

Isaiah Chapter 17 Preparing the Way of the Lord

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of preparing the way of the Lord by accepting His pardon, removing stumbling-blocks, and proclaiming His coming in faith, in order to experience the deeper blessing of His presence.

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11

Topics: "Spiritual Renewal", "Preparation for the Lord"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the prophetic call in Isaiah 40:3 to prepare the way for the Lord, highlighting the hope of deliverance for the exiled Israelites and the anticipation of the Messiah's coming. He discusses five distinct voices that call for preparation: the voice of divine love and pardon, the voice of preparation, the voice of the Spirit, the voice of faith, and the voice of God Himself. Each voice carries a message urging believers to accept God's grace, remove obstacles in their lives, and prepare their hearts for the coming of the Lord. Simpson encourages the congregation to recognize their need for spiritual renewal and to actively seek God's presence in their lives. Ultimately, he calls for a collective awakening to prepare for the glorious return of Christ.

Transcript

"The voice of him that cries in the wilderness; prepare you the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Is. 40: 3.)

This chapter opens the third section of the prophecies of the book of Isaiah relating to the return, consisting chiefly of longer captives from the exile and the coming of the Messiah.

Many modern critics hold that it was written by a second Isaiah in the time of the captivity, and one hundred and fifty years after the earlier portion of the book. Conservative expositors still hold to the old view that the prophet anticipated the future and wrote in inspired vision of things to come as if they were taking place at the time.

The text is written from the standpoint of the exile. The captives are waiting in sorrow and bondage for the coming of the Lord to set them free. The one bright hope of their bondage is, "Behold, the Lord shall come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule before Him. He shall lead His flock like a shepherd." But this

coming of the Lord for Israel's deliverance was but a type of all those other comings which were to follow at the great epochs of the ages. A few centuries later He was to come again in the flesh as the incarnate Son of God. The promise also may well include the coming of the Holy Spirit in times of special blessing to the church of God; a coming such as God's people are waiting and praying for today in every land. The climax of all these comings will be the glorious return of our Lord and King "when He shall come to be glorified in His saints and admired in all them that believe."

The prophet calls upon the people to prepare for the coming of their king, and this is also a summons to us bidding us to meet the conditions which will bring His presence in our midst and in our day.

There are five voices in this dramatic passage that speak in the wilderness, each with a distinct message.

The first is the voice of divine love and pardon, assuring the people of God's forgiveness and grace.

The second is the voice of preparation that bids them get ready for His presence, for He is to come Himself to dwell among them.

The third is the voice of the Spirit as He breathes upon all fleshly and forbidden things, and leads them down into that deeper death which is to bring the spiritual realization of the promise.

The fourth is the voice of faith as it proclaims from the mountain tops the glad tidings to Jerusalem and Zion, "Behold, your King comes." And the last is the voice of God Himself responding to their faith and declaring, "Behold, your God shall come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule before Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His work before Him. He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arms, carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young." (Is. 40: 10, 11.)

I. The voice of pardon.

The Hebrew construction here is dramatic and beautiful. Softly breathing upon the air like the faint notes of rising music comes the whisper, "Comfort you My people, says the Lord; speak to the heart of Jerusalem." (Is. 40: 1.) It is like a love note wooing a maiden's heart. Then the notes rise to bolder tones and ring out like a trumpet call, "Cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished," or, as the margin reads, "that her appointed time has come; that her iniquity is pardoned, for she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." (Is. 40: 2.)

The very first thing that is necessary in our preparing to meet the Lord is that we should accept His grace, dismiss our doubts and fears and be reconciled at our Father's feet. We can have no fellowship with God while guilt and fear interpose their heavy clouds between us and His love. God meets us with the frank and full proclamation of His grace and love and bids us accept His pardon without conditions and without reserve. The very first thing for the sinner to do is to receive God's mercy. You may not be able to understand how He can offer you such grace, but that is His business, not yours; it is yours to take it in thankful confidence and enter into the relations of a forgiven and accepted child. Then He can lead you on into all the fulness of his manifested presence and deeper blessing.

