



December 8, 2019
Isaiah40:109
Pastor Phil Ward
The Heart Prepared

Hi Everyone. Thank you for reading this message. At Golden Hills we are committed to exalting Jesus and preaching the Word. Your downloading of this message is a great encouragement to us, as we know that our ministry is going out to spread God's Word all over the world.

We want you to know, too, that in no way do we intend these messages to be a replacement for your involvement in a good local church, where, sitting under the authority of pastors and other teachers, you can learn to worship, grow and serve and be engaged with a body of believers where you can grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We realize also, that some of you may be in areas of the world where there is no local church. Therefore, we hope you are using this message to gather with your family or other believers, or people from the community and that it will be a great encouragement to you, as you hear God speak into your life, helping you to become disciples who are true, reproducing followers of Jesus Christ.

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Father, we have gathered in this place to worship You and to give You honor and praise and thanks. In this season of Advent, we have every reason to do so. Lord, in this season of Advent, we are reminded of how the saints of old waited. They waited and waited, over hundreds and thousands of years. They waited for Your promises that You gave them, to come to fruition. They waited with eager longing and expectation to see when You would come through for them, to deliver through the Messiah, the anointed one, Christ. So You promised them through the seed of Eve, that a conqueror over death, over Satan, over sin – would come. You promised through the offspring of Abraham. You promised through a prophet, Moses. It was You who used Joshua and the judges in order to prepare Your people for what it would look like for a conquering king to come, a redeemer. You promised to David that he would have a descendant who would sit on his throne forever over a kingdom that has no end. So the people waited. They longed for the day when the new covenant would come, and the indwelling Holy Spirit would circumcise our hearts and renew us. A ruler to be born in Bethlehem, the one of whom You had spoken of so many times, the ruler over Your people. Lord, we sit here today, no longer anticipating who that might be. We know. His name is Jesus. He is the coming king. He is the one who is our savior and redeemer, the one who is reconciling all things. He is the one who gives life, conquers death, gives forgiveness. So Lord we, this side of Jesus' first coming, like the saints of old, still wait. Because You have yet made more promises that You will return. So we long in eager anticipation for Your return. For when You return, You will set up Your kingdom in fullness and finality. You will put an end to death, an end to sin. No more crying. No more pain. No more sorrow. No more tears. You will consummate Your kingdom, and we who believe in Jesus will reign with You forever and ever. So in this world, where we live, we see brokenness, sin and destruction and death. So we, like the saints who have gone before us, cry out, "Come, Lord Jesus, come!" In this season of waiting and preparation, we continue to wait, to prepare. So Lord, be honored in what You see in and through our church as we are a waiting people, confident that You will come through for us. You will fulfill Your promise. You will yet

again return. So Lord, we just thank You. Thank You for this season and for all it means for us. We ask that You bless us now, in Jesus' name, amen.

Welcome everyone. My name is Phil. It's good to be back with you. Heather and I travelled with over 100 people from our church to Israel and Jordan for the last three weeks. We had such a good time. We got to see things that we never expected to see. We got to be in places we never expected to be in. It is already beginning to bear fruit for me, in reading the Bible, having been there. It was a wonderful time.

This season is a great time when we are filled with joy and filled with hope. But it isn't because we're going to get stuff. It's because Jesus has come. What a special time.

I have to confess that I have not overcome jet lag. I thought I would. I thought, *I'm young, I can do this!* But man! It's legit! No one told me. I feel right now as I normally do at about 9 at night. So I pray for you! (laughter). We'll get through this.

I am grateful to be back. There was a number of things we were able to do. I want to highlight a couple of things we were able to do, that were so cool for Heather and me. One day we woke up right next to the Sea of Galilee. We went out there as the sun was rising over the Galilean hills. We just read the book of Mark out loud, about how Jesus was going back and forth over the Sea of Galilee to the different towns, doing ministry and preaching the gospel. I just cried. Here we are! This is real!

