

When God Comes Down

The Glory of God Is Our Comfort

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Scripture

In his book, titled *The Pressure's Off*, psychologist Larry Crabb tells a story from his childhood to illustrate how God works in our adversity.

One Saturday afternoon, Larry said, when he was three years old he decided that he was a big boy and could use the bathroom without anyone's help. So he climbed the stairs, closed the bathroom door and locked it behind him. And for the next few minutes he felt very self-sufficient.

Then, it was time to leave. But, to his horror he discovered that he could not unlock the door. He tried with every ounce of his three-year-old strength, but he could not unlock the door.

He panicked. He felt like a very little boy again as the thought went through his mind, "I might spend the rest of my life in this bathroom."

His parents—and likely the neighbors—heard his desperate scream for help.

"Are you okay?" his Mom shouted through the locked door. "Did you fall? Have you hit your head?"

"I can't unlock the door!" shouted Larry. "Get me out of here!"

Now Larry was not aware of it right then, but his Dad raced down the stairs, ran to the garage, found the ladder, hauled it off the hooks, and leaned it against the side of the house just beneath the bathroom window.

With adult strength, his Dad pried open the window, then climbed into Larry's prison, walked past him and with that same strength, turned the lock and opened the bathroom door.

"Thanks, Dad!" Larry said. And then he ran outside to play.

¹ The material for this sermon is drawn from Ortlund, R. C., Jr. & Hughes, R. K., *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*. Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005).

Larry said that many of us think that this is how the Christian life is supposed to work. When we get stuck in a tight place, we do all we can to free ourselves. But when we can't free ourselves, we pray. Then God shows up. He hears our cry—"Get me out of here! I want to play!"—and unlocks the door to the blessings we desire.

The truth is that God sometimes does unlock the door for us.

But, more often than not, the Christian life does not work that way. We find ourselves in some kind of adversity, and we cry out to God to open the door for us. But nothing happens.

What do we do when a marriage is falling apart, when health worsens in spite of much prayer, when a child is diagnosed with a terminal illness, when a spouse dies, when a teenager rebels, when a friend betrays, when a job is lost, when financial reversals strike, when the threat of terrorism lurks, when loneliness intensifies, when depression creeps in, when hope dies?

Sometimes God disciplines us and leaves in the bathroom for a while so that we can examine ourselves and repent of our disobedience.

Then he climbs through the window into the bathroom with us. But he doesn't walk past us and unlock the door. Instead, he sits down on the bathroom floor to comfort us. He seems to think that being in the room with us matters more than letting us out to play.

We don't always see it that way of course. "Get me out of here!" we shout. "If you love me, unlock the door!"

We think that the way to blessing is getting what we want—to get out of the locked bathroom so we can go out and play.

But the way to blessing is to sit down with God, as it were, and take the opportunity to listen to him and be comforted by him.²

Isaiah ministered to the people of the southern kingdom of Judah from about 740-700 BC. The northern kingdom of Israel had been attacked, defeated, and taken into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The people of Judah were scared that they would be next.

² Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2002), 222-223.

They were in fact attacked, defeated, and taken into exile by the Babylonians more than a century later, in 586 BC.

Now, in Babylonian exile God's people were defeated and disillusioned. They were locked in a bathroom, as it were, and they were crying out to God for help.

The message of the prophet is that God would come down, sit with them, and comfort them. Let's read Isaiah 40:1-11:

¹Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

**²Speak 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.**

³A voice cries:

**"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.**

**⁴Every 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.**

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

⁶A 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.**

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

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

**⁹Get you 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)**

Introduction

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent. We are considering what happens when God comes down. What happens when God comes down to his people when they are hurting?

Author Philip Yancey wrote an article about someone wrestling with that question:

I once was part of a small group with a Christian leader whose name you would likely recognize. He went through a hard time as his adult children got into trouble, bringing him sleepless nights and expensive attorney fees. Worse, my friend was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. Nothing in his life seemed to work out.

“I have no problem believing in a good God,” he said to us one night. “My question is, ‘What is God good for?’”

We listened to his complaints and tried various responses, but he batted them all away. A few weeks later, I came across a little phrase by Dallas Willard: “For those who love God, nothing irredeemable can happen to you.” I went back to my friend.

“What about that?” I asked. “Is God good for that promise?”³

³ Philip Yancey, “Where Is God When It Hurts?” *Christianity Today* (June 2007), 56.

