

Isaiah 40:1-8 ; 1 Peter 1:22 - 25

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 October 2017

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] I saw a cartoon the other day of two elderly gentlemen on a park bench reflecting on life, and one of them was lamenting the ravages of advancing years. And he expressed himself in this way, he said, I feel like an old man, every bone in my body is aching. Now, the other gentleman, who was also elderly, was seemingly much more upbeat. And he expressed himself in this way, he said, I feel like a newborn baby. I have no hair, no teeth, and I've just peed in my pants.

Well, joking aside, we can't escape the reality of the human condition. We blossom for a season, and then we wilt. That's the way it is. We blossom and we wilt. And this is the message of the second voice in Isaiah chapter 40. All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

The grass withers and the flowers fall. And he goes on. But the voice, and we can probably identify the voice or the one who asks, what is the message I am to give? What shall I cry?

We're going to probably identify that voice as being Isaiah himself. He doesn't just comment on the human condition. The voice also contrasts men and women with the Word of God. And I want us to explore this contrast, and we can draw out what Isaiah has to say by posing two questions. First of all, what are we like, men and women? What are we like? And then, what is God's Word like? And as we see here, the way in which we can draw something is by the contrast that is being painted. So, we'll begin by posing and trying to answer the first question, what are we like? And note that what Isaiah has to say is true of all of us. All men are like grass. All men, all women, all human beings are like grass, like the flowers of the field. Now, Isaiah doesn't provide us, nor is it his intention to provide us with an exhaustive answer to the question, what are we like? But he does identify two core truths about human existence, the two that we've already highlighted. We blossom and we wilt. And I want to think about these two things that Isaiah says are true of all of us. First of all, we blossom, because notice what he says, all men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

Now, while it is true that Isaiah's principal concern is to stress that we are transient, that we are passing, nonetheless, in doing so, he does identify this reality about us as men and women, that we do blossom, if only for a season, but we do blossom. Isaiah speaks of the glory of men and women. All their glory is like the flowers of the field. And it's helpful to note the different English words that have been employed to try and capture the sense of the Hebrew original. And in the translations that I was able to look through, three words figure as possible English equivalents to the word that is employed in the Hebrew original. The word glory, which is what we have in the church Bible here.

[3 : 5 1] Also, we sometimes find there the word beauty, and also the word strength. And I think we get a sense of what is in mind by considering each of these words as capturing something of what is meant by the picture of men and women blossoming like the flowers of the field. Glory, beauty, and strength.

There is a glory to men and women. We are beings created in the image and likeness of God. We are capable of acts of extraordinary brilliance and kindness. We excel, we explore, we endure. Men and women are in many ways amazing. There is a glory to men and women. There's also a beauty to men and women. Like the beauty of the flowers of the field, we are in varying measure pleasing to the eye. But there's also an interior beauty that marks many women and men. The beauty of a kind heart, of a sensitive spirit. And we're capable of creating extraordinary beauty. Some possess an angelic voice, others a capacity to compose music or poetry or prose. Still others use their hands to paint or sculpt or fashion artifacts of stunning beauty. And then even those deprived of hands employ their toes or mouth with similar effect. And we stand in awe at the capacity of our fellow men and women to create that which is beautiful to the eye, indeed to the spirit. For some of us, our gift is simply the capacity to appreciate the beauty in or created by others. As there is a glory to men and women, as our text acknowledges, there is a beauty to men and women. And there is a strength to men and women. We can stand in awe at the capacity of a single mother to raise her children with love and skill and dedication. Or we can marvel at the strength of a child with a terminal illness, cheerfully and selflessly raising funds for research into the very illness that will drag him or her to their early grave. And we've seen examples of that. And we see the news item, we read the article about this child, and we stand amazed at the capacity of fellow men and women, of even a small child in such a difficult circumstance. There is a strength to men and women. We all, in one way or other, and to varying degrees, we blossom. There is in all of us glory and beauty and strength.

Now, those of you who come to Bon Accord regularly will know that any occasional musical reference that I venture is likely to date to the 1980s. But this morning, I am going to rather smugly mention the latest release by Morrissey. Now, I happened to be watching the Graham Norton Show on Friday night, and he was singing. I'm not a great avid follower of this musician, but I happened to hear what he was singing, and it's his latest release. And it goes by the rather intriguing title, I spent the day in bed.

