

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness, Part 1

Scripture: Luke 3:4-6

Code: 42-39

Well, we come to a wonderful portion of Scripture, this morning. Open your Bible to Luke's gospel, chapter 3...Luke chapter 3. This will be message number five in the first six verses of Luke 3. This is such an important portion of Luke's gospel because it is foundational to the rest of the story.

God is the author of history. History unfolds not as a random series of serendipitous events influenced by a myriad of disconnected forces, but history unfolds as the purpose of God and the plan of God worked out in precision. God is the author of history. It unfolds from beginning to end under His sovereign control. And at the center of history and really the purpose for history, the purpose for the universe, the earth and its human population is the salvation of sinners. That is the saga that gives meaning to creation. God brought the universe, the earth and mankind and all his environment into being in order that He might redeem sinners. History then is primarily His story, it is the story of redemption.

In that sense all of history has integrity, all of history has continuity and all of history has purpose as designed and executed carefully by God. Nothing proves God's control over history and particular God's concern about the story of redemption, nothing proves that better or more convincingly than fulfilled prophecy. One of the reasons we know God wrote the Bible is because there in Scripture hundreds of prophecies about future events, very precise prophecies, many of which have already come to pass in the first coming of Jesus and in other historic events that occurred in Old Testament times. There are many more prophecies yet to come to pass, connected with the time around the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

But anybody who really wanted to know whether the Bible was in fact written by God need only to honestly and thoughtfully and objectively look at what the Bible predicted which has already come to pass with precise accuracy. The Bible is filled with hundreds of prophecies, most of which relate to the coming of Christ, either His first coming which have already been fulfilled, or His Second Coming yet to be fulfilled.

One of those prophecies, just one of those hundreds of prophecies, a most magnificent prophecy, a most far-reaching prophecy is the subject of our study today. Look at chapter 3 and let's read through the text.

"Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Then the prophecy, "As it is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight, Every ravine shall be filled up and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall become straight and the rough roads smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

That is a prophecy, as Luke indicates, from Isaiah. In fact, it is from Isaiah chapter 40 verses 3 through 5. That prophecy was given 700 years before John, 700 years before Jesus began His ministry. And it is a powerful, powerful prophecy. In fact, I confess to you as a human preacher, a very human preacher, I'm not sure I can bear the weight of it. Literally this prophecy overwhelms me and I confess to you that it places on me a huge burden to communicate because it has so much contained in it. The implications around this prophecy are vast, even the explicit elements of this prophecy are powerful, but what surrounds this prophecy in the context of Isaiah has sweeping implications. And Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has picked the perfect prophecy from the Old Testament to identify John. It is a prophecy that has immense theological implications, immense historic implications, immense salvation implications. It is not just limited to John, the forerunner crying in the wilderness, it is the whole message of what he is saying that is coming to fulfillment at that moment with the arrival of Messiah. And all its implications for Israel and for all flesh, as verse 6 indicates, that is all people across the faith of the earth, this is a sweeping prophecy that literally covers all the ground of redemptive history. And that's why I say, it puts a tremendous burden on the back of a human preacher to even begin to unload the greatness of this prophecy and I'm sure my effort the second service will be as vain as my effort in the first service, to try to discharge this serious responsibility.

As I was studying much about this and going over it in my mind and meditating it and searching the Scriptures, I began to grow saddened because the more thrilled I became about this, the more I began to grasp its far-reaching truth, the more I began to understand what is being said here and how the Jewish people would have heard it and how they still need so desperately to hear it, as do all men and women, as that began to sink into my mind the greatness of this prophecy, I began to feel myself becoming sad. I started out getting more exhilarated and more exhilarated and then I turned a corner and I began to become very sad because it struck me that most people who call themselves Christians will never come to grips with the greatness of this text. And that is a travesty. That is a tragedy. That is a serious tragedy because of what is here. There are errant theologies and there are preachers and teachers everywhere who teach in error about the purposes of God, who teach in error about the future of Israel, who teach in error about the plan of God because they do not understand this prophecy and its great framework and context. It is a point of immense joy. It is a

point of exhilarating thrills to understand this, but it is also a point of sadness when you realize that not only does the world miss this, the unconverted world, not only does Israel in a state of unbelief miss this, but most people who call themselves Christians can't even come to grips with the richness of this magnificent part of biblical truth.

