

God's Faithfulness

in Times of Suffering

Daily Devotional Readings and Prayers for
Suffering Church Action and Awareness Week
2021-2022

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Suffering Church Action
and Awareness Week


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hope and relief for the persecuted church

Introduction

The LORD Saves

Isaiah 1:27

The name “Isaiah” means “the LORD saves” or “the LORD is salvation”. The prophet living in the eighth century B.C. was well named, for his long book is all about salvation. As Edward Young explains:

“The purpose of this noble prophecy is to teach the truth that salvation is by grace, that is, it is of God and not of man. This is embodied in the very name of the prophet, but it is clearly taught in all his utterances. In the first chapter occur the words, ‘Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and her converts with righteousness’ (verse 27, KJV). This verse introduces the theme upon which the prophet continually expands. Indeed, chapters 40-66 may be regarded as a general exposition of this thought.”¹

Isaiah lived at a time of great danger, uncertainty and upheaval. When he began his prophetic ministry, the mighty nation of Assyria was expanding westward, threatening the small kingdom of Judah, where Isaiah lived, as well as the slightly larger kingdom, Israel, which lay to the north of Judah. Isaiah proclaimed this threat to be a warning from God to His people (for example, Isaiah 8:6-8; 10:5-6). About two decades after Isaiah’s call to be a prophet, Israel was conquered by Assyria (722 B.C.).

Within Isaiah’s lifetime, Assyrian troops also marched into Judah, threatening its capital, Jerusalem, but God miraculously delivered His people (Isaiah 36-37). It was not until 597 B.C. that Jerusalem was conquered, and then not by the Assyrians, but by the Babylonians. Many of the people of Jerusalem and Judah were taken captive by their conquerors and forced to go into exile in Babylon in a series of deportations.

Among the wonderful treasures of the Spirit-inspired Word of God is the fact that the later chapters of Isaiah contain prophecies about the return of these exiles from Babylon, even though the exile itself did not take place until about a century after Isaiah’s death. (See, for example, Isaiah 43:14; 47:1; 48:14,20.) In words spoken through Isaiah, God says:

“I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come.
I say, ‘My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I please.’”
(Isaiah 46:10)

So our passage in Isaiah chapter 40 is addressed to the exiles still in captivity in Babylon. Their homeland Judah is desolate and laid waste, Jerusalem and the temple destroyed many decades earlier. The afflicted and oppressed people of God, in their captivity, are in desperate need of hope to counter their despair and of consolation to counter their distress.

Isaiah brings a message from God of hope and consolation for this crisis that was still many years in the future when he was prophesying. What was in the future for Isaiah is in the past for us, but the deep riches of these words, with their many layers of meaning, are given to us in Scripture for our hope and consolation too.

God – Yahweh – is coming to the aid of His people. As He did long ago in Egypt when He delivered them, so He will do again, soon. As He led them through the desert then, so He will lead them again. As He brought them into the Promised Land, so He will again fulfill His purposes for them.

¹ Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, London, The Tyndale Press, revised edition 1960, reset 1964, p.211.

Sunday, October 31

Angel Messengers Are Sent Out From the Heavenly Court

Isaiah 6:1-8; 40:1

The opening scene is set in heaven, in the court of the King of kings, who is addressing His angelic messengers. He is sending them out with a message of comfort, deliverance, hope and love to His beleaguered people.²

This is not the first time that Isaiah has given us a glimpse of heaven. For in chapter 6, Isaiah told us how he saw the LORD, seated on a throne, high and exalted, with six-winged seraphim flying above him (Isaiah 6:1-4). Isaiah describes this awe-ful vision, which he probably received around the year 742 B.C., as if it were occurring in the temple, which he sees filled with the train of God's robe and with smoke, while the doorposts shake at the sound of the angels' praise. But has he not in a sense been caught up to heaven, as the Apostle Paul once was, not knowing whether he was in or out of the body (2 Corinthians 12:2)?