Yes, God is good for that promise. And it is also true that for those whom God loves, nothing irredeemable can happen to them.

Lesson

In Isaiah 40:1-11 God comes to his people with a comforting promise. Isaiah tells us four truths about God's promise:

1. The occasion of God's comforting promise (40:1-2),
2. The content of God's comforting promise (40:3-5),
3. The certainty of God's comforting promise (40:6-8),
and
4. The spreading of God's comforting promise (40:9-11)

I. The Occasion of God's Comforting Promise (40:1-2)

First, observe the occasion of God's comforting promise.

The occasion of God's comforting promise is failure. For the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, the prophet warned the people of God that they would be disciplined for their failure to obey God.

Then, it is as if Isaiah had fallen asleep. While he slept, God disciplined the people of Judah by taking them into exile. God also took Isaiah into the courtroom of heaven to hear Judah's predicament discussed (cf. 1 Kings 22:19-23). When he woke up, in Isaiah 40, he revealed to the people of Judah what he had heard in the courtroom of heaven.

Isaiah told God's people of God's comforting promise to them. He said in Isaiah 40:1-2: **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 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.”**

There is an end to the discipline of God. God's deepest intention toward his people is love and grace and mercy and comfort. Sometimes he disciplines his people *because* he loves them. God never does anything capriciously or impulsively.

If God's focus was our sin, our future would be obliterated. But God's focus is not our sin, but rather God's focus is his grace.

God overrules our stupidity and failure and disobedience and sin with his own promise of comfort.

Do we fail? Yes. Do we disobey? Yes. Do we sin? Yes. And do we suffer for it? Yes. But is that where God leaves us? No!

When discipline has done its good work, God comes back to us with his overflowing comfort.

Believers in Christ, as commentator Ray Ortlund says, "See in God not a frown but a smile, not distance but nearness."⁴ Even when we fail and disobey and don't act like the people of God, he still identifies with us. He calls us, "**My people.**"

God comes down to us because we are sinners, because we are failures, because we are locked up in a bathroom, because of his grace, in order to comfort us.

II. The Content of God's Comforting Promise (40:3-5)

Second, notice the content of God's comforting promise.

While Isaiah was in the courtroom of heaven, he heard a voice. God commanded his servants, not yet identified, to bring a message of comfort to his people. God told his servants to proclaim three truths about his comforting promise.

The first truth about God's comforting promise is that God *is* coming. Isaiah 40:3 says, "**A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'**" The New Testament tells us that Jesus was the Lord who came for his people 2,000 years ago (Mark 1:12-3). But the Lord still comes for his people today. He comes to us as we are, where we are, in the wilderness and desert of our lives. He wants us to get ready to receive him. He wants us to acknowledge our failure and disobedience and sin.

The second truth about God's comforting promise is that God

⁴ R. C. Ortlund, Jr. & R. K. Hughes, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*. Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 235.

will accomplish his purpose. In Isaiah's day when a king went to a certain place, people went ahead to fix the roads so that the king's travel would be unhindered. **"Every valley *shall* be lifted up, and every mountain and hill [*will*] be made low; the uneven ground *shall* become level, and the rough places [*will be*] a plain"** (40:4). But Isaiah is not talking so much about a literal topographical change. He is talking about God accomplishing his purpose in our lives. When God comes down to us, he reorders our lives. When God comes down to us he crushes sin, relieves sadness, flattens pride, levels inconsistency, and smoothes roughness.

And the third truth about God's comforting promise is that the glory of God *will* be revealed. The voice continued, **"And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken"** (40:5). The glory of God will be seen by the entire world. We can be certain of it, because **the mouth of the Lord has spoken it**.

We talk a lot about the glory of God. But do we know what is the "glory of God"? John Piper's assessment seems accurate:

In the church, our view of God is so small instead of huge, so marginal instead of crucial, so vague instead of clear, so impotent instead of all determining, and so uninspiring instead of ravishing that the responsibility to live to the glory of God is a thought without content. The words can come out of our mouths, but ask the average Christian to tell what they know about the glory of this God that they are going to live for, and the answer will not be long.⁵

So, what is the glory of God? The glory of God is the fiery radiance of his very nature. It is his blazing beauty. At Mount Sinai "the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire" (Exodus 24:17). Ezekiel saw the glory of God in the form of a supercharged war chariot coming down from heaven to establish the rule of God on earth (Ezekiel 1:4-28). When Jesus was born, the

⁵ John Piper, "A Passion for the Supremacy of God," *Spirit of Revival*, March 2002, 5.

glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds, and they were terrified (Luke 2:9). The Bible also says that Jesus himself is the ultimate display of the glory of God (John 1:14). His transfiguration unveiled his glory (Luke 9:28-36). But also—this is the irony of the gospel—when Jesus hung on the cross in shame, we were seeing the glory of God (John 13:31).