Another time that stood out to me was when we were sitting on the southern steps where people would go up to the temple. They are the actual steps from the first century. The very steps where Jesus walked. We know for a fact, without any doubt that those were the same steps where Jesus walked. The Jews used to take Psalm 119 and read a portion. There is a big step, then a little step. So they would go to the big step and read the psalm out loud, then pray. Then they would go to the next big step and read the next section. So I started at the bottom and broke open my Bible and read Psalm 119 on every step.

The third thing that was really cool was when I got to preach in an ancient little town called Emmaus, in a fifth century basilica. If you remember, Jesus encountered two disciples as He was walking the 6 miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. As He encountered the two disciples, they invited Him to their home. He went there and broke bread with them. He ate with them and He illumined their minds to understand scripture. He revealed Himself to them there. I got to preach that exact story there in Emmaus. Even now, I get goose bumps. It was so cool.

The other thing, on a comedic note, that I learned was that people are super impatient. I learned a lot and this was one thing. Let me give you an example. When we were in Jerusalem, we were in the hotel with little, itty-bitty elevators. You could fit like 5 people in it. But for some reason, people from all over the world decided – *no, we can fit six AND our luggage*. So it was an incredible experience. But my favorite thing was this. These elevators were not only small, but slow. So we'd get done eating, then people would walk over to the elevators. They'd push the button and then keep pushing it. I never understood this. I'm not a genius, but I'm pretty sure the elevator isn't going to go *oh, man! They're really pushing the button! I better hurry up!* So they'd wait and then finally get all mad and leave and storm up the stairs. I thought it was so interesting because regardless what country they came from – speaking in all kinds of languages I've never heard before – they were talking so angry! Crazy! Then they'd storm up the stairs! I thought – I have no idea what they said, but I know exactly how they feel. Those

who did speak English – same thing! Americans too! They'd get all mad and then head for the stairs. As soon as they'd leave – "Bing!" (laughter)

Another favorite thing was – we were on the eighth floor, coming down to have dinner. There were four elevators. One was the Shabbat elevator, or "Sabbath elevator". It stops at every floor and opens the door, to keep Jews from pushing the button on the Sabbath day, because pushing the button would be work, breaking the Sabbath. So we got into the elevator, knowing it would stop at every floor. No biggie. We're in there. I don't think everyone else knew that. So it stopped on the 7th floor. Bing! Opens up. People get in. They are in a rush. The world is about to end. They were just, GAAAAH! Got to get to the lobby! The doors close. I'm thinking *this is going to be a fantastic ride!* Level 6 – Bing! Opens up. No one is there. People asked, "Why did it stop? No one is here!" The door closes. Level 5. Opens up. "No one is even here!" They step out to look. Who is pushing the button?! Get back in. Level 4. Bing! "Come on!" (laughter) So when we got to the end, the guy was speaking German (sorry if there are any Germans here) – his face was red! That door opened to the lobby and he bolted out! Going crazy! I walked out thinking, *man! Some people are so impatient!*

But one thing I learned so much from that experience is – we as human beings, regardless of what country we live in or what language we speak, we are impatient people!

Then I came home to preach about Advent, which is fundamentally a topic about waiting. Isn't that ironic? Isn't God hilarious? So, as pastor Dennis taught us last week, Advent is a season in which we as Christians slow down. We remember that God is not slow in fulfilling His promises, He is faithful to fulfill His promises. Though it may seem slow to us, it is actually training us to patiently wait upon the goodness of the Lord. So Advent is a season where we as Christians has a time to be counter-cultural. I'm not shocked when unbelievers don't want to celebrate the birth of Jesus. That doesn't surprise me. But I am shocked, though, that those who do love Jesus, don't slow down to appreciate and to meditate on, and to patiently observe what the season means for us. That does shock me. So, church, let's slow down. Let's let this season just permeate us, wash over us.

