**Those Who Hope in the Lord Will Renew Their Strength**

December 27, 2015

Isaiah 40:1-31

Key Verse 40:31 “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.”

When we confront the end of the year, there seems to be much work to be done. At the same time, there seems to be nothing to be done. Most people are sorrowful, reflecting on the past year, which gave them continuous defeat and failure or meager success. Most people are fearful, anticipating a new year, in which they have to suffer. But God’s people must thank God for his grace upon them in the past year. God’s people must start the new year prayerfully, asking God’s strength and wisdom through Bible studies. But how easy it is for us to become busy-minded, not knowing where to start first. As we conclude 2015, let’s remember God’s grace and start the new year 2016 having God in our hearts.

Look at verse 1. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Israel was under the slavery of sin and condemnation. Because of their sins, they suffered unbearable pain under the Babylonian captivity. But God tells to comfort these people. We can see that the purpose of God’s punishment is not just to punish them but to comfort them. God is God of comfort. We too have been struggling with our school studies and our job and our Bible students and our children. We all need comfort. How can the Israelites and we be comforted?

**First**, real comfort comes from the forgiveness of sins. Look at verse 2. “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.” We cannot properly describe the suffering and pain of the Israelites under the Babylonian captivity for 70 years. It was worse than Korean people’s suffering under Japanese occupation for 36 years, or Burmese people’s suffering under military Junta for 47 years. God made them suffer under the Babylonian captivity not because he hated them but to cleanse them from their sins. Now they don’t have to suffer any more since they received double for all their sins. The grace of the forgiveness of sins is the greatest comfort. Those who are tired and weary need comfort. How can we comfort them? Can we comfort them by giving them a million dollars? By giving them good jobs? The message of forgiveness is the best comfort we can give them.

**Second**, we should accept God’s rule. Real comfort comes when we accept God’s rule after the forgiveness of sins. Look at verses 3,4. “A voice of one calling: ‘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.” In order to accept God’s rule, their hearts should be prepared first. After the Babylonian captivity, their hearts were like wilderness. They were despised by the Babylonians and their self-esteem was very low, and their hearts were like valley. At the same time, they were deeply influenced by the Babylonian culture that they were very proud. They were not ready to accept God’s rule. When the Israelites served the idols leaving God out, they only received pain and suffering due to sins. The first thing they need to do in order to receive comfort and strength, was to repent of their sins and prepare the way for God. Many people, especially teenagers, complain about their situation, “Why was I born in the poor family? Why was I born not so smart?” They do not accept God’s sovereignty. They have a pride that they know better than God. If they do not accept God’s sovereignty, they can never be comforted. They have to believe that God put them where they are, made them who they are so that they can serve his purpose in their generation. Real comfort comes when we accept God’s rule.

**Third**, we have to stand on God’s word. God says to Isaiah to cry out. Look at verses 7-8. “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall…but the word of our God stands forever.” The Israelites, after coming back from the captivity, must have felt miserable when they looked at Babylon’s glory. It looked so glamorous. On the other hand, even though they were chosen people, nothing went well, and furthermore they suffered under the strong godless neighbors. They felt really miserable of their situation. They must have earnestly prayed to God to restore their situation so that they may live comfortable lives. Many people say, “It is good to live by faith, but I need to live a comfortable rich life.” But God says that all men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The Babylon’s glory and power looked as if they would endure forever, but when she became proud, she was defeated by the Persians. However, we who live by faith may be tempted to seek glory and honor in this world. If we do not obtain the honor and glory in this world, we feel like losers. But God says clearly that all their glory will perish. But the word of God stands forever. When we live by faith, sometimes things do not go well in our way. Then we doubt the word of God and doubt the life of faith. But that time is the best opportunity to learn God’s will, and grow strong in our inner men. Then we can experience real joy and strength.

**Fourth**, God is our shepherd. Isaiah who has been delivering the message of comfort, now declares who God is. Look at verse 9. “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!’” The Israelites only looked at their pathetic situation or their prosperous godless neighbors, and then despaired. At this time, they should look up at God. As we conclude 2015 and start the new year, we should look up at God instead of looking at things of the world. We should help others to look up at God. Then who is God?

Look at verses 10,11. “See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 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.” The Israelites knew God as God who condemns sinners without mercy, God who is so holy that no one may approach him. But in fact God is our shepherd. He is gentle and patient. 2000 years ago, he was born in a stable and laid in a manger in order to demonstrate that he is approachable as a gentle baby. The gentle shepherd Jesus rewards all our effort and work without fail. When we look at such God, all our sense of loss and fear disappear and we can have peace in his arms.