So I will do the best I can to try to unpack this tightly packed treasure for you this morning and next Lord's day and that will provide for us this very important foundation that Luke is giving us. Remember now, he's now at the point where the story of Jesus really begins. John, the forerunner to Jesus, steps center stage to announce that the Messiah is coming and six months later Jesus began His ministry. But as John steps on center stage and readies it for the Messiah, Luke wants us to understand the setting. He knows that we can't understand the story if we don't understand the context. And so in verses 1 and 2 he gave us the historical setting. And he didn't just set the time for us, but he set the main characters for us so that it was more than just dating this, it was really painting the drama that surrounded the arrival of John and Jesus. There was Tiberius Caesar and Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch and his brother Philip, and Lysanias, the tetrarch of Abilene and all of them, a part of the machinations of Gentile occupation of the land of Israel, a part of what was the oppressive invasion of the freedoms of the Jews which they so loved and cherished.

And then he tells us in verse 2 about the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas who were corrupt and wicked men who ran a kind of mafia-style temple operation which bilked the people of all their money and propagated an apostate kind of religion. So the historic setting is provided by seven names, five Gentiles and two Jews.

And then we looked at the geographical setting in verse 3. We were reminded there that John's ministry was outside the conventional population areas. He was in the wilderness. Since the time of his birth, since the time of his circumcision on the eighth day after his birth in chapter 1 verse 80, it tells us that he spent his whole life in the wilderness. Now he's reached the age of 30 and the wilderness is where he lives. He wears camel's hair and he eats locusts and wild honey. He's a man apart from the establishment. He is outside the influences, the attitudes and the life style of his culture. And that's by design, by God's design he is uninfluenced by his society. To some extent he is ignorant of its subtleties and its trends. But that was by divine purpose so that he could speak the pure message of God to people uncluttered by the nuances of society.

And we can safely say that John stands as a large looming rebuke to the popular church growth movement which claims that cultural relevance and social savvy are the key to effective ministry. Well John didn't care about cultural relevance, he didn't have any social savvy. He didn't know his culture by personal experience or study. But he knew his God and he knew the message of his God, that's the way God wanted it. The true prophet of God has never been called to find the common ground with his culture. The true prophet of God has always been called to bring the pure uninfluenced Word of God to confront that culture, preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

And that's what John did.

And so we saw as Luke unfolded the historical setting and the geographical setting, and then we looked at the theological setting. When John came he came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. They were religious people, they were lost. They needed the forgiveness of sin. The theology was they had a form of religion without the reality of it. They had a zeal for God but not according to a true knowledge of God, as Paul put it. And so John tells them their sins can be forgiven but only if they repent. And if they repent so deeply that they're willing to be baptized in the same way that the Gentile was when a Gentile wanted to enter into Judaism. When a Gentile wanted to be a proselyte, they were baptized in a special ceremony to show that they needed to be cleansed before they can engage themselves with the covenant people of God.

Well John by baptizing Jews is saying you have to repent to such a depth that you will confess your no better than a Gentile. So he preached a baptism for repentance for the forgiveness of sin. That was the theological perspective. People were under the damning burden of guilt and they needed forgiveness which God always has given, always will give to those who repent, whose repentance is genuine and in this case evidenced by a willingness to say I am no better than a pagan.

Now that brings us then to a fourth component of the setting, the historical, the geographical, the theological and finally the prophetic. There is a context here that fits into the scheme of Scripture. History and geography and theology are, of course, important components for Luke, but the really important element comes at this juncture because with the coming of Messiah it is critical to make certain that everybody understands this is in fact the true Messiah, and the true forerunner of the Messiah, and evidence can be gained by looking at an Old Testament prophecy.

Obviously it is critical that the Jews believe the gospel, and that is going to necessitate some connection to the Old Testament, some continuity from the Old Testament. John doesn't want to step on the scene and just launch something in a vacuum. He wants to put a hook in the Old Testament that is very tight, a clasp that can't be broken and show that his ministry and the coming of Jesus is a precise fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. This is the true word of the same God who wrote the Old Testament. And so John calls on a prophecy from Isaiah. And again, this is a powerful and really a ponderous prophecy in the sense of its great weightiness. It is this prophecy that comes written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight. Every ravine shall be filled up, every mountain and hill shall be brought low, the crooked shall become straight, the rough road smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

There is so much there, so much there. The obvious thing there is that the prophet Isaiah predicted a time when a voice would come in the wilderness. Well here's John and he's been in the wilderness since a child. That's his domain, that's where he's always lived. He's the voice in the wilderness.

