

This morning, we are continuing in our sermon series on the meaning of Christmas. We are looking at the Old Testament book of Isaiah, a collection of prophecies from the 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century BC. The Christmas season can be a difficult time of the year. For many, there is loss, broken relationships, difficult providing for family needs, physical pain and limitations. There is a lot of joy, but also lots of suffering and pain. The passage this morning, as well as Christmas, speaks to the problem of suffering.

Isaiah was a prophet. God raised up prophets as His spokespeople when the nation of Israel was violating the covenant that had been set up at Mt. Sinai. At the time of Isaiah, Israel was in moral decay – idolatry, empty worship, and social injustice. Isaiah came to warn them. Last week we looked at how their King, King Ahaz, trusted in Assyria instead of God, and how eventually Assyria would turn on Israel and they would be taken off into captivity.

But in the midst of this oracle of judgment came this promise:

*<sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*

A child will be born who will be wise, a father to his people, establish peace, and most shocking of all – be known as mighty God. Israel failed in their calling to bring salvation to the nations. They could not even lead themselves in righteousness and justice. And so God would come down as a child to save them from their sin and from their mess. Jesus is the perfect King the world is looking for.

Isaiah is broken into two sections. Chapters 1-39 are judgments directed towards Israel for their idolatry and covenant-breaking, and then judgments directed at the nations who have oppressed and mistreated Israel. 40-66 is directed at the people in exile, with words of comfort and hope about God's restoration. We're going to read chapter 40 this morning:

***Isaiah 40:1-31** - **Comfort, comfort my people**, says your God. <sup>2</sup> *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all**

her sins. <sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. <sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." <sup>6</sup> A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. <sup>7</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> *The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.*" <sup>9</sup> You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" <sup>10</sup> See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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? <sup>13</sup> Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor? <sup>14</sup> Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? <sup>15</sup> Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. <sup>16</sup> Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. <sup>17</sup> Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. <sup>18</sup> To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? <sup>19</sup> As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. <sup>20</sup> A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple. <sup>21</sup> Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? <sup>22</sup> He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. <sup>23</sup> He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. <sup>24</sup> No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. <sup>25</sup> "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. <sup>26</sup> Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of

them is missing. <sup>27</sup> *Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"?* <sup>28</sup> *Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.* <sup>29</sup> *He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.* <sup>30</sup> *Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;* <sup>31</sup> *but 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.*

What does this passage tell us about suffering and the meaning of Christmas?

### 1) Your suffering is not meaningless

*Isaiah 40:1-31 - Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.*

Your hard service will end, your suffering is atoned for. From the outside it may seem like a bigger country conquered them, but God allowed it for a purpose. They are being disciplined for their sin to purify them so that they would turn from their sins and enjoy once again a covenantal relationship with God.

Their sins have separated them from God. Listen to Isaiah 59:

*Isaiah 59 - Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. <sup>2</sup> But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.*

Isaiah 59 goes on to list the sins: Injustice, empty worship, idolatry, rebellion against God. They are not just in exile because Babylon defeated them. They are in exile because God is disciplining them for their sin.

But listen to Isaiah 40: My people. Your God. The covenant still stands. He is still their Father and they are still His people. And their sin has been paid for, and their hard service, their exile, is coming to an end. Their suffering was not meaningless. It was not random; God has a purpose for allowing it.

Similarly, it is so important to know that our suffering is not meaningless. God does not waste suffering. There is a purpose in your suffering. Like Isaiah 59 said,

our sins have separated us from God. Sometimes your suffering is the result of your sin. Sometimes it's because of other's sin, sometimes it is just the result of living in a fallen world. But God allows it for a greater purpose.

**John 9:1-3** - *As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup> "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of **God** might be **displayed in** his life.*

How does God use suffering for good?

### 1) Wake us up to our need for Him

Many people walk through life thinking they are self-sufficient, that they can do this life without any help. But our suffering reveals the myth of self-sufficiency. Eventually something happens and makes you realize that you can not do this life yourself. Sickness, poverty, job loss, rebellious children, relational stress, and so on. And at the very least, everyone faces death. You can buy all the anti-aging things you want, but you can't prevent it.

