

The King is our Comforter

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Isaiah 40 begins a new section of the book of Isaiah. For 39 chapters, the basic message has been, “*Rebuke, Rebuke.*” Now we get to Isaiah 40, and it is, “*Comfort, Comfort.*” Why the shift? Why does the rest of the book of Isaiah sound so different than the first 39 chapters?

If you remember, Sunday, we learned in Isaiah 39 that Judah would go into exile in Babylon. Then about one hundred and fifty years later, in 586 B.C., Jerusalem was destroyed, and the people were taken to Babylon.

Isaiah prophesied they would be taken into captivity, although he was not alive to see it. When we get to Isaiah 40-55, his prophecy begins to project further out into the future. In this section, he wrote to prepare them for how they should serve God while in Babylon and that the Lord promises to bring them back to Jerusalem.

So, his prophecy reaches about 150-200 years into the future. Eventually, the latter parts of Isaiah 40-55 see even further out into the future and tell of the coming of the Messiah.

In the last section of Isaiah, Isaiah 56-66, his prophecy reaches out to the very end of time. Through Isaiah, God prepares us for Jesus’ return and establishment of the new heavens and the new earth.

Here is the rub with these last two sections of Isaiah. Some scholars believe that Isaiah did not actually write chapters 40-66. Some believe his disciples wrote it much later. In other words, they are saying that there were multiple authors who contributed chapters 40-66.

I do not believe this is the case. Here is why, first, Jesus and the apostles refer to the book of Isaiah as a complete work written by Isaiah. Second, when the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, they contained the book of Isaiah. When the scroll changed from chapter 39 to chapter 40, there was no section break in the scroll. It seamlessly transitioned to the last two sections.¹

Here is the miracle of prophecy. The Lord, by His Holy Spirit, gave his prophets the ability to see into the future. They wrote what they saw. Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and even the Apostles tell us of the sovereign events the Lord has planned. Bottom line: The book of Isaiah has one author—Isaiah, the son of Amoz.

The section of Isaiah 40-55 was primarily written to console the captives who were carried off to Babylon. Isaiah 40:1-11 sets up the message of consolation. Let’s work through these eleven verses and meet the King who comforts His people. In Isaiah 40, Isaiah is caught up into the throne room of God. In this vision, we hear the Lord give assignments to His servants to proclaim words of comfort.

The people had been through very dark years as exiles in Babylon. They felt alone and perhaps even abandoned by God. But He had not left them. In Isaiah 40, He came to them in their brokenness and bitterness and spoke tender words of comfort and hope.

Do you ever feel like these people did? Do you ever feel like God has abandoned you? I mean, the pain is so great and has lasted so long that you wonder if He even cares.

Listen to me; for those who are in Christ, He never leaves you. He comes to you and speaks words of comfort to you. He will put fresh winds in the sails of your life. He will renew you while you are an exile in this world.

In Isaiah 40:1-11, we need to answer the question: *How does our King comfort us in our exile?* I think we see four ways in these eleven verses: *He speaks tenderly to us, He comes near to us, He assures us of His promise, and He sends us to proclaim the good news.*

¹ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *Preaching the Word Series: Isaiah*, 233.

I. He speaks tenderly to us in our pain (vv. 1-2)

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God.

*² “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and announce to her
that her time of hard service is over,
her iniquity has been pardoned,
and she has received from the Lord’s hand
double for all her sins.”*

Remember, Isaiah has been lifted up to the throne room of God, and now he hears the voice of the Lord speaking. Isaiah is listening because when God speaks, it is important to listen to His word. Right?!

What does the Lord of Armies say? He wants to speak words of comfort to His people. The word for *tender* in v. 1 is the Hebrew word *heart*.

Do you see what God is doing? He is saying, *“I am opening up My heart to you. I am speaking to you from My heart. I want to comfort you.”* God was hurting for His people. They had suffered because of their rebellion, and He wanted to help them.

Do you remember why they were taken captive to Babylon? They abandoned God. When Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, became king, he led the people of Judah to rebel against the Lord. They worshipped idols and to commit all kinds of wickedness. He was a horrible king.

But these people who were stuck in Babylon had forgotten that. Many of them had been in Babylon so long they didn’t understand why they were even there. So, as a result, they began to blame God for all of their miseries. Isaiah 40:27 says:

*“My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my claim is ignored by my God”?*

They believed that God had failed them. Imagine that. They are blaming God for their suffering but then notice what He says to His people; he says, *“Comfort, Comfort!”* I don’t know about you, but that is not how I would have responded with: *“Comfort, comfort.”* I would have started over with, *“Rebuke, Rebuke.”* But that’s not what the King of Comfort does. He speaks tenderly to His children.