And when that voice comes it will say, "Make ready the way of the Lord," and that's exactly what John was called to do. When the angel Gabriel came to Zacharias and said you're going to have a son, and that son is going to be the forerunner of the Messiah. He's going to make a people ready for the coming of the Lord. That's what Zacharias was told by the angel Gabriel who came from God. So from the beginning, John was to be the prophet in the wilderness who got the people ready for the Lord's arrival. That's what he did.

John is then the precise fulfillment of this prophecy. But there's more than just that here, a lot more. And we're going to look at the richness of this but before we get into some of the detail, let me just give you kind of a broad picture here.

John's responsibility was to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. And the analogy that is used by John is from the prophecy of Isaiah in which Isaiah under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit likens preparedness to getting the highway ready for a king. In ancient times when a monarch went on a tour of his domain and approached the various cities and towns along the route, there would be an advanced message "The king is coming and you need to make things ready. We don't want the king going through deep ravines, we don't want the king having to climb over great high rocks and mountains. We don't want the king going on some circuitous pathway. We don't want the king to have to come stumbling over rocks and boulders and great holes in the path. We want a highway for the king that's suit his dignity and one that provides ease for the monarch. We want you to get a highway ready for the great king to come to your city."

Now the people knowing this would set about to do this. It was the greatest of events to have the monarch come to their town, to have the king come to their home. And they would know of such an arrival. They hadn't seen the king so it was an act of faith, but a forerunner came and said he's coming, get everything ready so that he has easy access into your city. Start preparing a road. Start constructing a road because in a matter of months or whatever the time might be, the king will be arriving.

And so Isaiah said in his prophecy, the king will come some day but before he comes, a voice will come in the wilderness and tell people to get the highway ready for the king. And here Luke quotes that because John is the fulfillment of that. He is the voice crying in the wilderness. He has come to the people and he is saying to the people of Israel, "Get the highway ready, the king is right behind me." And truthfully, about six months later the King did begin His ministry.

So John is taking that prophecy of Isaiah and fulfilling it. And Luke makes note of that fulfillment. John was calling on the people to prepare a highway for the true King who was Messiah. There is an individual element of that, we're going to talk about that next time. And there's a national element of that as well.

Before we look at the specific fulfillment of the prophecy in Luke 3, let's go back to Isaiah 40. I need to do this. I need to go back to Isaiah 40 because I need for you to understand this prophecy the way the Jews who heard it would understand it, or the Jews who read it would understand it.

Now in the time of Jesus the Jewish people, for the most part, knew the Old Testament. And if they knew anything about the Old Testament, one of the things they knew about was the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah was a great prophet. Isaiah's prophecy was a large prophecy, it was a prophecy they were very, very familiar with. And when Luke in his writing refers to Isaiah 40 verses 3 to 5, which is what he quotes, immediately the Jewish reader would understand the whole context and flavor of that prophecy. There would be a complete setting in the mind of any knowledgeable Jew, you need to understand that because you can't grasp the greatness of this prophecy if you don't have a framework and a context for it.

Now let's go back to Isaiah 40. You look at chapter 40 and let's look at verse 1. And first of all, you immediately see a repetition of the word "comfort." "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." Now we'll stop there for a moment.

And for you it's...oh, that's nice, I'm glad God feels that way about comforting His people. You might have just nothing more than that minimalistic response if you didn't know what I'm about to tell you. The great book of Isaiah has 66 chapters. The first 39 chapters major on severe judgment. Now we don't have the time, you can do it yourself, but just start reading in Isaiah and read the first 39 chapters and you will find repeated threats of severe judgment...the northern kingdom, Israel, has gone into captivity from which they never returned. The southern kingdom, Judah, in which the city of Jerusalem exists, is now the only Israel there is. Judgment already fell on the northern kingdom for their unabashed and unrelenting idolatry and they were carried off into captivity never to come back. The only Israel there is now is the southern kingdom. And God has been pronouncing judgment through Isaiah on the southern kingdom, severe judgment which was fulfilled in the Babylonian captivity 586 B.C. and is still being fulfilled today as God brings judgment on unbelieving Israel even in our time.

