



Text: Isaiah 40:1-11¹
Series: Tidings of Comfort...
Title: Comfort in Four Voices
Date: December 7, 2008
Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Isaiah 40:1

Let me risk beginning with an aside. One scholar I read in preparation had done a study of the religions of the Ancient Near East. He looked for evidence that their gods comforted their people. He found none that did. He determined that “the biblical concept of a God who comforts was otherwise virtually unknown in the ancient world.”² That puts a bit of a new light on Paul’s description of our God as “the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3) doesn’t it?

Handel’s oratorio, *The Messiah*, opens with this Scripture and he returns to this passage several times in the first section of *The Messiah*. *The Messiah* has come to be a Christmas classic, even though the themes of that great piece of music cover the birth, death, resurrection and the final glorification of Jesus Christ. *The Messiah* covers the entire history of salvation – and the text is all Bible! Actually, Handel didn’t write the words, he only wrote the music. Charles Jennens composed the libretto, the technical term for the words in a dramatic musical work. Every time I listen to it live I find myself deeply moved as the Scripture washes over me reminding me of what Jesus has done and will do for my salvation. Before I go in to the concert hall, I make sure I’ve got Kleenex in my pocket because I know I’ll need it at some point in the performance. It’s a piece of music that could as easily be sung at Easter as at Christmas, but its opening focus on the prophecies leading up to the fulfillment of the birth of Jesus have made it a traditional Christmas choice for choirs.

But aside from this musical tradition, there is a very Biblical reason why Isaiah 40 connects us with the birth of Jesus. Forty days after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph brought him to the temple to present him to the Lord and to fulfill the requirement of the Old Testament law that every firstborn child was to be redeemed by the offering of a sacrifice. As poor people, Mary and Joseph came to the temple to offer a pair of turtledoves or young pigeons as their sacrifice. As they were on their way to the place of sacrifice, carrying the baby Jesus in their arms, they were met by a godly man named Simeon. The Lord had revealed to Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he died and when he looked eyes in the baby Jesus, he knew! He just knew that this baby was the One! We’re

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²Alexander, T. D., & Rosner, B. S. (2001). “Comfort,” *New dictionary of biblical theology* (electronic ed.). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.



going to look at Simeon's words next week but this week I want you to take note of what Luke says about him...

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.” Luke 2:25

It's that phrase “the consolation of Israel” that I want you to notice. The word translated as “consolation” is also translated as “comfort” in the New Testament and the Old Testament foundation for “the consolation of Israel” is right here in Isaiah 40, verse 1. When Simeon picked up Jesus in his arms and looked him in the eye, he knew he was holding “the consolation of Israel,” “the Lord's Christ” (v26), the comfort of God for his people.

There is something about the Christmas story, the birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, that is intended by God to bring us “comfort” and that's what I want us to think about together this morning. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, the Holy Spirit moved Isaiah to proclaim “tidings of comfort” that would be fulfilled in Jesus' birth. God knew we would need comfort and so he planned for it in the coming of Jesus. What are “the tidings of comfort” that God wants us to hear this Christmas?

“Comfort” can mean a lot of things and we need to make sure that we're on the same page with God's purpose. God is not talking about being “comfortable.” A few weeks ago I defined the gift of exhortation as the ministry of “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.” The words of comfort in Isaiah need to be understood against the background of affliction that we find in chapters 1 to 39 of Isaiah's prophecy. We need to know why God's people needed God's comfort if we're to properly understand the comfort he wants us to experience.

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah's prophecy are warnings – warnings that if Israel did not repent of its sin against God, God would radically discipline them in order to bring them back to righteousness. Here is the opening salvo that God directs against his people...

“Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: ‘Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.’ Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.” Isaiah 1:2-4

And for 39 chapters, it doesn't get much better than this! There are occasional bursts of hope and promise (cf. 1:18-20; 9:1-7) in these early chapters, but Israel's persistent rebellion against God had reached a point in Isaiah's day when



God needed to speak harshly, not tenderly. God's direction to Isaiah to speak a word of comfort to Israel in chapter 40 needs to set against God's direction to Isaiah in chapter 6. Here is God's commission to Isaiah in the beginning of the prophecy...