"She has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." (Is. 40: 2.) This is a strange and striking announcement. Does it mean that God's mercy is given on the principle that where sin abounded, grace should much more abound? Does He, in His marvelous generosity, treat us so much better than we deserve, that the most unworthy receive most richly of His grace?

Or does this double portion mean that the sufferings of Israel were a type of the sufferings of their great Messiah; that Israel, the servant of the Lord, was fulfilling in some measure now the vicarious work of the greater Servant of the Lord that was soon to come, and that their calamities as a nation had been a foreshadowing of that great atonement which was to be made for them by the Son of Man, and which was, as it were, discounted and anticipated now in the mercy of God and deemed a double satisfaction for all their sins? This, at least, we know: His great sacrifice is the ground of our forgiveness and salvation, and that it is for every believing soul,

"Of sin the double cure,

Cleansing from its guilt and power."

If we would prepare for the deeper blessing which the Lord is waiting to give, let us begin at the foot of the cross; let us take the riches of His grace in Jesus Christ and God's double for all our sins.

II. The voice of preparation.

"The voice of him that cries in the wilderness, Prepare you the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it." (Is. 40: 3-5).

After God meets us in His pardon and love, there is a deeper experience into which He would bring us. He wants to come Himself and dwell within us. This is the climax of the believer's experience, the highest possibility of blessing here. But for this we must prepare the way. The promise also includes His coming in blessing to His church and people. There are special seasons of spiritual blessing promised to the church and the people of God. The Holy Ghost does come in a very glorious way and give power to His word and salvation to His people; but for this also there must be special preparation. The crooked must be made straight and the rough places plain. The stumbling-blocks must be removed and the way of the Lord prepared. To each conscience and heart the light will come directly and individually. If we want to know, God will show us what hinders the fulness of blessing, and He will make us both willing and able to put it aside and then He will come into our own hearts and through us into the hearts of others in the fulness of His power and blessing. Is He speaking this word to the conscience of any reader of these lines? Are there low places in our life that should be raised to a higher level of fellowship and obedience? Are there crooked places that need to be made straight? Are there rough places that need to be made smooth? Is there sin unconfessed and uncleansed? Is there strife or strain with any fellow Christian? Is there any forbidden thing in our relations with man or woman? Is there a neglect of the family altar, the Word of God, the house of God and the habit of secret prayer? Is there something which stands out before the searchlight of the Holy Ghost as we read these lines, and which we know is a stumbling-block and a hindrance in our life? God help us to meet it without reserve, and so to open the way that the glory of the Lord shall be revealed in our hearts and lives and divine things shall shine with a beauty and reality so heavenly that it will almost seem as if we had never known the Lord before. God is waiting to show His glory and to lift us to a plane where all that we have known of His grace and blessing shall seem but as the light of the moon to the sunshine of His face. Shall we prepare the way of the Lord?

III. The voice of the Spirit.

"The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field; the grass withers, the flower fades because the Spirit of the Lord blows upon it. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God shall stand forever." (Is. 40: 6-8.)

There is a still more searching, penetrating voice. It is the very breath of the Spirit, withering our fleshly life and bringing to death all that is of the old natural life, that we may rise to the supernatural and resurrection life with our risen Lord, and His Word may have free course through all our being. Life must always begin with death, both in the individual soul and the church work of the Master. God cannot purify or improve the flesh. It must be condemned and crucified, and God cannot use the worldly and unscriptural methods by which the church too often is seeking, through fleshly means, to bring people to its fold. All this must die, and through the simplicity and power of His Word and Spirit alone the work must be accomplished. Oh, how much rubbish in the form of religious machinery and manmade revivals must be got out of the way before the Holy Ghost can come in the fulness of His power, and how much of mere sentimentalism and worthless formalism must be burned out of our individual experience before we can go down to death with our Lord and come forth in the fulness of His resurrection life!