So the first 39 chapters of Isaiah are very severe judgment on Judah and Jerusalem which is Israel and on other nations. So you'll read in the first 39 chapters about God's judgment on other nations as well. By the time you get through 39 chapters, it's pretty easy for you if you're a Jewish person to believe that there's no much hope for the future, that all that's going to be left for you is doom and gloom and judgment. And all of that judgment is based on God's reaction to Israel's sin and to the sins of the other nations. And that's why when you come to chapter 40 and you read, "Comfort, O comfort My people, says your God," it is dramatic. This is a dramatic moment here. This is a shock. In fact, there are some foolish students of Scripture who have concluded that this is so different than anything in the first 39 chapters that it couldn't have been written by the same author. And so they

have invented a weird theory called "The Deutero Isaiah Theory," that says Isaiah wrote the first 39 and somebody else wrote 40 to 66 because they couldn't possibly been written by the same writer.

Well, they were written by the same writer and they were authored by the same God because the same God who pronounces judgment can also offer comfort, right? That's certainly not impossible to comprehend. But it is stark in the dramatic change. Look a little further in verses 1 and 2. "Comfort, O comfort My people, says your God. Speak kindly to Jerusalem and call out to her that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins. Tell Israel the judgment is over, the war is over. The iniquity is removed. The payment has been made."

This is a shocking change. There isn't even as much transition, it's just kind of a cold change. Chapter 40 then launches the rest of the book of Isaiah all the way to chapter 66 and the message changes from judgment to salvation, from warning to encouragement. And the latter half of Isaiah's prophecy is all about salvation and the Messiah and His Kingdom and righteousness and joy and peace. And the simple message of the overall view of the book is the same God who has judged Israel for sins will some day save Israel. That is the great message of the book of Isaiah. The same God who promised terrible judgment on a sinning Israel, promises salvation on a penitent Israel. That, folks, is at the heart of redemptive history. God is not finished with Israel. Whatever may lie ahead and the prophet Isaiah knows what's going to lie ahead, he's said it for 39 chapters and the people know it, and it's also been prophesied by many other prophets, but whatever may lie ahead for the people of Judah and Jerusalem, God's ultimate purpose for them is not judgment, God's ultimate purpose for them is salvation. God's ultimate purpose for them is not destruction but redemption, not death but life. God's ultimate purpose for them is not the abolition of His covenant, but the fulfillment of His covenant.

So you see here really in my mind a dramatic insight into the unfolding and eternal purposes of salvation that God has purposed for Israel. There is a future for Israel, for Jewish people who today reject their Messiah, but some day will be saved by the very Messiah they reject because they will look on Him and see Him for who He really is and turn to Him for salvation and Zacharias said, "A fountain of cleansing will be opened to the house of Israel."

So these two verses have a warm affectionate and tender tone. Something unfamiliar in the first 39 chapters. God is saying there will come a time when sin has been paid for. There will come a time when the suffering is over, warfare has ended. There will come a time of salvation so here's the message, comfort, O comfort My people. Who's God talking to? It says "your God," who's He talking to? Who's He talking to? It doesn't tell us. I can answer it. He's talking to anybody who ever speaks to Israel. If you ever get an opportunity to speak to Jewish people, tell them this...yes, you've suffered, yes, God punished you, yes, God took the northern kingdom into captivity, God took the southern kingdom into Babylonian captivity, yes, God has punished the nation that has rejected Him

and rejected Scripture and rejected the Messiah, yes, you have suffered even in this century at the hands of Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler and Arab terrorists, etc. Yes you have suffered but the purposes of God toward Israel are salvation. And so, please, whenever you speak to Jewish people, will you say this to them? Comfort, comfort, comfort...warfare has ended, iniquity has been removed, sin has been paid for. Will you tell them that? Will you tell them that? That's the message.

I don't ever want to be responsible to say to the Jews, "I hate to tell you this, folks, but all the promises God ever made to you about salvation are now fulfilled in the church, so you're out." That is not the message to Israel. The message to Israel is not that you've been excluded, the message to Israel is comfort, comfort, comfort. Sin is paid for, all can be forgiven. And then that becomes the theme, it's introduced in verses 1 and 2, that becomes the theme of the remaining prophecy of Isaiah. And as you go through this prophecy from 40 to 66, that is the theme.

Now to show you how dominant a theme it is, let me just show you in succeeding sections what it says. Go down to verse 6, still in chapter 40, a voice calls and it says, "Call out," here's another calling to anybody who speaks to Israel, "tell them this...what shall I call out?...tell them this, all flesh is grass and all its loveliness is like the flower, the field, the grass withers, the flower fades." Just tell everybody...Hey, grass and flowers die, tell them that. And it happens whenever the wind, the breath of the Lord, the wind blows on it and people are like grass and they wither and they die, but the word of our God stands...what?...forever.

