

# Divine Preparation

Isaiah 40: 1-11

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Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are usually referred to as the major prophets because of the length of their varied prophecies, while the rest of the recorded prophecies from Daniel to Malachi are referred to as the minor prophets. It is apparent to anyone reading through these inspired records that the book of Isaiah is rightly given first place. Its scope, its themes and its account of future glories, places this book in the forefront of the prophetic word. The meaning of the name Isaiah is "Salvation of Jah," and the theme of salvation runs through its pages. Moreover we find over sixty quotations from this book in the New Testament, a further indication of the important place it has in the divine record.

In our Bibles it consists of sixty-six chapters, and these are composed of seven sections, each having its distinctive heading.

The first section embraces Isaiah 1 to 12, and is mainly occupied with the sinful state of the nation. From Isaiah 13 to Isaiah 27 the removal of Israel from the land in divine chastisement is pronounced. From Isaiah 28 to Isaiah 35 the theme is in relation to the return of Israel to their own land in view of their coming Messiah. In Isaiah 36 to Isaiah 39 the future attack of the Assyrian is foretold. Then we have a distinct section comprising Isaiah 40 to Isaiah 48, where the preparation of the nation for their coming Messiah is the theme. This preparation is that which we have in mind at the moment. We then come to what is perhaps the best known portion of this prophecy Isaiah 49 to Isaiah 57. Here our thoughts are turned to the Messiah as being with His people, first in spirit, and later in actual fact when He came into this world and was rejected by His own. This leads to the last section where in Isaiah 58 to Isaiah 66 the display of glory in the world-to-come is clearly brought before us. Such is the wide range of truths covered by this book.

In calling attention to the opening verses of Isaiah 40, where preparation for their coming Messiah is the theme, we have in mind to indicate how this preparation was made. Obviously it is the first coming of Christ into the world which is before us; it is that which is referred to as the subsequent verses will clearly show.

Two lines of truth are in view, human responsibility and divine sovereignty. Our finite minds often fail to grasp the wonderful way in which these truths blend together in the dealings of God with mankind. Yet both are clearly taught in the word of God, and we must have some understanding of them if we are to know and enjoy the fulness and the security of the blessing into which God has brought us. While Israel as a nation is in view in these chapters, we have nevertheless truths set out which have reference to all those who have been brought into blessing by God. "All flesh shall see it together," Isaiah 40: 5. As sinners we all needed salvation, and God has provided this salvation in such a way that He can righteously bring us into blessing consistent with His own righteousness and holiness. Along with this He has wrought in our souls in sovereign grace in order to establish that salvation upon an indestructible foundation.

These are the two truths we have in mind at present. Such is the glory and power of our God who has so wrought *toward* us as well as *in* us that, while we must have our sins forgiven if we are to be blessed, yet He has sovereignly worked in our souls begetting there in the power of the Spirit an entirely new nature having a capacity to take in and understand His thoughts and movements towards

us. It is in this way that God has secured us for His own glory as well as for our everlasting blessing.

In a future paper we hope to show that even in the days of Isaiah's prophecy these two features of the truth are seen as a necessary preparation for those who would ultimately accept Christ as the sent One of God. As writing this paper to those who are conversant with New Testament teaching, we trust we may be able to show that these truths were in mind at so early a date in the history of God's dealings with mankind, and were then, as now, in view of bringing man back to Himself for the delight of His own heart of love.

Isaiah 40: 1-11

"Comfort ye comfort ye My people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins," (vv. 1, 2).

These opening verses plainly display the disposition of God towards His earthly people Israel. The marginal reading of "comfortably" is "speak to the heart," and this is the correct rendering. It is a call calculated to arouse the affections of God's people in view of the coming of their Messiah. The word "warfare" may be translated in several ways, "suffering" or "appointed time" being two of the alternative meanings of the word, and it appears to refer to a period of time which was about to come to an end, the time during which Israel had been subjected to Gentile dominion and which dated from the captivity under Nebuchadnezzar. Although a remnant had been restored to the land under the Medo-Persian rule, the results of which are recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people themselves remained under Gentile dominion, passing under Greek rule and finally that of the Romans. Stephen, in his address, refers to this time of captivity, and was led by the Spirit to quote from Amos, chapter 5. Having turned in heart and in practice to the worship of idols, God gave the people over to Gentile captivity where these idols were worshipped. They had suffered as a consequence, and it is to this time of suffering these verses refer. The coming of their Messiah would bring this state of things to an end providing they would receive Him. Had they done so, His kingdom would have been established and their deliverance effected.