As C.S. Lewis put it, *"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."*

**Matthew 7:24-27** - *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. <sup>26</sup> But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."*

Jesus talked about the one who doesn't act on his words is like a foolish man building his house on the sand. Everything may look good, but the foundation is not solid. This was a big part of my conversion, realizing that my great life was built on a foundation of sand.

And so, if you are suffering, it may be to wake you up to your need for God, to wrestle you out of your self-sufficiency.

### 2) Discipline us to make us more like Jesus

**Hebrews 12:7-12** *Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? <sup>8</sup> If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. <sup>9</sup> Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! <sup>10</sup> Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. <sup>11</sup> No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.*

Make us more like Christ. Remove sin, make us like Jesus.

**Romans 8:28-29** *- And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

**James 1:2-4** *- Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, <sup>3</sup> because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. <sup>4</sup> Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

Suffering as He did helps us to know Him better

### 3) Prepare us for service to others

**2 Corinthians 1:3-6** *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. <sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. <sup>6</sup> If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and **salvation**; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.*

Makes us more compassionate and gives us power to minister to others. Fight Club.

Nowhere has this been put more beautifully than by the 19<sup>th</sup> century London preacher Charles Spurgeon in his book "The Soul Winner."

*Some years ago, I was the subject of fearful depression of spirit. Certain troublous events had happened to me; I was also unwell, and my heart sank within me. Out of the depths I was forced to cry unto the Lord. Just before I went away to Mentone for rest, I suffered greatly in body, but far more in soul, for my spirit was overwhelmed.*

*Under this pressure, I preached a sermon from the words, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" I was as much qualified to preach from that text as ever I expect to be; indeed, I hope that few of my brethren could have entered so deeply into those heart-breaking words. I felt to the full of my measure the horror of a soul forsaken of God. Now, that was not a desirable experience. I tremble at the bare idea of passing again through that eclipse of soul; I pray that I may never suffer in that fashion again unless the same result should hang upon it.*

*That night, after sermon, there came into the vestry a man who was as nearly insane as he could be to be out of an asylum. His eyes seemed ready to start from his head, and he said that he should utterly have despaired if he had not heard that discourse, which had made him feel that there was one man alive who understood his feeling, and could describe his experience. I talked with him, and tried to encourage him, and asked him to come again on the Monday night, when I should have a little more time to talk with him.*

*I saw the brother again, and I told him that I thought he was a hopeful patient, and I was glad that the word had been so suited to his case. Apparently, he put aside the comfort which I presented for his acceptance, and yet I had the consciousness upon me that the precious truth which he had heard was at work upon his mind, and that the storm of his soul would soon subside into a deep calm.*

*Now hear the sequel. Last night, of all the times in the year, when, strange to say, I was preaching from the words, "The Almighty hath vexed my soul," after the service, in walked this self-same brother who had called on me five years before. This time, he looked as different as noonday from midnight, or as life from death. I said to him, "I am glad to see you, for I have often thought about you, and wondered whether you were brought into perfect peace." I told you that I went to Mentone, and my patient also went into the country, so that we had not met for five years.*

*To my enquiries, this brother replied, "Yes, you said I was a hopeful patient, and I am sure you will be glad to know that I have walked in the sunlight from that day till now. Everything is changed and altered with me."*

*Dear friends, as soon as I saw my poor despairing patient the first time, I blessed God that my fearful experience had prepared me to sympathize with him and guide him; but last night, when I saw him perfectly restored, my heart overflowed with gratitude to God for my former sorrowful feelings. I would go into the deeps a hundred times to cheer a downcast spirit: it is good for me to have been afflicted that I might know how to speak a word in season to one that is weary.*

*Suppose that, by some painful operation, you could have your right arm made a little longer, I do not suppose you would care to undergo the operation; but if you foresaw that, by undergoing the pain, you would be enabled to reach and save drowning men who else would sink before your eyes, I think you would willingly bear the agony, and pay a heavy fee to the surgeon to be thus qualified for the rescue of your fellows.*

*Reckon, then, that to acquire soul-winning power you will have to go through fire and water, through doubt and despair, through mental torment and soul distress. It will not, of course, be the same with you all, nor perhaps with any two of you, but according to the work allotted you, will be your preparation. You must go into the fire if you are to pull others out of it, and you will have to dive into the floods if you are to draw others out of the water. You cannot work a fire-escape without feeling the scorch of the conflagration, nor man a lifeboat without being covered with the waves.*

Our suffering is not meaningless. We need to know that God has a purpose for it all.

