

Christmas 2020

*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
(Isaiah 40:1 KJV)*

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.
(Micah 5:2 ESV)*

*“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel,
and for a sign that is opposed”
(Luke 2:34 ESV)*

Comfort Ye My People

December 20th, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! I hope you brought your Bible with you and that you are able to open it now to Isaiah 40:1. For those reasonably new to the Bible, if you open your Bible to the exact centre and then go right just a little bit you should bump into Isaiah.

This text in Isaiah is a CLASSIC “BUT GOD” passage.

Do you know what I mean by that?

All throughout the Scriptures we run into these “reversal passages” – a classic New Testament example would be Ephesians 2:1-7 where Paul says:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience⁴ **But God**, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.
(Ephesians 2:1–5 ESV)

Praise the Lord! That is a full and complete turn-around! That's a dramatic reversal. We were DEAD in our trespasses and sins – BUT GOD!!!!

That's the shape of the biblical narrative as a whole. If you were going to DRAW the Gospel you would draw it as a giant V. We were up here WITH GOD and then we wanted to be god, so we fell AWAY from God BUT GOD came down to us and redeemed us and restored us and brought us BACK TO GOD through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That's the Gospel – thanks be to God!

Well we are seeing the EXACT same movement in this Old Testament text that lies open before us today. This is a classic Old Testament “BUT GOD” story. If you've found it now, let me direct your eyes upward a little bit or backward into the previous chapter. Look at Isaiah 39 verses 5-7. There the prophet predicts an absolute catastrophe – he predicts ROCK BOTTOM in this V shaped story. He says:

⁵“Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: ⁶Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. ⁷ And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” (Isaiah 39:5–7 ESV)

Now Isaiah the prophet lived THROUGH the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel in 701 BC. A lot of people thought THAT was rock bottom. The 10 northern tribes were MASSACRED by the invading Assyrians. Refugees from the north were pouring down into the southern kingdom of Judah where Isaiah was living and they were telling HORRIFIC stories about the brutality of this seemingly demonic army.

People were wondering – how could this happen? How could the people of Promise be ALMOST completely obliterated? But they were thankful that at least a remnant had been preserved. At least the southern kingdom was still standing – at least God stopped the advance of the Assyrians at the Gates of Jerusalem. Surely now we have reached rock bottom.

No, Isaiah says, this isn't the bottom. This is a warning! This is a dress rehearsal. The Assyrians are gone but in a few years from now another army will come – this one from Babylon and they will finish what the Assyrians have started. They will tear down these walls, break down this

temple and scatter these people like sheep upon the mountains before a pack of ravenous wolves.

Isaiah didn't live to see that – he died during the early days of King Manasseh's reign but the Lord showed it to him and that is what he is prophesying in Isaiah 39:5-7. And it came to pass several decades later, just like Isaiah had said. The record of the actual rock bottom is preserved for us in 2 Kings 25:1-7:

And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. And they built siegeworks all around it. ² So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. ³ On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. ⁴ Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden, and the Chaldeans were around the city. And they went in the direction of the Arabah. ⁵ But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho, and all his army was scattered from him. ⁶ Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and they passed sentence on him. ⁷ They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon. (2 Kings 25:1–7 ESV)

That's ROCK BOTTOM. The nation has been destroyed. The temple has been torn down. The people have been scattered and the King has been despoiled. And the Kings sons have been slaughtered before his eyes.

That's ROCK BOTTOM.

Isaiah saw that and foretold that and then immediately after that he was given a Word of comfort from the Lord. And we'll look at that today. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1 of chapter 40. This is God's Word to us:

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² 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.

³ A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

⁶ A voice says, “Cry!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹ Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (Isaiah 40:1–11 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Well, as I said, this is one of the great “Gospel turn around” passages in all the Bible. This passage takes us from the absolute bottom of the valley to the absolute top of the mountain so let’s take a few minutes and look at this message of comfort as delivered by the prophet Isaiah.

A Message Of Comfort To A Broken And Battered People:

The first thing he says, which might be the most important thing he says, is found in verse 1. He says:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. (Isaiah 40:1 ESV)

Key word in that verse obviously: MY. As in comfort YE MY people saith your God.

The Lord has not rejected you – that’s the message! That’s the first thing that the prophet says.

1. God has not rejected you

He is chastening you, he is scourging you, but that doesn’t mean that he has abandoned you. He is still your God and you are still his people – and knowing that changes everything.

