

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

By

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ISAIAH CHAPTER FORTY

GOD THE COMFORTER

"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. The voice of him that meth 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. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness 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 1-8).

THE latter part of Isaiah is actually in a sense, the third part, because, as we have already considered, the first part of the book was divided into two sections - one, the prophetic, and the other, historical and typical.

Beginning with chapter forty this part of Isaiah's great book is the portion which some attribute to "the great unknown," or, as they put it, "the second Isaiah," some unnamed prophet who wrote after the Babylonian captivity and whose work was supposedly incorporated into the book of Isaiah by a later editor. But the New Testament definitely negatives this and attributes this section to Isaiah himself (Matthew 8:17; Luke 4:17, 18); so we need not trouble ourselves about such unfounded critical theories. The matter is settled for us.

The chapter commences with the words, **"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."** GOD means to comfort His people, but in doing so He has to bring before them very definitely their true condition in His sight, and then shows His remedy.

The first part of this message may not sound very comforting and yet GOD must begin that way.

GOD wounds that He may heal; He kills that He may make alive. We never know Him in the fullness of His power to sustain and comfort until we have come to the end of our own resources.

In His gracious ministry of comfort GOD always begins by showing us our need and our dependence upon His omnipotent power. In this chapter forty he says to the prophet, "**Comfort ye My people,**" and then proceeds to instruct the servant as to the character of his message. "**The voice said, Cry.**" Isaiah asked, "**What shall I cry?**" The answer was, "**All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field.**" This is ever the divine order. It is not until we realize our own utter nothingness and helplessness that we are in a position to avail ourselves of the comfort which the Lord waits to give.

In the New Testament we see each Person of the blessed Trinity engaged in this ministry of comfort. GOD the Father is called "**the God of all comfort**" (II Corinthians 1:3). GOD the Holy Spirit is spoken of four times in our Lord's last discourse to His disciples as "**the Comforter**" (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). One character of our Lord's work and ministry is "**to comfort all that mourn**" (chapter 61:2). He is also called our "**Advocate with the Father**" (I John 2:1).

The word for "**Advocate**" is exactly the same in the Greek as that for "**Comforter**" in John's Gospel.

How blessed to be in fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, so that one can enter into and enjoy the comfort They delight to give!

What greater privilege can we have on earth than to enjoy the abiding presence of the GOD of all comfort as we face the perplexities and bitter disappointments that we are called upon to endure?

If we never knew grief or pain we would never be able to appreciate what GOD can be to His suffering people. When we cry to the Lord in hours of distress, He does not remove the cause of our trouble in every case, but always gives the needed grace to bear whatever we are called upon to endure. When in heaven we read the meaning of our tears and see just what GOD was working out in our lives, we shall praise Him for every trial and affliction, as we see in them all the evidences of a Father's love and His desire to conform us to Himself.

If GOD gives the comfort of the knowledge of forgiveness of sins, and of the salvation of the soul, He begins by stressing the utterly lost condition of men, their helplessness, their sinfulness, thus leading them to take their true place before Him in repentance, confession and acknowledgment of their iniquities.

He looks forward here to the time, however, when Israel's iniquities will all be put away. He says, Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and tell her that her warfare, her long conflict, is accomplished, her iniquity pardoned, and the Lord hath returned unto her double for all her sins. That does not mean that Israel will have been punished twice as much as her sins deserved. GOD will never do that.

When speaking to Job, Elihu very clearly says that GOD will not lay upon man more than is right. He will deal with each man according to his light and knowledge, and the actual sins that

he has committed (Job 34). But He will not punish anyone more than his sins deserve. But this expression, "**She hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins,**" is a commercial one.

If a Jew were in financial difficulties and he turned his home or his farm over to a creditor in order to meet his debts, a paper would be made out giving this full information. One copy would be kept by the one who placed the mortgage on the property, and the other would be nailed up on the doorpost, so that anyone would understand that this property was transferred temporarily to another. When the account was settled and everything was paid, the notice on the doorpost would be doubled, tacked up double, covered over. That indicated it was all settled.

When it says, "**She hath received of the Lord's hand the double for all her sins,**" it is as though it said the account has been fully paid. Nothing more now to suffer, because the Lord will have pardoned her iniquity.

That is declared in the very beginning of this section. That is the goal toward which the people are to look and then later we are told how they reached that goal. And so in the first place now, we have a prophecy that relates to the coming of John the Baptist, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "**Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.**"

When certain of the Pharisees asked John the Baptist if he was Messiah or the one spoken of by Moses, "**A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up like unto me, him shall ye hear in all things.**" John said, "**I am not.**" His questioners asked, "**If thou art not Messiah nor that prophet, who art thou, and why baptizest thou?**" John said, "*I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness; Prepare ye the way of the Lord.*"

Thus he applied to himself these words of Isaiah.

The voice said, "**Cry.**" In sending His messenger GOD says, "Cry! Cry aloud. Give out My message." And then the question comes back, "**What shall I cry?**" The answer is, "**All flesh is grass. . . and all the glory of man is the flower of grass. The grass withereth, the flower thereof fadeth away, but the word of our God shall stand forever.**"

What is significant about that to comfort the people of GOD? "Tell them that all flesh is grass, that they are just poor helpless sinners, there is nothing to glory in. All the glory of man is as the flower of the grass and the grass withereth and the flower thereof fadeth away."