“And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’ And he said, ‘Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.” Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.’ Isaiah 6:8-10

Then I said, ‘How long, O Lord?’ And he said: ‘Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.’ The holy seed is its stump.” Isaiah 6:11-13

The message that God gave Isaiah to deliver was that God's discipline of Israel's rebellion against him would end in the emptying of the land. When God had established his covenant with Israel through Moses, he had warned them that if they persisted in rebellion against him, he would remove them from the land he had given them (cf. Deuteronomy 28) and Isaiah's message to Israel was that that awful day of reckoning was about to dawn.

Isaiah wrote his prophecies in the early 700s and late 600s BC. He was alive when the Assyrians swept in and took the ten northern tribes of Israel into captivity in 722 BC and he witnessed the attack on Judah and Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701 BC and God's miraculous intervention to save the city. He ministered from approximately 740 BC to some time after the reign of King Hezekiah whose reign ended in 686 BC. During the reign of King Hezekiah the Babylonian king sent an envoy to Jerusalem, seeking an alliance against the Assyrians. Hezekiah was flattered by the attention of the Babylonians and the possibility of support against the dreaded Assyrians. He gave the Babylonian envoy a guided tour of his palace, proudly showing him all his treasures and his armory. When Isaiah caught wind of this, he came to King Hezekiah and demanded to know what the envoys had been shown. “They have seen all that is in my house,” King Hezekiah replied.

“Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, ‘Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: Behold, 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. 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



One hundred years later, in 586 BC, the Babylonians returned and did exactly as Isaiah prophesied they would. The land was laid waste, the city was destroyed, the people were taken into captivity with only a handful of lonely, isolated Jews remaining in the Land of Promise. The Seventy Years of captivity had begun.

One of the best pictures of the mood of the captives during those years in Babylon is found in Psalm 137...

“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” Psalm 137:1-4

They were discouraged. They felt distant from God, unable even to worship Him with song. They were guilty and ashamed before the whole world. They had let God down and brought His great name into disrepute. Pagan, unbelieving people were mocking them and their God who had been unable to save them from defeat in battle. Their sin of rebellion had brought them to this sorry situation and they were ashamed and despairing.

What kind of comfort did the captives need? What word from God would bring them consolation?

I want you to understand that Isaiah’s prophetic words of comfort in chapter 40 were written to these captives a hundred years before they went into captivity! God prepared comfort for his captive people even before they were in captivity because he knew what they would need even before they needed it. It’s a demonstration of the truth of what God says through Isaiah...

**“Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.”
Isaiah 65:24**

Just take a moment and think about that fact as it applies to your life. Whatever situation you are in right now, God has addressed that need somewhere in His Word because he knows what you need even before you need it. He knows your life, he knows the world in which we live, and he knows the Word you need to sustain you, to guide and direct you, to console and comfort you. Last week we talked about the importance of taking time to read his Word and to listen to Him during this Christmas season. I hope you’ve been able to find moments of stillness so that you can hear God’s Word for you. God has a word of comfort for you. Centuries ago, he inspired his prophets and apostles to write words that you need today. Perhaps, in some way, you feel like the captives did in Babylon. Perhaps God’s Word for them is also His Word for you today.



What comfort did they need?

First of all, they needed...

The comfort of God's pardon for sin

“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.” Isaiah 40:1-2

The very first thing that God knew they would need was a word of forgiveness. Even though they were in captivity because of their sin, God's desire was to bring them to repentance and the blessing of forgiveness. He didn't want to destroy his people with his discipline, he wanted to correct them and bring them to a life of holiness and righteousness. Even though they were rebellious and obstinate in their sin against him, God still called them “my people” and he still called himself “your God.”

What God wanted his sin-sick people to hear was the word “pardoned.” The word literally means “acceptable.” These sinners had been made “acceptable” before God but we're not told how. According to God's Law, acceptance before God for sinners came through the offering of an acceptable sacrifice. For anyone looking to deal with sin, the Law of God stipulated that...