If we see God seated on His throne, where can we be but in heaven? When the Apostle John saw a door standing open in heaven and went up there "in the Spirit," he saw before him "a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it" (Revelation 4:1-2). It is hardly surprising that John struggles to find human language to give even an approximation of the glory of the One on the throne, who is soon revealed to be the Lord God Almighty who lives for ever and ever (Revelation 4:3-11). Six-winged flying creatures praise Him as "holy, holy, holy." Day and night they never stop saying it, John tells us, and so we should not be surprised that Isaiah saw the six-winged seraphim and heard them calling the same words eight centuries earlier.

The court of the heavenly King occurs elsewhere in Scripture, with people going in and out from it. Jeremiah thrills us with the idea of the LORD holding council with His trusted team, who gather round to hear His words (Jeremiah 23:18,22). Another prophet, Micaiah, saw the LORD sitting on His throne with the whole host of heaven standing around Him, ready for their orders (1 Kings 22:19). Who were the host of heaven? Many translations indicate that it was the heavenly army, but the New International Version says "all the multitudes of heaven," while the New International Reader's Version says "all the angels of heaven."

So the King of kings sends out heralds, or messengers, from His heavenly court into the earthly realm to speak for Him. We live not only in a physical world, but also in a spiritual world. We face not only the secular, but also the supernatural. It is heaven where decisions are made. It is heaven that dictates what happens on earth. Nothing is left to "chance." God is the author and preserver of all things, including our lives, and His purposes will ultimately be fulfilled. It gives great encouragement to know that our lives are not at the mercy of haphazard random events, nor controlled by stars, black cats, ladders and four-leaved clovers. God is in control – the God who controls the movements of galaxies and of sub-atomic particles – and His heavenly angels do His bidding.

Nothing that happens to us or to our persecuted brothers and sisters is beyond God's control, and He still sends His angels to help His suffering people.

Thank you, heavenly Father, that You are in control of our lives, that You are always working out Your purposes, and that Your will is good, pleasing and perfect. Please send Your holy messengers to help and succor our brothers and sisters who are suffering today for the sake of Christ, in whose Name we pray. Amen.

² Some interpretations of this passage see the message as being entrusted to prophets or other leaders of the people, rather than to angels.

Monday, November 1

The Angelic Message of Comfort and Forgiveness

Isaiah 40:1-2

Isiah chapter 40 begins with an instruction from God to His angels to bring a message to His people: He tells the angels to comfort His people (v.1). The word “comfort” is repeated for emphasis, as if God were putting it in bold italics. This **comfort** is a word rich in meaning and full of emotion. It contains the idea of consolation in grief, which is the foremost meaning of the English word today. But there is also its old English meaning of “to make strong and brave to endure” and the literal Hebrew meaning of “to cause to breathe again,” that is, to let out a sigh of relief. A rabbinical interpretation focuses on a process of learning to think differently about a situation.

God’s message is to be conveyed by his messengers gently, softly, tenderly (literally, “spoken to the heart,” v.2). The word used is the normal Hebrew word for wooing. God’s heralds are told to plead His love to His people as a man pleads his love to a woman. In the words of George Adam Smith, the messengers must speak as a man “will plead at a maiden’s heart, knowing that he has nothing but love to offer as right of entrance, and waiting until love and trust come out to welcome him.”³

The message recognizes that this comfort is to be brought into a context of suffering, to people who have undergone a period of “hard service” (v.2). Many older translations use the term “warfare,” and indeed the Hebrew word *saba* is often used to mean military service to which someone may be conscripted for a period of time. But here, as in Job (7:1; 14:14), it can be understood as “hard service” – a time of discipline, hardship, pain and grief – but of limited duration. The message the angels bring is that the people’s

hard service has been completed, their time of captivity in Babylon is over, the *saba* has reached its end.

From our perspective, on the other side of the Cross, we can also hear the message as a promise that the time of striving legalistically and by temple rites and rituals for forgiveness and an unbroken relationship with God was to come to an end, when Christ would appear and die once for all to take away our sins (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12,26; 10:1-2,10).

