

ADVENT 2020: What are You Waiting For?

Great Expectations

Isaiah 40:1-8

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 (Isa. 40:1–8).

The end of the year frequently features news articles highlighting things that were "Best of the Year." My inbox was recently flooded with friends sharing their "Best Books I've Read" list. It's always amazing to me how many books they read. It's not usually a super encouraging list to me. But I do find it interesting.

Just think about all the other "Best of the Year" categories:

- Best news stories of the year
- Best songs of the year
- Best sports moments of the year
- Best business deals of the year
- Best cakes on the Great British Bake Off of the year (okay maybe not that one)

I find these year-in-review features to be fascinating because I'm so quickly inclined to forget what happened in a year. I often enjoy looking back and remembering what things I've forgotten.

But not so much this year.

Recently I was scrolling through the pictures on my phone as I was looking for a particular picture. I happened to find a picture of our sanctuary filled with people. It was around our THINK conference. People were sitting close and with no masks. At first, I gasped because it seemed so surreal – like it was from another century. And then it made me feel a bit homesick: "Man, I miss those days."

But I also found an immediate emotional reaction followed. It sounds like this: “Whew, I wonder what 2021 is going to be like?” I didn’t ask the question out of curiosity; I asked it out of anxiety.

I don’t know about you, but one of the traumatic things about 2020 was how often I felt blindsided. One thing after another kept hitting me out of nowhere. Historically, I’ve been pretty good at anticipating challenges or issues. But 2020 blew that all up.

If I’m honest, I’m going into 2021 a little cautious—maybe even jaded. I don’t know what to expect. It’s hard to plan. Uncertainty is not just a reality, it’s painful and taxing.

So how should Christians think about uncertain times? What truths do we need to remember when our expectations for the future might not be very great?

That’s the issue we are going to explore today from Isaiah 40. This is our fourth week in Advent, and as we turn the corner toward Christmas Eve, let’s consider some biblical anchor points to remember as we look toward the conclusion of this year and the beginning of the next.

Three Biblical Expectations

Two weeks ago we studied Isaiah 43, and I talked about what it means to belong to God. Hopefully, you’ll remember the thesis: you belong to God because of God for the glory of God. In that sermon, I told you that Isaiah is divided into three major sections with different circumstances in view. Isaiah 40-55 is written prophetically to God’s people as they experience the Babylonian captivity – a time when the nation was destroyed and the people were displaced.

In other words, the context for these words is pretty dark and discouraging. And Isaiah 40 is the first chapter of this section designed to remind God’s people about truths that suffering might cause them to forget. In this chapter we’ll see that (1) God will care for his people, (2) God will always be in control, and (3) God will empower our endurance.

Let’s look at this text to remind our hearts what we should expect.

1. God will care for his people (vv. 1-11)

This section begins with a theme of comfort with a particular focus on the way that God will care for his people. The Israelites, like you and me, may find themselves looking at the circumstances and feeling the gravitational pull toward questioning God’s kindness. What’s more, the devil loves to tempt us with thoughts that question God’s care for us.

Perhaps you’ve had thoughts that raced through your mind like: “God has forgotten me,” “There’s no kindness in this,” “I’m facing more than I can bear,” or “There’s no hope.”

Isaiah 40 begins with the repetition of the words “comfort.” This is for emphasis, and it’s as if God is calling upon a chorus—perhaps a choir—to remind his people about some things. I’m sure you know the effect of hearing a particular song or listening to a particular sermon and how it was such a timely word for you. It called to mind truths that you might forget.

In verse two we see that God's care for his people flows from his posture of graciousness. God calls for tender words as he pursues his people ("cry to her"). This kind of language is used for wooing and reassurance in the Bible (see Gen. 34:2 and Ruth 2:13).

It's also used for redemption in the Bible. Verse two communicates that their time of hardship or warfare has divine limits to it and that her iniquity is pardoned. To receive "double" for all her sins isn't necessarily about the severity of the punishment as much as it is about a dual reality of their sins – what they see and what they don't.

The point here is about God's posture toward his people. Even though they have been rebellious toward him, he is still tenderly calling them back to himself. Even though they have sinned, he is providing the means of their pardon. And he's doing this because of who he is. God cares.