That in itself attracts me to that song, regardless of its musical qualities. I spent the day in bed. Anyway, the lyrics include this recommendation, stop watching the news, because the news contrives to frighten you. Now, as I was hearing this guy singing and hearing that particular lyric, I was struck by how that is what people often say, don't they? Oh, the news, it's so depressing. I don't watch the news anymore. I don't read the papers anymore. It's all just so depressing. But you know, when I pick up a paper or scan news items online, I'm often struck by the glory of men and women, multiple stories of heroism and kindness and brilliance. Of course, it's not the whole picture, but it's there. We see that, and we are rightly amazed by it as we witness the capacity of men and women.

They sometimes say that we who are at least labeled or perhaps happy to label ourselves as Calvinists, that we're a miserable bunch with a very low view of the human condition. But you know, my little spirit is often lifted and my sense of hope resurrected by the glory of fellow human beings. We do blossom, and we can witness that in ourselves, in a measure, and certainly in others.

[8 : 57] But, you knew there was a but coming. There had to be a but coming. We also wilt, and that's what our text recognizes. We blossom, and we wilt. The grass withers, and the flowers fall.

The reality is that God, through the prophet, is principally highlighting this truth concerning the human condition that we, like the grass, like the flowers of the field, we wilt. We wither. We are here today and gone tomorrow. Now, let me just make three comments concerning this reality that is true of us that we wilt and die. Three observations, three comments about it. The first thing that I want to say is simply this, that this truth that is expressed in God's Word is our observed and experienced reality. It's what we ourselves acknowledge to be true. We observe it to be true. We experience it in our own selves. We are all marked by weakness and frailty and ultimately death. In conversation, we might ask of a friend or an acquaintance, how is so-and-so doing? We know that they've been struggling a little with their health perhaps. How are they doing? And the answer is often a resigned but honest, not so bad, but he's failing or she's failing. And ultimately that is true of all of us. All of us, in different measures and at different rates, are failing. We blossom, yes, but we also wilt.

So, this truth that we find in our text is our observed and experienced reality. That's the first thing I wanted to note, but also to note how in the text there is an identified cause for this reality.

We read there in verse 7, the grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Now, in one sense, our wilting is due to what we often call natural causes, old age and failing faculties. But in another and deeper sense, this inescapable propensity to wilt is a consequence of God's judgment on the human race of which we form a part. Our first fathers, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God, and as a consequence, death entered human experience. Death is not natural to the human condition. It is an intruder that came into our experience as a result of our rebellion. And consequently, the breath of God blows on us and hasten us to a waiting grave. That's the second observation about this reality that Isaiah highlights, that we wilt, we wither. But the third thing I want to say is this, that this reality that we all wilt has implications. And let me offer you two words of advice that acknowledge the implications of man's frailty. I'm sure we could say a lot about the implications, but I want to limit myself to these two words of advice, if I may, that spring from this reality that we wilt and wither. First of all, let me counsel you in this way. Don't put your trust in those that wilt. The woman you adore, the leader you admire, the artist you aspire to be like, they are all just like you, wilting. They may seem at the moment to be blossoming, and they may well be blossoming, but the time will come when they like you will wilt and wither and die. So, don't put your ultimate hope and trust in those who wilt.

But the second word of advice that I would give you is this, don't think of yourself more highly than you ought. There's perhaps nothing so ridiculous about humans than our capacity for self-importance. You know, we sometimes see that in others, and we do. We smile at how ridiculous it is how men and women can think of themselves as being so important and so special. And we look on with a wry smile. And there is something really quite ridiculous about it, but it seems to be this trait that is so often witnessed in us as humans, this idea of our own self-importance. To forget that, yes, by God's grace, we can blossom for a season, but the time will come when we wilt and wither and die. You may be blossoming today, but tomorrow be assured you will wilt. What is man like? What are we like? What are men and women like? Well, there are two truths concerning humanity. We blossom and we wilt. But let's move on to the second question. The second question is, what is God's Word like? And this is the contrast that Isaiah is drawing, that God is drawing through the prophet. And let me say a couple of things almost in passing before answering the question. The first thing to say in the passing is this, that to answer the question, what is God's Word like, is really to answer the question, what is God like? Because God's

[14 : 42] Word reflects God. God's Word has the characteristics of its author. And so, while the question is, what is God's Word like? Because that's what our passage is speaking about. Be aware that the answers that we are able to secure to that question will be true of God Himself. But the other thing to say in the passing is this, and it may seem an obvious thing to say, but it really is a very fundamental thing to say, and that is that implicit in what is said here in our passage is that God is a speaking God. The very language of God's Word implies that God speaks. God uses words to communicate with us and to reveal who He is and what He's like and the amazing love with which He loves us. You know, in the words of an author of a few decades ago, God is there and He is not silent. But back to the question, what is God's Word like? And the description that we have in our text is what we might call a dynamic description because it identifies a capacity of God's Word.