But for the hearers of Isaiah in Old Testament times, the *saba* in question was the exile in Babylon, a punishment for the sinfulness of God’s people, and the message was that now they are forgiven. “Her sin has been paid for” (v.2, NIV) is translated in several other Bible versions as “her iniquity is pardoned.” Barnes explains that “pardoned” does not catch the full meaning of the Hebrew original, which is about taking pleasure in something or finding satisfaction, even delight, for example, in offerings and sacrifices (Ezekiel 20:40). In this case, God delights in being able to restore His people to their own land after their allotted time in Babylon is completed. It is not pardon in the sense of the pardon that is available to us because of the atonement of the Lord Jesus. Nevertheless, Barnes tells us, there is a link because the “pardon” of Isaiah 40:2 illustrates God’s “pleasure or delight in setting the soul free from the bondage of sin.”⁴

For persecuted and suffering believers, this could be a message that the Lord has seen their situation and will bring it to an end, whether by easing their situation in this life or by taking them Home to their heavenly rest.

Thank You, Lord Jesus, that You died to take away our sins, that You took the punishment that we deserved, and that You rose victorious over death. May Your mighty resurrection power be at work today to help those who suffer because they love and follow You. Set them free or give them grace to endure. Amen.

³ George Adam Smith, *The Expositor’s Bible. The Book of Isaiah*, Vol. II, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1890, p.76.

⁴ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament Explanatory and Practical, Isaiah*, Vol. II, 2nd edn, 1845, Reprinted Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1950, ed. Robert Frew, twelfth printing 1974, p.54.

Tuesday, November 2

Grace Upon Grace

Isaiah 40:2; John 1:16

Yesterday we saw that the core of the message of comfort to be conveyed by the angelic host was about God's forgiveness of His people's sin.

"The very grammar [of the Hebrew message] is eloquent of grace," explains George Adam Smith, and can only be conveyed in English by an unusual word order. He suggests translating the three-part message of verse 2 as:

Fulfilled is her warfare, absolved her guilt, received hath she of Jehovah's hand double for all her sins.

This gives prominence not to the warfare, the guilt or the sins, but to the fact that the first is completed, the second is forgiven and the third is sufficiently expiated.⁵

Smith points out that the third of the three parts of the message is "especially gracious," for, theologically speaking, it is impossible for us to atone for our sins, let alone doubly atone for them. It is only our Redeemer who can make sufficient atonement for our sins. The statement at the end of verse 2:

"would scarcely pass some of our creeds today. But all the more, that it thus bursts forth from strict terms of dealing, does it reveal the generosity of Him who utters it. How full of pity God is, to take so much account of the sufferings sinners have brought upon themselves! How full of grace to reckon those sufferings *double the sins* that had earned them! It is, as when we have seen gracious men make us a free gift, and in their courtesy insist that we have worked for it. It is grace masked by grace. As the height of art is to conceal art, so the height of grace is to conceal grace, which it does in this verse."⁶

Surely this is an example of the "grace upon grace" that we have all received (John 1:16).

In Isaiah 6 the prophet spoke of his own sin and the sin of his people:

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." (Isaiah 6:5)

Here the focus is on the people as a whole but recognizing also that a people is made up of individuals who are individually rebellious. In Genesis 3 we see that Adam and Eve's sinful rebellion against God was what brought pain and suffering into the world. Not all suffering is a direct result of sin, for many suffer – whether it be cancer, Covid or cyclones – simply because of the natural order of things in our fallen world. But at the beginning of Isaiah 40, the sufferings of the people of God were directly due to their rebellion against Yahweh, a rebellion typified by corruption and idolatry at which many prophets and priests had connived.

Sin is serious. It is grievous in the eyes of the Lord. When the Lord, speaking through Samuel, rejected Saul as king because of his disobedience, what Saul did is described as rebellion:

Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD?
To obey is better than sacrifice,
and to heed is better than the fat of rams.
For rebellion is like the sin of divination,
and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has rejected you as king.

