

# Isaiah 40

**Comfort, Comfort My People**

**June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**Isaiah 40:1-11**

**Rev. Levi denBok**

## **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Isaiah 40.

Redeemer City Church! It is so good to be with you this morning! We had initially planned to begin our new series today but, in light of this reopening and in light of all that has happened as of late, this seemed like an appropriate time to pause.

Truth be told, I had a plan for this morning's sermon – two plans, actually – and they were both upended as I did my morning devotions on Tuesday. As I read Isaiah 40, I felt a strong stirring in my spirit that this was the text that we should consider for Sunday. I'm so glad that God thwarted my plans! I have been so blessed as I sat in this text all week.

Now, since we are jumping right into the centre of a new book, I want to spend a moment helping you to understand where this text fits. Isaiah 40 is a HUGELY significant chapter. In chapters 1-39, God sends his prophet to decree judgement against His sinful people. That judgement came in two waves.

First, God used the Assyrian army to call His church to repentance. Do you remember that story? It's actually one of my favourite stories in all of the Bible! Jerusalem had been surrounded by the army of Assyria – the most powerful army on the planet at the time. The Assyrians had destroyed the northern tribes of Israel already and by all human accounts Jerusalem did not stand a chance. The situation looked bleak.

But, with the certainty of destruction standing upon their doorstep, the Israelites repented of their sin, and they called upon the name of the Lord.

Trials tend to do that, don't they? They wake us up to what ultimately matters, and they expose the futility of our idols. That happened here. The Israelites woke up, and they cried out for mercy!

And God heard their cry! He accepted their repentance and He delivered them from their affliction. Over the course of one night, an angel went forth into the camp of the Assyrians and struck down the most powerful army in the world! What a tremendous story of repentance and deliverance! An experience like that is probably enough to straighten a people out for good, right?

Well, unfortunately, the story didn't end there. In fact, one generation later, the children who celebrated this deliverance wound up returning to the same sin that their parents had succumbed to. Like a dog returns to its vomit, so God's people returned to their idols and their apathy once again. Thus, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to declare another judgement. God announced a second wave of discipline – this time in the form of the Babylonians.

This wave of judgement was far more severe than the first. Babylon would succeed where the Assyrians failed. They would overcome the Israelites and overthrow Jerusalem, and they would tear the temple down to the ground. The Israelite grandchildren who had heard stories of the miraculous deliverance from the mighty army of Assyria would be bound up in chains and led away to a foreign land.

That, in a nutshell is the message of Isaiah 1-39. It is a message of judgement and discipline – darkness and despair.

And that brings us to Isaiah 40. Isaiah 40 is the HINGE of the entire book where Isaiah turns from God's promise of judgement to God's promise of mercy. It is the sun breaking through after a long, dark night. It is God's word of hope to a people who were going to be sitting in the darkness of exile in Babylon for an extended timeout. So, what did those exiles need to hear?

Look with me to Isaiah 40. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> A voice cries:  
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;  
    make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
    and all flesh shall see it together,  
    for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

<sup>6</sup> A 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.

<sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades  
    when the breath of the Lord blows on it;  
    surely the people are grass.

<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,  
    but the word of our God will stand forever.

<sup>9</sup> Go on 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!”

<sup>10</sup> Behold, the Lord God comes with might,  
    and his arm rules for him;  
behold, his reward is with him,  
    and his recompense before him.

<sup>11</sup> 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 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Isn't this a glorious passage?

Remember, this comes directly after a 39-chapter-long declaration of judgement. God has promised that He is going to send His people into captivity in Babylon for a long and PAINFUL timeout! And rightfully so. They have sinned. They have become complacent. They have taken for granted the generosity and the mercy of God. So, there will be discipline.

And yet.

Discipline won't be the final word. Like a good father, God picks the Israelites up, puts them on His knee, and speaks to them these words of comfort. Matthew Henry says here:

Before God sent his people into captivity he furnished them with precious promises for their support and comfort in their trouble; and we may well imagine of what great use to them the glorious, gracious, light of this prophecy was, in that cloudy and dark day, and how much it helped to dry up their tears by the rivers of Babylon.<sup>1</sup>

In the cloudy dark days – when they wept by the rivers of Babylon – when all seemed lost – THESE words of comfort preserved them through the night. In this text we learn what you need to know when you're sitting in the dark.

