

I'm sure you've heard the expression that "God works in mysterious ways." Maybe you've even used it yourself. We normally use it when talking about something we can't understand, especially hard times. If something hasn't gone the way we expected it to, we might say that "God works in mysterious ways." If something in our lives is hard to bear, we might say that "God works in mysterious ways." Or even if we are simply trying to understand why the world seems to be going downhill, we might say that "God works in mysterious ways." But what makes it mysterious is that we know that God has promised us many things, such as peace and comfort. What do we do when that peace and comfort seem far off? What do we do when God seems to be going back on His promises?

Our Old Testament reading in Isaiah chapter 40 is an answer to these questions. But to see how it answers these questions, we first have to understand the context. God once made a promise to David in 2 Samuel chapter 7. He promised that David's house and kingdom would stand forever. David praised the Lord for such an undeserved blessing, and the Lord kept that promise. After David came Solomon, and everything was going great. But Solomon sinned and the kingdom was divided. The northern half had its own kings, all of whom were evil men. And the southern half had its own kings, all of whom were David's descendants, and the Lord preserved them because of the promise which He made. The kingdom wasn't what it used to be, sure, but things were still moving forward.

But then something strange happened. The northern kingdom was destroyed. Assyria came and took the people away. Half of the kingdom was no more. What happened to God's promise about the kingdom? Why was half of it now gone? Didn't the Lord say that David's kingdom would stand forever? Why did it seem like He had gone back on that promise? The people who remained in the southern kingdom could probably comfort themselves with half of the kingdom still being there. It was better than nothing. But Isaiah brought a message of judgment to the southern kingdom. God was going to destroy that half too. They would go into exile just as the northern kingdom had done. The Assyrians had almost even captured Jerusalem! It all seemed so mysterious and strange. Where were God's promises of peace and comfort and a kingdom which would go on forever?

Christians, how often do you feel the same way? Does it ever seem like God is somewhere far off, as if He is going back on His promises? That can be a very difficult thing to deal with. God promises us peace, a peace beyond all understanding, as Jesus says in the Gospel of John. But sometimes our lives are anything but peaceful. We deal with conflict in our nation, conflict in our family, conflict with our neighbors, conflict which takes away all sense of peace. Or maybe we lose our loved one or our health or anything else, and then we can't find that peace in the midst of suffering or grief. What happened to God's promise? Why does it seem like He has taken that peace away?

God promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age, as Jesus says at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. He will never leave us or forsake us. Jesus Christ is Immanuel, which means "God with us." But sometimes God seems to be so far away from us. When we face the reality of evil in this world, especially evil which seems to be getting worse, we wonder where God has gone. That feeling of God being near to us, that sense of His presence and comfort, seems to disappear. You pray to God over and over again, but nothing seems to come of it. What happened to God's promise? Why does it seem like He's hiding from us?

God promises to take care of us, to provide for all of our needs and guard us in all of our ways, as Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew. Seek first the kingdom of God, Jesus says, and all of these things will be added to you. But a lot of people think that this past year has been

especially difficult. Even if you haven't gotten sick, everyone has been affected by the events of this year. People have lost jobs. People treat one another terribly, looking at each other with suspicion. And a spirit of fear grips the whole world, one which seems to have no end in sight. What happened to God's promise? Why does it seem like He's given us a hard year? What are we supposed to do when God seems to go back on His Word?

But now the Lord commands Isaiah to speak: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God! Give comfort to those who belong to Me." You are God's people, Christians, the people of the living God. Even when God takes away the things which He gives to you, He is still your God! Even when Israel would be taken away, God would bring them back. No matter what happens, God is still with His people.

Isaiah says, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." Israel had sinned, and God punished her hard for her sins. But the time of punishment would come to an end. And it didn't change the fact that Israel was still God's own people. The time of warfare would come to an end. Her sins would be forgiven. Even when God seemed far off, He would not forget His promises. Even when He seemed to do the opposite, it was only for a short time. Soon He would come and do what He said He was going to do.

That's why Isaiah gives us two beautiful pictures of God's faithfulness. Prepare a highway in the wilderness for God. It's not a highway for you, but a highway for God Himself. He is coming and He is coming quickly! Level the ground. Make a straight path. God will reveal His glory when He comes to keep His word, because the mouth of the Lord has spoken. And the other picture is grass withering because of a hot wind. That's how the world is. The world comes to an end. But the Word of the Lord will stand forever!

But you might say, isn't that the problem? Aren't we wondering why God makes promises and then seems to do something else? Yes, but keep this in mind, Christians. Even when God gives us hard times, hard times which seem to be contrary to His promises, He still keeps His Word. Those hard times are not Him changing His mind about you or deciding to break His promises. He has a purpose for sending those hard times, and they will soon come to an end. But the promises which He made will never come to an end.

So when, for example, we can't seem to find the peace which God has promised to us, that doesn't mean that He broke His promise. The peace which He promises is greater than the world. It is the peace of knowing that all bad things will soon come to an end. It is the peace of knowing that Jesus rules as king over all things. It is the peace of knowing that He will give us a perfect peace on the last day. It is the peace of knowing that, even when we suffer, our suffering is not in vain. Jesus is with us when we deal with terrible situations in our families, in our nation, and in our world. The world has no hope, but we have hope in Christ.

When God seems to be far off and distant from us, that doesn't mean that He broke His promise. Sometimes He hides Himself so that He might be found. He promises that He always hears our prayers, even if His answer is to make us wait for a while. When we face the terrible evil of the world, God is with us so that even if we lose everything, we still have Him. And if we have Him, we are richer than any king. The world has nowhere to turn in trouble, but we have a God who is with us always.

When we struggle with loss and a hard year, that doesn't mean that He broke His promise. God will never fail to take care of His people. We may have to suffer for a time, but it will come to an end. We may lose much for the sake of the kingdom, but God will restore all things to us both now and in the life to come. If we lost our jobs, God will provide for us, even

giving us new opportunities. If we lost our health, God will give healing. If we lost our lives, God has given us eternal life, a life which does not end, a life which knows no more evil. Even in the very worst years in history, God led His people through. And if God brought back Israel after 70 years in captivity, do you think He has forgotten you?

So yes, Christians, God gives us hard times. He has His reasons, reasons we won't always understand. But they are always meant for our good. Even when God gives us those hard times, He is not going back on His promises. God will always keep His Word. He has spoken. He will do it. The Word of our God will stand forever. This time of suffering will end faster than you think. And then you will see clearly that God is always faithful. Be patient, Christians. The Lord is coming soon. And He will keep His Word.

To Him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.