Now we live in a world where things die, people die, grass dies, flower dies, things die, but the word of our God doesn't die. Whatever God promised He will do. That's the idea here.

So, get up on a mountain he says in verse 9, whoever you are, they're talking to Israel. "Get up on a mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news and lift up your voice mightily. O Jerusalem, bearer of good news, lift it up, do not fear. You talk to Zion," which is just a synonym for Israel. "And you talk to Jerusalem," a synonym for Israel, "and you say to the cities of Judah, here's what you say when you talk to Jewish people, verse 10, behold, the Lord God will come." You tell them that. You tell them God will come. Boy, this is...I don't even know where to go there's so much here.

See, you've got a problem. You are alienated from God, Israel, you are suffering, you're in unbelief, an apostate religion. And at the time when John came on the scene and this prophecy was fulfilled and Jesus showed up, as I said, Israel was apostate and unbelieving. And sad to say, they rejected John, they rejected Jesus, they're still that way. But he says, "Whenever you talk to Israel, tell them this, 'The Lord God will come.'" You need to underline that. That is critical. That...that...that solves the problem because the problem is this, how can God say, "O your warfare is ended, your iniquities removed and your sins been paid for?" How could He do that? Does He just decide He's not going to make an issue out of sin? Or did the people do enough good deeds to cancel out the bad deeds? Or did the people devise some means to save themselves or to satisfy God? NO.

The only possible way that comfort could ever come to sinners, the only possible way that Jerusalem could ever be comforted, that warfare could end, that iniquity could be removed and sin could be paid for was if...listen carefully...the Lord Himself came. That is so critical. After 39 chapters of indictment and you're feeling the tremendous weight of sin and sinners under the weight of Isaiah's prophecy are feeling the accumulated weight of the record of crimes against God's towering holy perfection, and they're crushed under the weight of their guilt and then comes this announcement, "Comfort, O comfort you, My people," and the question is...how in the world can we be comforted under such a weight of guilt? How can our sins be forgiven? How can this happen? And the answer is, "Get up on the mountain and shout it out, I've got good news, the Lord will come...the Lord will come."

Now the whole story, see, isn't told in the judgment. Comfort My people, says your God, comfort them with good news, the Lord will come. Look at verse 10 again, "And He'll come with power, with His arm ruling for Him, with His reward, and His recompense. He's going to come and rule His people and reward His people and He's not going to be like a judge, He's going to be like a shepherd and He's going to tend His flock and in His arm He'll gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom and gently leave the nursing ewes, the female sheep that are nursing the little ones." And the picture is of this loving shepherd who just gathers up in his arms the little lambs that can't walk and who walk slowly because the ewes are laden with milk because they're nursing and they can't go in a rapid way, so He's just tenderly dealing with His flock.

This is...this is a vision of God that's different. This is a promise of restoration, a promise of salvation. Go down to verse 28, "Do you not know, have you not heard, the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth doesn't become weary or tired? His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary. And to him who lacks, mighty increases power. And though ewes grow weary and tired, even young people, vigorous young men stumble badly." I mean, we all experience human weakness. "Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength, will mount up with wings like eagles, will run and not get tired, will walk and not become weary," that magnificent and familiar verse is telling us that God who is the Creator, God who is the everlasting God, the Lord, God is going to come but when He comes, if you wait for Him to come, He's not going to come to judge you in the end, He's going to come to strengthen you. He's going to give you strength so you can fly like an eagle and run and never get tired and walk and never become weary. He's going to infuse you with a new kind of eternal life. That's all salvation blessing.

Go down to chapter 41, and we won't go beyond that, it's all through here, but just to give you some samples. Verse 8, "But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, meaning Israel, descendant of Abraham, My friend, you whom I have taken from the ends of the earth and called from its remotest parts and said to you, 'You are My servant.'" God is going to take Israel from all over the globe, gather them back and they're still going to be His servant because that was His elective purpose. And then I love verse 10, "Do not...what?...fear, for I am with you. Do not anxiously look

about you for I'm your God, I will strengthen you," like He said in verse 31 of chapter 40, "and I will surely help you and I'll lift you up and hold you with My righteous right hand." What a great promise, so hopeful.

Verse 13 He repeats it. "I am the Lord your God who upholds your right hand, who says to you, 'Do not fear, I will help you, do not fear, you worm, Jacob, you're lowly, you're earthly, but don't fear, you men of Israel, I will help you,' declares the Lord, 'and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.'" That same holy God who punishes your sin is your Redeemer.