The cross also is involved in these verses, for pardon is held out to them, that is the cancellation of their sinful account before God. We understand the word "double" to mean the "receipt of a settled account." Instead of attaching a receipt to the face of a settled account as we do today, it was the custom in those days to fold over the foot of the bill and write the receipt on the back. Receiving the "double" meant that the debt was paid. Such is the promise held out in these two verses, and which would have been true of the people had they received in their hearts their promised Messiah. This was offered to them in preparation for His coming.

"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it," vv. 3-5.

These verses outline the ministry which was committed to John the Baptist. Turning to the gospel by Luke 1 and 3, we read of John "He shall go before Him . . . to make ready a *people* prepared for the Lord," Luke 1: 17. Again, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord," Luke 3: 4. John pressed upon the people their sins before God, and quotes these verses in Isaiah 40 as the basis of his ministry.

A threefold effect is presented here involving three classes of persons, "And the *people* asked him saying, What shall we do then?" Luke 3: 10. "He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise," verse 11. Thus the mountain and the hill were made low and the valley exalted. Secondly, "then came also *publicans* to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you," verse 12, 13. Here we see how the crooked were to be made straight. Thirdly, "and the *soldiers* likewise demanded of him, saying, and what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages," verse 14. Thus we see the rough places made smooth. He would arouse every class to a sense of their responsibility before God, thus preparing them as a *people* for the coming of their Messiah. This was an appeal to the hearts of the people, God on the one hand offering them pardon, they having suffered for their sins under His governmental hand; and He also seeking to prepare them for the reception of Christ who would bring them into the blessing of God. Their responsibility is the theme of this appeal.

Referring again to Isaiah 40, we find a note of a different sound in the next few verses.

"The voice said Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field; The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the Spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it; surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God shall stand for ever," verses 6-8.

The first cry (verse 2) was to awaken the people to a sense of their responsibility, but this cry showed the need of the intervention of God in divine sovereignty. "All flesh is as grass." It was right that Israel should be awakened to a sense of their need, and this was the object of the testimony of John, but did he know of the need of a work in their souls ere repentance could be effected? Two statements of John would involve this truth. "Begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father; for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to *raise up children* unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the *root* of the trees," Luke 3: 8, 9. While John exercised their hearts as to the *fruit* they ought to have borne, he also spoke of the necessity of a new *root* before good fruit could be produced for the pleasure of God. How then was this new root to be implanted in their souls?

Two elements are brought to our notice in the verses we have referred to in Isaiah 40, the Spirit (verse 7) and the word of God (verse 8). These are potent forces which God uses to lay an entirely new foundation in the souls of men. It involves death to the flesh, for both the Spirit and the word stand in contrast to the withered grass. These verses are quoted by Peter in his Epistle, 1 Peter 1: 24 & 25 where the need of new birth is again in question. We read in John 2: 24, 25, that the Lord did not commit Himself to man after the flesh, "for He knew what was in man." Truly, "All flesh is as grass." If then man according to flesh is incapable of responding in heart to the appeal of grace, God will by His Spirit and by His word lay a foundation in the souls of men, which work will enable them to respond to His call and to accept Christ and thus be brought into the blessing which is in His mind for them.

Reading on in Isaiah 40, we hear another call, "Behold your God!" verse 9. How this reminds us of that word of John the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb of God." Many names are brought before us in that first chapter of John's gospel, names of persons who were drawn to Christ, and we are not left in any doubt at all that those so drawn had been born of God. John 1: 12, 13. Such obtained the reward of eternal life; "behold, His reward is with Him," Isaiah 40: 10. They also obtained the blessing which His work secured for them, "His work before Him." As the Good Shepherd He would lay down His life for the sheep, and would feed them as belonging to Him (verse 11). It is worthy of note that when the Lord speaks of His sheep, He regards them as His sheep *before* He lays down His life for them. He did not

lay down His life to *make* them His sheep, he laid down His life for those who *were* His sheep (John 10). Thus the blessing He came to secure for those who were His in Israel was secured to them on a two-fold basis. They were born of God, and the Shepherd died for their sins.