

## Foundations

I never usually have great confidence when I'm preaching but this sermon has already been used in deliverance ministry: Alice used my printed copy to get a wasp out of the window.

The two Isaiah passages came up in a prayer meeting earlier this year. As I was preparing, the parable kept coming so I will look at the three in conjunction.

Although it's possible to look at the Isaiah passages each in isolation and to claim the promises for ourselves, they are part of a longer cry from God to Israel and to the Gentiles which covers chapter 40 and into chapter 41.

Judah had gone into exile because of the nation's idolatry. God had called them to build lives in Babylon but to remain faithful to him. The people had peace and some prosperity, they were settled and had families, children who had never known Jerusalem. And they had spent 70 years surrounded by Babylonian and Persian idols. Whilst some Jews kept themselves separate from the Babylonians, others were assimilating and were tempted to follow those idols.

The idols all around them seemed real, clearly Babylon and then Persia were successful empires, and Judah had been conquered. It was tempting to worship the idols who had apparently brought success to these empires, rather than worshipping the Almighty.

Into this situation, come these prophetic words from Isaiah. They had probably been written over 70 years before and then sealed, for Isaiah's disciples to open and read at the time God set.

### Deal with terrain

Our first passage starts with God's prophet calling His people to "make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level"

God was not calling for an improved road system, or some major geographical changes. He wants His people to do major work on their hearts, to turn back and repent.

Although valleys could be fertile and good, they were also symbols of treachery, idolatry and despair. Their streams were unreliable, drying up in the heat, and their open spaces were used for human sacrifice and warfare. The mountains also held places of sacrifice and idol worship and were believed to be the homes of the Babylonian gods. The rough places were places of stumbling and caused difficulty in walking.

Before God can come to His people, they must deal with their idolatry and despair.

God doesn't beat them up and say you sinned and now you've got to make up for it. He tells them their sin which led to the Exile has been dealt with and now is the time to move on.

So how do we make level ground in our lives?

### What shall I cry? – Behold your God!

Firstly, we have to get our position right before God.

The prophet says "What shall I cry?" He has no words. He declares that human beings are like grass and flowers, we have no strength in ourselves. Our very lives are dependent on God and will come to an end when He says. The one thing that is stable is the Word of our God which stands forever.

Secondly, we have to remember who God is.

The prophet cries out "Behold your God!" God does not hide himself from His people. He declared Himself to them at Sinai and now He declares His status, His nature and His works to them again. (v 21)

He is the mighty King who has won the victory. His reward is already before Him. He is the loving shepherd who carries His sheep and gently leads those with young. He sits above the heavens, the nations which appear so great to humans are like dust to Him.

Isaiah asks "Who will you compare God to?"

God challenges His people to reconsider their view of Him. As with Job, He gives them the chance to argue with Him, to reason with Him if they can find fault. In a reflection of the plagues in Egypt, this passage is also challenge to the idols of Mesopotamia.

Will they choose the LORD who is the eternal King, or the king of the Babylonian gods who changed with each generation? Will they choose the idols who had specific job descriptions, dealing with agriculture, or wisdom, or goldsmithing, or the LORD who declares Himself the God of the whole universe? He needs no counsellors or teachers, He has the power of life and death over all living things.

God measures creation like a woman weighing out ingredients (v 12) and stretches out the heavens like a nomad stretching out his tent (v 22). Can the Babylonian's 'king of the heavens' do that?

The Babylonians made idols of the sun, moon and the Pleiades, but it is the LORD who calls every star into its place by name (v 26). The Babylonians worshipped gods of the wind, but God use the wind for His purposes.

After challenging His own people, God addresses the peoples of the Coastlands, the Gentiles. He calls them to strengthen themselves, to come forward with the Jews for judgement. He declares His greatness and challenges the Gentiles over their idolatry. Isaiah gives a picture of the Gentiles having idols made for themselves because they are afraid of God's wrath. They encourage each other in their idol making, saying "Be strong" and checking to make sure their soldering will hold.

The message is clear, how futile to trust that soldered metal will protect them from the Almighty!

Our idols may not be made of wood and metal whose quality depends on the money in our pocket, (v 18-20) but are there things in our lives which have become too important to us or that we do not want to give up? We need to knock down these high places in our lives and flatten them, ready for the King.

### **My way is hidden from God**

The Lord had promised Israel great things, but Jerusalem was in ruins and they had been left to fend for themselves in Babylon. They had been traumatised in battles and sieges, humiliated in defeat and led into captivity. Some accepted God's judgement and cried out to God, but others blamed Him and rejected Him. It appeared that He had let them down and forgotten them. Doubts crept in, maybe even that He was just a local god, less powerful than the Babylonian idols.