(1 Samuel 15:22,23)

Part of the sin-caused suffering within our fallen world is the injustice and cruelty with which human beings often treat each other. Here lies one of the reasons for the oppression of God's faithful people.

O Lord, thank You for Your grace and undeserved mercy poured out daily into my life, as You forgive my sins. In Your gracious love, enable me to live a life that brings You pleasure and delight. In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.

5 Smith, p.79.

6 Smith, pp.79-80.

Wednesday, November 3

Hope in the Wilderness

Isaiah 40:3-4

With the message of comfort and forgiveness, now comes a message of hope. For something marvelous is about to happen: the LORD will lead His people out of Babylon, through the desert and back to their own land. It is interesting to note that the Chaldee Targum, a paraphrase in the East Syriac language attributed to Jonathan Ben Uzziel, which was made after the Jews had returned from Babylon, gives verse 3 as a command to prepare the way for the *people* of the LORD and make straight the ways before the *congregation* of God.

A fitting highway must be prepared and all obstacles removed. Such preparation of a royal route – building bridges, finding shallows that could be forded, setting up depots of supplies, leveling precipitous slopes or cutting paths through vegetation – would be made in ancient times before a conquering monarch and his army in the Middle East or West Asia.

Who are those commanded to make these preparations? Are they not the angels gathered in the court of the King of kings? The direct route from Babylon to Judah was mainly desert, and it was normal for travelers to go around the desert, not through it. “But now the heavenly beings are to build a road across the desert for a miraculous journey.”⁷ It was to be an even more glorious desert journey than the Exodus had been.

We know from Matthew’s Gospel that this was also a prophecy about John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, who would prepare the way for Him (Matthew 3:3). John’s way of preparing a straight road, leveling mountains, filling in valleys, and smoothing the rough ground was to call the nation to ready themselves spiritually, for their God was about to come to His people to redeem them.

The desert or wilderness seems at first like a place of misery and hardship, where the Divine is absent. Yet it was in the wilderness that the LORD appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-6), and where Elijah was fed and encouraged by an angel (1 Kings 19:3-8).

So the wilderness is not just a place of suffering, but a place where God is encountered. It is also a place of purification and therefore of hope. When God delivered His people from the oppression of Egypt and led them in the desert, they were sorely tried and their sinfulness exposed. But from this experience came a renewed people, faithful to their God.

We should never be afraid of a wilderness experience. It is a *saba* that should be not shunned but embraced. For there the disciplining hand of God works in our lives. Neither should the vine try to avoid the knife of the Divine Gardener during the pruning season, as He cuts away all that is wrong, bad and useless (John 15:1-2). To mix our metaphors, it is often in the desert that the pruning process occurs.

Ultimately He will make the barren wilderness like the beautiful Garden of Eden:

The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing. (Isaiah 51:3)

Many who have been persecuted for Christ’s sake have testified to how His presence with them in their suffering, for example in prison, made it a time of wonderful blessing.

O Divine Deliverer, meet me in my wilderness experiences and grant me showers of blessings. O Divine Gardener, prune me and make me fruitful. Be close to all who suffer because they follow Your Son and make their sufferings a time of precious fellowship with Him, in Whose Name we pray. Amen.

⁷ R.N. Whybray, *New Century Bible: Isaiah 40-66*, London, Oliphants, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1975, p.50.

