

Introduction: Christian Hope

At Christmas time we often reflect on the birth of Christ and the hope brought in that moment. According to the Gospels, especially those of Matthew and Luke, the birth of Christ confirmed the hope that Israel had proclaimed over them by their prophets in years past. Though Christ has come, God’s people today continue to wait for his promises to reach their ultimate fulfillment. Therefore we still hold on to this idea of “hope.”

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 that faith, hope, and love mark the Christian community, but that one day only love will remain because faith and hope will no longer be needed. Our *faith* in Christ will not be needed for we will see him face and face, and our *hope* in Christ will not be needed because we will be dwelling with him in the New Creation we had been anticipating. But today is not that day. Today faith and hope are still desperately needed until Christ returns and makes all things new.

What does it mean to have hope? And does being a Christian have anything to do with how you answer that question?

In the Bible — for God’s people — “hopeful” does *not* mean holding onto an unrealistic, imaginative, wishful prayer...like the prayers I used to pray when I was a young school boy in MA in May... “Oh Lord, even though it’s Spring time, I hope that somehow — magically — we have a snow day tomorrow so that school is canceled.”

No. For God’s people “hopeful” does *not* mean holding onto an unrealistic, imaginative, wishful prayer — but rather — hope is a future expectation grounded in the past & and sustained in the present **[repeat]**. You’re not worried about it. There aren’t any questions. You’re actually preparing for your hope to come.

Yet we often stop short in that definition of hope, only thinking of “hope” as a future expectation. “The sum total of our hope is, ‘I hope Jesus comes back soon.’” But Christian hope is much more than that. Yes, we certainly have a future hope that Jesus will return and bring about New Creation. But hope that only looks forward is merely wishful thinking. To go beyond wishful thinking, our hope must also look backwards and side to side. We need not only a future orientation, but we need to remember what God has done in the past and perceive what God is doing in the present.

This brings a **sure** hope which has been held out to God’s people for generations upon generations, and in our passage this morning the Prophet Isaiah holds this sure hope out to the Israelites who have been ravaged by invading nations.

[Turn & Read together]: Isaiah 40:1-5

[trans.]: In the time we have remaining we’re going to see how their hope is accomplished, and how we share together in the same hope. — in three points: Pardon, Preparation, and Paradise.

I. Pardon (for purity) — Isaiah 40:1-2

A. Hope Needed in Despair

What was the state of Israel’s people at the time of this prophecy? They were a scattered people — wallowing in despair. This is why this prophet of hope was desperately needed.

1. The Pattern Broken

Because of Israel’s idolatry and rebellion, God punished them by raising up stronger nations to destroy their land, leave the people desolate, and take captive their strongest and wisest leaders. The poorest remained behind in their destroyed and desolate city while the strongest and wisest of their leaders were taken captive in another nations’ land.¹ *Do you remember the names of some of those carried off in captivity?*

This is the life-story of Daniel and his three friends. They were among the up-and-coming leaders of Israel who were taken captive and separated from their homeland and their people.

The people were left without their farms, shelter, protection, and leadership. Another prophet mourns over this tragedy as he writes in Lamentations,

How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies.

But it’s worse than merely having your city laid waste and your people scattered. Along with their city, their temple was destroyed, leaving them without access to their God, the only one who could save them in such desperate need. Imagine crashing on an island, going back to the cockpit of the wrecked plane to use the radio and call for help...only to find that the radio had also been destroyed in the crash. The Israelites were in desperate need, and no one who could help them would ever know.

What’s worse still, as the Prophet writes, their God — their great warrior and defender — brought this on them himself because of their sin. *“The Lord has become like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel; he has swallowed up all its palaces; he has laid in ruins its strongholds, and he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation (La 2:5).”*

¹ “The unanimous testimony of the texts holds that the elite, and probably the urban elite, were carried away. Those who remained were identified as the ‘poor of the land’ [2 Kgs. 25:12] (Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 385).”

2. The Pattern Restored

Is there any hope? Can the pattern where God establishes his Kingdom be restored so that he might dwell with his people again?

There is a pattern that God uses to build his dwelling place with his people. Knowing this pattern will help us make sense of what we see here in Isaiah, but it will also help us understand every other story in the Bible better. We see this pattern at Creation, under Adam, under Moses, under David, under Christ, and in the New Creation. *What's the pattern...you ask?*

Before God can dwell with his people, a place fit for him must be prepared. This involves purifying the place and the people that are in it. We see this pattern in Creation when God brings order, structure, and light to the formless, empty, and dark world. Once purity is established and a place is prepared, the people must maintain their purity for God to remain with them.

Under Moses' leadership, the Israelites were required to maintain the purity of the Tabernacle and themselves through ritual sacrifices for God to remain with them and be their Leader and King. But they repeatedly sin, and the presence of God leaves them in their corruption. So in order for God to be able to return to his people, their sin and guilt must first be pardoned. Purity needs to be remade. That's the idea here in Isaiah 40. The pattern of God's kingdom is being restored beginning with purification: the forgiveness of their sin.

