

## Isaiah Chapter 40

The madness in our world today is but trivial compared to the madness in our churches. I'm horrified that in people who proclaim, "I'm born again!" there's near total or complete indifference to God's will or (and this is even worse) to the Day of Accountability that's coming. As I meet people who profess to be Christian and chat with them, I'm struck by the sad awareness that there's no love for God. There's no fear of God. "I'm already saved. You don't need to give me any of your literature," they say when I'm giving out tracts. And I respond, "Well why don't you just read this Gospel tract and then give it to someone who needs it?" And the typical reply is, "You do that. Not me." Something big is very wrong. I suspect that evangelicals today need to understand the message of Isaiah 40. Isaiah 40 is there *for us*.

Isaiah wrote at a time of horrid Middle-East violence. Wicked Assyria was ascendant, cruelly gobbling up one Gentile nation after another. Even the Northern Kingdom fell to Assyria. And that brutal Gentile power was threatening to wipe out Judah too. But Judah deserved it! Idolatry and indifference to God were rife in the land. The monarchy was a tragedy. The people didn't know what righteousness was, they were so corrupt and ignorant of the Law. Isaiah prophesied however that it wouldn't be to Assyria that Judah would fall, but to Babylon, and that in another century or so. And God, in grace and covenant love for His people, then gave them a message of hope for the future. This is the message of Chapters 40 to the end. They would indeed suffer for their rebelliousness, but in the future (as it turns out, in the distant future) there would be forgiveness and restoration. And, there would be a Servant; a unique Person would come, a suffering Servant, who would bring the needed deliverance.

A theological issue amplified that Assyrian threat. Every nation had its own god. The Gentile nations all had their own ruling gods, malevolent beings all. And it was universally believed that the fate of a nation hinged on the power of their particular god. The god of the Assyrians thus seemed to be the most powerful of all the known gods. But the Nation of Israel had been taken by the Creator God; He was their ruling God. And He ruled over all the other gods as well. If the Northern Kingdom or Judah was to be overthrown by any Gentile nation, whether Assyria or Babylon (or Persia, or Greece or Rome), it would be only because God was giving them over to deserved discipline, to judgment, and not because He was weak or indifferent. This is why the writing prophets gave us these Scriptures.

Chapter 40 opens this section of the Book. The chapter is in 3 parts, an introduction, then the message, then a closing that prepares the reader for the rest of the prophecy in subsequent chapters. The first 5 verses introduce the theme of hope for deliverance and restoration in the future. The last couple of verses again focus on hope for the future. But the compelling lesson of verses 6-28 can be summed up in this paraphrase: "What? Don't you people realize Who I am?" It's like the ending to the Book of Job: "Don't you know Who I am? You need to know Me!" We don't have to do verse by verse exposition of this section. The great message is, "I am the Creator. I have taken you, Israel, as my own. And I, the sovereign Lord God, am in total control – of everything. So trust Me." And so, to us today, the same message: "Don't you people—you church-people, you professing Christians—don't you know Who I am?" Those Judeans of 2,500+ years ago took God for granted. And we're not much different.

Is God like a close friend, someone we can be chummy with or, if we're otherwise occupied, forget about? Do we assume He's so benign, so loving and so forgiving that we can ignore Him as we pursue our own interests in life? Is 'Out of sight, out of mind' our problem? We can't see Him, so we forget He's there. No, none of these. Jesus nailed the problem: We're too self-absorbed to know God, to love God, to serve God or even to fear God. We're stuck on ourselves. We love self, even to the point of being narcissistic. We live so engrossed with our own personal interests and concerns that we're oblivious to God. That's why Jesus made it clear that if we're going to follow Him, i.e., be His disciples, we must deny ourselves. It's not an option. We need to be a totally, radically different kind of person to be a follower of Jesus. Here are Jesus' words. Let them sink in, for they are critically important:

**"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me . . . whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23,24b). "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, and . . . yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. . . any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26-27,33).**

Self-denial. We hardly even know what self-denial is, let alone practice it. We're so imbued with a sense of freedom that we don't intend to limit or restrict our desires and interests, ever. So we classify these verses as Jesus' "hard sayings" and put them into a drawer with a lock and forget that they're there. Yet Jesus said that without self-denial, no one can be His disciple. And that may mean that without self-denial no one can be saved! Salvation, after all, is discipleship; it's following

Jesus. This is heavy! We need to discuss it. Let me say here exactly what the issue is: Self-denial is necessary *because of who Jesus is*. It's the very same issue as in Isaiah 40, except that for us the focus is Jesus.