In v. 2, the Lord told them that their period of hard service was over. Their suffering was complete. He had forgiven them. They had received double for their sins, but now they were going to receive double the comfort from God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, here’s the good news. When the Lord disciplines you, He never drops the hammer of punishment on you. First of all, if you are in Christ, the hammer of judgment fell on Jesus. He took the hammer blow of the wrath of God for you. All you and I ever receive is discipline.

Second, the Lord never over-disciplines. He never overcorrects. He sees the pain of our discipline, and He hurts for us as a parent hurts for a wayward child.

So, when your heart breaks because of what you are suffering, He feels the very pain you are enduring. But here is the difference between how you feel and how God feels. God’s heart has more depth of feeling and much more capacity for emotion than our hearts.

Think about it this way; I know many of you like *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. Probably my favorite book in the series is the *Magician Nephew*. In this book, Lewis tells the story of how Aslan created Narnia and how evil was brought into His world.

One of my favorite scenes in the book is Digory pleading with Aslan to give him some magic fruit that will heal his mother. However, Digory had committed a great evil. He was the one who let evil into Aslan’s new world of Narnia. So, when he was pleading with Him, he was wondering if Aslan would even listen to him, much less help

him. Aslan said to the crowd around him, *"Here was the boy who introduced evil into My new world."* Then Digory collapsed before Aslan and said:

"But please, please - won't you - can't you give me something that will cure Mother?" Up till then, [Digory] had been looking at the Lion's great feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at [His] face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion's eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory's own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be [hurting more for] his Mother than he was himself. "My son, my son," said Aslan. "I know. Grief is great."

Friends, Jesus is our Savior who is acquainted with our grief. He knows more about our grief than we will ever know. And because He knows more about grief, it means He knows more about comforting us.

Jesus knows when to give us comfort and how best to give us comfort. Friends, when Jesus speaks the words, *"Comfort, comfort"* His comfort is real, deep, and healing because His comfort is grounded in His own grief and agony that He experienced on the cross.

Friends, take time today to look in the eyes of your Savior and see His tears for you as you suffer. Then let Him speak words of comfort to you from the Bible and by His Holy Spirit.

II. He comes near to us in our pain (vv. 3-5)

So, not only does Jesus speak words of comfort to us in our suffering, pain, and grief, but He comes near to us. Look in vv. 3-5.

³ *A voice of one crying out:
Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness;
make a straight highway for our God in the desert.*

⁴ *Every valley will be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill will be leveled;
the uneven ground will become smooth
and the rough places, a plain.*

⁵ *And the glory of the Lord will appear,
and all humanity together will see it,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

Now the Lord commissions one of his servants in the throne room to cry out. Verse 3 certainly points to the ministry of John the Baptist, who cried out in the wilderness to people who were suffering, wandering, and had lost their way. Here we see Isaiah's prophecy reaching all the way into the first century when John came to prepare the people for the coming Messiah.

Yet, this message was not only for the people who lived some 500 years later, but it was also a word to the people who were exiles in Babylon. What kind of comfort would it be if Isaiah said, *"Hey guys, I know things are tough, but 500 years from now, God's going to do something to help you."* That's not much comfort. Isaiah's message was for the future generations, but it was also for those suffering in Babylon.

So, in vv. 1-2, the Lord God spoke tender words of comfort to them. Now, in vv. 3-5, He comes to their rescue, and just like the people who had wandered in the desert for forty years were led to the Promised Land, now the Lord was going to rescue His people by leading them out of Babylon and back to the Promised Land. And just like God's glory went before and behind the people, as they wandered in the desert those 40 years, now the glory of God will be revealed as they leave Babylon and travel back to Jerusalem.

Friends, Israel's exile in Babylon points to something bigger and more serious—humanity's exile and separation from God right now. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve sinned, and since then, we have been in exile. But here is the good news! The King has come!

Jesus is the King who suffered in the wilderness so that we can be rescued from our wilderness of sin. Cry out to Him for rescue right where you are, for He will lead you out of the wilderness of your sin and lead you home.

Listen, the Lord makes a way where it seems like there is no way. It may seem like there is no way you can return to the Lord. It may seem like there is a mountain of sin that separates you from Him. It may seem like there are so many rough places in your life that there is no way the Lord will want you. But God has made a way for you to be brought home.

How did He do that? When the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sin and rose from the dead on the third day, He removed mountains of sin. He smoothed the uneven places of hopelessness and leveled the uneven places by His blood. Bottom line: The path back to God is paved with the blood of Christ.

Our part is to repent and look to Jesus in faith. He has done all the construction work necessary for us to return to Him.

Finally, when Jesus comes near to you, the glory of the Lord is revealed. Now, currently, God's glory is being revealed to the whole world as the gospel is preached, but one day, it will be fully and finally revealed to all flesh for all time and eternity. One day every knee will bow, every eye will see, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.