### What You Need To Know When You're Sitting In The Dark

If and when you find yourself in such a place, you need to know that:

#### 1. God punishes, but He does not abandon

Yes, the Israelites had sinned and, yes, they were going to experience a painful exile in Babylon. Yes. They would be punished – but they would not be abandoned! The timeout would not last forever. J. Alex Motyer writes:

Like tiny children they have stumbled in the uncertain paths of the world and will be bruised by their fall, but they have a God rushing to pick them up in his arms.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 21907.

<sup>2</sup> J. Alex Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 274.

They have a God RUSHING BACK TO PICK THEM UP IN HIS ARMS! We see that in verse 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 young. (Isaiah 40:11 ESV)

Do you believe that? Because if you do, it changes the way that you view your adversities. And, more importantly, it changes the way that you see your God.

Punishment is not a sign of abandonment. On the contrary, discipline is a sign of CARE and CONCERN. The Bible says that. In Hebrews 12:6, we read:

For the Lord **disciplines the one he loves**,  
and chastises every son whom he receives. (Hebrews 12:6 ESV)

So, God says to His people, “You’re heading into a season of adversity, and this timeout is going to last a while. You have some habits that need to be broken and you’ve done some things that need to be dealt with, but while you sit there in the discipline you need to remember that I’m not done with you! If I were done with you, I wouldn’t bother with this, but I AM bothering with this because I LOVE YOU!” As the Psalmist declared:

For his anger is but for a moment,  
    and his favor is for a lifetime.  
Weeping may tarry for the night,  
    but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5 ESV)

Matthew Henry notes:

Words of conviction, such as we had in the former part of this book, must be followed with words of comfort, such as we have here; for he that has torn will heal us.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 21914.

He will. He will put us back together, and we will be better for it. Discipline is not abandonment. It is the OPPOSITE of abandonment. Discipline is a sure sign that God cares.

Next, when you find yourself sitting in the dark, you need to remember that:

## **2. God knows which hurts matter the most**

From the outside looking in, it would have seemed like Assyria and Babylon were the greatest threats to the nation of Israel. If you were an Israelite in Isaiah's day, then you would have been crying out to God for deliverance from those enemies and those circumstances.

But God knew that neither Assyria nor Babylon were the greatest danger to His people. In fact, God is the One who SENT Assyria and Babylon against His people! Did you know that?

Earlier in Isaiah, when Assyria had surrounded the city, the Assyrian King, Sennacherib, began to boast. He taunted the Israelites for trusting in their God. "Did any of the gods of the other nations deliver them out of my hand? Why, then, do you think that *your* God will fair any better?" As you can imagine, God was not particularly pleased with that arrogance. God replied:

Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it,  
or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it?  
As if a rod should wield him who lifts it,  
or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood! (Isaiah 10:15 ESV)

Do you hear what He's saying? That is a profound verse! God said to Assyria, "Who do you think you are? You're the axe that I used to cut some things down. You're a tool, and I can cast you aside at any moment." But that begs the question: What was this tool for? What was God working on that required such extreme measures? Look again at verses 1-2:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.  
<sup>2</sup> 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 ESV)

Commentator Herbert M. Wolf notes here:

He depicted sin, *not* the Exile, as Israel's major problem.<sup>4</sup>

Assyria wasn't the ultimate cause of Israel's unpleasant circumstances, and neither was Babylon. It was God's doing! God was the One who had put them into that exile. And it wasn't meaningless! He was revealing sin and He was rooting it out because He is more concerned with the eternal joy of His people than He is with their present happiness!

Hear that this morning. Our God is the God who was willing to send His people into captivity in a foreign land for 70 YEARS JUST TO MAKE THEM HOLY. He does that kind of thing. We don't care about our holiness as much as we should, but God loves us and knows what's best for us, so He will put to use whatever tool He sees fit to position and prepare us for the life everlasting. That's the consistent message of the Bible – Old Testament and New. In Romans 8 we read:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

ALL THINGS!

