

Christmas Through the Eyes of Isaiah
Hearing the Good News
Isaiah 40:1-5
December 9, 2018
David Taylor

We are in our Christmas series looking at the Old Testament book of Isaiah, Christmas Through the Eyes of Isaiah. Today we are looking at Isaiah 40:1-5, Hearing the Good News. The Christmas season and specifically the Christmas message is good news, if we hear it. This good news is much more significant than presents, holiday meals, decorations, and time together as family. I want us to hear the good news amidst the clutter of life and festivities. Let's see what that good news is today in Isaiah 40:1-5.

The Good News

It has been a tumultuous time in the life of Israel for a very long time and it is only going to get worse as they continue to turn from God. There is political posturing, there is religious formalism with no spiritual reality underneath, they are in exile, and the people are in turmoil. What often happens when life is difficult for us? We blame God. And how does God often respond to our blaming? Comfort. Where does your mind go when you think of comfort, where do you go to find comfort? *Wherever you go for comfort, this comfort is much more satisfying. Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, my people, and cry to her that warfare (source of suffering) has ended, that her sin is forgiven, that she has received from the Lord's hand double pardon for all her sins* (1-2). Notice how lovingly God tells Isaiah to speak to his people. First, there is an emphasis on comfort. Then God instructs him to speak tenderly, like a parent comforting a child who hurt themselves because they did not obey you. God is going to remove their suffering and extend forgiveness. That's good news! They are not getting what they deserve! God will not forgive because he just overlooks their sin and disobedience like a soft parent. God has provided payment for their sin. The power of sin has been conquered, the penalty removed, and the price has been paid. God was looking to the future when He provided a substitute for human sin. So, the good news for those in exile and suffering and misery that God comes to comfort and restore his people. So what is the right response to this good news?

Responding to the Good News

There is a king coming and God wants them to build a highway so all kinds of people from all kinds of places can find this king. Make an accessible road, straight and level and smooth for easy access. When a king or dignitary was going to visit the land, a public works crew would go before him to repair and expand the road system to prepare for his coming. The right response to the good news, preparing for his coming, is by repenting, turning from sin and turning to God (Isa 57:14-15). Centuries later this passage describes the ministry of John the Baptist calling people to repent and bear fruit of a changed life (Lk 3:4-14). How do you prepare for his coming? If you came here today feeling good about your own morality, you must recognize that your sinfulness means that you will never be good enough so turn from your moralism and trust in Jesus. If you came crawling in here today because you feel terrible about yourself and your life, then turn from looking at yourself and find rest by looking to Jesus. None of us can save ourselves. God sent a Savior because we must look outside ourselves for help. Repentance is turning from whatever you are trusting in or looking to, to get by in life and turning to Jesus. Today you will hear from those getting baptized how they recognized their need for someone else to save them. In one sense their stories are very different but in another they are all very similar. They all recognized their sinfulness, were sorrowful for their sin, and they turned to Jesus in faith for salvation. They did not clean up their life, Jesus did. They heard the good news and responded.

The Purpose of the Good News

The goal of this repenting is that the glory of the Lord will be revealed (5). Like spectacular northern lights dancing across the midnight sky or a spectacular sunrise, God's glory is revealed against the backdrop of human darkness and sin. Hearing the good news as good news is recognizing that the

Christmas message is not just good advice. Advice is counsel about what you must do while news is a report about what has already been done. Advice urges you to make something happen while news urges you to recognize something already happened and to respond to it. Advice leaves it up to you to act while news tells us that someone else has acted. Let me illustrate. Let's say that an army is coming to invade Homer. What we need most is a military expert to advise us how best to prepare for the invasion. But what if a great king has intercepted and defeated the invading army, what do we need most then? We need a messenger to inform us of the news. The messenger does not give us advice, they give us the good news! On the night Jesus was born, God's glory shown around the shepherds and an angelic messenger declared good news of great joy (Lk 2:8-12)! In other words, stop trying to save yourself, the King has saved you.¹ The Christmas message tells us the gospel is not good advice but good news that changes everything. How will you respond?

Jesus cannot be just liked or admired. He draws a reaction. When those in the bible understood who Jesus was they reacted – either they fear him or they are hostile to him or they worship him. Nobody just liked him. Nobody was just inspired by him to live differently, to say that is to diminish what he said and what he did. I want to encourage you with this, to really hear the Christmas message as good news not just good advice.

¹ Adapted from Keller, Tim. (2016). *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ*. New York, New York: Viking Press, p. 21-22.