Thursday, November 4

The Glory of the LORD

Isaiah 40:5

What is the ultimate purpose of all that we have been looking at so far this week? It is to reveal the glory of the LORD (v.5), to display His mighty and matchless work as a covenant-keeping God who has delivered His people from their bondage and brought them back to their own land. This achievement would demonstrate to all the nations Yahweh's faithfulness and thus redound to His glory and the praise of His Name. His splendor will be displayed in His people (Isaiah 49:3). The Septuagint⁸ makes this crystal clear with the words "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

The message comes from the sovereign LORD who is in control, Yahweh who makes covenants with His people, the forever I AM, who is always faithful and compassionate. The message is addressed to "my people," which in Hebrew is a single word: *ammi*. To belong to Yahweh was their identity, honor and joy. When He rescued them from Egypt, Yahweh's message to Pharaoh was "Let my people go" (Exodus 5:1). But later Yahweh commanded the prophet Hosea to name his son Lo-Ammi, meaning "Not My People" (Hosea 1:9) as a sign to the rebellious nation that had rejected the LORD. Now, however, Yahweh affirms that they *are* His people despite having gone astray. For they have been punished for their sins and now there is forgiveness, mercy, grace and restoration. How precious was that one word *ammi*, as a token of His forgiveness.

An event during the long desert journey of the exodus teaches us that the glory of the LORD is His goodness. When He agreed to show His glory to Moses, the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you... When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock." His goodness was His glory. His glory was His goodness (Exodus 33:18-23).

The advent of the Messiah would, to an even greater degree, show to the whole world the glory of the LORD.

God's glory described not only in terms of His character and actions, but also in terms of dazzling radiance. Ezekiel, a prophet who was himself carried off to exile in Babylon, saw visions of God's glory. Writing of glowing metal, fire, brilliant light and rainbows, he struggles to describe the "appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (Ezekiel 1:26-28). He also witnessed the horrifying sight of the glory of the Lord gradually departing, in stages, from the holy of holies in the heart of the Jerusalem temple to a mountain outside the city (Ezekiel 10:4,18; 11:22-23).

How similar Ezekiel's description of God is to John's description of the one "like a son of man" whom he sees among the golden lampstands:

"The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance" (Revelation 1:14-16).

This is Jesus, the Living One, who was dead and now is alive for ever and ever (Revelation 1:18).

Like Ezekiel when he had his vision of the LORD, John was in exile when he had this vision of Christ. Many Christians today have been forcibly displaced from their homes or their homelands by anti-Christian violence and are living as refugees in exile.

O God of glory, the great I AM, the First and the Last, the covenant-keeping Yahweh, I praise You for Your goodness, Your compassion and Your mercy, new every morning. You are mine and I am Yours, now and in eternity. I pray for Christian refugees, perhaps never to return home again, that they will know their ultimate identity is as part of Your people. In Jesus' Name I ask. Amen.

⁸ The Septuagint was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) made in the third or second centuries B.C., probably for Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt.

Friday, November 5

Confidence in the Unchanging Word of God

Isaiah 40:6-8

In contrast to the glory of the everlasting Alpha and Omega, humankind is as frail and short-lived as grass (vv.6,7). There are plenty of candidates for the damaging wind in the imagery of verse 7. It could be the destructive scirocco of the Mediterranean, hot from the Sahara Desert, which can reach hurricane speeds and quickly brings an end to the spring flowers. Or it could be the scorching east wind that caused Jonah so much suffering in Nineveh (modern Iraq, Jonah 4:8). But surely there is significance in the fact that the wind is described as “the wind of the LORD.” At the very least this must mean the wind sent by the LORD, like the one Jonah experienced. Perhaps it even means the Spirit of the LORD, for the Hebrew word *ruach* can mean spirit, breath or any kind of wind from a soft breeze to a howling gale. Could the wind that destroys the flowers be a picture of God’s judgment?

The image of the fading flower or grass is often repeated in Scripture (James 1:10,11; 1 Peter 1:24,25). Jesus spoke of grass that is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire (Matthew 6:30). David compared the human lifespan to a mere breath (Psalm 39:4-6) and Job used the metaphor of a fleeting shadow (Job 14:1,2). The feebleness and frailty of humankind makes it all the more wonderful that the Word became flesh in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus (John 1:14).