“He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.” Leviticus 1:4

Sacrifice for sin could only be made in one place, the temple in Jerusalem but Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple had been laid waste. Where could they off-load their sin? How could God say that they had been pardoned?

Isaiah's words looked into the future, but not only the future of the captives in Babylon. He looked into the future and saw the hearts of the captives of sin everywhere. He also looked and saw the sacrifice that made the announcement of pardon possible. The sacrifice that would make all of us sinners acceptable before God was coming. Isaiah this about him...

“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 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



This is one of the passages in *The Messiah* were I lose it every time! As the Scripture washes over me I am overwhelmed by God's amazing grace and mercy and I begin to weep.

All of our sin was laid on Jesus. God wants us to know that payment for sin has been made in full. Tell Israel, God said to Isaiah "that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." What he's saying is that the sin-debt has been paid in full, with nothing outstanding. When Jesus died on the cross he spoke one final word before he died. He said...

"It is finished" John 19:30

Although we need three words in English to translate it, in Jesus' mouth this statement comprised only one word: "**tetelestai**." It's a Greek word that was often used to mark bills and invoices that had been paid, articles of business that had been completed in full. It means, "paid in full." *Tetelestai*: "it is finished," "the price has been paid in full."

Dear child of God, do you ever wonder if your repeated sin has led God to cast you off? Listen, you might feel distant from Him because of your sin but please know that the distance between you and your God is all of your own making. If you have been made a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:12-13) you are always "his child" and he is always "your God." Your sin has been "pardoned," paid in full, by the death of Jesus Christ on your behalf.

The **second** word that God knew his captive people would need to hear was...

The comfort of God's presence wherever they might be

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Isaiah 40:3-5

God, speaking through Isaiah, expressed his understanding that his people would feel abandoned by God because of their sin. One hundred years before their hearts knew the pain, he asked them...

"Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God'?" Isaiah 40:27

Even before they have had a chance to sit by the rivers of Babylon and lament that they are unable to sing, the Lord commands them to sing in captivity because of the comfort he is about to bring them...



“Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted. But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.’ Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.” Isaiah 49:13-16

This prophecy was taken up by John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. John and the New Testament Gospel writers understood that John was the one whose voice cried out in the desert to prepare the way for the glory of the Lord to be revealed. Matthew tells us that in the days just before Jesus began his ministry...

“...John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” Matthew 3:1-3

And notice who met with John in the wilderness – Jesus. Jesus of whom the Apostle John said...

“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 bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ”)”
John 1:14-15

The glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ – that’s what John saw in the wilderness of Judea. And from that day to this, “all flesh,” everyone who looks to Jesus, will see the glory of the Father in face of His Son (John 14:9).

What does Isaiah mean when he says that God’s people are to “make straight in the desert a highway for our God”? He means that when people get their hearts right before God, God will meet with them anywhere. The people of Israel didn’t need to be in Jerusalem to meet with God. The people of John’s day didn’t need to be in Jerusalem to meet with God. God, in the person of His Son Jesus Christ, met with John in the middle of the Jordan River ... and he’ll meet with you whenever you turn your heart toward him in repentance and faith.

The **third** comforting word that God knew the captives would need is...

The comfort of God’s constancy in an uncertain world

A voice demanded that Isaiah cry out to God’s people and Isaiah asked, “What shall I cry?”



“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.” Isaiah 40:6-8

At first appearance this is simply a statement that people come and people go, but God stands forever. But sadly, it's more than that. The word translated as “beauty” is often translated as “faithfulness,” especially the faithfulness of God to his promises. The margin of the ESV suggests that another viable translation for the word is “constancy.” If that is true, then what God is saying through Isaiah to us is that people are not only here today and gone tomorrow, but sadly, their faithfulness and dependability is fleeting as well.

To a people in captivity to a powerful empire this is a hopeful word. Empires rise and empires fall, kings decree this and that, but they are all just “grass” – their lives are short and their words are ephemeral. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the British, the Soviets -- all these empires have come and gone. Many of our brothers and sisters around the world are living under powerful regimes that hold them in captivity. To them this word spells hope for the future. One day, their oppressors will wither away, but God will remain.

