

THE COMFORT OF GOD

ISAIAH 40

“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God. (Isaiah 40:1).

Thus begins the second section of Isaiah. So different is this section as to its style and theme that many scholars have assumed that it was the writing of a different man altogether. We have already looked at several reasons for believing that Isaiah is a unified book.

- The New Testament quotes from both parts of this book and attributes them both to Isaiah.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls have the entire book as one seamless whole without a hint of division.
- Both parts of Isaiah regularly describe God as “the Holy One of Israel.”

Why then does Isaiah give us this very large section of comfort and restoration from captivity when Judah had not yet been taken into captivity? The answer is rather simple. The time to learn about the comfort of God is BEFORE you need the comfort of God. You don't wait until the ship is sinking to learn about lifeboats. You don't wait until times of distress to learn about the comfort of God.

There is a corollary to this principle: Never doubt in the darkness what you have learned in the light.

Chapter 39 ends with a prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction and the Babylonian Captivity. But now Isaiah offers comfort by looking beyond the captivity to the promises of the restoration that would come after.

“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God. (Isaiah 40:1).

The word translated “comfort” is נַחַם. It is the same word that we see back in Genesis 5:29 where Lamech named his son **Noah** [נֹחַ], saying, *“This one shall give us rest [נַחַם מֵעֲמָל] from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the LORD has cursed.”*

There is a rest and a comfort for the people of God. That is the message that Isaiah brings us in this chapter.

1. WE CAN TAKE COMFORT IN KNOWING THAT OUR SINS HAVE BEEN REMOVED:

*“Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,
That her iniquity has been removed,
That she has received of the LORD’s hand Double for all her sins.” (Isaiah 40:2).*

This had not yet taken place as Isaiah penned these words. The Babylonian Captivity was still many years in the future. But afterward there would come a time of restoration and of rest and of comfort.

Throughout this chapter, we are going to see two applications of the words of Isaiah. The immediate application has reference to the Jews returning to their land. It is for this reason that these words of comfort are directed to Jerusalem. They could take comfort in the promise that there would come a day when the punishment for past sins would be accomplished and at an end.

But there is also a further application of this principle that goes far beyond the city of Jerusalem and the return of the Jews to their homeland. It is seen in Jesus. He is the personification of Israel. These words have their ultimate fulfillment in Him.

Jesus paid the full price for the sins of men. The reference to a “double” payment points to the fact that it was paid in full. There remains nothing more to be done. His work on the cross paid it all.

2. WE CAN TAKE COMFORT IN KNOWING THAT THE LORD REVEALS HIS GLORY.

*3 A voice is calling,
“Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.
4 Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the rough ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;
5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
And all flesh will see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:3-5).*

When we first read these words, we might have a tendency to try to take them literally. We might imagine mountain-moving bulldozers that raise valleys and level mountains and pave highways.

To do so would be to try to impose a 21st century interpretation on an ancient writing. It would be missing the entire point.

The Scriptures themselves explain to us the meaning of this passage when it is quoted in the New Testament.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way; ³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.'" (Mark 1:2-3).

Mark says that this is "written in Isaiah, the prophet" (1:2). Actually, the quote is taken from two separate passages of the Old Testament.

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me,,," (Malachi 3:1a).

A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:3).

Mark tells us that both of these passages have reference to the same thing. They both point to John the Baptist who was the messenger and the voice calling for the way to be prepared in the wilderness.

³ *A voice is calling,
"Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.*

⁴ *Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the rough ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;*

⁵ *Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
And all flesh will see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."* (Isaiah 40:3-5).

John was the voice calling in the wilderness who came to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord's Messiah. He built a highway upon which the ministry of

Jesus entered history.

John prepared the way. But notice for whom it was that he prepared the way. It is seen in verse 5. He prepared the way for the glory of Yahweh.

*Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
And all flesh will see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:3-5).*

I cannot read these words without thinking of the incident of Moses in the wilderness. Moses had seen some great things. He had seen the plagues of Egypt. He had seen the parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of the armies of Pharaoh. He had seen the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He had seen the Lord’s daily provision of the manna in the wilderness.

Was there anything more for which a man could ask? Only one thing remained. Moses asked that he might be permitted to see the glory of God.

Moses asks, “Show me your glory!”

And the Lord replies, “You cannot do that and live; but I will permit you to catch a glimpse of My afterglow.”

The Lord places Moses into a cleft in the rock and covers it and then His goodness passes by and Moses is allowed to see the afterglow of God’s glory.

But here is a promise that *the glory of the LORD will be revealed.*

That for which Moses could only long is given to men.

