminders. This text asks a series of rhetorical questions.

He begins with measurements and weights relative to the immensity of creation. In verse 12, we see that God measures the waters in the hollow of his hand, marks the heavens between his thumb and pinkie, weighs the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance. In verses 13-14, we find that it is God who provides wisdom—that is out of reach; skill that can’t be taught. In verses 15-17, we see that the nations are just a drop from a bucket, the coastlands are like dust, and every nation is nothing before him.

Isaiah is trying to take the things that we think are big and powerful and show you a comparison between them and God. The reason he does this is because human beings understand power. Nations were powerful. Lebanon had a lot of trees. The ocean is vast and untameable. But God’s power is greater.

Think of the things in your life that are truly powerful. Think of the things that make you afraid, anxious, or cause you to react. Isaiah’s point here is that God is so much greater than any power that we can possibly imagine. Or to put it another way: if God is this powerful, why don’t I believe him?!

That’s one of the reasons why Isaiah turns to the foolishness of idolatry. In verses 18-20, he addresses the irony that human beings make their own images and then we give them power! But do you know why we do this? Because we want the power of control. We make idols because we want the assurance that they bring us. “I need _____ or I’ll never be safe. I need to know _____ or I’ll never be fulfilled. I need _____ and then I’ll be _____.”

Oh, how many things we put in those blanks! The problem is that we pursue idols because we think they’ll give us control, only to discover that the idols control us.

Assurance comes from understanding and valuing who God is. That’s why Isaiah asks the questions that he does in verse 21. He’s calling the people back to what they know to be true. Despair, discouragement, disillusionment, and depression call us to live in a world that doesn’t reflect what’s true!

Isaiah reminds us in verses 22-24 that God not only rules over creation but he rules over rulers. God reigns over politics. He sets up leaders. He takes them down. He reigns over everyone and everything

that thinks or acts like it's powerful. The trouble for many of us is that we spend way more time studying the landscape of politics or the trends in business or the dangers of culture that we can forget where our true assurance is! We may know it rests with God, but we've spent so much time in other spaces and listening to other voices that we lack assurance.

That's why, in verses 25-26, Isaiah invites us to look at the sky. If we are going to compare anything to God in terms of assurance, we might want to consider the immense power, beauty, and grandeur behind the natural world. I have a favorite part of my commute back and forth to church, and it constantly reminds me that I serve a beautiful, creative, and thoughtful God.

Or maybe you need to look at the stars and then consider something like this:

Here we are on tiny Planet Earth. The closest star to us is, of course, the sun. The sun generates energy with the same explosiveness as a hydrogen bomb—its own continuous internal nuclear fission. The surface of the sun is a relatively cool 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit, while the center is a toasty 27,000,000 degrees. The diameter of the sun is 870,000 miles, 109 times larger than the earth, and its volume could contain 1,000,000 earths. Its luminosity is equal to four million trillion 100-watt lightbulbs—more than you'll find even at Home Depot. And the sun is just an average star.

Our solar system is inside the galaxy called the Milky Way. And this galaxy we live in is shaped like a spiral, a gigantic pinwheel spinning in the open expanse of space, with our solar system rotating around the center once every million years or so. We lie about two-thirds of the way out from the center of the galaxy, in what might be considered the boondocks. The Milky Way is 104,000 light-years across, containing over 100 billion stars. To count them one by one would take us over 3,000 years. And according to the latest probings of the Hubble Space Telescope, there are hundreds of billions of galaxies in God's universe!²

In effect, Isaiah says, "God is so strong that he knows every star by name. Nothing gets lost in his universe." When life is scary, hard, or fearful it's vital to live on promise. And when your performance has gotten the best of you—through your sin or human inability—you can still live on promise.

You may be listening to this message today and you lack assurance because you don't live on promise. By that I mean you are on a performance treadmill. Running from the failures of the past and trying to find fulfillment in the things that you do or in who you love or in how you feel. But it may be that the core issue about your relationship with your Creator is not right. You don't have assurance because you don't have a relationship with Jesus. I want to invite you to put your trust in him today. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved! (Rom. 10:9-10)

² Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 247.

And if you are a Christian, maybe today you just need to be reminded that the same God who created all the stars in heaven and the same God who raised Jesus from the dead is worthy of your trust. Talk to him. Sing to him. Read about him. Consider him. He's made promises and he has the receipts.

The Christian life is lived by promise and assurance followed by hope.

3. Hope (vv. 27-31)

Where do you go when life feels deeply discouraging? Where do you turn when you feel like an exile? Isaiah concludes this chapter with a compelling invitation to hope, but (to warn you) it will sound like this: "wait for the Lord" (40:31).

Isaiah begins to make this point by addressing the despair that the people of God were feeling. In verse 27, he gives voice to what they struggling with. Isaiah names the problem. In the psalms of lament this is called a complaint. It's telling God exactly what's wrong. In Isaiah 40 it sounds like this:

"Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"?" (Isa. 40:27)

Let me read it to you from The Message which is Eugene Peterson's paraphrase. I love Peterson's writings. In fact, there were a few weeks in 2020 and 2021 when it was nearly impossible to read the Bible on my own. My despair and grief were overwhelming. I read a lot of Eugene Peterson and let him bring healing to my soul. Here's what he thinks Isaiah the people are saying:

*"God has lost track of me. He doesn't care what happens to me"?*³

Have you felt that way? I sure have. But notice what Isaiah does. He pulls the people back to who God is and what he's like. Isaiah doesn't provide assurance in who they are. No, he points them to what they already know: God rules over everything. He never gets tired. He's working out his plan (v. 28). We don't live by performance, we live by promise. But we also don't live by explanation, either.⁴

Performance seeks to control through what I can do. Explanation seeks to control through what I know.

Take note of the promise that follows. God is ready to give power to the faint and strength to the one who has no might (v. 29). He who owns every resource in the universe is willing and able to give us what we don't have. What's more, he's willing to give it in a way that makes no earthly sense (see v. 30).

But what does hope really look like? Isaiah says, "they who wait for the Lord." This is more than just passing the time. It's more than resigned acceptance. Waiting is not doing nothing. Nor is waiting, in this

³ Eugene H. Peterson, [*The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*](#) (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), Is 40:27.

⁴ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 253.

context, what you do when you can't do anything else. No, waiting has the idea of anticipation, a sense of eagerness, and expectancy. Don't think of this waiting like at the BMV unless you are getting your license for the first time. Think of it like waiting for a baby to be born.

Because you know what's coming and how it's going to change everything, you wait with eagerness.

The promise and the assurance create eagerness. Because we know what God has said and because we know what he's like, we wait. And waiting—the right way—is how we hope.

To wait on the Lord means to place your hope in his promises, not your performance, expectations, or some explanation. There's freedom when you know you can't do it and when you know that you don't know.

Isaiah 40 is written to bring comfort to God's people—to show them the path of promise, assurance, and hope.

It invites us to consider two great invitations:

Behold your God!

Wait for the Lord

Waiting is how we live on promise and not on performance.

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