One thing that is amazing about Advent (in my mind) is the fact that Christians, for over 1600 years, have been practicing and observing Advent. We are joining with at least 1600 years of Christian practice, to reserve the four weeks before Christmas, as a time to slow down and observe faith, hope, love, joy – and on Christmas, peace. It's just a great time. A great practice. So we are joining our voices and our gatherings these four weeks, with the saints all across the world, but also the millions of saints who have walked before us over the last 1600+ years. How cool is that? What we are doing is an ancient thing.

I'm going to read Isaiah 40. I love helping people navigate Isaiah because it is Old Testament and we don't often spend a lot of time there. Turn to Isaiah 40. We're going to read this. We see that this, at first look, isn't a Christmas passage so to speak. But it is an Advent passage. It is a passage about the reason why Jesus came, and the promises of God fulfilled in His coming.

Isaiah 40:1-9

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² 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.

³ A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ 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.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
or the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

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.

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!”

Father, that is our prayer, that You would so reveal Yourself in and through Your word, that we would leave this place with the unmistakable reality that we have beheld You. In so doing, I pray that You would cause in our hearts a hope to fill us. And that hope that fills out hearts would cause us to be a people who would lift up fearlessly, the great announcement of the good news of great joy that is for all the peoples, in the town of David – Chris, our savior is born. So God would You teach us now, and we'll give You thanks for what You do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Like I said, advent season is a time of waiting and preparation. The people of old, the saints of old in the Old Testament, had various promises that were given to them, and their lives were characterized by faith, by just trusting that God's promises are going to come true. They anchored that trust in the very character and nature of who God is. So they believed, since God promised it, and God cannot lie, then we will trust that the promises He gave us, He will come through with, and He will accomplish them for us. So there were a whole host of promises that God gave His people. Pastor Dennis reminded us of the series of promises that are all linked together, progressively, through scripture, that signify and alert us and prepare us for the coming of the Messiah.

If you remember, when Adam and Eve took hold of the fruit of the garden, they should not have done it, but they did it anyways. They no longer trusted God and they acted out in disobedience. God came to them and He cursed not only Adam and Eve for their actions, but He also cursed Satan for tempting Adam and Eve to do such a thing. In the midst of that curse, God provided a hopeful promise. In the midst of that dark moment in which God's judgment was being poured

out on Adam and Eve, there was a ray of hope, a ray of sunshine. God said this (Genesis 3:15) “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel.” God is speaking directly to Satan. He says, between you and your offspring (that is, all those who are not God’s people) and the woman and her offspring (God’s people), there will always be enmity, always be strife. But there is coming a day when there will be one born to the woman who will actually conquer you, Satan. He will conquer the effects of sin, which is death and will actually conquer and vanquish sin itself. But in the process of his victorious conquering, he will be bruised. In other words, there will be pain and suffering along the way.

So the nation of Israel took this promise and they clung to it all their lives – that one day, God is going to come through for us. He is going to put an end to sin. He is going to put an end to death. He is going to conquer Satan, and we will once again dwell with Him in a paradise like Eden. So they waited. And waited.

Then over time, God gave them other promises which fleshed out this promise. God gave promise to Abraham that through his offspring, He will bless the nations. After that, God raised up Moses. Moses led God’s people and redeemed them out of Egypt, just like Exodus 19 says.

But the whole time, the people of Israel were wondering – *ok, we’re waiting for the seed of the woman who will conquer Satan. Is it Abraham?* It’s not.

Well, then it has to be Moses – he delivered us from bondage and slavery. But it wasn’t Moses. He died at 120. But God promised a prophet like him would one day rise up and lead the people. So they waited.

Then God brought forth Joshua to lead the people in conquest of the land. So surely it must be Joshua. His name, Yeshua, means “savior” or “salvation.” But it wasn’t Joshua.

Then God raised up the judges, and another way to translate “judge” is “deliver” or “redeemer,” It wasn’t any of the judges.

