

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 7, 2021

A Word for the Weary

Isaiah 40:21-31

There are certain Bible verses that frequently make it onto t-shirts, mugs, posters, figurines, and other media. The conclusion of today's passage from Isaiah is one of them. "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 faint" (v. 31). Some of you may have claimed this text, or quoted it, or posted it, or worn it. People struggling under all sorts of heavy circumstances have looked to these words to lift them up and lead them onward.

These words were originally addressed to God's weary people. They were in exile from their homeland and struggled to imagine a future that looked any different from the present. At the beginning of the chapter, Isaiah tries to soothe them with the good news that a highway will be built for their return. But this announcement didn't completely quell their questions. "When is this going to end?" "Where is God in this experience?" "Has the Lord abandoned us?" "When will things be like they used to be?" This is the context in which Isaiah is doing his best to preach. He wants the Judeans to know that they're still God's people, and that what God has promised isn't just pie in the sky. God has the power to take the vision of homecoming and make it a reality.

In order to take the people forward, Isaiah first points them back. He pleads with them to think back and remember the kind of God who initially redeemed them and brought them into relationship with himself. God wasn't some minor deity who appeared on the scene, worked a miracle or two, and then exited the stage of history. No, God was, and still is, in control. Isaiah uses his words to paint a picture of a God who is strong and creative. He sits above the dome that forms heaven and holds back the waters of chaos. This God is so great that we here on earth seem like insects. Nations and their rulers may think they are great and mighty, but God has real power to govern. Then Isaiah lifts our eyes back to the skies where the heavenly bodies preach their own sermon about God's power and creativity.

God's people may agree that that's all good and wonderful. The skies do testify to God's glory and his capacity to create. But while the stars shine brightly in the heavens, hope often grows dim here on earth. Here where we are, death, not life, seems to be in charge. Each day starts to feel like a repeat of the previous day's sorrow. The dominant mood isn't strength but fatigue.

It will soon be almost a year since we first started closing down a lot of life as we knew it. We began staying at home, keeping our distance, and washing our hands. We started stocking up on essentials, working from home, and going to school online. We stopped gathering for worship, traveling to see relatives, and going out to eat. We made it through spring, then summer, then fall. Then winter arrived. Now here we are, millions of COVID cases and hundreds of thousands of deaths later, sitting in church and thinking back over where we've been. Yes, we've learned a lot medically. Vaccinations are underway. Numbers seem to be improving. But COVID variants may become more dangerous, and

huge numbers of people are still suffering, nationally and around the world. It has been a long, tiring period of exile from life as we knew it.

No one has experienced the fatigue of the pandemic more than frontline health care workers. As one South Carolina doctor put it after a two-week shift in an ICU filled with COVID-19 patients, "I am exhausted, I am tired. I don't even know how I am still standing up."¹ I'm sure he captures the experience of many health care workers who have battled illness, burnout, anxiety, fear, and exhaustion. Among the sick and those who care for them, the weariness is physical, as well as emotional and psychological. And out beyond the walls of our hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers, there's a widespread pandemic fatigue, a complex mixture of emotions that includes loneliness, sadness, frustration, boredom, fear, and anger. In short, weariness is everywhere.

Except in the life of God. "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" (v. 28). So though we may be weary, God is not. He has the energy to finish what he has started. Runners and athletes in other endurance sports will sometimes speak of "hitting the wall" as they push themselves past their comfort level. This means the body runs out of energy and becomes so tired it can't go forward. Several years ago, the day before the Boston Marathon, a health magazine article predicted what would happen to many of the runners:

Come tomorrow morning, about 27,000 runners will begin the annual 26-mile, 385-yard (42,195 kilometers) mass run from suburban Hopkinton to Boston. But if past marathons in Boston and elsewhere are any indication, perhaps up to 40 percent of these optimistic and determined souls will slam into a sudden sensation of overwhelming, can't-do-this fatigue several miles (typically about five) before they get a chance to experience the glory of crossing the finish line.²

Isaiah wants God's people to know that though they may grow tired, the Lord doesn't "hit the wall." With all that has happened, including events and experiences that lead them to question God's presence and purposes, God's people need to know that he isn't finished with them yet. God still has the power and creative energy to fulfill his promises and accomplish what he has promised, to form them into a new creation.

