

Comfort My People: Isaiah 40 and the Exaltation of the Valleys, pt 3 by Ward Fenley

This section of our exposition of Isaiah 40 could be properly called "Escaping Shame." We touched previously on the subject of the glad tidings that represent the Gospel (or Christ Himself) coming to a people in need of eternal life. However, eternal life is contrasted with that which every Old Testament believer feared under the Mosaic covenant: death.

Zion, the church, or God's righteousness is that which brings the tidings, and cries, "Be not afraid." Hebrews speaks of the consuming fear that gripped the hearts of all believers, and that was the fear of death:

Hebrews 2:14-15 Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; 15 And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

Where can we see clear testimonies of the fear of death in the O.T. Scriptures? First, in the life of David, we see a man who was well-aware of the implications of physical death upon the human consciousness:

Psalms 6:5 For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?

Psalms 30:3 O LORD, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave: thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit.

Psalms 30:9 What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Shall the dust praise thee? shall it declare thy truth?

Psalms 88:10-12 Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee? Selah. 11 Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction? 12 Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

The Psalmist understood that under the Old Covenant there was the severely terrifying reality that once one was dead there would be:

1. No more remembrance of God
2. No more giving thanks
3. No more praise of God
4. No more declaring the truth of God
5. No more experiencing God's wonders
6. No more declaring God's lovingkindness

7. No more knowledge of God's righteousness

These sorrowful truths often go unnoticed as we glance through the Psalms to find meaning for our lives today. But when we consider the magnitude of these Old Testament realities in contrast to eternal life in Christ, the contrast is enormous. Even Isaiah agreed with the Psalmist:

Isaiah 38:15-18 What shall I say? he hath both spoken unto me, and himself hath done it: I shall go softly all my years in the bitterness of my soul. 16 O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit: so wilt thou recover me, and make me to live. 17 Behold, for peace I had great bitterness: but thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back. 18 For the grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth.

Isaiah believed that in death:

1. He could not praise God
2. He could not celebrate God
3. He could not hope for God's truth

But Isaiah had hope:

Isaiah 38:19-20 The living, the living, he shall praise thee, as I do this day: the father to the children shall make known thy truth. 20 The LORD was ready to save me: therefore we will sing my songs to the stringed instruments all the days of our life in the house of the LORD.

As did the Psalmist:

Psalms 49:15 But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me. Selah.

This fear cannot be separated from shame and the accusations from the self-righteous, for under the Old Covenant all believers experienced both fear and shame:

Isaiah 51:7 Hearken unto me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be ye afraid of their revilings.

Isaiah 54:14 In righteousness shalt thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression; for thou shalt not fear: and from terror; for it shall not come near thee.

Righteousness would be the answer to their fear and shame, for righteousness comes through faith in Christ, and inherent in that righteousness is rescue from shame:

Romans 9:33 As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.

Romans 10:8-13 But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; 9 That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. 10 For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. 12 For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. 13 For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

We would be remiss to stop at that verse and fail to see the context of Paul's thinking:

Romans 10:14-15 How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? 15 And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!

This should immediately bring to mind our initial context:

Isaiah 40:9 O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!

Through the Gospel, the fear of death and shame is removed because Christ, who knew no sin, became sin for us that we would become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). Granted, most Christians who have darkened the door of a church for a year or more have probably run into that last verse a few times. However, it is when we connect righteousness with the abrogation of shame and the fear of death that we become amazed at what Christ has actually fulfilled in reference to Old Testament prophecies.

Those who come against God's people have imprecatory prayers against them, who contrast righteousness:

Psalms 35:26 Let them be ashamed and brought to confusion together that rejoice at mine hurt: let them be clothed with shame and dishonour that magnify themselves against me.

The Psalmist frequently prayed against the self-righteous (cf. The Pharisees of Christ's time). He prayed for their shame and confusion, and of course fear:

Jeremiah 2:11-13 Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? but my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit. 12 Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the LORD. 13

For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

The Pharisees had sought out their own righteousness and had not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God and had changed what would have been their glory into shame:

Romans 1:23 And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.

They began to worship and serve the creature (the law and sacrifices and ritual) rather than the Creator:

Romans 1:25 Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

Rather than becoming righteous after their own doing, their self-righteousness became abominable to God:

Luke 16:13-15 No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. 14 And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him. 15 And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.

The mammon represents the self-righteousness of man. Their self-righteous works became works of unrighteousness in the sight of God:

Matthew 23:4-5 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. 5 But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,

Notice that the works were perceived as righteous in the sight of men but in the sight of God they were filthy:

Isaiah 64:6 But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

Their sacrifices would show them to be as the very people they despised, which were the unbelieving Gentiles:

Isaiah 1:9-13 Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah. 10 Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. 11 To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. 12 When ye

come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts?
13 Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.