The Apostle to the Hebrews adopts the same perspective. He says in Hebrews 12 to a people experiencing a significant hardship:

God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. (Hebrews 12:7–8 ESV)

Old Testament and New – to be God’s child is an incredible honour - but it is also an incredible challenge. To be God’s child is to bear the family name. That means that how we conduct ourselves as God’s children reflects back upon God himself – and therefore God is massively and actively invested in our growth and development.

So that means discipline.

But discipline never means hatred. Discipline never means rejection. Discipline – according to the prophet and according to the Apostle - means love. God is committed to our becoming the people we were created and saved to be. And he will stop at nothing to get us there. That message is supposed to comfort us – I hope it does.

The second message of comfort in this text is found in verse 2. The prophet 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. (Isaiah 40:2 ESV)

The prophet is saying here:

2. Your sins have been forgiven

The prophet had figured out - by inspiration and also no doubt by observation - that it was their SIN as a people that had attracted this calamity from the Lord. It is hard for a sinful people to live with a holy God.

And that's a problem, because to BE ISRAEL – is to be LOCKED in a DEATH GRIP with the Almighty – that's where the name comes from!

Jacob was wrestling with God – do you remember that – and God suggested that maybe Jacob better let go – but Jacob said:

“I will not let you go unless you bless me.”²⁷ And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”²⁸ Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” (Genesis 32:26–28 ESV)

So to BE ISRAEL is to take hold of God and to refuse to let go.

But that comes at a price.

You can't hold on to God and also hold on to your sin.

One of those things has to go – and the comfort in this story is that Isaiah says that somehow, in the mercy of God their sin has been taken away. Which means they can continue to be Israel.

Now it isn't entirely clear in this passage on what basis God forgave the sin of Israel. In the text, at first anyway, it sounds like the exile itself was what atoned for the sins they had committed.

Verse 2 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. (Isaiah 40:2 ESV)

So there, the text SEEMS to be saying that the exile will be their TIME OUT. It will be the fair punishment warranted by their sin. It will square their account with God, so to speak.

But is that what is going on in this story?

Does the exile ACCOMPLISH their ultimate redemption or ANTICIPATE IT?

Most scholars actually understand it in the latter sense. D.A. Carson says here:

“How this was accomplished is not fully unveiled until chapter 53, but the overture anticipates the symphonic splendour.”¹

By Isaiah 53 of course he means Isaiah 53:4-6:

⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4–6 ESV)

So the final payment – the ultimate payment – will be made not by the nation but by a person.

The suffering servant – JESUS – the true Son of God, the true Israel, the LAST ADAM – the first born from the dead – praise the Lord.

So God has not rejected his people and he has ordained a means by which they may be fully and finally forgiven.

Your sin need never send you into exile.

Your sin need never result in the full and total destruction of your life.

¹ D.A. Carson, *For The Love Of God Volume Two* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), June 8th.

Your sin need never again disrupt your worship and adoration of God –because God has made a way! God – in the body of his Son Jesus Christ has paid the price. A fair price; a just price and there is no one in the universe who call him into question. So all you need to do now is receive it! With that payment in your account – you can go home. And that’s the third theme we encounter in this Old Testament message of comfort.

3. God will bring you home

You can see that in verses 3-4:

A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. (Isaiah 40:3–4 ESV)

Are you hearing that? “Send a prophet to begin levelling the ground and staking out the route” – well we know that was John the Baptist. John was not the road – he was the surveyor.

Remember? He said that himself. People came and asked him if he was the Christ and:

He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” ... ²² So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” ²³ He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” (John 1:20–23 ESV)

I am not the road. I am not the way home. I am the surveyor. I’m the guy with the bulldozer and the little orange flags – Jesus is the ROAD. Jesus is the Way, the truth and the LIFE – he is your way home.

Old Testament and New – that is the ultimate message of comfort: God is bringing us home!

That’s what Isaiah is saying here: “Your exile is not forever. God will bring you home! He will bring you home to Jerusalem and then he will bring you home to himself eternally through the life, death and resurrection of the One who is to come.”

No mountain, no valley, no obstacle of any kind can stand in the way of that promise – for the mouth of the Lord has spoken”, that’s the fourth thing the prophet says:

4. God’s Word never fails

You can see that in verses 5-8:

“the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:5 ESV)

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” (Isaiah 40:8 ESV)

If God has said it then it will happen. God’s Word doesn’t change. It doesn’t adjust. It doesn’t conform. It never falls to the ground. It **MAKES** what it **PREDICTS** – so brothers and sisters, Isaiah says, this will happen.

