



Highlights From the Book of Isaiah

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New Testament
Usage of
Isaiah 40:3-5

A Call to Make Ready the Way for the Lord (40:3-5)

40:3 A voice cries out, “In the wilderness clear a way for the LORD; build a level road through the rift valley for our God. ⁴ Every valley must be elevated and every mountain and hill leveled. The rough terrain will become a level plain, the rugged landscape a wide valley. ⁵ The splendor of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it at the same time. For the LORD has decreed it.”

The Gospel of Matthew's Usage of Isaiah 40:3-5

Isaiah 40:3 *A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."* (ESV)

Mat 3:1 *In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" (ESV)*

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- This citation of Isaiah 40:3 occurs in Matthew chapter 3, at the point where Matthew moves from Jesus' birth narrative to the events that would inaugurate Jesus' public ministry as an adult.
- He ***begins*** this section by introducing John the Baptist.
- The ***entire*** third chapter of Matthew demonstrates how John the Baptist ***fulfills*** this prophecy by preparing the way for the Lord.
- That preparation involves calling Israel to ***repentance***, which is symbolized by baptism, the hallmark of John's ministry (3:1-12).

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- Matthew interprets the phrase "*in the wilderness*" as referring to the *location* from which the "*voice*" cries out and he sees a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in the *preaching* of "*John the Baptist*" in the *Judean wilderness*" (i.e. desert).
- John's message of *repentance*, symbolized by the ritual of baptism (3:6) and summarized by the concepts of fleeing from God's wrath (3:7) and of bearing fruit (3:8), corresponds to Isaiah's call to "*prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway our God*".

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- Matthew shows that now that **Jesus** has come as the **promised Messiah**, it is now clear that his **forerunner**, John the Baptist, **fulfills** the Old Testament prophecies referring to one who would **"prepare the way"** for that coming **"LORD"**.
- In making this connection, Matthew equates Jesus to the **"LORD"** (Hebrew: Yahweh) of the Old Testament.
- In other words, according to Matthew, Jesus is Yahweh!

The Gospel of Mark's Usage of Isaiah 40:3-5

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Mark 1:2 *As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, ³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" ⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (ESV)*

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- Mark tells us in Mark 1:2 that he is going to quote from Isaiah; and that is **exactly** what he does – though **not immediately**.
- **First**, Mark quotes Mal 3:1: "*Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way*"
- **Then** he quotes Isaiah 40:3 – "*the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'*"
- The Isaiah reference is **clarified** by the Malachi reference:
- If we reflect **first** on the quotation from Malachi, and **then** read the quote from Isaiah, it helps us to understand that the "**voice**" to whom Isaiah refers is not just a disembodied voice but is, in fact, the voice of the Lord's "**messenger**."

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- Isaiah 40:3-5, in its **original** context, pictures the approach of the LORD for the purpose of leading the future procession of Jews who will be returning joyfully to their homeland after long years of captivity.
- In the Syrian desert, between Babylonia and Palestine, the way must be prepared for the Lord's coming.
- So, a **herald** cries out to the people: "*In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*"

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- Mark and the other gospel writers apply this figure of a herald to ***John the Baptist*** as ***Jesus'*** herald.
- This shows us that the deliverance granted to the Jews in the latter part of the sixth century B.C. and afterward when they returned to their own country was ***sovereignly designed*** by God to serve as a ***type*** of that far more ***glorious*** liberation in store for all who accept Christ as their Savior and Lord.
- In other words, Isaiah's prophecy of the "***voice***" that cried out was ***ultimately*** fulfilled in the arrival of both the Messiah's forerunner and also the Lord himself.

The Gospel of Luke's Usage of Isaiah 40:3-5

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Luke 3:2 *During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" (ESV)*

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- The quotation of Isaiah 40:3-5 by Luke should not be considered as an isolated quotation from Isaiah introducing the ministry of John the Baptist.
- Rather, this citation is ***significant*** for establishing the ***foundation*** for the rest of Luke's narrative.
- This point can be seen by the fact that Luke's quotation of verses 3-5 extends ***beyond*** Matthew or Mark's citation of just verse 3.

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- In Luke 3 the quotation *climaxes* in a quotation from Isaiah 40:5 that emphasizes the *universal* significance of this dawn of salvation: "*all flesh shall see the salvation of God*"
- Luke's inclusion of this longer quotation shifts the focus from John the Baptist to the entire early Christian movement.
- This citation not only highlights the importance of the mission to the Gentiles but also points to the unity of Luke's two volumes (Luke and Acts).
- The history of the early church therefore becomes an extension of the ministry of Jesus himself.

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- This citation links Jesus' ministry with the prophetic promises to Israel in the *past* and the apostolic ministry of the *future*.
- The citation of this text from Isaiah points to the fulfillment of God's promise to accomplish a "*new thing*" in history as John prepares the people for the salvation that is brought about by the life and ministry of Jesus:
- *Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:19)*

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- With the arrival of the climax of God's covenantal relationship with his people, **Gentiles** will be able to witness the salvation of God.
- Luke's second volume (the book of Acts) will make it clear that the Gentiles are not simply observers from a distance; rather, together with Israel they will become part of God's people.