So, we come to Isaiah 40 then and we see that God is tender and God is kind, something very easy to overlook after 39 chapters of indictment. The prophet is as much as saying...Yeah, that's all true and God will punish sinners and God is punishing sinners and He does always punish sinners, even Jewish sinners, even people in the covenant, even God's chosen people, they will be punished like everybody else for their sin. But that's not the end of the story because there is another part of the story, God is compassionate and God is forgiving and God will bring comfort to those who repent."

Look at the verse...verse 1, "Comfort, comfort," in the Hebrew that is a word used often in the Old Testament to express encouragement to someone who was grieving over the death of a family member. Genesis 24:67, Genesis 37:35, 2 Samuel 10:2 and I think Jeremiah 16:7, this is a word to speak of the deepest kind of bereavement, comforting someone who lost an intimate family member.

So God is speaking a true deep word of comfort and they are spoken, look at this, to My people, says your God. That struck me when I read that because back in the first 39 chapters He often referred to Israel as "this people...this people do this...and this people dishonor Me...and this people disobey Me." You can see it in chapter 6 verse 9, chapter 8 verse 6 and elsewhere. This people that have refused to honor Me. But all of a sudden, "this people" becomes "My people." This people may have committed willfully and constantly iniquities against God, but they're still God's covenant people. They are still the people He chose. They are still the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, the patriarchs. And they do not need to fear that God has cancelled His promises with them, He hasn't. Israel God has not cast off forever.

I'll talk about this tonight but in the Old Testament God did divorce Israel, the northern kingdom. Said, "I divorce you." But He never divorced Judah. There was nothing redeeming in the northern kingdom. There was no penitence at all, but God separated from Judah, there was a separation in that marriage, but not a divorce. There was only a temporary separation. He had to separate from those people because of their sin and that separation still exists today. And His anger against them has been serious because the sin has been so serious. And Israel has every reason to believe. They have the Scriptures, the doctrines, the promises, the covenants and even the Messiah. But God in the end will be faithful...faithful to that covenant and there will come a time when He takes Israel back, separated but not divorced and He'll take that...all that is Israel today, the remnant of

Judah and Jerusalem and He'll take them back and that's part of the message of the latter part of Isaiah. Look at chapter 49, I have to give you this.

Verse 14, now if you were in Israel and you just heard 39 chapters of judgment and you heard judgment pronounced by other prophets who were contemporaries of Isaiah and even some before and after his time, if you heard nothing but judgment, you might say what verse 14 of chapter 49 says, "But Zion," again just a synonym of Israel or Judah. "But Zion said the Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me." That wouldn't be too hard to come to that conclusion. I mean, my goodness, we've had all this judgment pronounced on us and that's the end of that, the Lord has turned His back on us, the Lord has forgotten us. And here's God's answer, quoting Him, verse 15, "Can a woman forget her nursing child?" I don't think so, for two reasons, because your nursing child will not let you forget. Secondly, neither will your body. That's the perfect illustration. You can't forget you're nursing. "Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb?" Is that possible? No that's not possible.

Well even if they could forget, I wouldn't forget. God says, "I'm not going to forget, I'm not going to forget My covenant, I made a covenant with you and I will keep that covenant." And then in verse 16 He uses another analogy, "I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands." That is the...that is the part of the human body which you see most often. There are parts of yourself that without mirrors you would never see but the palm of your hand is what you see most in just the tasks of life. And right there most visible, God says I have you down in indelible, permanent ink. I won't forget you, there's no way I would ever forget you.

Chapter 51 again is reassuring about this. "Listen to Me, you who pursue righteousness, who seek the Lord." Oh, you see, that's always the caveat, you know there is salvation but there must be the pursuit of righteousness. You really want the Lord, you want Him, you want salvation? "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the quarry from which you were dug. Go back to the covenant God. Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain. When he was one I called him, when there was only one, only Abraham and only one child, only Isaac, the nation, the covenant was established with that one man, Abraham, and that one son, Isaac. A covenant was established that will sweep across all redemptive history and ultimately bring salvation to the whole remnant to the nation Israel.

Verse 3, indeed for real, "The Lord will comfort Zion and the Lord will also comfort her waste places, and the wilderness He'll make like Eden and the desert like a garden of the Lord and joy and gladness will be found in her and thanksgiving and the sound of a melody." That's the promise of salvation and that's the promise of the kingdom of Messiah in which the desert will blossom like a rose and Isaiah does have things to say about that. And the whole topography of the globe will be changed in the Messiah's Kingdom.