The glory of God, therefore, is God himself becoming visible, God coming down to us, God displaying his beauty before us, the true answer to our deepest longings. And he *promises* to do this for us. The glory of God is our comfort. Indeed, the glory of God is *the* central promise of the gospel.

God kept his promise in the glory of Christ's first coming. He continues to keep his promise as the Holy Spirit awakens us to the glory of Christ in the gospel (2 Corinthians 3:18-4:6). He will consummate his promise at the second coming of Christ.

This is the content of God's comforting promise in Isaiah 40:5. Our response to God's comforting promise is to submit to God's reordering of our lives.

III. The Certainty of God's Comforting Promise (40:6-8)

Third, observe the certainty of God's comforting promise.

Isaiah hears another voice, "A voice says, 'Cry!'" (40:6a).

And Isaiah said, "What shall I cry?" (40:6b).

And the answer came back, "**All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever**" (40:6c-8).

Basically, the message is that people are frail, weak, and fallible. But God is not.

Everything we are and do in our own strength and power will ultimately fade into nothing. But **the word of our God will stand forever**. Because God said it, it is certain, and we can believe it.

IV. The Spreading of God's Comforting Promise (40:9-11)

And fourth, see the spreading of God's comforting promise.

Isaiah says to the people of God, **“Get you 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!’ Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 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”** (40:9-11).

God's people are to spread the good news of God's coming. They are to declare to the world, **“Behold your God!”**

The good news of God coming down to us is to be spread to others.

On that tragic morning of September 11, 2001, The Brooklyn Tabernacle lost four of its members. One victim was a police officer. The officer's funeral was held at the church building, and Rudy Giuliani, then mayor of New York City, had been asked to share a few thoughts. In his book *You Were Made for More*, Jim Cymbala, pastor of The Brooklyn Tabernacle, records what the mayor shared with the congregation that morning:

You know people, I've learned something through all this. Let me see if I can express it to you. When everybody was fleeing that building, and the cops and the firefighters and the EMS people were heading up into it, do you think any of them said, “I wonder how many blacks are up there for us to save? I wonder what percentage are whites up there? How many Jews are there? Let's see—are these people making \$400,000 a year, or \$24,000, or—?”

No, when you're saving lives, they're all precious. And that's how we're supposed to live all the time. How would you want the cops to treat you if you were on the seventy-fifth floor that day? Would you want them to say, “Excuse me, but I've got to get the bosses out first”? Not exactly.

I confess I haven't always lived this way. But I'm convinced that God wants us to do it. He wants us to value every human life the way he does.⁶

The world in which we live is a fallen world. But God has come to us and he has revealed his glory to us and enabled us to believe in him. Our destiny has been changed forever. He has turned our sadness into joy.

Now, he calls us to spread the good news of his comforting promise to the entire world because every human life is valuable.

Conclusion

Advent is a great time of the year to reflect on the time when God comes down. He came down once physically when Jesus was born 2,000 years ago. And he will come down again physically when he returns to wrap up history.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Nazi Germany during World War II. He opposed Hitler, was imprisoned, and shot shortly before the end of the war. While in prison before his execution he wrote letters and books. In a letter to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, he said, "A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened 'from the outside,' is not a bad picture of Advent."⁷

God has opened the door "from the outside," he has come down, and he will come down again. And while we wait for God to come down again, let us cling to the promise that the glory of God is our comfort. Amen.

⁶ Jim Cymbala, *You Were Made for More* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2008), 94-96.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Christianity Today*, vol. 31, no. 1.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

O God, we live in a world of failure and defeat and disillusionment and sin.

But you teach us that you are coming. You came once physically when Jesus was born 2,000 years ago. And you are coming again. You accomplish your purpose in reordering our fractured and frail lives. You teach us that the glory of God is our comfort.

The reason we believe that your glory is our comfort is because the word of our God stands forever. Because you said it, it is certain, and we can believe it.

Encourage us to spread the news of your comforting promise to those with whom we come into contact because every life is valuable.

And for all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.