The Son denied Himself. What a stupendous act of condescension, of humility, for the Son to abandon glory and come to this violent, sin-saturated place called earth. He pursued a selfless life, depending on God's empowerment to do the Father's will. It wasn't an ascetic life, but a purpose-filled, deliberately selfless life, entirely for the sake of others. Then in unthinkable extreme self-denial, He gave Himself over to violent, hate-obsessed people to torture Him and put Him to death, an agonizing death at that. And all that was to obey and to please the Father, to carry out the Father's will, to be a faithfully serving Son, obtaining the salvation of all humanity. And so, thru the Son's personal self-sacrifice, God gained the victory over Satan, over sin and evil. Now—*get this!*—we're to do the same.

Self-denial is the only logical attitude any creature can take when aware of the infinite greatness of God and, in contrast, our finite, fallible selves. Do we really grasp who Jesus is? He's not the kindly-looking man in a robe knocking on a door, nor a man in a robe holding a lamb, as paintings hanging in many churches depict. He's the One who appeared to Saul as blinding light, light brighter than the mid-day sun, whose voice sounded like thunder. He's the exalted Son, the One who will return to earth to wreak vengeance on a world full of enemies. He is dangerous. We couldn't survive if we weren't prevented from experiencing His present glory. He's the very God who maintains our lives. He's the One who will one day judge everyone, even us, even our thoughts and our desires. He's the most important and the most ideal Person in all existence. What arrogance to love self rather than Jesus! Or to pursue one's own interests rather than His.

More: Do we have any notion of how vast, how exalted, how supremely great the Creator God is? He fills the cosmos, knows our thoughts and motives, and sovereignly rules His creation, sending both peace and calamity according to His wisdom and justice. He sees to it we're fed, and He restrains the ghastly evil that could overwhelm us. As Creator, He's the infinitely wise biologist, chemist, physicist and engineer. His holiness transcends all human attempts at understanding morality. Again, what a monstrous, abominable thing it is, to love self more than God! Self-love is inexcusable. It's idolatry. It's folly in the extreme. Let's not ever take God for granted, but live humbly and submissively before Him, filled with awe and wonder at knowing Him, as we creatures rightly should.

So, we're to participate in the great mission of God by denying ourselves and pursuing the same purpose-filled kind of life as Jesus did, to obey and please and serve God for the eternal benefit of others. But we refuse to do it! We love self too much. We're self-absorbed, self-indulgent, self-loving people. Maybe even self-righteous too. We love our comforts, our security, our well-being, and our interests. We *cannot* deny self, for self won't allow it. Lose our life for Jesus? Take up a cross? Hate family? Hate ourselves? Give up everything? No, not me. So we refuse to know God as He really is, and we pursue life as practicing Deists. We're too attached to the world and its values. We haven't really absorbed the Word, nor God's will for us.

But some will argue: "Hey, God loves and accepts us just as we are. We've been justified by grace by the atoning work of Christ. Believing in Christ is all we need to do to be saved. Who says we need to be different or do *anything*; that's legalism. If self-denial is your thing, good for you. But I don't need it." To such, I reply as follows. (i) To believe in Jesus is to follow Him. And He is the despised, rejected, suffering Servant of God — all of which we are to be also. Only self-denial makes that possible. (ii) Faith is entry into a relationship, and this is a relationship with God Himself, who makes huge demands and gives big responsibilities to go with big privileges. So faith necessitates commitment to God's will, obedience, loyalty, trust and, more, it necessitates selflessness and self-sacrifice. It's the only rational and appropriate response to the God who reveals Himself to us as infinitely glorious. And (iii), salvation isn't like a contract in which we believe in Jesus and God so loves us for doing that that He forgives us our sins and promises not to send us to hell. Nor is salvation being a passive recipient of grace, as if we're God's trophies. Salvation is being in a real, personal, intimate relationship with Jesus, indeed, with the holy, creator God. Believing in Christ is the *entry* into this relationship. And the relationship necessarily involves love and trust and obedience and becoming like Him and doing as He did. We must be careful not to mistake the entry point for salvation itself.

Dear reader: A profession of faith may be real, but words are cheap and can be insincere. It's a life of trusting, loving and obedient service that shows that our faith is genuine. And trust necessarily involves risk; if not, it's not trust. So I ask, What exactly do we place at risk in trusting Christ? A life spent taking real risks, in which personal loss or sacrifice is involved, is a life of trust. The 3 friends of Daniel, in real, genuine faith, placed their souls at risk. They preferred a horrible death and God's promise of resurrection to reward, rather than judgment the idolatry would bring. Those three Jews knew Isaiah 40, and they knew God! They loved Him, and they feared Him. They served Him by offering their lives to Him, and they serve us by being an example to us of faith and of self-denial, without which such commitment is impossible.