Babylon things.

Covid things.

Lockdown things.

Cancer things.

---

<sup>4</sup> Herbert M. Wolf, *Interpreting Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 183.

Nothing is wasted. Nothing is chance. Nothing is outside of His perfect loving control. All of it is working towards the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. From God's hand and for your good.

The Israelites thought that they had a Babylon problem, but their problem ran deeper than that. Israel had a deep SIN problem. And, in fact, Babylon was actually the PRESCRIPTION for their healing!

Sometimes God writes us a prescription that we never would have written for ourselves. But here's the good news: When your heavenly Father is holding the prescription pad, He only, ever and ALWAYS gives you EXACTLY THE RIGHT TREATMENT.

We have been prescribed some interesting medicine this year, haven't we? It was a hard pill to swallow. It seems to me that our most urgent task in the days ahead is to discern what God was teaching us in this season and to make sure that we learned our lesson! Amen? He has revealed specific sin in each and every one of us. He has exposed our idols and toppled them down. He has demonstrated how desperately we need to gather while simultaneously stripping away all of the bells and whistles that we thought we couldn't live without. He did things in us and taught things to us this past year that we couldn't have learned any other way. Book a retreat with your wife. Write all of the lessons down. Pray together and resolve to walk in obedience in the days to come. I can tell you that we as a board of elders team will be doing just that.

God knows the medicine we need. And He loves us enough to give it to us. Even when we kick and scream through the whole process. That's a great comfort. There's no one else I would entrust with that prescription pad. Because, the next thing we need to remember when we're sitting in the dark is that:

### **3. God is strong to save**

Look again at verses 9-10:

<sup>9</sup> Go on 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!”**  
<sup>10</sup>Behold, the Lord God comes with might,  
    and his arm rules for him;  
behold, his reward is with him,  
    and his recompense before him. (Isaiah 40:9-10 ESV)

Behold your God!!

He is infinitely more powerful than any enemy or circumstance that you will ever face! The people who this prophecy was initially for would be hearing this from within the walls of Babylon. They would have witnessed the destruction of Solomon's temple. They would have watched as the Babylonians carried off their best and brightest young men. They would have perhaps been a part of the failed attempt to resist their assailants and they would have experienced the humility of being absolutely powerless before their captors.

Sometimes, our circumstances are so bleak, and our souls are so downcast, and the world feels so dark that we begin to question the power of God. Have you been there?

The exiles in Babylon were tempted to despair. But God reminded them that, even in Babylon, they had all of the evidence that they needed of His unparalleled power. All that they needed to do was to look up. If you flip ahead to verse 26 you can see that:

<sup>26</sup>**Lift up your eyes on high and see:**  
    who created these?  
He who brings out their host by number,  
    calling them all by name;  
by the greatness of his might  
    and because he is strong in power,  
not one is missing. (Isaiah 40:26 ESV)

It's as if Isaiah is saying, “Do you think Babylon is impressive? LOOK UP! Nebuchadnezzar built a city but YOUR GOD HUNG THE STARS!”

Your God stretched out the heavens like a tent for you to live in. He set the sun and the moon and the stars in their perfect positions. If He put the moon any closer the tide would flood the earth. If he put the sun any closer, we would burn up like marshmallows on a campfire. But He designed it with perfect precision. Look at this world! God's power is on full display every time that sun rises in the East and sets in the West. Do you think Nebuchadnezzar is impressive? Do you think that he can stand in the way of God's plan of deliverance for you?

**All flesh is grass,**

and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

<sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades

when the breath of the Lord blows on it;

surely the people are grass.

<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,

**but the word of our God will stand forever.** (Isaiah 40:6b-8 ESV)

Leaders will rise and fall. The strength of our own bodies will decline. All of the things that we place our trust in in this world will be blown away with the slightest breath of the Lord. But the word of our God will stand FOREVER! Amen?

We've experienced that this year, haven't we? Everything was shut down. Everything that we placed our trust in proved to be powerless and temporary. And yet, the Word of God went forward. It was proclaimed and received! God's Word spoke clearly and powerfully to our everchanging circumstances.