If humans are grass, what is it that is compared to flowers (v.6)? Many English translations say that it is our “glory” or “beauty” or “loveliness.” But these words are way off the mark. Other translations say it is our faithfulness (NIV), loyalty (NABRE), constancy (NRSV), promises (NET), kindness (CJB) or mercy (JUB). These are much more apt, for the word in Hebrew is *hesed*, a steadfast and unswerving love like that shown by our covenant-keeping God. However, our own *hesed* is as fragile as a wildflower and does not last. Our faithfulness

is not to be depended on, our loyalty wavers, we are inconstant and we break our promises, our kindness and our mercy are fitful and sporadic.

Our technological achievements may fool us into thinking that we are strong, powerful and eternal, until we realize that a tiny microbe can destroy us, our nation and our world. Then we grasp that humankind is fundamentally weak, fragile and vulnerable. We are like flowers that spring into life in the desert after rain falls, only to shrivel and die a few weeks later under the relentless sun. But this need not trouble us, for our God truly is strong, powerful and eternal. He is almighty and invincible. And He is faithful. Unlike our *hesed*, His is unbreakable and completely dependable:

“The steadfast love (*hesed*) of
the LORD
never ceases;
his mercies never come to
an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness”
(Lamentations 3:22,23; ESV).

We can place our confidence in His unfailing Word, which stands forever (v.8, compare Matthew 5:18). Because of God’s faithfulness, His promise of deliverance to His people in Babylon was secure and firm. Peter shows us that the dependability of the Word of God, as promised in Isaiah 40:8, also applies to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, for, he tells the persecuted Christians to whom he writes, it is “the word that was preached to you” (1 Peter 1:25).

These promises are especially precious to persecuted Christians, giving them hope and confidence in the midst of their suffering.

Faithful One, my Anchor and my Rock, whose promises never fail, thank You for Your unwavering, steadfast love. May Your Holy Spirit bring to the minds of those suffering for Christ today the promises in Your Word that will give them hope and peace, reminding them that no matter what storms and winds may buffet us, Your faithfulness never wavers. In Christ’s Name. Amen.

Saturday, November 6

Do Not Be Afraid

Isaiah 40:9,10

The image in today's passage is of a military runner bringing good news of victory in battle. "Do not be afraid," the runner is told, but proclaim the news loudly.

The phrase "do not be afraid" often announces the appearance of God. At the birth of our Lord Jesus, the angels used the same words to Mary (Luke 1:30) and to the shepherds (Luke 2:10). In the words of Sawyer, it runs "like a golden thread" through this part of Isaiah, associated with God's presence or imminent arrival, often at the end of a period of anxious waiting.⁹

"Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
'Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come...'" (Isaiah 35:3,4).

"So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right
hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

Some other examples are found in Isaiah 41:14; 43:1,5.

The message is proclaimed to the desolate and empty cities of Judah that they are about to be blessed with the return of happier and better times, as the people came back from captivity. What is more, Yahweh Himself would return: "Here is your God!" (v.9). Barnes puts the message this way:

Lo! your God returns to the city, the temple, and the land! Lo! he comes conducting his people as a king to their land! Lo! he will come — under the Messiah in future times — to redeem and save!¹⁰

In verse 10 we read that the sovereign LORD is coming with power and His arm rules for Him. The arm is a symbol of strength, and Yahweh has no need of any other help but His own arm to accomplish His purposes, whether it is rescuing the exiles in Babylon or defeating Satan on the Cross.

Before we leave verse 10, let us focus on one of the most astonishing, thrilling, humbling and breathtaking parts of the whole chapter:

"See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him"
(Isaiah 40:10).

Who is going to be rewarded and recompensed? Verse 10 tells us that it is the sovereign LORD. Some scholars hold that this verse speaks of the victor bringing home the spoils of victory, which in this case are the exiles. Others say that Yahweh is going to be rewarded for the years of misery that He endured while His wayward people rebelled and suffered their punishment; the joy of seeing His people's delight as they return to the land He intended for them will be His reward.