There in verse 8 we have it, the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever. It's a dynamic description. This is what God's Word can do. It can stand forever. And what does the language of the description reveal? I want to just notice three things that it reveals, and we'll have to do this fleetingly and not develop each, though there would be plenty of scope to do so. The three characteristics of God's Word that are revealed by this dynamic description that it stands forever. First of all, very evidently it speaks of the permanence of God's Word. God's Word doesn't change just as God doesn't change. Of course, that has huge implications for us. What it says about who God is and what He's like, it doesn't change. What we discover about God's law and what is pleasing to God and what is displeasing to God doesn't change. Society may say that right and wrong changes from one generation to the next, but God's Word makes it clear that that is not so. The permanence of God's Word. You know, sometimes we're told as

Christians when we look to stand firm on biblical truth, maybe in the realm of morality or ethics, you know, the language that is used is that we're on the wrong side of history. Have you heard that expression used? Some pompous commentator mocking those who hold to God's Word and say, oh, you people, you're on the wrong side of history. Well, I'll tell you something, I'd rather be on the wrong side of history than on the wrong side of God. Now, I don't concede that we are on the wrong side of history, but even if that were so, it's a much better place to be than on the wrong side of God.

God's Word is permanent in character just as God is permanent and eternal. But then also this language speaks of the strength of God's Word. The Word of our God stands forever. It stands. It endures opposition generation after generation. There are those who attack God's Word. And those who attack, those who have done so in previous generations, where are they? Well, they've withered, they've wilted, and they've died. And God's Word continues. It remains strong. In the face of vitriolic attack, it stands strong. Not only in defending itself, if we can use that language, but also in conquering.

By force of divine reason and wisdom, the consciences and minds, even of those who oppose it. The permanence of God's Word, the strength of God's Word. But the language also points to the reliability and trustworthiness of God's Word. It stands forever. And what is true of God's Word is true of God. God is permanent. God is strong. God is reliable. God is trustworthy. So, that's the contrast. But is that it? Are we left simply to acknowledge our own frailty, our own mortality, and maybe admire the permanence and strength of God's Word? Is that all we can do? You might say, well, that's not a bad thing to do. Acknowledge who we are and admire who God is and what God's Word is.

[19 : 26] Maybe we can do a little more. Maybe we can try and apply God's Word and wisdom to our transient lives, to direct us and to guide us, to counsel and encourage and comfort us, as we make our our brief and fleeting pilgrimage through this life. So, not only acknowledge God's Word to be true and permanent, but seek to make use of it in a way that's of help to us. Maybe we can do that.

But in the end, and for all that, we die, the inevitable and inescapable end point of our wilting. When you begin to wilt, there's only one destination, and that is death. You know, wilting doesn't stop. You can't, you know, you can't put a brake on that process. We wilt and we die.

Does God's Word that stands forever have anything to say to our transient and mortal condition? Well, this is where it gets exciting. Now, I'm excited because I know what's coming.

So, I'm at an advantage. But I hope you can be excited in expectation and get excited by the discovery of what we're going to see in a moment. And the excitement comes from discovering how Peter employs this passage in his first letter. Now, we read the verses there in 1 Peter 1. And what we'll discover is that Peter identifies God's Word not only as permanent, strong, and reliable, he does that, but also as life-giving. Now, let's just remind ourselves of what Peter says there in 1 Peter chapter 1, verses 22 to 25. Let's read the verses again. They're only two or three verses.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth, so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and enduring Word of God. For 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 the Lord stands forever. And this is the Word that was preached to you. Two key elements to focus on.

[21 : 49] Peter identifies what the Word of God is, and he identifies what the Word of God does. Now, no doubt we could find more in these verses, but these two key elements I want you to notice with me. First of all, Peter identifies what the Word of God is, certainly in the manner in which he is speaking of it on this occasion. Notice what Peter says immediately after quoting from Isaiah 40.