The world was shaking, but His word was our stability.

The world was uncertain, but His promises remained "yes" and "amen."

The same God who hung each and every star in just the right place has promised that He will deliver His people! And His word never fails! Behold your God! He is strong to save, and that is exactly what He will do because, finally:

#### **4. God knows the way home**

What a comfort that was for the exiles in Babylon longing for home. From within those walls, surrounded by foreign languages and strange customs, home must have felt like an impossibility. But, God promised that a voice would cry out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
<sup>4</sup> 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. (Isaiah 40:3b-4 ESV)

Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised His people that a day was coming when they would be returned from exile. And of course, he miraculously kept that promise! The Babylonians were overthrown by the Medo-Persians and eventually God positioned the Persian King Cyrus in a position of authority over the Israelites. Not only did Cyrus send the Israelites home, but he sent them with money and supplies for a rebuilding project and an armed guard to keep them safe!

But that wasn't all. God's plan of redemption was so much greater than the Israelites understood. They thought that God was going to pave a way home for them to return from exile – which He did – but they didn't realize that God was working an even GREATER plan to bring them all the way home to the GARDEN. God had a plan to bring them back into His presence forever.

We know that God's promise to make a straight path in the wilderness stretched beyond the days of the Babylonian exile because 600 years later, John the Baptist proclaimed:

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ **as the prophet Isaiah said.**” (John 1:23 ESV)

We so often fly by that in our Bible reading, but just think about how that must have caught everyone off guard! They must have been thinking: “That promise was for the exiles! And it was fulfilled! They already came home! That's why we're here today, John! Surely you know this.”

But just because Israel returned from exile didn't mean they had returned home. The way home had not yet been revealed. But we see the way home now, don't we? Jesus said:

**I am the way**, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.  
(John 14:6 ESV)

There is a way home. And His name is Jesus.

God's plan was about far more than delivering the Israelites from Babylon. His plan was to bring them ALL THE WAY HOME! And, in fact, in order to get home, they NEEDED that exile in Babylon. The road that leads home is marked with many dangers, toils and snares. But when we have learned our lesson in the adversity – when we have walked through the valley of the shadow of death – our Shepherd will lead us out. That's what Isaiah says in verse 11:

<sup>11</sup> 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 40:11 ESV)

Church, by all accounts, it appears that we are coming to the end of our temporary “exile.” We’ve been sitting in the dark on a timeout for a long time, and it looks like God is bringing us back out into the light. But we need to understand that deliverance from Covid is not God’s end game for us just like deliverance from Babylon wasn’t God’s end game for the Israelites. Covid – like Babylon – was one more tool that God saw fit to use to refine His people and to cause them to depend on Christ. Charles Spurgeon wisely said:

I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages.<sup>5</sup>

We are through this difficult stretch, but inevitably another wave will come. Another enemy will surround the walls. The road home will pass through the valley of the shadow of death once more. But WE WILL NOT BE SHAKEN! Because we have learned to kiss the wave that throws us against the rock of ages! Anything that causes us to lean more upon Christ – to trust less in ourselves, and in our government, and in our resources – is GOOD! Anything that reminds us that this world is not our forever home is good! Anything that reminds us that God is large and in charge – able to shut down the entire world if He so pleases – is GOOD! Because as PAINFUL as

---

<sup>5</sup> You can read the quote and find a fuller explanation here: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/kissing-the-wave>

those lessons might be, they PAIL in comparison to the joy that they are preparing us to enjoy. We can declare with the Apostle Paul:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18 ESV)

If the Lord sees fit to send another wave – if He casts us against the Rock of Ages once more – let us resolve to KISS THE WAVE! Because the wave presses us deeper into Christ. It causes us to press up closer to the good shepherd.

<sup>11</sup> He will tend his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms; (Isaiah 40:11a ESV)

Behold your God. His anger is but for a moment, and His favour is for a LIFETIME. He is perfect in all of His ways. He is strong to save. And He will lead you safely home. Let's pray together.