

“The Word and Arm of God”

Isaiah 40:6-11

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

⁶A 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.

⁷*The grass withers, the flower fades*

when the breath of the LORD blows on it;

surely the people are grass.

⁸*The grass withers, the flower fades,*

but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹*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!”

¹⁰*Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,*

and his arm rules for him;

behold, his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

¹¹*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.

- Isaiah 40:6-11, ESV

Introduction: When People Fail

They say you should never meet your heroes. I used to work as part of the concert team for Bright-FM back in the 1990s and early 2000s, and I got to meet a number of Christian recording artists who came to town on tour. I also produced and hosted a radio show and got to interview a number of artists. I really liked the music of some of these artists, so I was really excited to meet some of them. Most of them were

very nice and humble. Some of them were obviously tired and stressed from long tours. A few just came across as being very arrogant and rude. One of the nicest young artists I met in August of 2001 was Katy Hudson, who seemed very sincere and genuine. You probably know her by the name she uses now, Katy Perry.

Over the years, I have watched people I admired and respected fall away from their ministry positions or from the faith or have deep scandals uncovered about them after they died. It's too easy for us to build other people up in our minds as being greater and stronger than they really are. Today's passage contrasts the weakness and unreliability of people with the strength and dependability of God's Word and God's Arm. God's Promises and God's Presence will never fail us, unlike people who will always disappoint us in one way or another.

The Frail & Failing Nature of Humanity

Why do people disappoint us? Part of the answer lies in the inherent nature of people, but part of it also lies in the weight of our expectations that we put on people. Let's look closely at verses 6-8:

⁶*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.

⁷*The grass withers, the flower fades*

when the breath of the LORD blows on it;

surely the people are grass.

⁸*The grass withers, the flower fades,*

but the word of our God will stand forever.

The first command Isaiah was given in verse 1 of Isaiah 40 was to comfort the people of God. This is a further development of that call, as he is now commanded to cry – to cry out or to proclaim. And Isaiah wants to know what he is supposed to cry. Then, the exact meaning of the second half of verse 6 and verse 7 is a little uncertain because we don't know for sure who's speaking these lines. The original Hebrew has no punctuation. So, it could be as it is marked here, that God is telling him these things. Or it could be that Isaiah himself is wondering what he is supposed to cry, given how frail and unreliable people are.

I kind of favor this interpretation, that Isaiah is expressing his frustration: "What can I possibly proclaim, since people are so very unreliable and temporary?" He may be

expressing his disappointment with Hezekiah, who was such a good and faithful king right up until the moment when he wasn't anymore.

Whether it is Isaiah who is saying these lines or God Himself, they are true, because verse 8 is almost certainly God's response and a sound conclusion to the question of "What shall I cry?"

If we understand human nature as portrayed, then not only does it mean we should not rest our hopes on people who will disappoint us, but it also means we need to be careful what kind of message we proclaim to such people. People often want to hear messages that are all about themselves – helping them better understand themselves and especially how to improve their lives. Preaching as personal self-improvement therapy is popular because people like to hear how great they and their lives can be if only they have the right information, the best advice or guidance. But that's not what we need, and given our natures, it's not what will ultimately work to bring real and lasting change and redemption. You shouldn't trust in yourself any more than you trust in other people.

This is how we know if we've really understood and believed these verses – not if we can see how they apply to other people but how they apply to ourselves. We can easily be upset with how much other people have disappointed us, but how often have we disappointed others. How often have we let ourselves down? We may dismiss the ways others have been disappointed with us as being a matter of their unrealistic expectations or them misunderstanding us, but the truth is that we are just as frail and unreliable as other people. After all, we're all only human, and that's not a very high assessment. It's not just other people who are grass.

The Eternal, Enduring Nature of God's Word

Unlike people, the Word of God never changes and never fails. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Think about times when your plans and purposes failed or when you disappointed someone or had to break a promise you made to someone. What happened? Sometimes we make plans but are unable to keep them because of events outside of our control. Sometimes we plan to do something but then we can't afford it because some emergency expense arises. Sometimes we disappoint people because we forget an appointment or a commitment we made.

Lack of resources, lack of remembering, lack of ability to predict or control the unknown – any or all of these can and do prevent us from keeping our word. On top of all of these reasons are laziness, apathy, changing our minds, deciding we'd rather do something else, and other more morally blamable reasons why our words fail.

Now, how many of these realities apply to God? None of them!

God never forgets an appointment. He never changes His mind and decides He'd rather do something else besides keeping His Word. He never gets surprised by things that are unknown or unseen by Him. He never lacks the power to accomplish His will.