Dare we also say that He missed them while they had wandered away from Him? Like Rachel weeping for her children, He wept for us (Jeremiah 31:15-20). Like the devoted parent in Hosea 11:1-9, He cannot bear to lose His beloved child, even though the child has turned away. Like the father of the prodigal son, in the parable Jesus told, He considers our returning home to Him to be a cause for exuberant celebration (Luke 15:11-24).

God's many promises in His Word to strengthen us, and His many loving commands not to fear, are so important for all believers, especially those who are persecuted because of their faith.

O Father, our creator, O Jesus our redeemer, O Holy Spirit, our sustainer, help me and all Your children, especially those who face great danger because they are Christians, to be courageous, putting aside all fears as we trust in You. Amen

⁹ John F.A. Sawyer, *The Daily Study Bible. Isaiah*. Vol. II, Edinburgh, St Andrew Press and Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1986, p.45.

¹⁰ Barnes p.62.

Sunday, November 7

Our Shepherd

Isaiah 40:11

A good shepherd is like a good king, who protects the vulnerable members of society from injustice and oppression, enabling them to live in peace and security.

The sovereign LORD coming to rescue us is just such a shepherd, strong to protect the flock but sensitive to their needs. Like the Shepherd of Psalm 23, who leads His sheep to restful green pastures and fends off the wild animals which threaten them (Psalm 23:2-4), the Shepherd in Isaiah 40 feeds and cares for His flock, especially the ewes nursing their young, and tenderly carries the lambs in His own arms. These are the same arms that show His strength (v.10). He does not sling the lambs over his shoulders, but holds them close to His heart, as if carrying a baby or a little child. The strong arms of deliverance are also the gentle arms that bear up the youngest, weakest and most vulnerable. The arms of power are the arms of protection that surround us. They are the everlasting arms of our eternal God, which uplift us continually (Deuteronomy 33:27). They are the arms of Jesus.

A Christian cannot read of the LORD who tends His flock like a shepherd without thinking of the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep, the sheep whom He knows and who know Him (John 10:14-16), the sheep who listen to His voice and follow Him, the sheep to whom He gives eternal life and who will never perish because no one can snatch them out of His hand (John 10:27,28). Here, indeed, is our God (Isaiah 40:9)!

*O Divine Shepherd,
take care of us
in this time of need,
Gather us together, the weakest in Your arms,
Carry them tenderly, close to Your heart,
And gently lead those on whom we depend.
O glorious, sovereign
Lord of all,
Show forth Your salvation
And glorify Your Name.
For Your covenant love never fails,
Your Word stands firm,
Your promises are sure,
Strong is Your arm,
Majestic is Your power.
To You we come in supplication.*

As Charles Wesley wrote in a hymn¹¹ about Jesus:

*“O that the world might taste and see
The riches of His grace!
The arms of love that compass me
Would all mankind embrace.”*

George Adam Smith imagines the Good Shepherd leading His people home across the desert, so differently from the way they left it:

“... the exiles left their home (as we can see to this day upon Assyrian sculptures) in closely-driven companies, fettered, and with the urgency upon them of grim soldiers, who marched at intervals in their ranks to keep up the pace, and who tossed the weaklings impatiently aside. But now, see the slow and loosely-gathered bands wander back, just as quickly as the weakest feel strength to travel, and without any force or any guidance save that of their Almighty, Unseen Shepherd.”¹²

What a lovely picture that is for us to hold in our minds at the end of Suffering Church Action and Awareness Week. Those who are abused and cruelly treated because they belong to Christ, those who feel themselves weak and close to their breaking point, He Himself will lift and carry close to His heart.

*Give us comfort in time of trouble,
Give us hope in our despair,
Give us forgiveness in
our sinfulness,
Show us mercy
As we lie under Your hand of judgment.
For we are frail flowers, so soon to fade.
We are green grass, so soon
to be cut.
Give us Your strength, O Lord,
For we are weak and vulnerable.
Give us Your presence, O Lord,
Provide our every need.
For You alone are worthy of praise
And we depend on You.*

11 *Jesus! The Name High Over All*, 1749.

12 Smith p.85.