However, for now, we see the glory of Christ in His birth in a manger in Bethlehem. We see the glory of God revealed to the shepherds when the brilliant light from the angels lit up the countryside and sang glory to the newborn King. We see His glory when He was transfigured on the mount with Peter, James, and John. We see the ultimate display of Jesus' glory when He hung on a Roman cross and died for our sin. We see the culmination of His glory in His resurrection when He walked out of the tomb!

Friends, with this victory, the mountains were leveled, the uneven places made level, and the rough places were smoothed out. It is not golden streets that lead us to Jesus but a blood-stained path that leads us to the cross of Christ where our Savior died and then to the empty tomb where He rose from the dead.

III. He assures us in our pain (vv. 6-8)

⁶ *A voice was saying, "Cry out!"
Another said, "What should I cry out?"
"All humanity is grass,
and all its goodness is like the flower of the field.*

⁷ *The grass withers, the flowers fade
when the breath of the Lord blows on them;
indeed, the people are grass.*

⁸ *The grass withers, the flowers fade,
but the word of our God remains forever."*

What is it that we need while we wait? We need assurance. We need to hear the voice of comfort that gives us assurance. Here is the deal. Life can be hard, even for believers. I mean, it can be very hard. We listen to the gospel, and we have hope. We look to the cross, and we see hope. We gather on Sunday mornings, and the Lord uses corporate worship to continue to infuse our hearts with His hope. All of these things are means of grace by which He gives us assurance. However, even with all of these means of grace, it does not mean life will be easy. It does not mean there won't be a difficult season.

Because life can still be a struggle, there is one more truth that we need to hold fast to in these dark moments—God’s promises will not fail. That’s why every Sunday, we read v. 8 out loud as a church. We need to be reminded of this truth. We need to hear others reminding us that God’s promises will not fail.

Many of us come in on Sundays, and our hearts are heavy and hurting. It is as if many of us are in a desert. We feel lonely, sad, and unsure of how God will care for us. We wonder how He will do what needs to be done in our lives. How will He care for us? We can’t conceive of how God will provide, but the truth is—He will. So, we need assurance that infuses our hope in Christ.

Friends, after Jesus was crucified, His disciples were devastated. They thought His life and ministry were all over because the flower of Jesus’ life had faded. He had been killed by the Jewish and Roman leaders, and that was it. They thought God’s rescue plan had failed.

But they did not understand God’s plan. His word foretold that Jesus would die and rise from the dead. They had forgotten His word. They thought His promise had failed. They lost their assurance in God’s promises.

They could not see God’s promise. All they could see was defeat. But God’s word stands. God’s promises never fail. Although they could not see victory, God brought victory. It was never in doubt. Where all they saw was death, God brought life and not just any kind of life but a powerful resurrected life that established assurance when Jesus rose from the dead.

So, let the promises of God do their work in your heart when life is at its darkest and most painful. Preach to yourself the assurances of His promises to your heart. Remember the gospel and Jesus’ resurrection. Then gather with the saints on Sunday mornings even when you feel weary and worn out and give each other assurance with these words:

*“The grass withers, the flowers fade,
but the word of our God remains forever.”*

IV. He sends us to tell others of His comfort (vv. 9-11)

⁹*Zion, herald of good news, go up on a high mountain.*

*Jerusalem, herald of good news,
raise your voice loudly. Raise it, do not be afraid!
Say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”*

¹⁰*See, the Lord God comes with strength,
and his power establishes his rule.*

*His wages are with him,
and his reward accompanies him.*

¹¹*He protects his flock like a shepherd;
he gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them in the fold of his garment.
He gently leads those that are nursing.*

Spreading the hope of Christ to others is the next way our King comforts us. After all, how can we not spread the hope we find in Jesus? Think about it. The King of Comfort has spoken tenderly to us. He has come near to us, and He has given us assurance through His death and resurrection. Now He sends us.

We are to be joyful lights in dark places. We are the fish that swim against the current. We are the ones that people look at the wonder how we can have joy and hope in all of this darkness in the world.

Here is how it works. God does not simply want you to enjoy the comfort He has given you, but He wants to INCREASE your enjoyment by you gladly sharing your comfort with others.

C. S. Lewis captures the idea in his book *Reflections on the Psalms* when he says:

The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical [persons], children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians and scholars . . . Just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: “Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?” . . . I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses [the enjoyment] but [it] completes the enjoyment.²

Friend, I don’t know where you are today in your journey in the wilderness of this world. I want to encourage you to listen to the King’s tender words of comfort. Let His love envelope you this morning. Rest in His assurance so that you become an overflowing fountain of comfort and joy for others.

² C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 94-95.