

# New Year's Eve 2005

## Isaiah 40:6-8

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

### **A Meditation on Our Mortality**

1. We are perishable
2. God's Word is imperishable

***NIV Isaiah 40:6 A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?"  
"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.  
7 The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the  
LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers  
and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."***

Fellow Christians,

What do Peter Jennings, General William Westmoreland, and Johnny Carson have in common? They are all well-known people who reached the pinnacle of their chosen professions—news, military service, entertainment—and they died in the year 2005. Johnny Carson was the so-called "King of Late Night TV" the host of the Tonight Show for nearly 30 years. William Westmoreland was a four star general and the leader of U.S. troops in Vietnam. And Peter Jennings, of course, was the urbane anchorman who brought *World News Tonight* into our living rooms for 20 years. Once household names, we'll hear no more monologues, no more news flashes, no more briefings from them.

The end of the year is a time when we typically contemplate our own mortality. In a few hours it will be 2006, another year removed from the year in which we were born and another year closer to the year in which we will die. As we acknowledge that fact, we also remember the words of Moses in Psalm 90: **"The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass and we fly away."** Of course, if all we have to look forward to is death—of the sudden variety or the lingering type—then rather than being here tonight we should be out with so much of the rest of the world, softening the persistent reminders of our mortality with a few stiff drinks. But the same Word of God that so bluntly reminds that our days on this earth are numbered also promises immortality to those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. That twin-themed message occurs throughout the Scriptures and also here in Isaiah 40. As we meditate on our mortality tonight, Isaiah reminds us 1) that we are perishable, but also that 2) God's Word is imperishable.

### **1. We are perishable**

Isaiah 40 is the beginning of the prophet's book of consolation. It was intended to be a source of comfort from God for Jewish exiles in Babylon. Here the LORD commands his messenger to "*Cry out,*" to preach. The messenger wants to know, "*What shall I cry out?*" This is the first part of God's answer: "*All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.*"

Our climate is close enough to the climate of the Holy Land for us to have a good idea of what the LORD is talking about when he says "all men are like grass." The winter rains that we're experiencing now, combined with the cool weather, are already causing green grass to appear on the field, the roadsides and hillsides here in northern California. Soon a carpet of lush vegetation will cover our valley. But if you look again in May or June, when the rains have stopped and the temperatures have climbed, what will you see? Not the lush carpet of vegetation anymore, but dead, brown grass. The grass was alive for a brief time, but then it died. Last winter there was a hundred-year bloom of wildflowers in Death Valley because of the unusual amount of rainfall there, but a few months later those flowers had wilted and withered due to the summer heat.

The average human lifespan is not counted in weeks or months, like that of the grass and the wildflowers, but it is relatively short. You begin to think about that as you grow older. Job said, "**Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow he does not endure.**" (14:2) King David wrote, "**As for man his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.**" (103:15-16)

The LORD says about humanity, "And all their *glory* is like the flowers of the field." The Israelites reading these words might have thought about their oppressor, Nebuchadnezzar, the fabled king of Babylon. His hanging gardens were counted as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. But Nebuchadnezzar's glory proved transitory. He gave himself a bit too much credit for the splendor of Babylon. We read in the book of Daniel that as he walked on the roof of his royal palace, he said, "**Is not this great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?**" The boastful words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven telling him that he would be driven away from people and live like a wild animal. And immediately, that's what happened. How the mighty are fallen!

The fleeting nature of human glory can be seen in every area of life. In politics, the players on the world stage are continually changing. In sports, the fabulously gifted athletes who once thrilled us with their abilities get injured or grow too old to compete. Entertainment is, for the most part, the province of

the young and beautiful. Beauty regimens and cosmetic surgery can do only so much, and pretty soon the phone stops ringing and the roles stop coming. In the realm of science, even those who make the greatest discoveries and achieve the greatest accomplishments don't get to enjoy them for long and, in the end, all that they've accomplished will pass away. That's because this world in its present form is passing away. God's words here are a dose of reality in a world that is prone to boast about what man can do. All our glory is like the flowers of the field.