Is there anything comforting in that? It is the first thing we need to know. If we do not learn the lesson of our utter helplessness, we shall never turn to GOD for salvation. If we think that we can save ourselves we shall not avail ourselves of the provision that GOD has made for our salvation. So He says, "Tell them that all flesh is grass." But tell them that the Word of the Lord endureth forever. Peter quotes this in the first chapter of his first epistle and gives this significant comment on it: "**This is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.**" It is the gospel message which comes before us. The Word of the Lord that endureth forever is the good tidings of the gospel.

"O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young" (verses 9-11).

Immediately following the words, **"The word of the Lord endureth for ever,"** comes, **"O Zion, that bringest, good tidings. . . say. . . Behold your God!"** Good tidings - that is the gospel.

Here are not only "the silent glances of Scripture," but they are intimately linked with the early chapters of all the four Gospels, which speak of the Lord's first advent, and Matthew says plainly the events given are the fulfillment of that which was spoken by Isaiah and other prophets. The coming One is Emmanuel, **"God with us," "the Lord God will come,"** and then His character is given as the tender Shepherd.

When the Lord JESUS actually came, He took the very phrase spoken of here by Isaiah. He says, **"I am the good shepherd . . . I lay down my life for the sheep"** (John 10:11, 15). And so as the tender shepherd He is pictured here in the good news that GOD brings to Israel - the shepherd carrying the lambs in his bosom and gently leading the flock, gently leading those with young.

Yet this One who comes to us so tenderly as the Good Shepherd, a real Man, a Man in absolute holiness, kind, compassionate, loving, is the almighty omnipotent GOD, the omnipresent and omniscient One, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

GOD Himself speaks in power and majesty, putting Himself in contrast with the helpless man-made idols of the heathen, to whom many of the people of Israel had turned.

"Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold: he taketh up the isles as a very little thing. And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering. All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will ye liken GOD? or what likeness will ye compare unto him? The workman melteth a graven image, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold, and casteth silver chains. He that is so impoverished that he hath no oblation chooseth a tree that will not rot; he seeketh unto him a cunning workman to prepare a graven image, that shall not be moved" (verses 12-20).

The Blessed One, Shepherd of Israel, who is speaking here as the Creator of the heavens, the One of omnipotent power and omniscient wisdom, has resources for faith to lay hold upon. So great is He that no suitable offering could be made to Him. **"Lebanon is not sufficient to burn,**

nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering" (vs. 16).

Sin is so terrible an affront to a holy GOD that no sacrifice, however great, which man could offer would ever avail to put it away. Although the mountains of Lebanon became as a great altar, and all the cedars thereon were hewn down and piled up for one enormous fire, on which were sacrificed the vast herds and flocks that grazed upon the pastures of these wooded hills, yet all together they would not be sufficient to atone for one sin. Only the precious blood of CHRIST avails to make propitiation for our guilt and to justify us before GOD.

"Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in: That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity. Yea, they shall not be planted; yea, they shall not be sown: yea, their stock shall not take root in the earth: and he shall also blow upon them, and they shall wither, and the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble. To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their hosts by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth. Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (verses 21-31).

Why, we may well ask, has GOD thus truly described Himself? It is because those over whom He has such a tender care are faint and weary, without strength, so He turns them to Him as the Source of power, simply to wait upon Him, for this divine GOD has an interest in everyone.

It is not because of lack of power that GOD does not give immediate release from trial and tribulation. His understanding is infinite and He is working out His own counsels for our blessing when He permits affliction to fall upon us and continue to oppress us.

We must learn the lesson put before Job, that man cannot fathom His plans, so should seek to submit without question to His providential dealings. It is easy, when distress or suffering becomes prolonged, to think that GOD has forgotten or is indifferent to what one is going through. But this is always wrong. He is ever concerned about His people, and in His own time will give deliverance; and until then His grace is available to sustain and strengthen the soul, that one may endure as seeing Him who is invisible.

"He giveth power to the faint." It was this that enabled Paul to glory in his infirmities, that the **"power of Christ might rest upon"** him (II Corinthians 12:9).

He will supply the needed strength to meet every test He permits us to face.

"They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength." Mere natural and physical powers will not avail in the hour when one is called upon to face great mental and spiritual emergencies. But they who have learned to refer everything to GOD and to wait quietly upon Him will be given all needed strength to rise above depressing circumstances, thus enabling them to mount heavenward as eagles facing the sun, to run their race with patience, and to walk with GOD with renewed confidence and courage, knowing that they are ever the objects of His love and care.

It is one thing to wait on the Lord. It is quite another to wait for Him. As we wait on Him we are changed into His likeness. As we wait for Him in patience we are delivered from worry and fretfulness, knowing that GOD is never late, but that in His own time He will give the help we need.

Someone has suggested that we may apply Isaiah's words, verse 31, as representing Christians or children of GOD in different ages. The young believers mount up with wings of hope and expectancy as eagles flying into the height of heaven. The middle-aged ones are running with patience the race set before them, while those who have reached old age have come down to a quiet walk with GOD as they near the portals of the eternal Home of the saints.

~ end of chapter 40 ~

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