

***For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away:" (1Pe 1:24)***

The Gospel is forever.

I've been thinking about this truth a lot lately as we've had these folks from overseas amongst us, conducting a small assault on us over the way we withdraw from those who have shown themselves to be "men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth" (1Ti 6:5) and who will not serve our King.

I think I've been drawn to this thought because it is to the Gospel I turn to explain this behavior which is so odd to the world. And of course, where else would I turn? We didn't just make this idea up out of whole cloth that we should separate from someone who doesn't believe. After all, we interact with people every day with whom we disagree on many fundamental matters. I fully understand the questioning from people who look at us and wonder how we can separate ourselves. It is an unnatural thing that we do, without a doubt, but it's dictated in Scripture to do so.

Just because it is clear for us to see the mandate, doesn't mean it's easy to do. It's one thing to obey, it's another to obey joyfully and feel squarely in your heart that you're okay with a thing. For me, it helps to look at the reasonable and sensible nature of the command. The Gospel being permanent and the flesh not makes this mandate easier to understand and more willingly comply with.

I hear people use the phrase "all flesh is grass", and I wonder how often they actually consider where that phrase appears in Scripture and what the context is? It's a very interesting study, exploring the passages and seeing how they are put together.

The phrase "all flesh is grass" appears twice, though the simile is used several times. It is an instance where almost identical language is used in both the Old and New Testaments. Both Isaiah and Peter use the phrase and they use it in similar ways. Some expositors say that Peter is quoting Isaiah, I'm not so sure about that, and I don't think it really matters; they both make the same basic point though in slightly different ways. The message is a good one for us to understand and consider. Here are the two passages:

*The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. (Isa 40:6-8)*

*For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth*

*for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you. (1Pe 1:24-25)*

In contrast to the Gospel's permanency, the flesh is temporary, as is grass.

Now, that might not seem to be an intuitive description for grass – temporary – since you see it all over the neighborhood and basically everywhere you look. Every time you mow the grass, it grows back. When animals eat it down to the nub, it grows back. When fire ravages a grassland, it grows back. Grass grows on every continent, even Antarctica, and on the floor of the sea. By a casual observation, grass is very hardy and resilient, a tough plant. But compare it to the oak tree or the cedar, which is another plant frequently used in Scripture. Grass might grow back, but it is not the most hardy or enduring of plants. Consider how James uses it to describe the rich man:

*For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways. (Jas 1:11)*

Grass is actually very easy to destroy, and quite ephemeral when you consider as James did that a bright sun can kill it. How many times have we made that mistake and watered some grass on a hot day only to have the sun wither it? I can water my oak tree any time of the day or night and not see that happen, by comparison.

At the very least, it is easy to see how grass is not the toughest of the plants out there, I think. It has no bark to protect it against insects or fire like the oak or cedar; it has no thorns to deter beasts from hiding in it and trampling it down as does the rose bush; it is tender and full of moisture, but has no spines to protect it as does the cactus. Consider how few months of the year our lawns actually grow and are bright and green, as opposed to their current state where they look brown and lifeless. Like the grass, the flesh of man is easily destroyed. Like the grass, the time in which we grow and flourish is but a small blip on the timeline of our existence. Our mortal lives are a pixel in the printout of the eternal timeline.

This mortal frame has basically nothing to offer at the most basic physical level. We have no scales, no horns, no sharp teeth, no fangs, no claws, no fur, no tough hide. Our skin can be cut by a piece of paper. Cut us the wrong way and we can bleed to death in as little as 20 seconds. We can drown in a puddle of rainwater. Too cold and we die. Too hot and we die. We kill ourselves with our food, our lifestyle and our consumption choices. The flesh, which is such a magnificent creation, a perfect system of life created by God, begins to decay as soon as it bursts forth from a mother's womb. Of course, that is all by God's design we must remember.

Even the greatness of the flesh, the flower of it, has nothing to offer us upon which we can rest a hopeful thought. The best minds in all of human history have not been able

to overcome the frailties of the flesh, they haven't been able to undo the natural depravity of man, defeat the slow decay we experience from birth to death, or add so much as one second to our lives. They haven't been able to overcome the inherently prideful nature of man with all their philosophy, religion, art, music, literature or science. The best men ever to live and create things haven't been able to reconcile us to our God or overcome His will. The great thinkers of our race haven't been able to stop war, murder, lust, envy, adultery, theft, inequality or any of the other weaknesses that plague mankind – the flower of the grass withers before the grass does. Our best and our brightest are basically just not bright enough to make a meaningful impact on the base nature of the flesh.

In comparison, the Gospel, which both Isaiah and Paul are contrasting to the flesh when they are likening it to grass (see Is 40:8 and 1Pe 1:25), “stands forever”. No grass stands forever, not even the great bamboo forests of Southeast Asia. And yes, bamboo is a type of grass interestingly enough.