He says in verse 4, "Pay attention to Me, O My people. Give ear to Me, O My nation, for a law will go forth from Me and I will set My justice for a light of the peoples, My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth." In the end, God brings salvation to Israel and the world.

Go to chapter 54, this similar note, "Fear not, fear not for you will not be put to shame." They were shamed at the time of John. Living under the oppression of pagan Romans was an embarrassment and a humiliation to them, worse than any other. But He says, "You're not going to be put to shame, neither feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced, not in the end, you will even forget the shame of your youth." You're in a period right now of your youth where your suffering shame, but you're not going to feel it anymore. Why? Verse 5, "For your husband is your maker whose name is the Lord of host and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel who is called the God of all the earth, for the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit and like a wife of one's youth when she's rejected, says your God." You're My wife and yes there was a time when I rejected you, yes there was a time when your sin separated. Verse 7, "For a brief moment I forsook you but with great compassion I will gather you." And the end of verse 8, "With everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you...I love this...says the Lord your...what?...your Redeemer."

How can...how can people think that there's no future for Israel? And then in chapter 55 these familiar words in verse 6, "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call on Him while He's near, let the wicked forsake His way, the unrighteous man his thoughts, let him return to the Lord, He'll have compassion on him and to our God for He'll abundantly pardon." And here are the terms...you want the salvation I offer? You want the comfort I offer? You want the consolation, and he encouragement? "Then seek Me, call on Me, forsake your ways." What's He calling them to? Repentance, the same thing John preached. John is such a perfect fulfillment of this prophecy. He's not just a voice in the wilderness. He's a voice in the wilderness announcing the Lord is coming. He's a voice in the wilderness announcing the Lord is coming, get ready. He's a voice in the wilderness announcing the Lord is coming, get ready by repenting and God will forgive you. And then in verse 12 He says, "You will go out with joy and be led forth with peace."

How can You do this, God? How can You just forgive disobedient people? Well verse 8, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts and your thoughts." This is beyond you. But this is what I will do.

And so, the call of Isaiah 40 is to anybody who ever speaks to Israel, tell them this...tell them this...the burden of sin is great, the punishment has been severe, but it's not forever and it's not the end of the story. Tell everybody who ever talks to Israel that God offers them comfort and forgiveness if they will call on Him, forsake their evil ways, seek Him, turn to Him, He will have compassion and abundantly pardon.

So what was John's job? He comes, he says you've been under judgment, you were under judgment by the Babylonians, then you were under judgment by the Medo-Persians, then you were under judgment by the Greeks who desecrated your temple. Now you're under the judgment of God, executed at the hands of the Romans. You're even feeling the judgment of God by the corruption of Annas and Caiaphas and the whole apostate form of religion. You've suffered a long, long time but John's message is this, "The Lord will come. In fact, He's nearly here." And what does John ask them to do? To recognize their sin and...what?...and repent. It's the very same message that Isaiah gave. John fulfills the whole picture of Isaiah's prophecy. So whenever you talk to Jewish people, tell them...yes, the punishment has been great because the sin has been great. But that's not the end of the story. You are still God's people, He is still your covenant God and He offers you comfort and forgiveness and the fulfillment of all the promises if you repent and receive His salvation. And then John would point, "And there's the salvation in the Lamb of God who alone takes away...what?...the sin of the world."

So the comfort of God offered in Isaiah 40 is not some sort of repayment for Israel's unjust suffering. Israel's suffering is just, the suffering of all sinners is just. All sinners suffer justly. The comfort of God is not some repayment as if they've suffered unjustly, the comfort of God is simply and only God's unmerited grace, that's what it is. God punished the nation with severity, He will also bring salvation to that nation, to any person who repents. And one day in the future that nation together will repent. That's the story of Romans 11. Has God permanently set aside Israel? Romans 11:1, "May it never be," no, no, no, no. Has God cancelled His covenants? No, the gifts and callings of God are without repentance. God will bring salvation to Israel, that's the promise.

So the message of Isaiah was this...there's going to be salvation but man isn't going to bring it, there isn't any man who can bring it. But God's going to come and He's going to bring it. But before He comes to bring the salvation, a voice is going to tell you He's on the way, get ready.

