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Last Sunday, the temperature hit a high of 39 degrees, and the cool change did not come until Monday morning. The extreme heat resulted in power blackouts across Victoria, so more than 41,000 households sweltered and slept fitfully with overnight temperatures hovering above 28 degrees.

My house was one of the victims. Electricity was cut around 5 pm, and was restored just before the Australian Open final commenced on the TV. So, we could start to watch the final match on time, but the power was gone again around 8 pm and it took about 11 hours to be recovered. It was too hot and dark to stay inside the house, so we escaped to Maccas and returned back home around 11 pm to go to bed. But, it was still so hot that we had broken sleep.

I got angry at the situations. There were few ways to lower the inside temperature except for opening the windows, but it did not work. We had to endure the heat while waiting for the power to come back on over night. It was a long and uncomfortable night. But, in fact, we spent just 12 hours without electricity! The hot summer night caused us to feel very annoyed though.

Through that experience, I realised anew how wonderful using electricity is on ordinary days. I felt grateful for turning on the lights in darkness and switching on the air-conditioner or heater whenever necessary. I felt grateful to be able to store food in the fridge, make coffee with hot water, and do the laundry by using the washing machine. Without electricity, we cannot watch TV, cannot use the computer or Internet; yes, we cannot imagine the world without electrical energy.

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However, we cannot say that electrical power is indispensable in our daily life. Just 200 years ago, there was no electricity. It is only recently that electricity and a diverse variety of electrical appliances were developed and came into wide use. The benefits that electrical power has provided us are immense, but that does not mean that our life is happier and more meaningful than that of people in the old days.

Lots of the heritage of humanity, that is, philosophies and religions, literature and music, buildings and artworks, cultures and traditions, were made before the Industrial Revolution, and they are still inspiring us a lot in many ways. If we suddenly had to live without electricity, it would be terrible; but, we might soon become accustomed to it.

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Today’s first Bible reading, Isaiah 40, is referring to one essential thing we should have in our lives. That is indispensable in leading a meaningful and happy life. Before talking about it, we need to browse the book of Isaiah first. The book of Isaiah is the longest prophetic book of the Old Testament. It consists of 66 chapters and is divided into two parts.

The first section is from chapter 1 to 39, while the second section is from chapter 40 to 66. The content of these two parts is very different. The main topic of the first part is the threat from Assyrian King Sennacherib and the prophet Isaiah’s prophecy about it, whereas the second section is God’s message to the Israelites forcefully taken to Babylonia after the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar.

Since there is about a 200 years gap between the two sections, many scholars believe that at least one or two other authors, or more, complemented the first book of Isaiah and inserted new contents. Isaiah chapter 40 is one of the core chapters in the book. For it is the first chapter of the second part. On top of that, it contains the essence of the prophet Isaiah’s theology.

As I mentioned just before, the background of Isaiah 40 was the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites. They were suffering from the long harassment of the Assyrian Empire. With the political changes in the region of the Ancient Near East, they could escape from the hands of the Assyrians, but not before long their kingdom was ruled and finally destroyed by the Babylonians.

The Babylonian captivity was one of the darkest periods in the Jewish history. They would not have found any hope; they thought God must have left them. It was a time of despair and depression. They would have asked themselves, “Is our God alive? Then, where is he now?”

We can overhear how bitterly they cried out at those days through verse 27; they lamented, “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God?” They believed God was no longer concerned about their troubles.

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Isaiah 40 was God’s response to their painful cry. The first action of God was to reveal himself to the Israelites. In verse 26 the prophet tells his people, “Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.”

And then, the prophet asks the core question of verse 27 to the discouraged captives, “Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God?’” He continues, “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.”

Through that revelation of who God was, God wanted his people not to lose something indispensable; that was hope. For human beings cannot live well without hope. His intention was revealed clearly in verses 29-31: “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 be faint.”

Yes, those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength all the time. So, God encouraged his people not to lose hope even in the darkest time. This is the core message of Isaiah 40. Not only in chapter 40, but also through the whole book the prophet Isaiah and his companions were trying to spotlight this truth.

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Nelson Mandela was the first black-African president of South Africa. He fought against the apartheid policy that was a system of institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination that existed in South Africa between 1948 and

1991. In 1962 he was arrested for anti-government activities and then was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964.

At the trial Mandela gave the three-hour ‘I am prepared to die’ speech. A part of that speech is as follows: “I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to see realised. But if it needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

Even in prison he did not give up the dream because he hoped for the equal society in God, he hoped for God’s grace to his country. He said later, “In the prison I always thanked God; I thanked God for watching the sky and the earth, for drinking water and eating food; I thanked God even when I did forced labours.”

Mandela stayed in prison for 27 years; he was prisoned at the age of 43 and released at 70. His situation was like that of the Israelites captured by the Babylonians. However, he did not grow weary or faint at the time of despair and darkness due to his strong faith and steadfast hope in the Lord.

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Sisters and brothers,

We can live well without electrical power, but we cannot live meaningfully without God’s power. Be sensitive to God’s presence, keep in mind who God is and how he loves us, and constantly hope in the Lord. Then, God will renew our strength, and we will soar on wings like eagles no matter how dark our situations are. Amen.