You can count on it.

We will drop one more rung down on our way to rock bottom, he says – and then we will be lifted up. God has not forsaken us, God has a plan to deal with our sins finally and forever and God is going to bring us home – come **HELL OR HIGH WATER!**

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 made **PLAIN – FOR THE MOUTH OF THE LORD HAS SPOKEN.**

Now, of course that doesn’t mean that there won’t be some difficulties and challenges along the way. There were difficulties and challenges for the prophet Isaiah!! Jewish history suggests that Isaiah lived into the early years of Manasseh’s reign. Manasseh as you will recall was the son of the good King Hezekiah under which Isaiah experienced such favour and under whose reign we believe Isaiah spoke this prophesy. But Hezekiah’s son Manasseh didn’t like this prophecy. He didn’t like the idea that there was **MORE DOWN** before the **UP** so he persecuted Isaiah. He sent

his henchmen to take his life. Isaiah, now well into his 70's fled into the forest and hid himself in the hollow of a tree only to be found by the King's assassins. They sawed through the tree with the prophet stuck inside – many scholars understand that historical reference as lying behind those strange words in Hebrews 11:36-38:

Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, **they were sawn in two**, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy (Hebrews 11:36–38 ESV)

King Manasseh killed the messenger – but he could not stop the Word of God.

Everything happened just as the prophet had said.

The grass withers – the flower fades – and the prophet may be hunted and sawn in two – but the Word of the Lord will stand forever.

Not a single promise in Holy Scripture will fall to the ground – and that is GOOD NEWS – that is THE GOOD NEWS because the best of those promises is found in verses 9-11.

Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (Isaiah 40:9–11 ESV)

That is the greatest promise in all the Bible. That is literally “the GOOD NEWS”. That is the Gospel – this message – this promise that THE DIVINE SHEPHERD is coming.

5. The Divine Shepherd is coming!

And he will be strong –

“the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him” (Isaiah 40:10 ESV)

And he will be gentle:

He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (Isaiah 40:11 ESV)

He is God, he is good – he is with us, he is for us. So no matter how dark it gets outside – if that ONE IS COMING – then we are saved.

Now of course, Isaiah doesn't yet know his name. Faith in the Old Testament was about looking forward. It was about believing and trusting that this ONE would come and save his people from their sins.

Faith now, in the New Testament era, is about looking back.

We live 2700 years after the prophet Isaiah. And we live 2000 years after the glorious fulfilment of Isaiah's prophesy.

The Lord God DID COME!

That's what we celebrate at Christmas!

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14 ESV)

He came! He was glorious! He was God! He was strong! He was full of grace and truth!

And he was gentle.

He said:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28–29 ESV)

He said:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11 ESV)

I am everything the prophet told you was coming. I am God. I am the Good Shepherd. And I am the Suffering Servant.

I am absolutely everything you need to come home.

I am your atonement. I am your healer. I am your teacher. I am your guide. I am your road.

Receiving Fresh Comfort In A COVID19 World:

That's the COMFORT that we celebrate at Christmas.

That is Jesus – do you know him?

Because I think you need him – and I suspect that you know that you need him in a way that you didn't know before.

This pandemic has been hard. This winter promises to be even harder. The darkness outside seems only to grow. We feel powerless before these forces that press down upon us. And for the first time in living memory we are a people in desperate search of strength, healing and POWER from outside ourselves.

Well, that's Good News, because that is what the Gospel offers – that is what the word COMFORT MEANS.

We miss this today because in English the meaning of the word “comfort” has shifted over the last couple of centuries. We think now it means “to soothe” – but that isn’t what the prophet offered. He didn’t offer soothing words – he offered hard, surgical, life-saving truth.

He offered power.

And that’s the word “comfort” used to mean. The word “comfort” comes from two Latin words – it is literally *com fortis* – which means “strength alongside.”

That’s what Jesus is.

He is the POWER OF GOD – WITH YOU, IN YOU and FOR YOU. He has come to destroy your enemy, heal your dysfunction, break your every bond and chain and carry you, body and soul home to God.

Do you know him?

If you don’t, then may this be the year that your heart is tender and your ears are open to these glad tidings from the Lord.

The grass withers and the flower fades but the Word of our God will stand forever. Let me pray for us.