Let's look closely at what these brethren have said. Isaiah tells us

*“All flesh is grass... but the word of our God shall stand for ever.”*

Those two things may not seem to be naturally drawn together for comparison, the flesh of man and the “...word of our God”, but let's look at some context prior to these statements to perhaps gain a little clarity. Looking at verses 1-5 of the same chapter:

*“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.” (Isa 40:1-5)*

There is an interesting shift that happens here, and before exploring this passage to write this sermon, I had never really considered that shift, or the somewhat odd nature of the language here. The expositions of chapter 40 are wide and varied when it comes to whether there are 2 voices, or 3 voices or even possibly 4, whether this is Isaiah doing this writing or whether this may in fact be another author that has been lumped in with the book of Isaiah. This shift really throws some of these guys for a loop.

Without getting into a long drawn-out aside on this matter, it is clear there is some difference in the tone and language of chapter 40. I don't think that difference is critical

to understanding the message however, so I won't detour any further on the why.

It is obvious that while the tone and nature of the book changes here, this is the Lord speaking, since it clearly says "*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God*" (Isa 40:1). I don't think that takes a lot of neurons to come to that conclusion, but still.

I don't think this is a message specifically directed to Isaiah, at least through verse 9. That seems to be a common theme amongst various expositors, that this is directed at all preachers in all times up to the end of human existence; you'll notice that there is no declaration along the lines of "the word of the Lord that came to Isaiah". The Septuagint and Arabic versions insert O ye priests at the beginning of verse 1. Now, that's not super meaningful, but it does I think give us a clue as to the original language used here.

What I will call the tone is different from other parts of the book as well. We don't have a 'burden of', we have a direct and clear instruction to comfort. But not just a patting the sinner on the hand and telling them "you're okay, God loves you just the way you are". No, there is comfort in knowing her iniquity is pardoned after having received a double portion of punishment for her wanton whorishness.

So here in verses 1-9, we have a set of general directions for all preachers, much like what we see from Christ in Mark:

*"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."* (Mar 16:15)

Embedded in these instructions, we have a prophecy, which gives a superb example of what the execution of these instructions looks like when we examine the fulfillment of it. The fulfillment is of course seen in John Baptist. How do we know that? Well, we're told:

*"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey."* (Mat 3:1-4)

John was a man who was not consumed with the world, he cared first and foremost about his preaching and doing what he could to deliver his message of repentance. He delivered the message to his generation with boldness, clarity, and Scriptural integrity. He is one of the premiere examples of how to 'cry', and while we don't have a lot about his life, we have enough to understand what it is we should be emulating in style, subject and substance.

Now, the rest of what Isaiah said by way of prophecy, we haven't yet seen come to full fruition. We haven't seen every mountain and hill made low, for instance. And while some expositors try to layer a whole lot of metaphor and symbolism onto those words (which there might be some value to) it seems like a pretty obvious reference to this language:

*“And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.” (Rev 6:14)*

*“And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found.” (Rev 16:20)*

I don't want to be one of those Prophecy Club types, who finds eschatological references around every corner even if they aren't there, but it seems pretty clear to me that Isaiah 40 is talking in part about the final restoration of the Jews to favor with God.

God instructs to comfort the Jewish people with a message *“that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins”* but surely you see that the iniquity of Israel has not yet been pardoned, and they are not restored. The departure from Babylonian captivity can be pointed at as one temporal fulfillment of restoration, but certainly not a final or complete one.

In the context of this prophecy both of John Baptist as a type of a proper preacher, and the last days, God's preachers are told to “cry”, and they're told what to cry,

*“What shall I cry? **All flesh is grass**, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: **but the word of our God shall stand for ever.**”*

That's the comparison point preachers are responsible to deliver. They're not supposed to take liberties or deliver some other message. It's the preacher's job to make the distinction between man and God clear. That word 'but' is very important to the message. Though all the greatness of men, our ability to withstand one another's violence, our dominion over nature, our great prowess at building cities, our exploration of the stars, our literature, science and art, all these visible things that are seen as good about humanity, they are as fleeting as the flower on a blade of grass, the word of our God stands forever. A God we cannot see face to face, who would only let Moses, His great friend, see his back parts

*“And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.”*

(Exo 33:22-23)

The Invisible God's words will stand forever, while all these visible things representing the best man has to offer are blown away by a stiff breeze! Consider it with soberness.

After hundreds, maybe thousands of generations of men have passed, here will stand the word of God ***exactly*** the same as it was at its beginning. Un-phased by the passage of time, unaffected by the whims of men or angels, here stands the word, the Gospel of God and His Christ for our reflection, our learning, our admonition, our comfort, our awe, our reverence and fear. It is a higher level message than what Isaiah is told to speak later in chapter 58

*“Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.” (Isa 58:1)*

I say higher level because this more detailed, specific warning against specific and notorious sins is encapsulated in the idea that all flesh is grass. Where do you get the idea of sin if not from the commandments of God, and if you are preaching that all flesh is temporary and only the word of God is forever, it follows that you would drill down further to lay out to men what God's word, that abides forever, actually says about their behavior.

