

HOPE – OUR SOURCE OF STRENGTH
Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
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Scripture: Isaiah 40

Text: Isaiah 40:31

In my study upstairs I have “hope” hanging on the wall. It is an ornament I bought for our Christmas tree a number of years ago but I like it so much I keep it out when the other decorations are put away.

So hope shines at me across the room yet I recognize there is something lacking. It needs a preposition. For hope needs to be linked with something substantial. On its own hope doesn’t do us much good. If I hope in luck, hope in the economy, hope in the government, or hope in myself, I will be in for disappointment.

So God’s people are told where to place their hope. Scripture instructs us to hope in God: to hope in Christ. To hope in the Lord’s steadfast love. To hope in scripture. And to hope in God’s salvation. Now we are getting somewhere. Our hope is no longer wishful thinking but is based on a certainty.

During this month of January we are looking together at this great biblical theme of hope. Today we look at that magnificent promise in Isaiah. Let us say it together.

“Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

This shows us that **HOPE IS OUR SOURCE OF STRENGTH.**

This 40th chapter of Isaiah is one of the great passages of scripture and it comes at a welcome time in the book. The previous chapters have included warnings of judgment and declarations of woe. But chapter 40 is all about the goodness and greatness of God. It is one of those places we turn to when we are feeling utterly hopeless. For here we have the offer of renewed strength, which includes physical strength, emotional strength and spiritual strength. So if you are in need of that strength today, this promise is for you.

This promise of strength comes at the end of the chapter but it is drawing on the truths that have been expounded in the previous 30 verses. The promise is given to people in exile in Babylon. They are voiceless, powerless, and comfortless. The best thing to do for folk in that condition is to urge them to hope in God. For that is where strength is to be found.

But practically what does it mean to hope in the Lord? Isaiah shows us that it means to hold on to four transforming truths about God. As we do this we grow stronger.

So first we are to hope in **GOD'S FORGIVENESS.**

The chapter begins, **"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." (v.1)**

The Jews have not received much comfort recently. The Assyrians have been attacking them. They have been told the Babylonians are coming to Jerusalem to carry off their prize possessions and their best people.

All this is happening because of Judah's sin. They had made some really bad decisions and brought the judgment of God upon themselves.

We do similar things. We paint ourselves into a corner because we have made wrong decisions. We reach a point where we see no way out. But here are words of comfort for God's people. **"Her sin has been paid for." (v.2)**

There is nothing so freeing as God's forgiveness. How wonderful to know that we can have a fresh start. This is where hope begins.

This forgiveness comes through Jesus. The passage continues, **"A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (v.3)**

Matthew takes that verse and applies it to John the Baptist. John's job was to point people to Jesus. Our journey to hope starts with going to Jesus and receiving God's forgiveness made possible by Christ's death on the cross.

Now we might wonder why hoping on God's forgiveness is so strength giving. The answer is that all of us have done things we deeply regret that are holding us back from enjoying life.

A Scottish relative of mine went to a Burns Night celebration where there was a lot of merrymaking. Driving his friend home he was involved in an accident that was probably his fault. Tragically his friend died. Imagine what that does to a person. You live with the memory for the rest of your life. We all desperately need to hear that our mistakes can be forgiven.

Those of us who are parents have regrets about mistakes we made in raising our children. And those of us who are children wish we could take back things we said or did to our parents. These memories can drag us down and tire us out. How freeing to know that our sins have been paid for as we hope in God's forgiveness.

If you have ever been backpacking, you know the experience of carrying a heavy pack up a mountain on a boiling hot day. By the end of the afternoon you are exhausted.

Then you arrive at your campsite and there's that great moment when you take off your backpack and lay it on the ground. You feel 100 pounds lighter. Your shoulders straighten. You are liberated.

Well that's what happens when we make our way to the cross. There Jesus cuts the cords of that burden of sin we have been carrying around. He throws it in the empty tomb and we see it no more.

Perhaps you are feeling hopeless because of a failure in your past. But where there is repentance there is always hope. Let repentance reach out even a little way to grace, and grace will come running to meet it.