Isaiah 66:3-5 He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog's neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine's blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol. Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations. 4 I also will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them; because when I called, none did answer; when I spake, they did not hear: but they did evil before mine eyes, and chose that in which I delighted not. 5 Hear the word of the LORD, ye that tremble at his word; Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my name's sake, said, Let the LORD be glorified: but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed.

They are contrasted with the people of God:

Isaiah 45:16-17 They shall be ashamed, and also confounded, all of them: they shall go to confusion together that are makers of idols. 17 But Israel shall be saved in the LORD with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be ashamed nor confounded world without end.

It is important to understand that the 'idols' of which the prophet speaks are not what we typically view as idols. The idols are those elements of the Mosaic Law that Pharisees turned into standards by which they thought they had eternal life:

John 5:37-45 And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. 38 And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not. 39 Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. 40 And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life. 41 I receive not honour from men. 42 But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you. 43 I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive. 44 How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only? 45 Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust.

Christ derided these Pharisees for their trust in Moses but not in God. All their righteousness was filthy in God's eyes. They were as Sodom and Gomorrah. They had become as Sodom and Egypt. Their works of obedience were regarded by God as disobedience. Their fruit was bad fruit from a bad tree, a tree that was the self-righteous teaching of men:

Matthew 12:33-35 Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. 34 O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. 35 A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth

evil things.

We must remember that these were the exact same Pharisees to which Christ referred when He spoke:

Matthew 5:19-22 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. 21 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: 22 But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

Some have mistakenly understood this passage to be referring to those who argue for the abrogation of the law. But Jesus in fact was teaching something entirely different. Jesus was teaching that these Pharisees were as moral outwardly as they could possibly be, and yet in heart they were immoral, so much so that they would be the most sorely in danger of the judgment:

Matthew 23:14-36 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. 15 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. 16 Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! 17 Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? 18 And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. 19 Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? 20 Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. 21 And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. 22 And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. 23 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. 24 Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. 25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. 26 Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. 27 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. 28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. 29 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, 30 And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not

have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. 31 Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. 32 Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. 33 Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? 34 Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: 35 That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. 36 Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

That was the great shame that would come upon the nation of Israel in AD 70.

With these things in view, we might recall passages which seem to speak of a moral righteousness in the New Testament, especially in light of bad fruit. That is, when a person's heart is bad, their righteousness is regarded as filthy, adulterous, abominable, and unworthy of the kingdom of God. For example, in Galatians we have Paul addressing a group of people plagued by the Judaizers. The Judaizers were a particularly deceptive group in that they combined circumcision with Christ. This was so abominable that Paul considered those who would teach such and believe such as accursed, and wished that they would "cut themselves off," or literally emasculate themselves. Therefore, when Paul speaks of what seem to be moral commands for salvation, it is very likely that He is addressing the heart rather than outward manifestation:

Galatians 5:19-25 Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, 20 Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, 21 Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, 23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. 24 And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. 25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

Notice how Paul begins this section: "The *works* of the flesh are manifest." Paul's use of the aorist tense ('once and for all') in verse 24 is very compelling:

"And they that are Christ's have crucified (aorist) the flesh with its affections and lusts."

Paul was very clear. He, like Christ, knew that outwardly the Pharisees and Judaizers were blameless:

Philippians 3:5-6 Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; 6 Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

Therefore it is highly unlikely that abstinence from those **fruits** of the flesh in

Galatians 5 is literally that to which Paul was referring. Paul simply stated: "if you are owned by Christ, you have once and for all crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts." This corresponds perfectly well with what Paul said would be the converse of pharisaical righteousness for those owned by Christ:

Romans 8:1-9 There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. 3 For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: 4 That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. 5 For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. 6 For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. 7 Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. 8 So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

The doctrine taught in these passages (Galatians and Romans) seems to be much clearer in light of how Jesus attacked those who were morally irreproachable but who were destitute of the righteousness of God in their own hearts. Again, Paul says in Romans that the law is fulfilled (aorist, or once and for all) for those who *walk* in the Spirit (present tense). Walking in the Spirit is continuing in faith (not in justification by works or even proving justification by works), so that the very idea of viewing these passages as teaching moral obedience for salvation or even proof of salvation is teaching exactly the opposite of what the Apostle Paul is teaching. The fruit of the Spirit is always there, regardless of whether we identify with it at any given moment, inasmuch as the kingdom of God is present regardless of our feelings. Paul said, "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink but righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit." We may not feel at peace, but we are at peace. We may not feel joyful, but we are joyful. We may not feel righteous, but we are righteous, for all of these things are in the sight of God and not men. "Ye are they which justify yourselves before men, but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God." All of these things are concerning the sight of God and not men, including Galatians 5 and Romans 8.

