

Comfort, Comfort My People

Isaiah 40:1-8

The announcement of the gospel brings sure and everlasting comfort. Isaiah proclaimed it seven centuries before Christ came and the call continues two millennia after His incarnation.

Summary of the Text

As exile to Babylon looms on the horizon, Isaiah announces comfort, comfort from God to His people (v. 1). Speak “to the heart” of Jerusalem and proclaim her warfare has finished, her iniquity is forgiven, that God has “doubled over” for her sins, meaning He has more than dealt with Israel’s sins and not that He has doubly repaid her (v. 2; cf. Job 11:6). A voice comes calling from the wilderness to prepare the way of Yahweh, a straight highway in the desert for God (v. 3). All valleys will be lifted up and each mountain and hill brought low; crooked places will be straightened and rough places made smooth (v. 4). All flesh together will see the glory of the Lord revealed because He has spoken it (v. 5). The voice speaks again saying all flesh is grass and our beauty fades like a flower in the field (v. 6). Though the grass withers and flower fades under the gust of the Lord’s wind, His word stands forever (vv. 7-8). Zion brings good news and will go to the high mountain, and Jerusalem will do the same and lift up her voice in strength without fear, telling the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” (v. 9). Behold, the Lord God will come with a strong hand, a ruling arm, His reward with Him and His work before Him (v. 10). He will feed His flock like a shepherd, gather the wandering lambs with His arm, carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young (v. 11).

Comfort From Unlikely Places

Hezekiah experienced great deliverance from King Sennacherib of Assyria when he spread his threatening letter before God and prayed (Is. 37:14-20). The angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers and Sennacherib’s sons took him out, ending the threat (Is. 37:36-38). When another threat arose from the Babylonians, Hezekiah kowtowed to them and so Isaiah prophesied the days are coming when everything his fathers built will be carried away to Babylon including his own sons (Is. 39:1-7). He responds in one of the most selfish and short-sighted ways in Scripture: “So Hezekiah said to Isaiah, ‘The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good!’ For he said, ‘At least there will be peace and truth in my days’” (Is. 39:8). Yes, at least there’s *that*, you faithless king. It’s this kind of cowardice and selfishness that leads to exile. Shocking and abrupt, but the prophet follows this with the wonderful announcement: “Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Isaiah doesn’t minimize the problem of exile, but he speaks to the reason for it, the nation’s iniquity and sins (v. 2). One is coming from the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord and clear a highway so He will be seen in glory by everyone (vv. 3-5). A Babylonian hymn says, “Make [Nabu’s] way good, renew his road. Make straight his path.” They would parade idols down the road in celebration. Isaiah’s message is that the true God will come to Israel in exile, exalt the lowly, humble the proud, reveal His glory and cry out to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” The “voice of one crying in the wilderness” prophesied of John the Baptizer: “Then [the priests and Levites from Jerusalem] said to him, ‘Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?’ He said: ‘I am ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the Lord,”’ as the prophet Isaiah said” (Jn. 1:22-23). John came out of the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance, and the scholars and authorities had no idea where he got the right to do so. Though his father Zechariah served at the temple, John lived in the wilderness until the word of the Lord came to him (Lk. 3:2). He had papers or prestige; you had to hear his message. We like to plan where hope and change will come from, but God’s ways are not our ways. His ways are higher, better, and totally unpredictable.

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Sorrow & Comfort

John made a way for God to come with His everlasting comfort in the forgiveness of sins. He had to clear and make the road with heavy equipment:

*Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."
-Luke 2:7-9*

The crowd wants to know what exactly they must do, and the Baptizer gets very specific: if you have two coats, give to the person with one; if you have excess food, do the same; if you're a tax collector, take no more than is appointed; if you're a soldier, do not intimidate or falsely accuse, and don't complain about your wages (vv. 10-14). Each of us has particular sins to confess and repent of, and the good news is that Christ has come and died for them all. We atone for nothing by confession, but if we have received His grace we must bear the fruits of repentance. Hezekiah lacked godly sorrow. Judas lacked godly sorrow. Herod the Tetrarch who imprisoned John after he told him it's not lawful to have your brother's wife lacked godly sorrow—he felt bad but had him executed anyway. John wore animals skins, ate locusts and honey, and came out of the wilderness in a ministry like Elijah's, "And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse" (Mal. 4:6). There's no way to hear him and not be made sorrowful. You either hear the convicting word, regret your sin, and turn to the Lord, or you regret having heard it and resent the one who said it. After all, you never asked weird, hairy John to say it in the first place. Christmas and the holidays bring to mind the blessings of the past year and give us to reflect and give thanks for all of God's goodness and kindness. This time also highlights pain, sorrow, loss, hard circumstances, strained and utterly broken relationships, and more. There is a sorrow that leads to death and a sorrow that leads to the everlasting comfort of life Himself (cf. 2 Cor. 7:10). One sorrow leads to more sorrow, but the other leads to comfort with zero regrets. John calls us to the latter, to receive the who came on the road he prepared.

After Exile

Isaiah's prophecy confirms that exile is not the last chapter for God's people. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of God stands forever (v. 8). The apostle Peter quotes this and says we have received the unfading word and by it been born again (1 Pet. 1:23-25). Jesus came with a strong hand (Is. 40:10). His work was cut out for Him and He finished all the Father gave Him to do. He saw the multitudes of Israel like sheep without a shepherd, and He gathered them to Himself and fed them, teaching His disciples to do the same and carry on the work after He died and rose. He sends out messengers to call the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the prodigal sons and daughters, and those who never called on God their Father to behold Him in glory in the incarnation of His Son, full of grace and truth. Exile is never the final chapter for those who look to Christ, and it's not the final chapter for this world. Christ has come to save this world and calls out, "Comfort, comfort My people!"