Why is it this way? In a word, sin. The fall into sin brought with it death and frustration. Not just human beings but the whole created world is in bondage to decay, according to the Bible. The war in Iraq and Afghanistan, global terrorism, natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the Indian Ocean tsunami, are just this year's proof of creation's bondage to decay. My wrinkles and gray hair, my age spots and arthritic joints are the very personal reminders that all flesh is like grass and all our glory is like the flowers of the field. Because of the evil inclinations of our hearts—inclinations we were born with—we are like grass, transitory, perishable, impermanent. And we proved our evil inclinations again this past year, didn't we? So much of the good we wanted to do didn't get accomplished. So much evil that we wanted to avoid we ended up doing anyway. Wretched people, we are: Prisoners of the law of sin and death at work within the members of our body.

Not very encouraging, is it? But when you ask, like St. Paul did, "**Who will rescue me from this body of death?**" you get an encouraging answer from the LORD. At the end of this section, the LORD says, "*The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.*"

## **2. God's Word is imperishable**

In the context of Isaiah 40, the LORD is directing that comforting words be spoken to his people. "**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for.**" About the coming of the Messiah, the LORD says, "**And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.**" (Is 40:1-2,5) God isn't a practitioner of mindless chatter, nor is he in the habit of tossing off throwaway lines. What God says, he means. What he says he'll do, he does. What he promises, he unfailingly fulfills. Thus the statement: "*The word of the LORD stands forever.*"

This is good news, because it means that not just God's blunt assessment of our mortality, but also his delightful promises of immortality through faith in his Son, Jesus, stand forever. God says, "**Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name, you are mine.**" (43:1) Here are cheering words

for people whose transitory nature would otherwise end in destruction: **“But Israel will be saved by the LORD with an everlasting salvation; you will never be put to shame or disgraced, to ages everlasting.”** (45:17) Rather than wanting to forget us or dispose of us, God vows that he will not forget us. He says, **“See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”** (49:16) With the coming of our Savior, God’s Son, whose incarnation we just celebrated, God has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. It’s through faith in the enduring word of God that Job could, in the same breath that he acknowledged his mortality, could also lay claim to immortality: **“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.”** (19:25-26)

How is it that we can be confident of such a dramatic reversal of our prospects? Because of Jesus. When he died on the cross, he paid for all our sins of 2005 and previous, and all our sins of 2006 and beyond. Every iniquity was paid for in full there at Calvary. The proof of that is Jesus’ resurrection. By raising Jesus from the dead, God was dramatically stating his approval of the sacrifice for sin that Jesus made. Now we can look forward to that day when in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet we will be raised from death imperishable, when our mortal bodies will be clothed with immortality and death is swallowed up in victory. God promises this in his changeless, enduring Word to all who believe in Jesus, his Son.

Now if this is true, that we are perishable, and that God and his Word alone are imperishable, what do you suppose this will lead to as far as our priorities for the New Year? It’s certain to be another year when Satan will toss obstacles in the way of our hearing and studying God’s Word. It’s certain that our sinful nature will be all too eager to do the devil’s work and de-emphasize hearing and learning the Word. And he’ll work hard to have us neglect or under-appreciate that medicine of immortality which is the faith-strengthening, sin-remitting Sacrament of the Altar. All the more reason, then, to hold firmly to the gospel of Jesus. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that this is the gospel that was preached to us, the gospel on which we’ve taken our stand, and it’s the gospel by which we are saved if we hold firmly to it. There is no better option. There is no other option, really. As Peter once said, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”** (John 6:68)

It is very likely true that tonight we have our plans for what we want to accomplish under God’s blessing in 2006. We have hopes and dreams of what we want to do or become. Those are fine, as long as we bear in mind that we are perishable, that God and his Word alone are imperishable. Knowing that, we will put Jesus at the center of all our hopes and dreams and plans. This is because we confess with the hymn writer,

***I am flesh and must return Unto dust, whence I am taken;  
But by faith I now discern That from death I shall awaken  
With my Savior to abide In his glory at his side. Amen.  
(Christian Worship, 167, stz 4)***