So then, through faith the glad tidings would take away the fear of death and fear of shame for disobeying the law. Jesus placed this comfort in the heart of the woman caught in adultery: "Neither do I accuse you." In essence, Jesus said, neither will you be ashamed, neither will your trespasses be held against you, but because you are still under the law, sin no more lest these men stone you and you feel ashamed." God is glorified when we proclaim that His everlasting salvation has come and there is no more shame. We may feel shame, but we are not ashamed. We may feel unholy, but we are holy and blameless in His sight. Again, the restoration of God's people was not to bring about a people that could perform an outward set of moral standards; rather, the restoration of God's people was to bring about a cleansing of the heart from sin and shame and have that very people brought into the presence and holiness of God. Shame is an entity that is abolished through the work of God, not the work of man; therefore shamelessness is an establishment based upon the

power of God and not man and thus cannot be lost, regardless of the personal mental experience of man.

We see that Old Testament believers had a problem, which was that the self-righteous would come against them and make them feel ashamed and remind them through accusations that they were worthy of death as a result of transgression of the law. It was upon these hypocrites that shame would come:

Psalms 35:24-28 Judge me, O LORD my God, according to thy righteousness; and let them not rejoice over me. 25 Let them not say in their hearts, Ah, so would we have it: let them not say, We have swallowed him up. 26 Let them be ashamed and brought to confusion together that rejoice at mine hurt: let them be clothed with shame and dishonour that magnify themselves against me. 27 Let them shout for joy, and be glad, that favour my righteous cause: yea, let them say continually, Let the LORD be magnified, which hath pleasure in the prosperity of his servant. 28 And my tongue shall speak of thy righteousness and of thy praise all the day long.

Consider the theological significance of David's prayer: David pleaded with God to judge Him according to His (God's) righteousness. David wished gladness and joy upon those who favored David's righteous cause (the righteousness of God) and prayed that He would magnify the Lord, and that as a result of God's righteousness David's tongue would speak of God's righteousness and of His praise all the day long, that God would be glorified and not man. When man glorifies himself, he is ashamed because he miserably fails at the standards that he either sets for himself or believes that God has set for him. Guilt quickly follows upon failure and then the cycle begins again, simply contributing to the humanistic endeavor of self-justification, which only brings shame and fear. It brings fear because man fears when he does not measure up to his own standard or a standard he believes God has set up for him to either grant him access to the kingdom or prove his access to the kingdom. The aberrant theology is the same whichever the perspective or intention. If outward moral transformation according to a set of standards is the means to, or the proof of a man's entrance into the kingdom of heaven, all will miserably fail, for if one commandment has been broken, then they all have. One then is forced to draw lines of: How much? Once a week? Once a year? A couple of sinful seasons?

Rest is only found in the abounding grace of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. In that work the recipient of eternal life is assured. When we begin to fall back on a set of moral standards, we then begin the cycle of guilt, fear, shame, and lack of assurance. We then gain assurance (and hence guiltlessness, shamelessness, and courage) based upon? Our performance. This ensures the humanism that so often takes away from the glory of God. Our greatest joy and comfort always comes when our reliance is simply upon grace and when our thankfulness reaches the ears of the Lord of the Sabbath (or rest). This may sound foreign to the ears of a 21st century neo-evangelical, but whenever we *experience* shame or guilt, it is then that God is speaking to us in a very profound way, essentially saying, "View yourself with the eyes of the God of heaven who has waged war against fear, shame, death, and guilt, and has won. View yourself according to the eternal righteousness that God has given you through the death, resurrection, and presence of Jesus Christ. Understand yourself to be in His presence always, and not just sometimes. Even in those moments of vice, those moments of apparent failure, those moments of imagined

thirst, understand yourself to be overcome with the water of life, the forgiveness of sin, and the eternal consequence of the agony of the Son." Would God be more pleased to have you announce the ultimate freedom from shame in your vice or to announce your shame at letting Him down? Believer, you could not possibly let God down, for He "humbled Himself to the point of death, even the death of the cross, wherefore God hath highly exalted Him..." In Him who is exalted, you are exalted. Nothing can bring Him or you down. This is the theology of the cross, and the power of His resurrection. You have known Him and that power and have been subdued. Again, feelings of shame may come, and God simply reminds you to call to remembrance what He has done and be thankful. Imagine the difference this could make in Christians across the world if, when feeling taken by a stronghold, they would simply say in the truthfulness of their hearts, "Thank you God for bringing me into the heavenly places where I am seated with your Son at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Thank you that I am perfect (Hebrews 10:14), righteous (2 Cor 5:21), holy (Col 1:22), washed (1 Cor 6:11), healed (1 Peter 2:24), and unashamed:

Psalms 37:19 They shall not be ashamed in the evil time: and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied.

The promise has been fulfilled:

Isaiah 40:9 O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift *it* up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!

Through the Gospel (Christ), we are not afraid and He says to us, "Behold, your God." Indeed, we behold our God in His presence.