B. Hope Because of God's Abundant Mercy

Look again at verse 2: [Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, \[why?\] that her iniquity is pardoned...she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.](#) God begins his work of restoration by pardoning their sin.

At first glance it seems to be saying that they received a double punishment for their sin. We can study the Hebrew word used here for “double,” but I am happy to spare you of those details. Consider instead the tone of this passage. “Stand up and proclaim loud and clear so that all the people in the city can hear, and say ‘Comfort, comfort! The time of hardship is over!’” What is the message here? “Speak tenderly to God's people... [whispers] God's going to get you double for what you did!” No, no, no. It's more of, “The punishment you have endured is sufficient.”

I'm still new to this game of parenting, but perhaps even you veteran parents still remember this. *Have you ever experienced this?* Your child persistently disobeys you, so you finally say, ‘Enough is enough’ and you put them into a state of condemnation. [Sit in the timeout chair...scrub the floors...or whatever]. And then, after some time — before their time of punishment is even up — you look on them and your heart breaks. You can't take it any more, and you say, “Enough is enough. Come, come...I love you...I want your best... please listen to me next time...now go back and play.”

[transition out]: The Israelites are pardoned under the light of God’s abundant mercy which surpasses a thousand generations. Hope is grounded in the Lord’s present steadfast love and mercy towards his people.

Though a Prophet laments the destruction of Jerusalem, hope wells up within him as he gazes towards the Lord’s unending love. ...*this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him (La 3:21-24).”*

II. Preparation — Isaiah 40:3

Now remember the pattern — God established his people, he dwelt with his people, and because of their sin he left their presence. But here, he has pardoned his people. Their sin has been covered. They have been washed clean of their guilt. *What does this allow?* God is now able to dwell with them once again. The people are pure, therefore, their God is returning.

A. A Call to Prepare

If you knew that a special guest were coming to your house, what would you do? Certainly, you would celebrate, but your excitement would fade as soon as you began to look at the rooms in your house...the clutter...the dust...the dishes...the chipped paint...that broken doorknob...etc. and suddenly you would come into a sense of urgency... “We have to prepare! Get everything ready!” And this is just what we see in Isaiah’s prophecy. The people have been pardoned, their King is coming, therefore, they must prepare for his arrival.

Look back at verse 3, *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”*

This call to prepare a way in the wilderness and a highway in the desert was the common, ordinary preparation people would make for their guests. Knowing a king or dignitary or important person was coming, the people would scatter about the incoming road to their city and remove rocks and debris from the path. Perhaps they would even use tools to level out some of the bumps in the road. This is what we mean when we say, “Roll out the red carpet!” All this was a sign to the coming guest that they had prepared for his arrival, making the final stretch of his journey nice and smooth.

B. A Call to Repentance

Hundreds of years pass and the people of Israel never saw anything resembling the hope of Isaiah’s prophecy. They heard the announcement that the Lord was returning, *but where was the announcement when he would arrive?*

This brings us to our studies in the Advent season: the coming of Christ. After hundreds of years of silence, waiting to see what would happen next, all of a sudden a voice is heard calling out from the wilderness: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Mt 3:2).”

This scene is recorded for us by Matthew in chapter 3 of his Gospel. He writes,

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” 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.’ ”...Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him...and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased (Mt 3:1-3, 13, 17).”

John the Baptist shows that the preparation Isaiah referred to was the preparation of our hearts through repentance as symbolized in baptism. Matthew writes, Mt 3:6, 8, “...they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins... [To the Pharisees who questioned John’s ministry, he said...] Bear fruit in keeping with repentance...” When Jesus took the helm he too repeated John’s message saying “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Mt 4:17).”

Preparation for the King of glory comes — not through removing rocks from the road — but from removing the sin and idolatry in our hearts. Not only does a clean heart make a suitable path for the return of the King, but the preparation of repentance solves the problem which caused the King to leave in the first place. For it was Israel’s sin of idolatry — worshipping other gods and trusting in other kings — which led to their judgment of exile. *What good would it be for God to return to his people only to leave them once again in judgement because of their next sin?* God’s people needed new hearts of faith which would rely on him without fail, so that when he returned to dwell with them they would remain together forever.

Likewise, we all are called to repent of our sin and fall on God’s grace in Christ. We must repent of trusting in other things apart from God. We must repent of thinking we can do it ourselves or help in any way. If we are to be welcomed into his family, made pure through Christ’ work for us, and be reconciled to God, we must fall on his grace. [If you have never repented of your sin and fallen on God’s grace in Christ, this call goes out to you this morning from God’s Word. His grace is sufficient for you.]

While we are called to repent of our sin, it is the Lord himself who prepares this way for us by removing the stone of our unrepentant heart and putting in a new heart of faith.

The Lord explained this to the Prophet Ezekiel saying, “*I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you...I will remove the heart of stone...and give you a heart of flesh (Ezk 36:26).*”

III. Paradise — Isaiah 40:4-5

Now back to this moment in Isaiah’s prophecy. *The people have been Pardoned, Preparation has been made, now what of Paradise? What is this place where God will once again dwell with his people?*

Before Christ comes Israel does return to their land. *Do you remember when?* It happens when Daniel is an old man under the reign of the Persian King Cyrus who conquered Babylon. Once he was in power King Cyrus let the people return to Israel under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. But although they return to their land they still never see the fullness of Isaiah’s prophecy, for it speaks of a hope far beyond what they would ever see or experience in their homeland.