So being God's people isn't about reaching deep within ourselves to find the strength that will get us to where we need to be. It's about staying connected to the Lord's strength and receiving his power as he gives it to us. "He gives strength *to the weary* and increases the power *of the weak*" (v. 29). In other words, our brokenness and fatigue can become the occasion for God's strength to operate in us and be magnified through us.

Pastor John Claypool had a little daughter who suffered with leukemia. When she went into remission, everybody thought maybe God had healed her. But on an Easter Sunday morning she went into a terrible recurrence. Claypool wrote about how for two weeks his daughter was racked with pain, her eyes swollen shut. She asked him, "Daddy, did you talk to God about my leukemia?" He said, "Yes, dear, we've been praying for you." She said, "Did you ask him how long the leukemia would last? What did God say?" Claypool acknowledged his own sense of powerlessness. What do you say to your daughter when you can't help her, and the heavens are silent? He was emotionally and spiritually exhausted. And a few hours later, she died.

The following Sunday, Claypool preached a powerful sermon on the last verse of today's text: "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." As one preacher

has put it, Claypool said something to the effect, “There are three stages of life. Sometimes we mount up with wings as an eagle and fly. We're on top of the world. Sometimes we run, and we don't grow weary. We just go through the routine. Sometimes it's all we can do to walk and not faint, and I need your prayers and your encouragement.”³

During our journey through the coronavirus pandemic, the Lord hasn't been operating remotely, removed from our weakness and sufferings. When Isaiah opens today's text by picturing God sitting undisturbed on a dome over the earth, with we humans wandering around like bugs in a terrarium, the point isn't that God is a detached, “above the fray” deity. Isaiah is simply emphasizing God's greatness and transcendence. The bigger message is that this powerful, creative God is at home in the creation. He provides and protects. Just as he names and claims the stars, so he names and claims his people. He hasn't passed over them, or disregarded their plight. He sees them and will provide the energy they need to make it back.

Some of you are familiar with Joni Eareckson Tada. A diving accident in 1967 left her a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. Today she's an internationally known author, vocalist, and radio show host, and an advocate for disabled persons worldwide. In an article for *Christianity Today*, she has written about how suffering and weakness help her gain a heavenly perspective on her present condition. She notes that two or three times a week, she'll go through an experience of reflecting deeply, sometimes tearfully, on the hope of heaven and future fulfillments of God's promises. She goes on to say:

Physical affliction and emotional pain are, frankly, part of my daily routine. But these hardships are God's way of helping me to get my mind on the hereafter. And I don't mean the hereafter as a death wish, psychological crutch, or escape from reality—I mean it as the true reality.

Looking down on my problems from heaven's perspective, trials looked extraordinarily different. When viewed from below, my paralysis seems like a huge, impassable wall, but when viewed from above, the wall appears as a thin line, something that can be overcome. It is, I've discovered with delight, the bird's-eye view found in Isaiah 40:31: “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.”⁴

Part of what Isaiah is doing is giving us this bird's-eye view, this heavenly perspective, to help sustain us and strengthen us. The prophet gives us imagery of a transcendent God who tells us that our way isn't hidden from him, and our cause isn't disregarded. We're to lift our eyes to the heavens, where we'll see signs of the Lord's great power and mighty strength. It's not just strength up there. It's strength down here. It's the Lord's life-giving power that upholds us and gives us the energy we need to keep going forward, relying on his promises.

¹ Dr. Jeffrey Albores, quoted in Damian Dominguez, “Doctor in S. Carolina reveals exhaustion amid COVID surge.” San Francisco Chronicle website. January 31, 2021. Accessed February 3, 2021 <<https://www.sfchronicle.com/news/article/Doctor-in-S-Carolina-reveals-exhaustion-amid-15913125.php>>.

² John Bishop, *God Distorted* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2013) 171-172.

³ R. L. Russell, “Triumphing Over Trials,” Preaching Today, Tape No. 119.

⁴ Joni Eareckson Tada, “Joni Eareckson Tada: Suffering Helps Me See Heaven.” Christianity Today website. November 6, 2018. Accessed February 4, 2021 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/november-web-only/joni-eareckson-tada-suffering-helps-me-see-heaven.html>>.