I'm reading an excellent book called *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund, and here's something similar that he says about Jesus:

Jesus is not trigger-happy. Not harsh, reactionary, easily exasperated. He is the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to him is not a pointed finger but open arms...his heart of gentle embrace is never out-matched by our sins and foibles and insecurities and doubts and anxieties and failures. For lowly gentleness is not one way Jesus occasionally acts toward others. Gentleness is who he is. It is his heart. He cannot un-gentle himself toward his own any more than you or I can change our eye color.¹

We clearly see God's care through three voices heard in the text (vv. 3-5, 6-8, 9-11). They proclaim the kind and caring plan of God.

Voice #1 (vv. 3-5) – God will come to his people in their wilderness for redemption. The spiritual landscape will be dramatically changed: a highway in the desert, valleys lifted up, mountains made low, uneven ground is level, and rough places are smooth. All of this is for the revelation of the glory of the Lord.

These verses should sound familiar because, in the gospels, they were used to speak about John the Baptist (see Matt. 3:1-6).

Voice #2 (vv. 6-8) – God's word can be trusted. Here we are reminded of God's care for us. These verses identify the instability and temporary nature of life – "the grass withers and the flower fades." And it points us to the enduring hope of the Word of God – "the Word of our God will stand forever."

In the book of 1 Peter this verse is used as a means of comfort and encouragement to motivate people who are suffering to love one another well. People who are not confident in the care of God tend to be careless in how they treat others. Doubt can breed discouragement and divisiveness. Faithlessness can create faint-heartedness in others.

¹ Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 19-21.

1 Peter 1:22-2:1 calls on people to love one another earnestly from a pure heart because we've been born by an imperishable seed. He calls on sufferers to put away all malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander. And the care of God through the Word of God is at the foundation of that calling.

Knowing and remembering that God cares for you is essential to caring for others in a crisis.

Voice #3 (vv. 9-11) – God's character is full of care. The third voice is the herald that goes up to a mountain to declare "good news." And the message is full of statements of power (v. 10). However, notice what his power produces: kindness, care, protection, and assurance.

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. 40:11).

I'm sure the imagery of a shepherd is not a new one for anyone. Even if you are not a Christian yet, you probably are familiar with Psalm 23 – "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." It's a powerful image of a strong Savior who comes to gather, protect, defend, feed, and lead his flock. It's a beautiful picture of strength and kindness, authority and grace, power, and mercy.

This is what Jesus was like and what he did for sinners on the cross. And this care for others became a model for how we are to care for one another. The kindness of God's care for us is designed to become the foundation of our hope, especially when things get difficult. Rather than reacting toward ruthlessness, self-centeredness, stinginess, or divisiveness, the care of God frees us to be caring.

Christian, you can trust that God cares for you.

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:32).

2. God will always be in control (vv. 12-26)

The second truth upon which we can place our expectations is that God will always be in control. You see, it is one thing to know that God makes particular promises, but it is another to be assured that he'll keep his word.

Verses 12-26 recount the stunning power of God. These verses lift us from the promises in the pages of the Bible to the glory of his might and strength. They are stunning. As we study them, allow the truth here to be a balm to your weary soul.

Isaiah takes a Job-like approach in asking three "who" questions:

- Who has the power to create? (v. 12)
- Who has more wisdom than God? (v. 13)
- Who has ever provided instruction to God? (v. 14)

He then provides three illustrations designed to highlight his power in verse 15:

- Nations are a drop in a bucket
- They are dust to be wiped off the scales
- The coastlands are like fine dust

The point is obvious in 16-17, the great forests of the earth (Lebanon) and all the nations are nothing before him. They are less than nothing. God's power is in a world beyond our imagination. Therefore, it is foolish to put any trust in a man-made idol (vv. 18-20).

Isaiah calls God's people to remembrance: "Don't you know? Have you not heard?" (v. 21). God's power is unbelievable. The inhabitants of the earth are like grasshoppers, the heavens are like a curtain, and he makes uses them like a tent (v. 22).

Rulers are nothing to him (vv. 23-24). Our trust or our fear cannot rest in human leaders. Nations and leaders rise and fall based upon the power of a sovereign God. Every election cycle reveals something about who we are as a nation. It's also revealing how the church responds. God's rule over all things means that we can avoid the ditch of "elections don't matter" or "this election is everything!" We can avoid the ditch of secular systems like Critical Theory and we can avoid the ditch of Christian Nationalism by being reminded that nations and rulers matter, but they're not everything. It means we can work to bring change without acting as if everything depended upon it. It means we can be patriotic and love this country without loving it more than the Kingdom of God.

An uncertain future looks different when you consider the Creator of the universe. Isaiah invites us to look at the stars of the sky and to be reminded who is really in control.