All of these truths about God and His Word explain why we need the King who is no less than the very Word of God made flesh and who thus never fails. Think about the ways Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, trying to get Him to go back on His Word. He appealed to His flesh when he tempted Him to use His power to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. But Jesus would not break His word to satisfy the cravings of His hunger, which were really strong after 40 days without food. Satan offered Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world and all of their riches, but Jesus would not break His word even when tempted literally with everything the world has to offer. And Satan tempted Jesus to show off by throwing Himself down from the Temple, appealing to His pride, His desire to demonstrate clearly who He was and have people take Him seriously as the Son of God. But honoring His Father and keeping His word was more important to Jesus than pride.

Only the King who is the Word reigns without failure, keeping His word at all times and at all costs, even to the cost of His life, given freely for us.

The Call to Boldly Proclaim the Gospel

This is why Isaiah is called to proclaim the Word of God. This is why it is only the proclamation of the Word of God that brings true and eternal comfort to God's people. But Isaiah is not the only one called to proclaim comfort from the Word of God.

Look at verse 9 –

*⁹Go 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!”*

Here, the city of God is called to proclaim to the people of God the Good News. The people of God are here called Gospel Heralds. It’s interesting that the first place they’re called to proclaim the Gospel is to the people of God. From there, of course, they take the Gospel to the nations. God called His people to be a light to the nations, but we must first have the light burning brightly in our own hearts before we can take it to the world.

As we proclaim the Gospel, we’re given three directions –

1. **Go up to a high mountain.** So, we should be as public and noticeable as possible, not hiding our light under a bushel basket.
2. **Lift up your voice with strength.** We should seek to be heard, to be confident.
3. **Fear not.** We should not be afraid of what people might say or how they might respond.

This is a joyful proclamation. It’s Good News! It’s not a political debate or a culture war argument. It’s the glorious glad tidings of God’s salvation!

And what is the essence of the message? “Behold your God!”

God is the Gospel, as John Piper’s book title aptly states. The Gospel is not primarily a set of beliefs to be accepted or principles to be lived. It is God Himself coming to rescue His people. The announcement is “Hey, look! Here is your God! He has come to save you! Rejoice, believe, and receive your God!”

The Mighty Arm of God

As the announcement of the good news is made, God is described in terms of His arm. Notice the contrast between verse 10 and 11 –

*¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
¹¹ 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.*

In verse 10, God comes with power, with a strong arm to execute justice. He comes to reward His own people and to pay people what they've earned. "Recompense" means wages, or what is due someone. It's a word that calls to mind Romans 6:23: "*For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

It also reminds me of one of the parables Jesus told, the Parable of the Talents –

¹⁴ "For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' ²³ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken

away. ³⁰And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ – Matthew 25:14-30, ESV

God will come to reward the faithfulness of those who have trusted Him and sought to honor Him with their lives, and He will also come to repay those who have taken what He has given and wasted it because they did not know Him and trust Him.

God will settle the scores and make everything right in the end. He has the power and the justice to right all wrongs, to reward those who have waited for Him and to repay those who have hated Him and persecuted His people.

The Tender Arm of God

And even as God comes in power and with justice, He also comes in tenderness.

*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. – v. 11*

For us to be able to trust in the Lord as our Savior and our King, He must be both strong and kind, both mighty and tender, both awesome in holy justice and amazing in lovingkindness.

In times of trouble and hardship, only knowing how mighty and just our Lord is gives us confidence to persevere, knowing He is in control and will make all things right in the end. And yet, because we know our own weakness and waywardness, we need His tender compassion, His heart of mercy towards those who call on Him and trust in Him.

The arm of the Lord is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the holy Judge of the Nations and the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. Jesus said, “²⁵ *“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.”* (John 5:25-27, ESV)

Jesus also said, “*the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.*” – Matthew 16:27, ESV

And yet, Jesus is also the Good Shepherd who loves the sheep and who freely gives His life for the sheep. He is the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 to go and find and bring home the 1 lost sheep that wanders from the fold.

Conclusion: We Need the True and Living God

In this world, we need comfort, when we're hurting, when we're weak, when we're wayward, when we're discouraged and doubting. We need real and lasting help. We can't find it in the world. The world is full of people seeking their own, and the world wants to entice us so it can use us to serve its agenda. We can't find comfort in ourselves, for we are grass, so frail and so temporary, and we are wicked grass at that, bent and broken by our sinful natures. And so, when we are under attack and needing comfort, we need nothing less than the one true and living God who gives Himself to us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, the strong arm of the Lord and the tender Shepherd for the lambs.

We need the rod and the staff of the Good Shepherd, as Psalm 23 says, "*Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me*" – the strong rod to fight off the enemy and protect us, the gentle and corrective staff that brings us back to the fold. The good news is that He has come for us. He is with us and for us. Here as we gather for worship every week, He meets with us and ministers comfort through His word and Spirit as He reminds us of His power and love, of just how strong and kind He is.