Here is the message of a true preacher of God. There is an end to men (whether that end is to everlasting life or to the second death is not for the preacher to decide, but only to describe and preach about it) but God is everlasting, and in the context of that ephemeral nature, how should we live our lives? John preached it elegantly “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”, and of course Christ's own message

*“I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” (Luk 13:3)*

Perish, just like the grass. No lasting impression on the earth, just another piece of the creation that has gone from living in one moment to death in the next. Do we remember any individual blade of grass? The idea is ridiculous. So should we think of the brief appearance of men in the earth.

That's the thing that is wrapped up in Isaiah's message – consider your life as a brief nothing up against God, and it establishes the necessity of John's core message – REPENT, which we also see from Peter's use of the same language.

*“Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy. And if ye call on the*

*Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear: Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you, Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God. Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. **For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.**" (1Pe 1:13-25)*

If all flesh is grass, and has no inherent source of hope, what then, shall we conclude our best option is to "let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die" (1 Co 15:32) and just live for this moment, this briefest of breaths, this miniscule portion of the historical timeline, letting our every lust and pleasure be satisfied? No, says Peter. Rather we must gird up the loins of our minds and be sober, hoping to the end of this brief existence for that grace which alone can save us from our natural depravity. Let us strive to be holy in our manner of life and born again of incorruptible seed, casting off the corruptible. Why should we do these things?

Because all flesh is grass but the word endureth forever! The word by which we are commanded to obedience is forever and will forever be used as the standard by which we are judged. If we do not, through the Spirit, love one another with a pure heart fervently, what love can we expect? Not feignedly "loving" with a heart full of corruption and love of sin. Not this unconditional, do-what-you-want "love" Billy Graham taught to his 4 times married daughter Bunny. No, no! We are given a direct message to deliver, and "you're okay just as you are" is decidedly not part of that message.

This is a word, this Gospel, that endures for all time and at the end, when men are being wiped off the face of the earth in numbers not seen since the flood of Noah, this is the word that it is still being preached

*"And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people," (Rev 14:6)*

Not preached to repentance, mind you, but preached as the matter of bedrock certainty and factual statement that it is. This Gospel is forever. I'm hoping by this point you

understand and are embracing, as much as you are able as an ephemeral creature, that the Gospel is the most permanent thing in existence.

And here, in this Gospel will I put my trust and from it will I draw hope, and I encourage you to do the same. Draw your hope from His word, like buckets of water from a fresh stream, not from some familial relationship. Not from some temporal human connection. That is what so many of these people cannot understand because they have no real hope. If you have no hope, you can't possibly give a reason for the hope.

*“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.” (1Pe 3:15)*

See, the verse doesn't say to tell them what the hope is. The requirement is that you can tell them the reason you have hope! Those are related but different things. Believers in Christ have a hope because the Gospel that we profess to believe will never go away! Though all those whom we know and love wither and blow away like grass in a forest fire under the judging winds of God's wrathful breath, nothing will ever take away the Gospel that God has preserved for us. That Gospel preserved throughout human history to communicate His promises to us. We all know deep down in our hearts that all flesh is grass! We see it every day! Lives snuffed out like so much chaff on the wind! Death all around us, even for those whom the world calls great and holy. Just look at all these people getting caught up in these sex scandals – they're the cream of the crop, the flower of the grass, and they're withering as their folly is exposed.

How could we possibly look to our 'family' for such a bedrock of hope as we receive from an unchangeable Gospel? It is foolish to think that we could possibly derive hope by sitting around with our mothers and fathers and grandparents and children and brothers and sisters laughing and taking family photos and sending out Christmas cards with lots of smiling faces on them. What is that but fluff? We won't find a reason to hope because we get together at the family reunion every year and reminisce about dear old Uncle Jack and how he was a great war hero. We can't build a foundation of hope, that calms us in times of great distress, that allows us to face down our enemies when they surround us on every side, that brings us back from the pit of sin and allows us to continue running this race to the strait gate if we rely on the flesh! How insane is that?

Consider these two passages and decide where you want to put your hope – the flesh or the Gospel.

*“Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.” (Psa 90:5-6)*

*“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Heb 4:12)*

Friends, I’m sorry that we are assaulted so regularly by these people, by even our blood relations, over our love of God and our desire to serve Him. I’m sorry that it is harder sometimes than others to deal with the assaults that come at us. We have been under assault over how we deal with departed unbelievers for a little stretch now, but don’t let it discourage you. We have a reason to hope and take joy in these afflictions, seeing them as light things.

When children, or siblings, or parents have declared that they do not believe in the permanency of this Gospel, they are saying they have lost hope when we have not. Though we have it, we cannot give it back to them, we cannot help anyone obtain it or retain it. All we have in this world that is steady and worthwhile is our own hope in God, that His promises are sure, that they are truly unchanging and that He will not let one of His servants fail to be saved. Where is that hope delivered to us if not in His word?

*“I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope.” (Psa 130:5)*