How can such a thing be?

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14).

In the person of Jesus men were able to see the glory of the Lord. On the night of Jesus’ arrest, his disciples asked Him about this.

Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:8-9).

3. WE CAN TAKE COMFORT IN KNOWING THAT WE HAVE A PERMANENT PROMISE.

6 *A voice says, "Call out."
Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"
All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.*
7 *The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.*
8 *The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever. (Isaiah 40:6-8).*

Isaiah is bringing us a message of comfort, but these verses focus upon something that looks like anything but comfort. They point to the transience of man. Man is compared to grass.

When you want to describe that which endures, the one symbol you do not use is grass. You might use granite. We talk about those things that are "chiseled in stone." But no one ever chiseled anything in grass.

Grass does not last. It grows up in its season and then the lawnmower comes and cuts it and the fallen grass turns brown and fades away.

Man is like that. He comes on the scene and he is full of youth and vitality and ideas and before you know it, life has passed by and the grim reaper comes to cut him down.

You read that here in Isaiah and you ask, "Where is the comfort?" It appears to be more of an advocate of depression.

Here is the comfort. It is that the Word of the Lord abides forever. It is that God's promises are not as short-lived as is your earthly life.

4. WE CAN TAKE COMFORT IN THE GOOD NEWS OF THE SHEPHERD-KING.

9 *Get yourself up on a high mountain,
O Zion, bearer of good news,
Lift up your voice mightily,
O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;
Lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"*
10 *Behold, the Lord God will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him,
And His recompense before Him.*

11 *Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs,
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes. (Isaiah 40:9-11).*

Isaiah announces some good news of comfort. It is interesting that the Greek Septuagint translates the phrase in verse 9 - “bearer of good news” with the term that we normally translate as “gospel” -- literally, “the gospelizer” [ὁ εὐαγγελιζόμενος].

What is the gospel?

It is seen in the last phrase of verse 9. It is seen in the One of whom it can be said, “*Here is your God!*”

Notice the description of the coming Lord.

- He will come with might
- He will come to rule
- He will come with His reward

The mention of His reward being with Him has New Testament echos. We read these same words in John’s Revelation of Jesus.

“Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Revelation 22:12-13).

Lest we have any doubt as to the identity of the One of whom John speaks, he goes on to identify Him in verse 16.

“I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.” (Revelation 22:12-16).

The picture here is of the Lord coming as the judge of the land. He comes to reward the faithful and to punish the unfaithful. But that is not all. There is also comfort here. The comfort is in seeing that the judge is also a shepherd.

*Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs,
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes. (Isaiah 40:11).*

This is a picture of tenderness. It is the picture of a shepherd. The shepherd is known by his love and concern for the sheep.

- He gathers the lambs in His arm
- He carries them in His bosom
- He leads the nursing mothers.

5. WE CAN TAKE COMFORT IN REALIZING THE LORD'S WISDOM AND POWER.

12 *Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand,
And marked off the heavens by the span,
And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,
And weighed the mountains in a balance,
And the hills in a pair of scales?*

13 *Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD,
Or as His counselor has informed Him?*

14 *With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding?
And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him
knowledge,
And informed Him of the way of understanding?*

15 *Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
And are regarded as a speck of dust
on the scales;
Behold, He lifts up the islands like
fine dust.*

16 *Even Lebanon is not enough to burn,
Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering.*

17 *All the nations are as nothing before Him,
They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless.
(Isaiah 40:12-17).*

The reference to "islands" in verse 15 can refer to any land with a coast. It points to all of the lands to the west of Israel.

Whereas verse 11 showed us God's heart of love and that He WANTS to save His people, these verses show us God's mind and strength and that He is SMART enough and STRONG enough to save.

You go down to the ocean and you look at its expanse and you realize that the Lord knows its span and its measure. Then you look at the heavens and see the innumerable galaxies and nebulars and realize that they are not innumerable to the Lord.

There seems no end to learning new things from our perspective, yet God has

never had to learn a new thought. There is nothing that we can teach Him, for He knows all things.

We read in our newspapers of the movements of nations and armies and they are insignificant when compared to the power of God.

- A drop in a bucket
- A speck of dust

When we realize that this is the God of our salvation, then there comes a great comfort. There is nothing that He has not foreseen. There is no one who is able to take us out of His hand.

THE POWER OF GOD AND THE FUTILITY OF IDOLATRY

18 *To whom then will you liken God?
 Or what likeness will you compare with Him?*
19 *As for the idol, a craftsman casts it,
 A goldsmith plates it with gold,
 And a silversmith fashions chains of silver.*
20 *He who is too impoverished for such an offering
 Selects a tree that does not rot;
 He seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman
 To prepare an idol that will not totter. (Isaiah 40:18-20).*

The rest of this chapter forms something of a parallelism. It is emphasized by the use of two repeated refrains.