IV. The voice of faith.

The next voice rings out in trumpet notes of confidence from the mountain height. It is the voice of faith proclaiming that the blessing has begun and the Lord Himself is coming to His people. The Greek translation is, "Oh, you that bring good tidings unto Zion, get up into the high mountain; Oh, you that bring good tidings unto Jerusalem, lift up your voice with strength, say unto the cities of Judah: Behold, your God." (Is. 40: 9.) The herald of faith must precede the coming of the Lord. We must believe before we can receive, whether for ourselves or for the work of the Master, and we must believe so utterly and unreservedly that we shall not fear to commit ourselves to our confidence and go forth to confess our blessing.

V. Finally, the voice of God Himself responds, "Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him." (Is. 10: 10.)

He will come in power. He will come to bring things to pass. He will come to answer prayer. He will come to silence the adversary and deliver His people. He will come to convict the indifferent and unbelieving world of sin. He will come to break down hardened hearts. He will come to lead ungodly men to the feet of Jesus and save the worst of sinners, and separate His people from the world and sin and reenact once more the victories of Pentecost. He will come to do the things we cannot do. He will come to consecrate the wealth of His selfish people and enable them to go forth with the message of salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth. He will come to silence the voice of unbelief and answer the unbeliever and the agnostic, not with words, but with mighty demonstrations of His power and presence.

And He will come in providence as well as grace to judge among the nations and prepare the way for His more glorious coming as earth's millennial King. Already we see some signs of His mighty working as the Ancient of Days and the Judge of sinful nations, but we are to behold more wondrous things as the latter days hasten to their consummation.

But these things must come to pass first through the revelation of His power in the hearts of His people. It is true His body, the church, with the Head, is to work in the victories of His providence in the world; and so it is from a great awakening that there must come the prayer, the faith and the cooperation that are to bring the mightier victories of His hand in the world at large. "He is able to do exceedingly above all that

we ask or think," but it is "according to the power that works in us" that His mighty working in the world is to be revealed. He works through His people, and according to their faith and spiritual preparation.

If, therefore, we would see the coming of our King in glory and the preparation of the world to meet Him, let us first receive Him in our own hearts, and work and pray for the opening of the hearts of His people everywhere for His incoming and indwelling, until the standard of Christian life shall rise to such a level that God can accomplish through His people all the highest possibilities of His promise and His grace.

The expression "His reward is with Him" literally means His recompense. This has reference, no doubt, to His judicial working in connection with the wicked and sinful nations of men. Already we see Him dealing with them in judgment and giving to us some pledges of that far-reaching and impartial retribution which He is yet to mete out to those that have oppressed His people and abused their sacred trust as the selfish and sinful rulers of this godless age. We are to expect more and more the manifestations of His judgments as His people rise to that plane of holy fellowship which will enable them to stand with Him in the conflicts and victories of these last days.

But it is not all judgment. It is not all power. He is coming also in the gentleness of His grace. "He shall feed His flock like a shepherd." (Is. 40: 11.) His coming will bring His people into all that is meant by the "green pastures" and the "still waters" of His grace. And His coming is to include the children, too. "He shall gather together the lambs in His arm and carry them in His bosom." But what is meant by this last clause, "He shall gently lead those that are with young?" Perhaps it is the picture of the tenderness with which the shepherd will guard them in the helplessness of motherhood; not hurrying or driving them as the cruel conqueror when he carried them across the land in that fearful captivity which we find depicted on the Babylonian monuments showing the brutal soldiers driving helpless women and children before them, and tossing aside the weak and fainting ones to perish by the wayside. Not so will this gentle Shepherd lead His flock, but with tender care will He conduct them in the noontide heat and rest them by the still waters, and carry the feeble ones in His loving arms.

But the phrase has perhaps a different meaning. "Those that are with young" would seem to suggest the mother and the young as they travel together. And when the mother is unwilling to follow the shepherd he sometimes carries the lamb across the river, and then she follows because her lamb has gone before. So sometimes He has led us by taking our loved ones from us and calling them on before, that we might follow them when we would not follow Him.

So He is waiting to come; to come to our hearts in personal blessing; to come to our work in the power of the Holy Ghost; and to come again in the fulness of His glory and make all things new. Do we long for His coming? Then let us arise and "prepare the way of the Lord."

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