The Gospel of John's Usage of Isaiah 40:3-5

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John 1:23 *[John the Baptist] said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."* (ESV)

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- The prologue of the Gospel of John presents John the Baptist as *"a man sent from God"* to *"bear witness concerning the light"* (i.e., Jesus): *"He was **not** the light, but came to **bear witness concerning** the light"* (1:6-8; also, 1:15; 5:33).
- This opening characterization sets the stage for the description of John's ministry given in 1:19-34.
- John's identity is *further* clarified when he is asked by a delegation sent by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem who he is (1:19).

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- In **response** to their question, John **begins** by telling them **three** particular end time figures that he is **not**:
 - He is **not** the Christ (1:20; cf. 1:8, 15)
 - He is **not** Elijah (1:21a)
 - He is **not** The Prophet (1:21b; cf. 6:14; 7:40; cf. Deut 18:15, 18)

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- After affirming three times who he is **not**, John in this citation from Isaiah 40:3 finally tells his interrogators who he **is**.
- He **is** *"the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"*.
- In this characterization of John, the Gospel of John is consistent with the other three Gospels (cf. Mat 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4).
- The thing that makes John's account **unique** is that he shows us that John the Baptist identified **himself** as the herald prophesied in Isaiah 40.

New Testament
Usage of
Isaiah 40:6-8

The Frailty of Man and the Enduring Character of God's Word (40:6-8)

^{40:6} *A voice says, "Cry out!" Another asks, "What should I cry out?" The first voice responds: "All people are like grass, and all their promises are like the flowers in the field.*

⁷ *The grass dries up, the flowers wither, when the wind sent by the LORD blows on them. Surely humanity is like grass.* ⁸ *The grass dries up, the flowers wither, but the decree of our God is forever reliable."*

1 Peter's Usage of Isaiah 40:6-8

Isaiah 40:6 *A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. (ESV)*

1Pet 1:22b *...love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (ESV)*

⁶ *A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. (ESV)*

^{1Pet 1:24} *for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (ESV)*

- Peter's citation of Isaiah 40:6-8 occurs in a part of 1 Peter where he is exhorting his readers to live in holy community.
- Prior to this citation, Peter has already urged them to set their hope fully on God's grace (1:13) and to be holy because their heavenly Father is holy (1:15-16).
- In 1:22 he urges them to "*love one another earnestly from a pure heart*".

⁶ A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. (ESV)

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- After all, they "have been born again, **not** of **perishable** seed but of **imperishable**, through the living and abiding word of God;" (1:23).
- In other words, the ability to obey this command to love one another is possible **only** because the very nature of Peter's hearers has been transformed.
- The new birth generates life from imperishable seed, the word of God, which is contrasted here with ordinary life generated by normal human procreation, life that is fragile, temporary, and sinful.

⁶ A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. (ESV)

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- The quality and enduring character of this new life, in comparison to the short-lived qualities of mere mortal life, is a result of the quality and enduring character of the "seed" that produced it: "*the word of the Lord*".
- Peter's logic here is that the new birth given by God is conceived from the imperishable seed of God's word, which generates eternal life.

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^{1Pet 1:24} *for* "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever." And *this word is the good news* that was preached to you. (ESV)

- To support this point, Peter introduces a scriptural quotation from Isaiah 40:6-8, introducing it with "*for*", to demonstrate that the sharp contrast that he has in mind is biblically warranted:
- *All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.*
- Peter equates this "*word of the Lord*" with the gospel itself: "*And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*" (1:25).

⁶ A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. (ESV)

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- The promises of Isaiah 40 were first given to encourage Israelites in exile after the Babylonian captivity.
- But Peter's use of this text shows that these promises had application **far beyond** the mere return of the Jews to their homeland under the leadership of men such as Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.
- Peter recognizes similarities between those who were initially comforted by Isaiah 40 and those who are going to read his letter.

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- He too is addressing readers who are exiled and oppressed.
- The contrast that the Isaiah text draws between what is temporary and what is permanent would, no doubt, be a good reminder for a beleaguered community of Christians facing persecution at the hands of a pagan Roman society.
- Perhaps it would be a good reminder for us as well!

Next Time

I plan to begin looking at “The Incomparable Greatness of the Lord” in **Isaiah 40:12–31**

- Over Against the World He Has Created (40:12–14)
- Over Against the Nations of the Earth (40:15–17)
- In Contrast to the Vain Idols (40:18–20)

Class Discussion Time



Class Discussion Time

- Many today, especially those of the Dispensational school of thinking, believe that there will be a time in the future when God will once again deal with the physical descendants of Israel as a separate nation – otherwise God will have failed to deliver on his promises to the Jews of old.
- I believe there are many problems with this view.
- But in terms of God making good on his promises, do you see how Isaiah's language (*especially* as interpreted by New Testament writers like we saw today in Luke) strongly hints that the *future* people of God would no longer be limited to the physical Jews living in the nation of Israel (cf. Amos 3:2), but instead will include men from every tongue, tribe, and nation?

Class Discussion Time

- There are many today who believe themselves to be Christians because at one point in the past they “walked an aisle” (or made some other profession of faith) – and yet they are living in utter contradiction to the Gospel and the teachings of scripture.
- How does Peter’s citation of Isaiah 40:6-8 about genuine believers being born of “incorruptible seed” fly in the face of this kind of thinking?