So, in verses 24 and the first half of verse 25, he simply quotes from the passage we're considering. But notice what he says immediately following that. He says this, and this is the Word that was preached to you. He's just spoken about the Word of the Lord that stands forever. And he says, and this is the Word that was preached to you. Now, what was preached to the believers to whom Peter is writing? Well, what was preached is the gospel, the good news concerning Jesus Christ. In fact, Peter's language makes that explicit as the word translated preached there at the end of verse 25 is the verbal form of the word evangel or good news. Now, it would sound odd, but what Peter says could be translated, and this is the word that was evangelized to you. Or better still, the translation of this expression that we find in the ESV, another translation of the Bible. This final sentence is translated in this way, and I think it captures what Peter is saying. And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So you see what Peter is doing. He is identifying the Word of the

Lord that Isaiah speaks of. He's identifying it with the gospel, the good news concerning Jesus. All of the Bible is God's Word, and all of the Bible in a sense is the gospel. But at the very heart of God's Word is the good news concerning Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who He is and what He has done, and the call that He extends to you and me to trust and follow Him. So Peter identifies, certainly for his purposes here, what the Word of God is, the gospel, the good news about Jesus. But he also identifies, crucially, what the Word of God does. Peter here identifies what we might call two dimensions of life, or perhaps more accurately, two distinct forms of life, perishable and imperishable, physical and spiritual, natural and supernatural. We have that language there in verse 23, for you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable. There are two forms of life identified. We have all, each and every one of us here today, everybody who lives in this grand city, each of us has been engendered of perishable seed.

We all blossom and wilt. This perishable life that is ours is like the grass and the flowers of the field. It's the life we all live. This is a life that we all have, a life engendered of, to use the language of Peter, perishable seed, a seed that dies. But, says Peter, there is another dimension or form of life that is imperishable. This imperishable life is not transient, but eternal. In this life we don't wilt and die.

But how can we be engendered to imperishable life? Well, Peter makes it clear we need to be born again. We need to start living again. There needs to be a new beginning to this new life.

[25 : 54] But how can we be born again? Well, Peter tells us, for you have been born again. Of course, he's speaking to those who have already been born again. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and enduring Word of God.

This is what the Word of God does. What is it? It's the Gospel. What does it do? It engenders new life in those who are spiritually dead. The Word of God, specifically the good news concerning Jesus, is the means God uses to awaken new, imperishable, and indestructible life in the believer. Since God's Word is living, the living breath of God, it has the power, accompanied by the work of God's Spirit, to engender spiritual life in you. Now, this is tremendous, what Peter is acknowledging, this capacity of God's Word. You see, God's Word isn't something that we can put on a pedestal and say, well, isn't it amazing? It's permanent. It's reliable. It's strong.

It doesn't simply have adjectives that can be applied to it. It is living and life engendering. Jesus said to Nicodemus, the man who came to inquire of Him that we read of in the Gospels, He said to Nicodemus, you must be born again. And He says the same to you. You must be born again.

And you can be born again through the living and enduring Word of God, as the truth of the Gospel, as the truth concerning Jesus is applied to your heart and mind. You are brought to embrace Jesus as your Savior. And that new life will be more and more evident as you grow in holiness and love, which is what Peter is speaking about here, that the holiness and the love of those he writes to is a consequence of this reality of this new birth that they had experienced.

Well, let me draw the threads together of all that we've been thinking about this morning. You are amazing. You are amazing. You blossom. You are a man or woman marked by glory and beauty and strength.

[28 : 29] Don't do yourself down and learn to see and appreciate the way those around you for all their faults also blossom. But you are transient. You are mortal. You are here today and gone tomorrow. Acknowledge your mortality. Get to grips with the implications of just how fragile you are. God's Word stands forever.

Every one of God's Word recorded for us in the Bible stands forever. Turn to God's Word in grateful recognition that it is permanent, strong, and trustworthy, just like the God from whose mouth it proceeds.

But finally, let me stress this reality. God's Word in the Gospel, in the good news concerning Jesus, God's Word in the Gospel, in the Gospel of the Gospel, in the Gospel of the Gospel of the Gospel.

You must be born again, and you can be born again. With Nicodemus of old, you might understandably respond, well, how can this be? How is it possible that this could happen?

It is God who grants new life. But what you have to do is what Nicodemus had to do. Because in that passage where we have this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, and he's puzzling as to how this is going to happen, what did Jesus go on to say to this man Nicodemus? He said this, whoever believes in Him, whoever believes in Me, whoever believes in Jesus, will have eternal life.

[30 : 15] It's God who grants new life, but what we have to do, what you have to do, is to believe, to trust in the one who is able to grant you that new life, who is able to engender a new life in you.

This is what the Word of God does, and may that be the work that it is doing and will do in each and every one of us. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the Bible.

We thank You that the Word of God stands true and stands forever. We thank You that we are able to turn to it in the confidence that what we discover in it is true and trustworthy. But we thank You that it is a living Word. We thank You that it is a Word that engenders new life, as we've read in Peter's letter, that we are born again through the living and enduring Word of God. Heavenly Father, we do pray that Your Spirit would indeed be the one who is at work in us and amongst us, performing this supernatural work of engendering new life in men and women and in boys and girls. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.