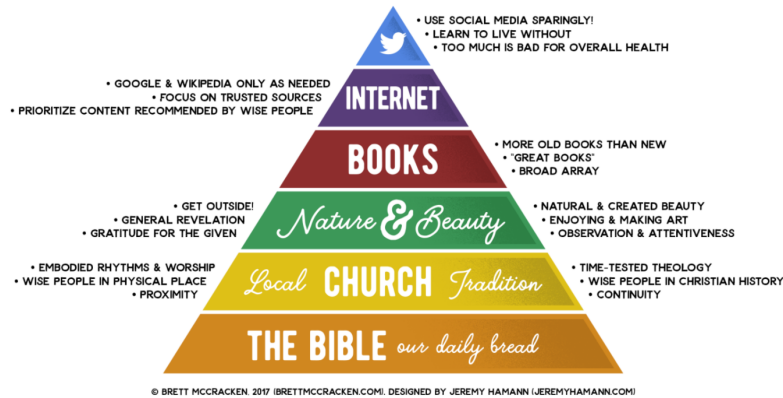
The natural world does not lie. I love this recent L.A. Times headline: "[We may live in a post-truth era, but nature does not.](#)" So true! We can't have our own preferred truth or "alternative facts" about whether or not it's raining. It either is or it isn't. Nature is a reliable and nourishing [source of wisdom](#). God speaks to us through nature, through general revelation (e.g. Psalm 19, Romans 1:20). The [heavens declare](#) the glory of God. So get outside and [listen](#)! Being in nature also helps us to be humble; it reminds us that there we are one created being as part of a massive created world. It leads us to understand the rhythms of nature and the rhythms of our own bodies, the concepts of Sabbath and rest. It helps us cultivate gratitude for all that God has given to us.²

Some of us might need to consider some perspective changes in 2021. Ask yourself what helps you to be reminded that God is in control? What do you need to be reading? What do you not need to be watching? To whom do you need to be listening? To whom do you not need to be listening?

Months ago, I shared an image from Brett McCracken's new book, *The Wisdom Pyramid*. I want to share it again so you can consider how to feed your soul in 2021:

² <https://www.brettmccracken.com/blog/2017/8/3/the-wisdom-pyramid>

Wisdom Pyramid



You can expect difficulties in 2021, but you can also use the divinely given resources to remind your heart that God is in control.

3. God will empower our endurance (vv. 27-31)

The final hope that is offered is deeply encouraging. Verses 27-31 detail the promised endurance that God will give to those who belong to him. These verses detail how God can sustain his people in dark and difficult days.

This passage begins with a unique level of honesty as verse 27 wrestles with why God seems to be far away. I love that these words are in the Bible: "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God."

When was the last time you felt that way? When was the last time you wondered in your exhaustion if God had forgotten about you?

Notice the hope that he offers and how it flows from the character of God himself. Once again (v. 28), he reminds the people about what they already know. Biblical endurance is often not learning something new, it's applying an old truth in a new way.

The truth to which he appeals is the power of God (v. 28). He's the everlasting God. He's the creator of the earth. He doesn't faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. This is the floor. This is what God is like. He possesses everything you need. God can give us what we need.

What does God do? (v. 30)

- Gives power to the faint
- Increases strength to those who have no might

And he does this in a way that doesn't make sense. Youthfulness or physical vitality are not determinative of this kind of endurance.

So, what are we called to do? Verse 31 is a powerful reminder:

...but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint (Isa. 40:31).

Waiting on God – that’s the key. It’s not a waste of time or energy. Waiting isn’t taking a passive, fatalistic approach. Nearly 25 years ago a friend gave me a book by Andrew Murray entitled *Waiting on God*. It proved to be a helpful counselor to me during a particularly hard season.

Here’s one of the things Murray says about waiting:

The giver is more than the gift; God is more than the blessing. And our being kept waiting on Him is the only way for our learning to find our life and joy in Himself. Oh, if God’s children only knew what a glorious God they have, and what a privilege it is to be linked in fellowship with Him, then they would rejoice in Him! Even when He keeps them waiting, they will learn to understand better than ever. “Therefore, will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you.” His waiting will be the highest proof of His graciousness.³

Waiting on the Lord provides the endurance that we need.

So, which truth do you need from the Lord today as we make our way into Christmas and consider another year before us?

Do you need to be reminded:

- God will care for you
- God will always be in control
- God will empower your endurance

While life is often uncertain, these truths are not. While we don’t know what to expect in the next year, we do know that we can expect God to care for us, be in control, and empower our endurance.

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³ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/239588-waiting-on-god>