Look again at Isaiah 40:4-5, *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. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*”

A. A New Jerusalem

Can you imagine such a place? Surely this will not be the same Jerusalem that the Israelites knew, because the road leading into their Jerusalem was quite difficult to traverse. Hear how one commentator describes the road to and through Jerusalem:

Throughout the Old Testament period, Jerusalem remained relatively isolated, accessible via one primary road, which began in the Aijalon Valley..., went up the steep slopes of the Judean Hills, and emptied out onto a small plateau some five miles (eight km) north of Jerusalem.²

It’s one thing to say, “Let’s sweep up the road and remove the rocks for our guest.” It’s another thing to say, “Let’s flatten Mt. Monadnock!” Raising up valleys and lowering mountains indicates that this preparation for the King requires nothing less than the remaking of the Earth such that all humanity will see the Lord’s glory as he returns. Even if the Lord would return to their own Jerusalem, the type of preparation needed for this coming King to Jerusalem went far beyond what the Israelites could do. How can it be?

The question they are left with (and the question we’re left with as we’re reading this) is, ‘Who could possibly prepare this kind of path?’

² Vernon H. Alexander, “The Words and Teachings of Jesus in the Context of Galilee,” in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*, ed. Barry J. Beitzel and Kristopher A. Lyle, Lexham Geographic Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 141–142.

B. A New Creation

Just as Christ came in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy preparing a path of faith in our hearts, so too this same Christ is preparing a place for us to dwell with him forever. *Do you remember him saying... “I go to prepare a place for you.”*

As the Lord comforts his people through Isaiah’s prophecy, Jesus comforts his disciples saying, *“Let not your hearts be troubled...I go to prepare a place for you...[and] I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also (Jn 14:1-3).”*

We sometimes call this “Heaven,” but the Apostle John describes it as a “New Creation” with a “new Jerusalem” for not only will the heavens above be made new, but the earth below, and everything in between. Listen to how the Apostle John described this future place:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, [a] new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God (Re 21:1-3).”

Here is where Israel’s hope and our hope come together. A New Creation whose roads are smooth. A New Creation whose paths are cleared. A New Creation where water and trees springs forth in the desert. A New Creation where sin and death are no more — where the nation’s gather to worship together their God, our King — a New Creation where the glory of the Lord covers the earth like the water covers the sea.

Conclusion: Hope For Today

Where do we fit into this story? What is our hope for today? Because this sounds wonderful, but its wonder quickly fades when we turn and look at ourselves and look at our world. We need hope for *today*...because despair continues to cling to our lives.

We see despair in our ongoing struggle with sin — this battle between what we’ve been saved from and what we’ve been saved to. We see despair in our decaying bodies — age and disease gradually breaking us down until we are dust. And we see despair in our broken world — war, famine, drought, destruction. But we have hope because all our despair is answered with a hope in Christ.

Our hope is sure when we not only look forward — to the future — but when we look back and side-to-side.

A. Looking Forward

First — forward. Our hope is orientated to the future: towards New Creation in Christ [we’ve seen this already]. The Apostle Peter writes, *...set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pe 1:13)*. This hope of New Creation addresses the problem of our broken world. All things will be made new and the glory of the Lord will be seen and known by all.

B. Looking Back

Second — back. Our hope is orientated toward the future New Creation, but is grounded in the past through Christ. The author of Hebrews writes, *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful (He 10:23)*. God has been faithful in his promises by sending Christ. We are reminded of this each Christmas season. His birth addresses the problem of our alienation from God. He has brought us near by coming to us himself. His death addresses our struggle in sin. We’ve been pardoned by God and empowered to live changed lives. His resurrection addresses our decaying bodies. The glory of his resurrection was a preview of the same resurrection all God’s people will experience. Our future hope is grounded in what Christ has already done for us in history: he came, he died, and he rose.

C. Looking Side-to-Side

Third — side-to-side. Our hope is orientated toward the future New Creation, is grounded in Christ’ past work, and it is sustained in the present by the Holy Spirit. We see this present hope expressed by the Apostle Paul who writes — *hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us (Ro 5:5)*. Our hope is sustained as we look to God’s *present* faithfulness to us when we see the Holy Spirit at work (1) creating faith where it does not exist and (2) strengthening the faith of those who believe. The Holy Spirit gives us glimpses of New Creation through the new creation of changed lives which glorify God.

Now we’re cooking. Now we have moved far beyond wishful thinking and have come to rest in a sure expectation. Despite the great struggle and despair we may experience in life, we are stood upright with courage moving forward in the lives God has called us to live, knowing that we have been pardoned by God through Christ, He is preparing a way for his arrival, and He is making all things new that we may dwell with Him in glory.

Because Christ has come and the Spirit is here, our hope is sure.