John was that voice saying get ready by repentance, the Lord is coming to bring salvation. People can't help themselves, God has to leave the holy throne room and come into the human realm to provide salvation. I close with this, Isaiah 59, this is just a beautiful picture. Chapter 59 starts, "And behold the Lord's hand is not so short that it can't save, His ears aren't so dull they can't hear. The problem is, your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He doesn't hear. Your hands are defiled with blood, your fingers with iniquity, your lips have spoken falsehood, your tongue mutters wickedness. No one sues righteously, no one pleads honestly. They trust in confusion, speak lies, conceive mischief, bring forth iniquity." This is...the next one means they poison and ensnare each other, "Hatching adders eggs, weaving a spider's web and from that which is crushed, a snake breaks forth." The poison of those snakes, sort of indicating the way people treat each other. "Their webs, it says, will not become clothing, nor will they cover themselves with their works." That's to say the machinations of their

wickedness don't hide the reality. "Their works are works of iniquity, too flimsy to hide their true condition and their feet run to evil. They hasten to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity. Devastation and destruction are in the highways. They don't know the way of peace. There's no justice in their tracks. They've made their paths crooked. Whoever treads on them doesn't know peace."

This is a mess. This is depravity and this is Judah. "Justice is far from us and righteousness doesn't overtake us." And then comes this pensive desire, "We hope for light and behold darkness. We hope for brightness, all we get is gloom. We grope along the wall like blind men, we grope like those who have no eyes, we stumble at mid day as in the twilight among those who are vigorous. We're like dead men. All of us growl like bears, we moan sadly. Cooing like doves we hope for justice. There is none. For salvation, but it's far from us. For our transgressions are multiplied before You and our sins testify against us and our transgressions are with us and we know our iniquities, transgressing and denying the Lord and turning away from our God and speaking oppression and revolt and conceiving in and uttering from the heart lying words. Justice is turned back and righteousness stands far away and truth has stumbled in the street and uprightness cannot enter. Yes truth is lacking and he who turns aside from evil makes himself a prey."

In other words, if you try to do anything good you become a victim of all the people who want to do evil. There's no way out. This is the human dilemma. This is Israel's own confession in the mouth of the prophet here. Verse 15, in the middle, it says, "The Lord saw and it was displeasing in His sight that there was no justice." Verse 16, "And He saw that there was no man. He was astonished that there was no one to intercede." Now here's the dilemma, salvation is going to come, it's not going to come from a human, there's no man, there's nobody to intercede, the Lord can't find anybody, there's no one. "Then His own arm brought salvation."

See, the only way for salvation to happen is for God to bring it. His own arm brought salvation. It shows Him getting dressed in verse 17, He put on the righteousness like a breastplate. This is the incarnation. Put on a helmet of salvation on His head. He put on garments, vengeance for clothing, wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle and said according to their deeds He would repay wrath to His adversaries and recompense to His enemies, to the coastlands He would make recompense." He's going to come and there's going to be some judgment when He comes, but not just judgment. Look at verse 20, "And a Redeemer will come to Zion and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob." Jews who turn from transgression. Verse 21, "As for Me, this is My...what?...covenant with them."

So God looks and says...I promised to save you but there's nobody that can do it but Me. And so God says I'll come, I'll come and save the sinners. That's what the incarnation was about. John is saying He's here and He's about to begin His work. Are you ready? Ready means repentant. You can't save yourself but you can prepare your heart for the only one who can save you. Get ready, He's coming. And for us, He's already come, hasn't He? Already died for sinners. And when you

repent, you are forgiven. Some day Israel will do that, until then, Jew and Gentile alike can do that and do as the Spirit works in their hearts. Let's pray.

By the way, before we pray, we didn't even get in to the text. Isn't that amazing? Of Luke 3, but wait till you see what it means and we'll talk about the ravines being raised and the mountains being lowered and all that next time.

Father, thank You for the clarity of Scripture, the consistency of Scripture. Thank You for the blessedness of salvation. Thank You for the fact that You are a faithful God, You are faithful to Israel and You are faithful to us. You'll be faithful to every promise You ever made because that's Your character, that's Your nature. We long for the salvation of Israel. We long to see Jew and Gentile embrace Christ and some day to see the nation of Israel saved, "So all Israel shall be saved," says the New Testament. We long for that day when they look on the one they pierced and are cleansed from sin. May we always preach comfort to Israel, may we tell them always suffering has been great but sin has been paid for, the Messiah paid for it on the cross and the forgiveness and pardon is available for those who repent. May that message be preached to the Jew and the Gentile. May many come to faith and salvation for Your glory in Christ's name. Amen.

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