

will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you' ” (vv. 3-4).

The restoration will bring healing for the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute... but also for the wilderness, the desert, the burning sand, the haunts of jackals... (vv. 5-7).

It will be a place of safety for the Lord's redeemed as they return. "They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (v. 10). Joy isn't a denial of the reality of pain and disappointment, but the assurance of God's presence and grace. They will know the fulfilment of the Lord's promises in the time of restoration and rebuilding.

Reflect:

- In what ways do human foolishness and sin impact on the natural environment? Would a widespread return of people to active faith in God bring physical improvement to the land? Why do we think this?
- Can we know joy before restoration? To what extent is our joy dependent on our circumstances? How does trust in the Lord's faithfulness bring true strength and support in adversity?
- Describe a time when we have experienced true joy – in spite of adversity.

Study 6 – The Servant of the Lord. Reading: Isaiah 41.8-10; 42.1-9
44.1-5;49.1-7

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Studies from the book of Isaiah
by Peter J Blackburn
5. Restoration, Comfort & Joy
Reading: Isaiah 32.1-8;35.1-10;40.1-11,27-31

People "hang in" against the most discouraging odds in the hope that the situation will change. When all hope dies, they begin to despair of life itself.

Human hopes can be shattered by many circumstances – accident, sickness, bereavement, loss of employment, marriage breakdown... Fire may have destroyed home or business. War may have ravaged a whole nation, destroying infrastructure, spreading fear and uncertainty, removing the usual checks and balances... The biggest pain is probably the pain of disappointment and personal failure.

Yet, no matter what the odds, again and again people rise above their circumstances to build their life and environment again. The greatest heroism may well be seen, not in the heat of battle, but in the will to rebuild, to rise again.

Reflect:

- Name some of the circumstances (from our own life or the lives of others we have known) where it has been necessary to "build again". What has been the motivating force to keep going forward no matter what?
- "The greatest heroism may well be seen, not in the heat of battle, but in the will to rebuild, to rise again". Do you agree? Why?

Restoration

Read: Isaiah 32.1-8.

The Lord has spoken judgment against the nations – including his chosen people. That judgment would be fulfilled for his people through the incursions of foreign nations, culminating in the fall of the northern kingdom (Israel) to Assyria in 722 BC and the fall of the southern kingdom (Judah) to Babylon in 587 BC.

They really believed that, because they were the Lord's people, they should be invincible. After all, they had "the temple of the Lord" (a hope recorded in Jer. 7.4) – almost like a lucky charm.

But the prophet makes it clear that judgment isn't God's last word. In this restoration he is looking forward to a kingdom which will be very different from the one they currently know.

Reflect:

- Think about the qualities of "the kingdom of righteousness" and about our own country. What gaps do we see between what is and what ought to be? What are our hopes for the "restoration"?

Comfort

Read: Isaiah 40.1-11,27-31.

It has been widely taught in modern times that the latter part of Isaiah was written by another prophet (termed Deutero-Isaiah) during the time of the Exile. Many find this theory both unnecessary and unhelpful. It fails to recognise the hand of God in the prophet's work and therefore separates judgment from grace and restoration. The faithful remnant received comfort and the promise of restoration against the fearful backdrop of the Lord's judgment. The Dead Sea Scrolls have provided our oldest complete manuscript of Isaiah with no evidence of the divisions proposed by scholarship.

"When Isaiah wrote these prophecies of restoration Judah still had over 100 years of difficulty ahead of her before she fell to Babylon, and then she faced 70 years of captivity. Anticipating the future Captivity and God's restoration, Isaiah wrote to encourage the Judahites to live righteously in the present, despite forthcoming difficult circumstances" (John A Martin).

The words of comfort anticipate the completion of divine judgment. The voice calls out, "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (40.3-5).

All true prophets were "voices" speaking from God. In the gospels, John the Baptist saw that his task fulfilled these verses (Mt. 3.1-4; Mk 1.1-4;

Lk. 1.76-78; Jn 1.23). They were also a theme of the Qumran sect who saw themselves as a voice calling in the wilderness.

The glory of the Lord and the word of the Lord are in sharp contrast to human glory and words. "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (vv. 6-8). Faced with a human conqueror, we may well be overawed – but only God's word is final.

After all, he is the Creator (vv. 26,28). Unlike pagan idols (vv. 18-20), God is eternal and never grows weary. His knowledge is complete. He gives strength to those who humbly trust in him.

"Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; 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" (vv. 30,31).

Reflect:

- Comfort – and the will and energy to go on. When have we experienced that in our own lives. Reflect on verses 30 and 31.

Joy

Read: Isaiah 35.

What a grand picture of restoration!

The prophet had said, "The land mourns and wastes away, Lebanon is ashamed and withers; Sharon is like the Arabah, and Bashan and Carmel drop their leaves" (33.9). Sharon is the fertile coastal plain south of Carmel. It would become dry and barren like the Arabah, the desolate area from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba.

In the restoration, "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom" (35.1). The restoration of the Lord's people will bring restoration to the land itself in a physical sense.

So... don't give up! "Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God