Then God raised up a faithful man named David who would reign as a great king over a great kingdom. Surely, they thought, it is David. It had to be David! Remember, David conquered Goliath. Goliath was the warrior who represented a king whose name, translated, means “serpent king.” So Goliath comes out, representing the serpent king, and does battle with David. David defeats him, cuts his head off! So surely, David has to be the seed of the woman who is conquering sin and death and Satan. But it wasn’t David.

So the people waited. God once again raised up, time and time again, prophets. One then another, then another one. Each of these prophets were telling the people to keep waiting. God will come through. There was the promise of the new covenant. There was the promise of the circumcision of the heart. There was the promise of being cleansed from idolatry. There was the promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit. There was a promise in Micah 5:2 that one day, as God says ...

² But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,

whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.

There is going to come a ruler from Bethlehem who has been spoken of from ancient times. He is going to be the ruler over Israel, over God's people. So the people waited. And they waited.

What is characteristic of the people was that they constantly trusted God. They knew God was going to come through for them. We read (Micah 7:18-20) –

¹⁸ Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.
¹⁹ He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.
²⁰ You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and steadfast love to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our fathers
from the days of old.

You see that last verse (20) -- You will be faithful to Israel because of Your steadfast love for Abraham. We are trusting in Your word. We are trusting in Your promises. So we wait.

So we, on this side of Jesus' coming, we actually understand what the saints of old experienced. We know what they were going through. As they waited for the first coming of Jesus, for the coming of Messiah, the one who would fulfill the promises of God, we now, on this side of Jesus' coming, also wait. We wait not for the first advent (Jesus has already been born). We wait for the second advent.

The word "advent" means "to appear" or "to make oneself known." In Greek it is the word "parousia" which means "the appearing" or "the presence" or the "coming". So advent is the time when we celebrate God's coming to us, both in the first advent and also, at some point, in the second advent. God will come!

So as the saints of old waited for Messiah to come the first time, we as the new covenant saints, we wait for Jesus to come the second time.

What exactly are we waiting for?

The people of old were waiting for a deliverer, for the forgiveness of sins. They were waiting for the indwelling Holy Spirit. We don't wait for those things. We have those things. But we long for God to fully and finally accomplish His redemption. He has begun the redemption in the coming of Christ. We can have forgiveness of sins and the indwelling Holy Spirit. We can be assured of eternal life. We can be made new again. We can honor God. We can love God and our neighbors as we ought to. We can do all these things, but we live in the midst of a fallen and broken world. We still struggle with disease. We still struggle with death. We still struggle with sin. We still see injustice running rampant all over our world. So we wait. We wait because God has made a promise that when He returns, He will consummate His kingdom and bring justice.

God will bring with Him, the righteousness we all long for. He will usher in His kingdom and those of us who repent and believe the gospel, will be raised victoriously. We will receive a body, the very body that He promised we would receive, called the resurrection, or glorified body. We will dwell with Christ in the new heavens and new earth, where righteousness dwells. There is no more tears. There is no more pain. There is no more sorrow. There is no more death. All of those things have been vanquished and done away with. So we wait.

In this advent season, brothers and sisters, we are not just waiting for anything. We're waiting for someone. This is a great season for us to remember how the saints of old waited for the first advent and we, like them, are continuing to wait. But we wait for a second advent.

As 1 John 3:2 says,

² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears [advents, comes] we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

So we wait. And we hope.

Philippians 3:20 says

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

So we wait.

Notice what the apostle John says. If we are waiting and hoping for Christ's second advent, if we are waiting for Him to return, he says, everyone who hopes, who has this kind of hope, *he purifies himself just as Christ is pure*. That tells me that we don't waste our waiting. If we're waiting for the coming of Messiah again, if we're waiting for the second coming of Christ, we don't waste our waiting. Instead, we get busy as we wait. What we get busy doing is informed by what the hope we have in our hearts is.