We were so relieved this week to hear that Jayme Closs is safe. She had been kept a prisoner for three months in a cabin in Wisconsin. She managed to escape and ran and asked a neighbor for help. Now she is free.

Unconfessed sin can keep us in a prison. Hosea tells us that hope is a door. Sometimes that door seems locked or jammed. We have to push on it in order to go through. But when we do we run to the one who can help us. His name is Jesus and he frees us from our past.

Second, Isaiah encourages us to hold on in hope to **GOD'S ETERNITY.**

There is a lovely piece of poetry that expresses this truth.

A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." (v.6-8)

There is a profound contrast here between us and God. We are like grass in that we quickly grow up, flourish, and die. But the word of God endures forever. It can be exhausting keeping up with changing human fads and fashions. But God's truth is eternal. It never goes out of style. As we rest in God's sure and certain promises, our souls are strengthened and our outlook is hopeful.

This theme of God's eternity is found throughout scripture. The Psalmist announces, **"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever." (Psalm 45:6)**

Revelation tells us that, **"God will reign for ever and ever." (Revelation 11:15)**

To say that God is eternal means that he is not hindered by any temporal limitations. Our existence is marked off by days and weeks and months and years, but not so for God. Our life is divided into a past, present, and a future. But not so God. He is the eternal I AM.

We say, "Well, that's all very well, but what does God's eternity mean for me?" It means that nothing takes God by surprise.

We may be alarmed at circumstances that have come upon us in the last week, but it wasn't a shock to God. He expected it and is able to deal with it.

It also means that God is dependable. Because his reign is unending, his will is unswerving and his love is unchanging. God is dependable because he doesn't grow older. His life doesn't wax or wane. God doesn't gain new powers or lose the ones he once had. He doesn't mature or develop.

God doesn't get stronger or weaker or wiser as time goes by. God cannot change for the better for he is already perfect, and being perfect he cannot change for the worse.

And what is true of God is true of his word. The Bible is as reliable today as when it was first written. That's why Isaiah can say, **"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."** (v.8) That word is hope-giving and strength-giving.

Then Isaiah urges us to hold on in hope to **GOD'S COMPASSION.**

If you are thinking "God would want nothing to do with someone like me," listen carefully to these words. **"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."** (v.11)

This is our God. He is the Good Shepherd. He looks after his flock. He lays down his life for his sheep. He knows our name and calls us to himself. When we are injured or weak he carries us in his arms.

When things are not going well we sometimes imagine that God is angry with us. When we pray and don't receive an answer we can think God is indifferent to our needs.

But that is not the case. For he is the God of great compassion. He is a Father who loves his children. This is the basis of our hope. This knowledge gives us strength.

But there is something else we need when we are weak and Isaiah now points us to it. He tells us to hold on in hope to **GOD'S POWER.** For Yahweh is not only a compassionate God, but an all-powerful one who does **"not grow tired or weary."** (v.28)

For the remainder of this chapter the prophet paints a series of pictures describing the awesome power of God that is available to us.

He begins, **"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?"** (v.12)

When my children were young I was never very good at helping them with their homework. But there was one exception. Each year they had to make a diorama and I gladly took over the project. I used the landscaping material from my model railway. I was disappointed if I didn't get an A+ from the teacher.

When you make a diorama you can hold a tree in your fingers or a building your hand. You can put it where you like.

That's what God is doing here. He is so mighty and powerful he can hold all the waters of the Pacific in the hollow of his hand. He can weigh the Rocky Mountains on his scale. In comparison to him, **"The nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales." (v.15)**

The prophet points out that God is incomparable asking, **"With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him?" (v.18)**

There is clearly nothing on earth that can be compared with God. He is greater than any king or president or leader for, **"He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing." (v.23)**

So the prophet now turns his eyes to the heavens as he asks again, **"To whom will you compare God?" (v.25)**

On a clear night looking up into the sky with the naked eye we can see something like 3,000 stars. In 1609 Galileo invented a telescope and with it he could see something like 30,000 stars. Then in the years that followed people improved upon Galileo's telescope and discovered there were 640,000 stars.