Some, tragically, are putting their trust in these empires of men. We've been reminded in these last few months that the financial empires of the world are “grass,” their “constancy is like the flower of the field.” Whether you put your trust in them or live in fear of them, you are investing your time and energy in empires made out of grass.

In contrast to the fickleness of humanity is the eternal foundation of God. I appreciate the Bible education I received at Briercrest Bible College and this truth from Isaiah was imprinted upon my heart and mind during my time there. This verse is the school's motto and it wasn't only a slogan; I saw this principle lived out in the lives of the leadership of the school year after year. It was a truth learned by the leadership of the school in the tough times of Great Depression when the school was founded. The growth and ministry of that school over the decades has been a testimony to the value of standing with God's Word regardless of the financial, political or social climate of the day. And over the years I've seen the same commitment lived out in the lives of other schools and missions and churches and individuals. And what I've observed confirms the truth of the old saying...

**“Only one life, 'twill soon be past;
Only what's done for Christ will last.”**



The Apostle John challenges us to reject investment in the “empires of grass” and invites us to align our lives with God. He tells us...

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.” 1 John 2:15-17

Finally, the last word is perhaps the most important word. It’s the word that sums them all up. It’s...

The comfort of the Gospel -- God himself

The Lord decrees ...

“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...”

And what is the Gospel, the good news that they are to declare...

“Behold your God!” Isaiah 40:9

And I lose it again! Handel’s phrasing of the words has the alto soloist punching the air with the words, “Behold – Your – God.” And then the whole chorus joins in and pushes it up a notch in volume and pitch – they all get up to the high mountain and the Gospel, the “good news” is proclaimed.

The Bible scholar, E.J. Young referred to this declaration as “the heart of the Gospel.” “If we have not God,” he wrote, “we have nothing; and if we have Him, we have all things.” (Commentary on Isaiah, vol. 3, loc. cit.)

And what a God to behold!

“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.” Isaiah 40:10-11

Some years ago I was attending a men’s conference. A couple of rows in front of me sat a man with his son. The son had Down syndrome and at one point in the meeting he became agitated about something. I watched as his father leaned forward to look his son in the eye, spoke gently and quietly to him and stroked his



son's arm with his hands to calm him. The son soon regained his composure and the father turned back into his seat. As he did so, he reached back behind his head to rub the back of his neck. I don't think I've ever seen a hand that was more powerful! They were strong hands capable of hard work, but they were also gentle hands skilled at comfort. It was a picture for me of our God whose arm is both strong to save and gentle to care. Whether you need protection or comfort, He is able. If you have a need, he can provide it. If you have a wound, he can heal it. If you need someone to hold you, he is able. If you need someone to fight for you, he is ready. "Behold – Your – God!"

Someone wrote Warren Wiersbe one day with this little saying. As he notes, it's not great poetry but it does carry a great truth...

**"Look at others, and be distressed.
Look at yourself, and be depressed.
Look to God, and you'll be blessed."**

What "comfort" do you need this Christmas season?

Do you need **the comfort of the assurance that your sins are forgiven**? Hear God's word to you: Your "iniquity is pardoned." "It is finished," "*tetelestai*," "paid in full." Two thousand years ago Jesus died on the cross to bear "the iniquity of us all." That's you! And you! And you! And me! Believe the word of comfort because God spoke it knowing you and I would one day need to hear it.

Do you need **the comfort of God's presence**? Then humble yourself before him and turn your heart toward him because God longs to meet with you. He waits for you to build him a highway into your heart.

Do you need **the comfort of God's constancy** while everything around you is shifting? He is a Rock of refuge on whom you can depend. Trust in his Word – it will not fail you.

Do you need **the comfort of God himself**? Then "Behold your God"...

"Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation." Isaiah 12:2

"Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." Isaiah 25:9

"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



- **Prayer**
- **Welcome of New Members (2nd service)**
- **Celebration of the Lord's Table**
 - In Christ Alone
 - Joy Has Dawned
- **Benediction**