

“Did You Collect Green Stamps?”

Isaiah 40:27-31

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How do you start over when your heart is not in it? How do you begin a new life when you lack the confidence to do so?

Many beginnings are exciting and the result of careful preparation. Getting married, having a baby, starting a dream job usually fall into this category. On the other hand, some beginnings are thrust upon us with little, if any time to prepare. When this happens, they can intimidate, frighten and overwhelm us. How can we overcome these obstacles and move forward?

This was the dilemma facing Israel when the prophet penned Isaiah 40. For fifty years, many Jews lived in exile in Babylon after the Babylonians invaded and destroyed Jerusalem. When the Persians conquered Babylon in 538 BC, they allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. As inviting as this sounds to us, it presented them with overwhelming challenges.

Moving is never easy, even if you are returning home. Relocating after fifty years is demanding to say the least. Roots and routines that have been established are difficult to change. The strong desire to go home diminishes as time passes, especially fifty years. No doubt the Israelites struggled with all these emotions and issues.

In addition, they wondered what they would discover upon returning. Homes, businesses and the temple were leveled when the Babylonians invaded their holy city in 587 BC. To what would they return? Nothing familiar, that's for sure. How would they take care of their families? Where would they live? What would they do? There were no answers and they knew it. How frightened they must have been.

What was Isaiah's advice to them? It came in words of comfort and assurance. Those that were willing to return would not do so alone. God would accompany them, providing the strength and courage needed to start over. Listen to his words.

“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. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall, 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” Isaiah 40:28-31.

Did you ever collect Green or Top Value stamps? Merchants gave them with purchases so customers could collect them. After collecting several books of stamps, you could redeem them for merchandise at the Redemption Center. Jackie and I got our first high chair and diaper-changing tray with these stamps.

This is the meaning of the word “renew” that Isaiah used in 40:31, “The Lord will **renew** their strength.” It means to exchange, in this case weakness for strength. The God who has power, an immeasurable and inexhaustible supply, also gives power and He does so willingly and generously. That was a revolutionary thought and still is.

When is God willing to share His power with us? There are many times, but the lesson of Isaiah 40 is that He is willing to share His power when we must start life over. He knows how difficult this is for us.

This is certainly good news because many times change is thrust upon us that demands more strength than we possess. The death of a mate, divorce, termination of a dating relationship, job relocation, a stroke or heart attack, an accident, a bankruptcy or any number of other things can leave us staring at an uncertain and intimidating future. We must have help and God knows it.

Isaiah knew his people needed divine assistance in order to return home and was quick to let them know that God was there to help them. The opening words of Isaiah 40 communicate this.

“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; that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.

A voice of one calling: In the desert prepare for the way of the Lord and make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low. The rough ground shall become level and the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.” Isaiah 40:1-5.

Isaiah’s audience would have recognized the meaning of his words. When dignitaries visited a community, citizens cleared the way and as much as possible leveled the ground upon which their horses and chariots rode. They wanted the king or prince to know that he was welcomed and needed.

Isaiah wanted his people to know that God was coming to their aid. He had not forgotten or abandoned them as they feared. He still loved and cared for them and was ready to help them make the difficult journey back home. That’s our message of hope today, too.

How do you receive God’s power, especially when you must start life over and are not up to the task? “Those that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength,” Isaiah wrote.

The basic meaning of the verb to wait is to wind or twist. From this root comes our word rope.

As the strands of a rope are intertwined, so we mingle our lives with His and cultivate a sense of connectedness. When we do, everything that happens to us is woven into the fabric of our faith and everything we need to do is empowered by our faith. We do not face anything alone.

I have seen a plaque with these words on it, “Remind me, Lord that nothing will happen today that you and I cannot handle together.” That’s the promise of Isaiah 40:31.

Let me encourage you to connect your life to His today. Wrap your life around Him like the cords of a rope that intertwine. Seek His heart, mind and will through prayer and study and draw from His immeasurable and inexhaustible supply of strength, especially as you start life over. What a difference it will make.