Let me say it differently: as John said (1 John 3:2) whatever your hope is will determine or shape the way that you live. Your lifestyle reflects what your ultimate hope and longing actually are.

Let me say in differently, in a way you will remember: Your destination determines your preparation. Your destination determines your preparation.

When Heather and I were preparing to go to Israel, we had to find out what the topography was. How far would we be walking? What kind of terrain is it? That informed us and helped us prepare for what kind of shoes we should bring. When we came to realize that much of Israel is a desert, then I started to realize, it would be nonsense for me to bring my surfboard – because my destination determines my preparation.

And if our destination, as Christians, is the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells, where there is no more pain, no more sorrow, no more tears, no more death, no more injustice – then that means that while we wait for that day to come, we ought to prepare ourselves by being people who are pursuing righteousness and holiness, and doing all we can

since we're going to a place where there is no injustice. So while we wait for that place, we work for there to be no injustice in this world. See that? (Applause)

And since we're destined to go to a place where there is infinite and inexpressible and glorious joy, then what we ought to do while we wait for that, is we are to labor well for the joy of all peoples. The greatest joy of all peoples is none other than Jesus Christ. So therefore, in light of our destination, while we wait, we prepare for His coming, by proclaiming the Lord's coming and the joy that is to be ours at His appearing for in His presence, there is fullness of joy. And at His right hand are pleasures forever more (Psalm 16:11).

So our destination determines our preparation. In other words, the hope we have in our hearts will shape the way in which we live.

I had the pleasure yesterday of listening to Rebecca McLoughlin speak at the Women's Extravaganza. It was awesome. You probably wonder how I was there – I was up in the sound booth. So I was there, listening to her. One thing she said got my mind racing. She said, "The Christian hope is a hope that gets us through death." Through death. The reason why that stuck with me was, I began to analyze – when we talk about hope in our world, our culture today, we see it as the slogan of politicians, and see it on churches and hear it all kinds of ways. You hear that word often.

Then I began to ask, it's not just that we say the word "hope" but what is implied in that word's usage? What are people communicating when they say the word, "hope"? Is it a hope that is going to get us through death? I don't know if you know this or not, but the odds are against us for living forever (in these bodies). Last time I checked, one out of one people die.

I'm noticing that most of the talk about hope in our culture today is not about a hope you can sink your teeth into, to really grasp to get you through death (which is inevitable for all of us). Instead, much of the talk and fervor about hope is merely how to make your life pleasant until death. See the difference?

So you hear the whole hope thing: "you can have your best life now" and "get that promotion" and "get that raise" and "get this or that, like a happy marriage or obedient kids". If you just had that. So all the hope is placed on stuff which will only get you TO death. But then you start to realize that the coming of Christ is not about us being comforted as we get to death. The Christian hope is that we are comforted to get THROUGH death.

I want to get through death, to the other side. That is exactly what the Christian hope is.

Here are the words that God gave the prophet Isaiah in order to comfort the people who were living in a broken and fallen world, who were asking themselves the question, "Where is God?" *Are you going to do anything?* So, God gives the words to the prophet Isaiah (40:1-9) –

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her

God tells Isaiah that He wants to ultimately comfort His people. The manner in which God is going to comfort His people is through *tenderness of speech*. God is going to speak. The tenderness with which He speaks is going to result in comfort.

What is He going to say? What can God say that will provide eternal comfort for His people? Three things. They are all indicated by the word “that”.

that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

First, that her warfare is ended. The word “warfare” can be translated “hardship.” What God says, her (meaning Jerusalem, representing God’s people) warfare is ended. That is significant because the people at this time, around the time when the Northern Kingdom (Israel) was acting like a fool. They were disobedient, living in idolatry. God was sending prophet after prophet, saying to them, *you need to repent or else!* And the people turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to God. They said, *we don't need You. We have everything taken care of! Back off!* So God said, all right. Then what else is coming? So He sent the people into exile. They were conquered in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians. In the midst of that conquering and exile, there was warfare. Men were being slain left and right. Women were being raped. Kids were being dashed upon rocks and killed.