Have we come through great hardship but still not seen the deliverance that we'd hoped for? Do we have boundary lines in our lives where we say 'thus far and no further' to God? For examples, are we happy to follow God until He says no to a particular desire? This can be hard to deal with when the desire is sinful, but when the desire is itself a good thing, it is even harder. Our disappointment or

sense of betrayal can lead us to feel, like Israel, that God has let us down or forgotten us. It can tempt us to harden ourselves towards God to avoid further pain.

### **Israel should not fear**

But God, the loving shepherd, tells His people that He has remembered them. He has chosen them and that they are not to fear.

There is no cult of power here. The LORD treats the princes and rulers of the earth like grass and causes them to wither and blow away like chaff. (40 v 23-24) The leaders who seem so great now, only have power for as long as God allows. Israel is as helpless as a worm, the nation has no earthly power, but the LORD will act for them, utterly destroying their enemies.

There is no cult of youth either: the young may become exhausted, but anyone who waits on the LORD will have his/her strength renewed. They may be the frailest old woman or a small child but if they hope in God, they will soar like eagles on the wind.

### **God will do a greater miracle than before**

If the people will return to Him and hope in Him, God promises not only to restore them but to do a great miracle, even a greater miracle than before.

In the wilderness, God provided two springs of water out of bare rock, despite how hard the Israelites tried His patience. In Deuteronomy, God promised His people cisterns full of water and fertile land for crops if they followed Him alone and kept themselves from idols.

Now, God promises His disobedient, idolatrous people that if they turn back to Him, He will bring not springs out of a rock, but rivers and fountains of fresh water from the mountain tops and the valleys. There won't just be good crops in the land, but God will make the infertile desert produce great trees! A greater promise than they could ever have imagined.

Those mountains that were the home of idols will release fresh water; those valleys of hopelessness will produce great fountains of water. The places that were rough and stony will produce pleasant forests.

This miracle is not just for Israel. God's purposes firstly bless His people but will also be a sign to the whole world: that everyone "may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it."

So what does this mean for us?

### **Building the highway in the desert**

We have not yet seen this miracle in creation, but we have the opportunity to see the miracle in our own lives and to see God bring Living Water and new growth in the spiritual desert around us. We need to prepare ourselves first.

If a road has been built on sand or a mishmash of materials, it can be easily damaged or undermined by storms. The force of rivers and waterfalls can even carve channels in the rock, anything crumbly or unstable will be easily washed away.

Rivers on the bare heights must involve a huge amount of water rushing down. The images of Uluru. A fore-shadowing of this happened in Australia in March when heavy rain caused temporary waterfalls on Uluru. The footage illustrates the force of even a short spell of heavy rain.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-24/uluru-rain-creates-amazing-photos-weather/100026672>

We must make sure that our own foundations are firm in the rock that they are not compromised with sin, complacency or idols, so that our house will stand strong.

We look forward to God sending revival, but it will not be popular with everyone. When He shakes Canterbury to bring forth rivers of living water, it will reveal the weaknesses in people's foundations, it will remove their comfort and show their idols for the useless things that they are. This will frighten and anger some. It may even be unpopular with us. (After all, like the Exiles we can all be keen to see the miracle, but less keen to do the hard work or humble ourselves!)

Isaiah 2 v 19 says that when people see God's awesome splendour when He shakes the earth, they will be terrified and will cry out for rocks to fall on them to hide them from God's wrath.

If our house looks unsafe, why would frightened people come to us for help? If our walls are damaged, how will we withstand the anger or rejection of those around us? If our foundations are compromised, how will we stand up to the pressure to conform to the world or to accept false teaching?

When God opens fountains in the desert, it will not be a trickle of water like a stream rising in a muddy field but a force of water breaking through hard ground.

We don't want to be hardened in any way towards God, or to have to be set aside because we won't let God deal with hardness in us. We need to examine ourselves and be ready to let the living water go through us and out to the city, rather than having to be broken before God can work through us.

As we are each obedient, it will affect not only our lives, but our nations' wellbeing and the whole of mankind so "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together," Is 40 v 5.

Thankfully, we are not left to do tear down and build up on our own. If we are willing, our Master Builder will check our foundations and our hearts, so we can build straight paths and strong foundations with Him. Then we can say with the Psalmist:

"But as for me, I shall walk in my integrity; ... My foot stands on level ground; in the great assembly I will bless the LORD."