<i>To whom then will you liken God? (40:18).</i>	<i>Do you not know? Have you not heard? (40:21).</i>
<i>"To whom then will you liken Me That I should be his equal?" says the Holy One (40:25).</i>	<i>Do you not know? Have you not heard? (40:28).</i>

The greatness of God's wisdom and power is now contrasted with the foolishness of idolatry. A man goes to make an idol. Perhaps he covers it with gold or silver. Or maybe he cannot afford such valuables and so he takes a piece of wood to carve it into an idol.

Foolishness! For one thing that you cannot do is to make an image that would be a true representation of God.

We live in a visual generation. It is the generation that has grown up on movies and television and is used to seeing. Indeed, we have a saying that says, "Seeing is believing."

But God is un-seeable. He is the invisible God. And the Scriptures prohibit us from even trying to make an image of the invisible God. Why? Because any image that we tried to make of Him would be an inaccurate representation and would make Him appear smaller than He really is.

The story is told of Pablo Picasso being hired by a husband to paint a portrait of his wife. When the portrait was done, the husband looked at it and proclaimed what most of us would have proclaimed, "It doesn't look anything like her!" Picasso asked, "What does she look like?" To which her husband pulled out a small wallet-sized photo and showed it to him. Picasso is reputed to have looked at the small photo and quipped, "Small, isn't she?"

The point is that even a photo is not exactly like the person in the picture. It is two dimensional. It isn't life-sized. It doesn't capture the personality of the subject. How much more does any attempt fail to capture the essence of the Almighty.

THE POWER OF GOD IN CONTRAST WITH NATIONAL RULERS

21 *Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been declared to you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?*

22 *It is He who sits above the vault of the earth,
And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain
And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.*

23 *He it is who reduces rulers to nothing,
Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless.*

24 *Scarcely have they been planted,
Scarcely have they been sown,
Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth,
But He merely blows on them, and they wither,
And the storm carries them away like stubble. (Isaiah 40:21-24).*

We look at the newscasts and we see an ongoing image of military power. Missles moving and tanks trucking and bombers bombing. The nations are in an uproar.

And then we look at God. There is no comparison. It is like comparing the strength of a

mighty man to an insect. Meaningless.
They move their armies across the earth -- He sits above the vault of the earth.
They rumble -- He reduces them to nothing.
He blows -- they wither.

THE INFINITE CHARACTER OF GOD

25 *“To whom then will you liken Me
That I should be his equal?” says the Holy One.*
26 *Lift up your eyes on high
And see who has created these stars,
The One who leads forth their host by number,
He calls them all by name;
Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power
Not one of them is missing.*
27 *Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God”?* (Isaiah 40:25-27).

Once again, the Lord asks the question.
It is the same question that was asked in verse 18.
But this time there is a difference.
In verse 18 we saw Isaiah asking the question: *To whom then will you liken God?*
Now God Himself asks the question: *To whom then will you liken Me?*

Take a look through the Hubble Telescope.
Look at the galaxies.
Endless.
He calls them by name.
He hasn't misplaced any.
He knows each and every one of them.

And if He knows each of them, then He also knows each of you.
He sees when no one else sees.
He sees the secret things.
Thoughts.
Intents of the heart.

Such a concept of God could drive us to terror.
But instead, it draws us in comfort.
Why?
What makes the difference?

His mercy and His lovingkindness to those who trust in Him.
This is seen in the last several verses of this chapter.

28 *Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth
Does not become weary or tired.
His understanding is inscrutable.*
29 *He gives strength to the weary,
And to him who lacks might He increases power.*
30 *Though youths grow weary and tired,
And vigorous young men stumble badly,*
31 *Yet those who wait for the LORD
Will gain new strength;
They will mount up with wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary. (Isaiah 40:28-31).*

What does it mean to “wait for the Lord”?

I think that I will scream the next time I hear some well-meaning but uneducated preacher say that this means to wait on God as a servant waits upon tables. It isn't so.

This term means exactly what it says.

We are to come to the Lord and wait for Him.

This is the language of faith.

It is the language of trust and reliance.

God says, “You trust in Me and I will lift you up.”

Isn't this really what Jesus told Martha? Martha was running around serving Him, and the result was that she got tired out. While Mary, was sitting at His feet. One was trying to serve in her own strength; the other had learned the lesson of waiting for the Lord.