So God says this with the aim of comforting His people, “Your warfare (hardship, affliction) is ended.”

What a bizarre thing to say, because he uses the present tense, “is ended.” Yet in the midst of what is going on in these peoples’ lives – they are in the throes of hardship! How in the world can my hardship be ended, if I’m still experiencing it? Duh?

I love that God doesn’t use the future tense (your hardship will be ended), but he says, *now it is ended*. How can that be? It’s that way because God speaks it. He promises it. When God speaks and promises, you can consider it as good as done. Because God’s word never returns void. God always fulfills His promises. God’s word stands forever. Nothing and no one can ever stop God from accomplishing what God wants to do. There is no other God before God. God is upper most in God! (applause)

So He speaks to an afflicted people and says, *I see you and I see all of the harm that has come upon you and I'm going to comfort you with these words. I'm making this declaration and promise: your hardship is over. You can take it to the bank.*

That puts a smile on my face.

Second thing: “that her iniquity is pardoned.” Iniquity is the word for physical disobedience, acting in a way you ought not to. He says, it is pardoned. Not “will be pardoned.” But “is pardoned.” It is as good as done.

For a people who knew their sin intimately because they had lost their land and had gone into exile, none of them would have ever said (which we hear today), “I don’t believe in sin. I don’t believe people sin.” Ok. You do lock your car, though, don’t you? They would never have said anything as ludicrous as that. But instead, God speaks tenderness to them, aiming for comfort by telling them, *your sin is pardoned. Forgiven.*

Third thing: “that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” God is saying through Isaiah, *your sin is paid for, doubly so*. Meaning, you have no reason to expect any

further punishment, for no other judgment is forthcoming. You have been bought. It's paid in full. You don't have to fear the wrath of God. You don't have to fear judgment. It's done. It is as good as done.

When you are in the throes of hardship and suffering, confronted by your sin regularly, and with the nagging and lingering feeling that judgment hangs over you, to hear the words of God tenderly spoken – *it is ended. You are pardoned. Have no fear. Comfort. Comfort.*

How can this be possible? Verse 3-5:

³ A voice [an unidentified voice] cries:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;

Why would you prepare the way of the Lord? Because the Lord is coming. So prepare His way for His coming.

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
⁴ 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.

Having been in Jerusalem now, I understand what Isaiah is saying. If you go to Jerusalem, I want to give you a warning: at no point will you ever be walking on anything flat, unless it is manmade – and even then, it will have an incline or decline. At all times, in all parts of the day, our group was either ascending or descending. All the time. When we went to this high lookout near Jericho, where the Dead Sea is, and we could look to the left and see Jerusalem, and to the right and see Jericho. You could see the road to Jericho (the Good Samaritan story) and you'd realize it is a gigantic, cavernous valley. It's like 1000 feet down. So if I wanted to go there, which is 3500 feet above sea level, all the way down to there, which is 1500 feet below sea level – that's a lot! We were huffing and puffing! You start to realize that what Isaiah was doing was to get into the minds of these people - whenever you travel and wherever you travel, it is filled with adversity. Danger is looming. Difficulty is always upon you because you are either going up or down at some point. There is nothing flat and level.

But if you notice, he is using this metaphor of high hills and low valleys, saying when the Lord comes, the adversity that you experience, metaphorically in the rising and descending of all the topography – all of that is going to be made level. Isaiah is saying, *when God comes, all the hardship and suffering is going to be done away with. Where there are highs and lows and treachery, God will smooth everything out. Everything will be made new again.* (applause)

Using that series of metaphors, Isaiah is painting a beautiful picture. When the Lord comes, He is going to do something. He is going to make life the way it ought to be.