**Fifth**, he is the Sovereign Lord. In verses 12-17, Isaiah speaks about God’s power and his Sovereign rule. God has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and marked off the heavens with the breadth of his hand. Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counselor? Look at verses 15,17. “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…Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.” Wow! Our God is so great that nothing in this world can defeat him. The Israelites thought that the Babylon ruled the whole world. But from God’s point of view, the Babylon was nothing but a drop in a bucket. This is Isaiah’s view of the world. Isaiah saw the world from God’s point of view and he was not afraid of the Babylon. Likewise, we can say with conviction, “The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies.” (Ps 118:6,7)

**Sixth**, he is the Creator God. Isaiah continues to testify who God is by comparing him to idols. Look at verses 18,19. “To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it.” How foolish it is to trust in idols which were made by men! On the other hand, God was in the beginning and stretched out the heavens like a canopy. Look at verse 26. “Lift up 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.” Isaiah told people to “Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?” When we look at the Creator God, we don’t trust in worthless idols. Last Friday, we watched a movie clip, “The power of ten.” It shows us a proton, size of $10^{-16}$ meters, and the universe, size of $10^{26}$ meters. It provides us a glimpse of the astonishing complexity and magnificence of the creation. God created and governs both big universe and small world of proton, both equally incomprehensible in their largeness and smallness.

In verse 27, Isaiah points out the real problem of the Israelites. They complain that God does not regard their difficult situation: Even though God is the Creator God and rules the world, he is indifferent to their sufferings and sorrow, and so they considered him irrelevant. They did not believe in God’s love and providence due to their hardship. Even though God is the Almighty God, if we do not believe him, we have no part with him. Isaiah cries out with a shepherd heart, “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. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.” Even though they seemed to know God well, they were blind spiritually and did not know who God is. When we only struggle with worldly problems, we forget who God is. Jesus’ disciples were struck by grief when their teacher died on the cross. They could not believe those who witnessed the resurrection. They could not believe even the risen Jesus. Isaiah rebuked them of their unbelief and ignorance, saying, “Do you not know? Have you not heard?” God gives strength to the weary and he is the source of the wisdom. Therefore, if anyone depends on God, he or she will not get tired, and be filled with wisdom like Solomon. On the other hand, those who do not depend on God grow tired and weary and fall even though they are young. Here we can see that the problem is not in God, but in their unbelief and ignorance.

Look at verse 31. “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.” “Hope in the Lord” means to put all our hope in God and depend on him. Those who hope in the Lord will always receive a new strength from God. Why am I powerless and enervated? It is because I depend on myself, on material things, and on my experience. But those who hope in the Lord will soar on wings like eagles and will have great vision and strength. Eagles have big and strong wings and they can soar high. In particular, when there is storm, other birds go into their nests, but eagles ride the storm and fly higher. Likewise, those who hope in the Lord will have more strength and faith through hardships. Those who hope in the Creator God do not live only looking at the problems like sparrow. They live with high hope and vision like eagles as God’s chosen people. They devote their lives to the eternal life instead of small benefit in this world. They live lives of mission instead of enjoying bits of pleasure. They live for the glory of God instead of their own glory. They have hope in the kingdom of God instead of this perishing world. Then they will run and not grow weary. Even if they may grow old outwardly, their inner men will be renewed every day and live like young men.

Many of you will have seen the film “Chariots of Fire,” an outstanding film about a Christian Eric Liddell, who refuses to run in the prestigious 100 meters in the 1924 Paris Olympics because it involved racing in a preheat on a Sunday, which Liddell believed to be a ungodly use of Sunday. Liddell was probably the fastest man alive at that time and had been the favorite to win it for Britain. The Press and even the Prince of Wales tried to talk him into running but he refused. Instead, he went to the Scottish Presbyterian church that Sunday and read the lesson from Isaiah 40. However, he was given the chance to race for Britain in the 400 meters a race he had never even run before. And God honored him for his stand. Liddell ran the 400 meters at a 100 m pace. The experts thought he was running the first 100 meters too fast and would tire later in the race. But it was not the case and he won with a new world record. As Christians, God wants us to rely on him, whatever we are doing. As we look to him, he will give us the strength to continue. There are times when we are tempted to give in, and want to throw the towel in - yet when we look to our Lord, he will RENEW our strength.

When I was a student, I was so tired and weary. Even though I was 20 years old, many people said that I looked like a middle-aged man. I was tired and weary because there seemed to be no hope for me. It seemed as though there were nothing I could do to make a mark in this world. That hopelessness made me powerless. But in Jesus I found hope. Jesus came to this world to make me a holy child and prepared a glorious kingdom as my inheritance. Even if I die without making a mark in this world, I am fine with that because of the living hope in the kingdom of God. That hope helps me to renew my strength and serve God every day.

In the past year we have experienced many failures and heartaches. We grew weary and tired. As we conclude 2015, let’s pray that we may put our hope in God so that we may soar on wings like eagles with high vision and hope in the new year 2016.