## 2) God will come to suffer and to put an end to suffering

<sup>3</sup>*A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. <sup>5</sup>And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

God is coming.

**Luke 3:1-6** *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar-- when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-- <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. <sup>6</sup> And all mankind will see God's salvation."*

What is the implication? Jesus is the Lord, and John the Baptist is the one prophesied who would come and prepare the way for him. And why has he come?

**Matthew 1:20-23** - *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us."*

Jesus is God with us, come to save us from our sins. Jesus means "the Lord saves." Listen again to Isaiah 40:9-11:

<sup>9</sup> *You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" <sup>10</sup> See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. <sup>11</sup> 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.*

He comes in power, and in tenderness. He will destroy sin and suffering, and He will tenderly love and save us. God will come to earth in His Son Jesus Christ to suffer and die and to save us from our sins. He saves us from the penalty of sin, he is saving us from the power of sin, and one day he will save us from the presence of sin.

**Revelation 21:1-5** - *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." <sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

He is coming to save you! Prepare the way! Repent and open your heart to him!

Second word of comfort: God has come to suffer and will put an end to suffering.

### 3) Put your hope in the Lord and He will strengthen you

<sup>6</sup> *A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. <sup>7</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."*

**We are like grass.** Nothing in this world is secure. **But God's word stands forever** – There is something eternal. There is something that lasts, upon which you can build your life, to which you can devote yourself. The Word of God. The promises of God.

God is Creator. He is Sovereign. He is good. He is just. He knows the end from the beginning. He works all things together for good. He is Savior. He is love. He is full of grace and mercy. He promises eternal life.

**If the goal is knowing God, then suffering and discipline and hardship do not steal from that purpose.**

*Tim Keller - "If your ultimate love and joy is found in the treasures of this world, then suffering will rob you of your joy and make you sadder and madder. But if your ultimate love and joy is found in God, then suffering will drive you deeper into the source of that joy."*

If you are living for anything other than God, if your goal is anything else, suffering will be that much more painful, because it is stealing from you the purpose of your life. Your looks, your reputation, your success, your relationships, your health. But those who hope in the Lord will be strengthened. Listen to the grand finale:

*<sup>27</sup> Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"? <sup>28</sup> Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. <sup>29</sup> He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. <sup>30</sup> Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; <sup>31</sup> but 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.*

God has forgotten me, His people say. Have you forgotten? God is the creator. He never gives up. Hope in the Lord and you will renew your strength. He will encourage and strengthen you to face life's demands.

The image of "soaring on wings like eagles" has captured the hearts of many Christians, resulting in songs, paintings, and sermons about God lifting us up on wings like eagles. **But the thing that has always stood out to me about this verse is that "soaring on wings like eagles" is not the pinnacle of that sentence.** Think about it – God does not say what we might expect: "they will walk and not be faint! They will run and not grow weary!! They will soar on wings like eagles!!!" No, the verse seems to be the exact opposite of what we would expect. It's as if the intro to Superman went like this: **"It's Superman! It's a plane!! It's a bird!!!"**

But the order of those final three statements is no accident. The pinnacle – the miracle, if you will – according to God is NOT that we would soar on wings like eagles. It isn't that we would run and not grow weary. **The pinnacle of the verse, and of our journey with God, is that we would walk and not be faint.** The miracle is not those times when we find ourselves on the mountaintop, fully in love with God and ready to give everything for Him. No, the miracle is when God gives us the strength to get back up when we are in despair, to press on when we feel like throwing in the towel, to put one foot in front of the other, to walk and not be faint.

God has come in Jesus to bring comfort to the afflicted. Your suffering is not meaningless. He will make an end to your suffering. And His Word and His promises are trustworthy. He came to save, to rescue, to atone for your sin, to show

you that you are not forgotten, that this world is not all there is, that there is hope forever and ever.