



Sermon

4th February 2024

Exchange your Strength

Isaiah 40:21-31

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I want to address two ideas relating to the OT reading today.

The message was addressed to the exiled Jews in Babylon. The end of their exile is prophesied. Now at last after 70 years they are to go back to their land.

There are two themes here:

1. The immense power – nay infinite power of God.
2. His readiness to strengthen those who rely on him.

The people have been beaten in battle and enslaved. The gods of Babylon have seemed to triumph over their God. But Isaiah is saying to the Israelites that Yahweh is the Creator. All the immensity of space is his creation. Have you seen photos from the James Webb Telescope? It keeps revealing more extraordinary pictures of deep space, of myriads of galaxies not previously discovered.

God is creator of it all. He is enthroned above the earth. It is He who spreads out the heavens like a canopy or a tent.

Again in 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 forth each of them by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

The Almighty's handling of the stars is likened to the action of a shepherd, who numbers his sheep and calls them by name. So it is with the multitude of stars – God marshals them, knows them, numbers them.

So he is telling us that our God is in control of the universe. He is greater and more powerful than the immense forces of the universe. Indeed it is because of his great power and mighty strength, that not one of them is missing.

Then Isaiah tends to earthly rulers. They may appear strong, terrifying, invincible. But before God they are nothing. He brings them to naught, and reduces them to nothing (v23).

²⁴ 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.

So people of God are you terrified of world rulers? Don't be – they are nothing before him. You may fear Russia, China, North Korea. You might quail at the wars raging in Ukraine and Israel, but none of these powers and threats compares to the almighty power of our God.

²⁵ "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.

In this light, let us think for a moment of Waitangi Day. The Treaty is a covenant and God regards covenants as very important. He made covenant with the people of Israel. Jesus made the new covenant on which our salvation is based.

The importance of standing by a covenant is shown for us in the account of the Gibeonites who tricked the Israelites into making a covenant with them under false pretences. It appears in Joshua 9. Nonetheless, God required the nation of Israel to honour that covenant they had made.

We as the Church can be proud of the Treaty. It was the product of Christians who were determined that the Māori should not be conquered as many other indigenous peoples had been but that any settlement was to be negotiated fairly. There is not time and I am not the expert to talk of what has gone wrong and by whom.

The situation now, requires us as a nation to work towards an honourable outworking of the treaty as we try to interpret it for modern times. This is not simple. So let us pray for our leaders as they navigate these white water rapids trying to avoid the rocks which would make shipwreck of this nation. Pray for wisdom, understanding, fairness and reasonableness from all parties.

But in all of it, remember that God is far, far above all the nations and he rules.

2. Strength for the Weary

The remaining verses of this chapter turn to strengthening those who feel weak.

You could apply these words to global or national conflicts. You could apply them more immediately to individuals struggling in life.

In spite of the fact that God is all powerful, yet he is aware of our needs. V27 We may complain that God does not see us. We may think he pays no attention to the cause of little ol' me. But no, God is acutely aware of our needs and pleadings.

Haven't you heard, Isaiah says,

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 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.

Church, let's dive into these last three verses [29-31]. We do get tired and weary. But here is the promise of provision to strengthen us and keep us going.

Two words are used for weary or tired here. They are drummed relentlessly upon us. I have colour-coded them in yellow and blue.

The other repeated word is strength. It appeared before in v26 when we learnt that it because of God's great strength that none of the starry host is lost. In these three verses the weak who hope in God are promised strength. Highlighted in green.

It starts by affirming that God does not grow tired or weary and he has understanding beyond our comprehension.

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak (or the not strong literally).

Actually all of us even strong young men do grow weary and tired. In their weariness they stumble and fall.

BUT – there is a BUT – But for those who hope in the Lord it is a different story. So what is this hope in the Lord? The Hebrew word means hope, wait and expect. It is positive, it is intentional. It is not waiting as in passing time until something happens, like waiting for a bus which is late. This is expectant anticipation of something good. Those who wait on the Lord who hope in him, they will renew their strength.

Friends, there is another gem in the word renew. It is not 'renew' as in 'get back what you had.' It is not the recovery after a rest. There are these shades of meaning: change, substitute, alter, change for better. There is the sense of exchange and substitution here. In other words, it is that God gives his strength to them. So as you trust God, as you look to him for the answers, as you lean into him, he renews your strength with his. There is an exchange, an impartation.

Now what is the result? They will fly, they will run, they will walk.

Whereas before they would grow tired and weary and stumble and fall. Now they will rise up on wings as eagles. Eagles fly high and they soar for hours. Do you know what an eagle's flight is like? They don't flap their wings all the time, they rise on thermal currents of air. They soar. They ride the wind.

We, as we wait upon the Lord, will be able to soar on the power of the wind or the Spirit. As God said through Zechariah 4:6 'It is not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit.'

Now they are like God in that they do not grow weary and tired. They will no longer stumble but run without getting tired and walk without fainting.

I suggest this passage is worth mediating upon. Chew it over. Think about it. Pray it into yourself.

Remember that hope, wait and expect are all meanings of the same word. We are to wait upon the Lord.

Remember that God does not grow weary but even young men stumble.

Remember that God gives an exchange of strength. Then we will be able to soar on the wind of the Spirit, run and walk with out tiredness.

May God grant us to hope in him and renew our strength. Amen.