This comfort comes about a second way:

⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
or the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

When the Lord comes, He will smooth everything over and He will reveal His glory. Those two things are going to happen when the Lord comes to provide comfort for His people.

How can we be assured of this? How do we know that this is actually going to happen? Verse 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.

I love this. After hearing these tender, comforting words, knowing that the Lord is going to come and reveal His glory, we're thinking *I just want to be assured*. Ok you want assurance? Ok, start with this: you as a human being are like grass. You are going to die. (what?) And everything you've ever accomplished and all the things that you do, the culture you make and the wealth you accumulate, the beauty of your life – all that is like a flower. It is going to fade. (what? What kind of happy news is that?!) We live in a positive culture – we only want to hear positive things. I don't want to hear about death. I don't want to hear about things being meaningless. That can't go on a Hallmark card.

But God confronts us with this reality: you need to wake up to the fact that your life is not going to last forever – in this world. Your life is fleeting. You are going to die. As the book of Ecclesiastes asks, "Then what will happen to all your stuff?"

Remember, the question I asked is, "What's my assurance?" My conclusion would be this: your assurance is not in yourself. You have an expiration date. Your assurance can't be in other people. They have an expiration date. And your assurance can't be in your stuff – because you don't get to take it with you. So the grass withers. The flower fades. What kind of assurance and hope is that?

Verse 8 – yes, the grass withers, and yes the flower fades. BUT – the word of our God will stand forever.

So God grants us assurance that He will comfort His people by ending their hardship, forgiving their sins and delivering them from the wrath of God. The assurance that these promises are true isn't because we have harnessed all of the self-positive thinking and self-talk that the pop psychologists of our day tell us to do. No, instead, our assurance is rooted not in ourselves, but outside of ourselves – in God, who never lies. He will do it. He has done it. You can consider it as good as done.

Notice the response in verse 9:

⁹ Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, [Zion is always the metaphor for the eternal people of God. We will feast
at the house of 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!”

Notice – the proper response for hearing these promises and being comforted by God’s word, the proper response is to go to a high place and declare the good news. To declare it with strength. To proclaim it. Herald it. Shout it. Scream it – fearlessly so! “Behold your God! God has done it! God has promised! God has fulfilled! God is not only a promise-maker, but He is a promise-keeper!” Declare it!

Notice precisely what he didn’t say? *Go to the mountains and declare good advice.* Notice that? He didn’t say, *Go to the mountains and tell people – look at all the good stuff God did. It could be yours, if you only did this, this, and this.* Harness positive self-talk. *Speak into existence what you want your dreams to be and then harness them.* I hear this all the time from pulpits! I can’t believe my ears! Yet it is not publishing good advice, *like go and do this.*

Instead, he says, having heard all of what God has promised, go and declare it. Declare good news. What’s the difference between good advice and good news? Good advice says, *go and do this.* Good news says, *look at what God has done, and believe it.* Believe it! Trust it!

So if our destination determines our preparation, and Isaiah writes, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” what do we need to do in order to prepare ourselves? I am often told, “Phil, your sermons need more application.” I am going to push back a little bit, church. So here is me, being the pastor and saying things that may make you feel uncomfortable: application comes in three ways: behavioral, cognitive thinking, and how you feel. So every time you leave from me preaching, I’m doing one or more of those things. I’m going to convince you to behave a certain way, think a certain way, and feel a certain way – because that is what the Bible describes as application. So if I don’t give you what to do, but I have taught you how to think – I have given you application. It’s just good news application, not good advice application. In other words, I preach the gospel.

So that was a side note. So what should we do? What should we do to prepare the way for the Lord to come in the second advent? John the Baptist has already prepared the way for God to come in His first coming. What we should do is to look at what John the Baptist did, and what God has said, then we should say to ourselves – *I should go and do likewise.*

Remember that whole “prepare the way”? A voice cries out? We don’t know who the voice is, but it’s just a voice crying out, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” We don’t know who that is, yet when we turn to the New Testament, we read (Matthew 3:1-3)

¹ In those days [of Jesus’ birth, exodus to Egypt and return to Nazareth] John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”

When we read in Isaiah 40, “A voice cries,” and we have no idea who that is, now we do. It was God, preparing His people to hear the voice of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was preparing the way for God to come.