In 1789 Sir William Herschel invented a telescope that made Galileo's telescope look like a toy. With the magnitude of that giant 40 foot telescope he could see something like 26 million stars.

Then, improving on that telescope, Sir Robert Ball discovered there were more than 50 million stars. Now with the 8 foot diameter mirror Hubble space telescope we can see an uncountable number of stars. The truth is we do not know how many stars there are.

Yet our **"God brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name." (v.26)** How good of God to give us this nightly reminder of his power. As we look into the dark sky and see those twinkling stars we are reminded that each one is in place by God's will.

Innumerable though they may be to us, there is neither one more or one less than God determines. As he knows their name, he knows ours and he invites us to hope in him. That word "hope" means to trust in him, to wait on him, to put our faith in him.

So this is the God of hope. **“He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.” (v.28-29)**

So Isaiah urges us to hope in the Lord and when we do we renew our strength, we soar on wings like eagles, we run and do not grow weary, we walk and do not faint.

Now we might expect that description to be reversed. So we start by walking, then we run, and then we soar. But this is written first from the perspective of young men who soar on wings like eagles, and eagles were considered the greatest of birds.

I was driving by Mayowood Lake last week. There was a bald eagle in a tree. He launched himself into the air and with a few flaps of his wings was just a dot in the sky. His flight seemed effortless and magnificent. That is how young men and women can live when they hope in the Lord.

So the passage starts with young men. Then it moves on to middle age men who run and don't grow weary. Finally to older men who walk and don't faint.

When we hope in the Lord our strength is renewed. That means we are given new strength. It is not our strength anymore, but God's strength.

Now let me tell you why I chose this passage and explain its relevance for us as a congregation. In a couple of weeks I will be leaving Autumn Ridge. And for some that may be a discouraging thought and you are wondering "What will we do without John?"

Well, here's the answer. You will do just fine if you take on board Isaiah's instructions to hope in the Lord. Then my departure won't be seen as an ending, but as a time for new beginnings.

I am praying that Autumn Ridge is going to experience this renewed strength not just when the new pastor arrives, but in the very next week after I am gone. I pray there is going to be new life, new hope, new people coming to Christ. New volunteers stepping forward in mission.

Let me tell you practically what it means to hope in the Lord in the next year for you as a congregation. It means you keep coming faithfully to worship week by week. It means you continue to support your church financially. You have done that wonderfully well when I've been here, and you can do it wonderfully well when I go. Gretchen and I plan to continue to give our offerings here after our departure. The reason is this is our church and we want to support what God is doing here.

Let me tell you what impressed me when I came to candidate 30 years ago. It was the fact that worship attendance had remained constant since Pastor Paul Siewert left.

When pastors leave, congregations sometimes decrease by 10% and giving by the same amount. But Autumn Ridgers are better than that because you are people of hope.

This church was never about me, but it is about Jesus. It is about reaching the next generation. It is about serving with all our might the children, middle schoolers, high schoolers, and college students, so they might put their hope in God.

Now let me tell you what the enemy of souls wants to do. He wants to spread his poison of hopelessness. Don't let him.

Despair is the dark chain of Satan's prison, but hope is the liberating light of the kingdom of God. And this God is our God. We need to know him and see him clearly in these days. And he can be seen in Jesus.

As they look at the state of our world today a lot of people are starting to panic. As the people of God we are to offer them words of hope. Some years ago Gretchen and I were flying to Scotland. The pilot came on the intercom and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry to inform you that the plane is on fire. Not to worry. While we won't be able to go to our destination we are going to land at a nearby airport so we can put the fire out."

I must admit I was tempted to worry that our Boeing could become a bonfire. But that captain exuded hope. Sure enough we landed safely. Surrounded with firetrucks we made a hasty exit. The fire was in the cargo hold and they quickly put it out and brought out our luggage, which smelled distinctly smoky and singed.

We Christians are to act like that pilot. For we know where we are going. Our God is in charge. Yes there will be a few bumps along the way, but there is nothing to worry about as together we hope in the forgiveness, eternity, compassion and power of the Lord.

So let's say together our **Victory Verse** for this week.

Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. Isaiah 40:31