Now how did John prepare for God to come? You notice, he came, preaching. So I say, the way in which John the Baptist prepared the world for Jesus’ first coming is by proclamation. What was it that he was proclaiming?

We see this in verse 2 : ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

And if you turn to Mark 1:1-4, as we’re introduced in Mark’s gospel to the person of Jesus, Mark says

¹ The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,

³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism
of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

So John the Baptist was proclaiming that when Jesus came, there would be forgiveness. This implies that there will be deliverance from the wrath of God. This implies that there will be an end to hardships. This produces . . . comfort.

John 1 – we see once again, John the Baptist. He is baptizing. One day (v 29) ...

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God,
who takes away the sin of the world!

Jesus was preaching in Mark 1:14-15, *the time is at hand. It is fulfilled. Repent and believe the gospel.* In other words, all of God’s promises are now fulfilled because I have come (Jesus said), and because I am here, repent and believe the gospel.

That’s what John preached. That’s what Jesus preached. John the Baptist was alerting the world – *this is your God! This is Jesus, who takes away the sin of the world.*

Now if you remember in Isaiah 40:5, “The glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” We see “the word of our God will stand forever.” Then we see at the end of verse 9, “Behold your God.”

So put this together. Behold your God. See His glory. For the word of the Lord has spoken.

John 1. In the beginning was the word. The word was with God, and the word was God. John 1:14 ¹⁴“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

John 1:29, “Therefore, behold your God.”

Do you see it? The word, which cannot fail, became a man. The word that cannot fail, which became a man – is Jesus, full of grace and truth, but also how we see God's glory. We are to behold Him, for He takes away the sins of the world.

So how do we prepare our hearts? How do we prepare for God's second coming? Look at John the Baptist, I would say. He prepared by proclamation. His proclamation was not good advice; it was good news. Look what God has done. Therefore, repent and believe it.

So if God has promised He is coming again, how do we prepare? Two things:

First, your destination determines your preparation, so we prepare for the Lord's coming by being people who are holy and righteous, people who are advocating for justice and righteousness, people who are seeking, through the gospel, to introduce people to the fullest and greatest joy they've ever known.

Secondly, we prepare for the Lord's coming through proclamation. We speak. Not the good advice of pop culture and pop psychology. No, we speak and proclaim the good news, "Look what God has done." Proclaim good news of great joy that is for all the peoples. In the city of David, a child is born.

Remember, the people of old, while they waited, they constantly rehearsed the promises of God. As we wait, church, I would say, let us constantly rehearse the gospel and remember that God has promised He is coming back. God is not a liar. He will do it. He will return. When He does, we will see Him as He is. We will receive our glorious resurrected bodies. Sin and evil and Satan will be vanquished. God will usher in the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells. We can take this to the bank because God's word abides forever.
(applause)

Father, it is right and good in this advent season to pause, to slow down and to remember that the saints of old had to wait thousands of years for Your promises to come true. Likewise, we may spend our entire lives, waiting with eager anticipation and longing for Your coming, and never see it. So I pray that in the midst of our waiting, You would help us to not be idle, and to not waste our waiting, but instead You would compel us, that since we are inheriting a kingdom that cannot spoil, rot or fade, and because it is a place where righteousness dwells, that You would renew us, that we would become holy and righteous people, pursuing holiness and that we will be proclaimers of the good news, so that many people upon Your good earth would come to know Jesus and in so doing, receive that infinite joy that You have promised. And all of this will well up to Your glory. So we grant these things to You and Your sovereignty and we ask You to do. For we pray it in Jesus' name, Amen.