

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NKJV)

1 "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" Says your God.

2 "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins."

3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth;

5 The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see *it* together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

6 The voice said, "Cry out!" And he said, "What shall I cry?" "All flesh *is* grass, And all its loveliness *is* like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades, Because 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."

9 O Zion, You who bring good tidings, Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, Lift *it* up, be not afraid; Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

10 Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong *hand*, And His arm shall rule for Him; Behold, His reward *is* with Him, And His work before Him.

11 He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry *them* in His bosom, *And* gently lead those who are with young.

Pretty much everyone who studies the book of Isaiah breaks the book in two at chapter 40. Why? Because the prophet is no longer talking about the Judeans in his time period. He now begins to prophesy to them about their future.

Now, what would you guess the liberal scholars might begin saying when Isaiah starts talking factually **in 800 BC** about events that will happen **in 600 BC**? Their assumptions begin to peak through. **This couldn't happen.** Their mindset says that everything that happens must be able to be explained in such a way that God need not exist. In fact, the assumption seems to be that God **must** not exist. So they begin coming up with theories. They think that

there are multiple authors to the book of Isaiah. Why? There must be. After all, no person can know the future.

What we see in Isaiah is that Chapters 1-39 address the people who were Isaiah's contemporaries. The message is mostly one of confrontation.

Then Chapters 40-55 speak to the Jews during the period of the Babylonian exile. And chapters 56-66 seem to lose sight of time and apply everything in the book of Isaiah to anyone who happens to read the book.

Now, what makes us think that the book only has one author? Well, the heading that the book itself contains says **The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amoz**. Then **when** the New Testament quotes the book it always refers to the **person of Isaiah** the prophet. So if we are to believe Jesus, we have no reason to doubt that Isaiah was the author.

Does that require us to leave the natural world of cause and effect. Well, yeah, I guess it does. But what law of cause and effect will result in one man, the man Christ Jesus, being the mediator between God and man? What law of cause and effect comes up with one man paying for the sins of all humans who are ever to be saved? If we can only believe what can be explained by natural forces, **there would be no way for us to be saved**. At some point we must believe that God is God and sees the future as the past and has always chosen to communicate with human beings when He feels good and ready to do so. There is no reason not to believe that the prophet Isaiah wrote the book of Isaiah as he was led by the Spirit to do so.

I like how Mr. Ortland describes this. He says **Isaiah was, above all, a herald of good news for bad people from a surprising God**.

Now let's look at Chapter 40.

We are breaking ranks with dealing with Isaiah's contemporaries. We can break this chapter into three sections.

Vs 1-11

God comforts with the news of a worldwide salvation

Vs 12-26

God shows that He is able to do what He says He will do

Vs 27-31

God shows how we can live a life now in hope of what He will eventually do.

We will start with the first 11 verses this morning.

I will borrow more from Mr. Ortland.

1. The occasion of his comforting promise ([40:1, 2](#))

2. The content of his comforting promise ([40:3-5](#))

3. The certainty of his comforting promise ([40:6-8](#))

4. The spreading of his comforting promise ([40:9-11](#))

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We need to realize at this point that Isaiah is seeing 100 to 200 years into the future. Babylon will grow into a mighty power and sweep the region much as Assyria had. But Jerusalem was in such a state of moral decay that God had lifted His protecting hand. Jerusalem no longer trusted their God, so their God delivered them into the bondage of their enemies until they would return to their God.

We need to put ourselves into the life positions of these people. They used to be special. They used to have their unique identity, their unique culture, their unique religion. But now they have been swallowed up in a godless world. They are no longer waking up to see the temple where they believed their God lived. They are no longer seeing the animals sacrificed for their sins. Their God was now distant, at least that would have been how it appeared. They may have felt abandoned.

Maybe you watch the news. Maybe you watch the world's entertainment. Maybe you listen to the conversations around you. I sometimes get angry about how little what God says matters in our world. No one, not even professing Christians, seems to care what God has so clearly spoken. It is like we are surrounded by zombies who simply cannot think about what choices they are making. They might claim to **not know** what is right and wrong, but in most cases it is more that **they don't care what is right and wrong**. What they care about is worshipping their idols. They want that thing that they feel they cannot live without. They want that thing their heart leads them to. And they will pay any price to purchase it, even the lives of their children. Truly nothing changes.

I have one more quote from Mr Ortland.

When we see how far we have fallen and how broken the world is, it explains something. It explains why disappointment pervades our experience. As we see more and more of life, we are confronted with disappointment so persistently and so convincingly, hope starts to look just plain stupid. We become disappointed in our ideals, disappointed in romance, disappointed in our careers, disappointed in the people we

trust, disappointed in ourselves. When all human hopes have let us down, we might be ready for the only real salvation that exists.

And that is precisely where we drop into our text. Oh the wonder of comfort in a world like ours. Oh the beauty of God's intervention in a world like ours. God truly is so good.

¹ **"Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" Says your God.**

² **"Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins."**

Have you ever considered that if God's deepest desire was to punish sin, all hope would be lost. We could give up immediately and rightly so. If that is what God wanted, there would be no one who would escape his completely justified eternal wrath.

But that is not God's primary focus. Oh, we can't be mistaken about this. Sin **will** be punished. **It must be.** But that is not God's **primary** focus. His primary focus is rescuing **His** people so they can worship Him forever without competition.

So what message does God hold out to these people who have abandoned Him and are now paying a harsh consequence for their rebellion? Wrath? No. Comfort.

What God desires is for mankind's salvation. There is one sense that God wills for all humans to be saved. He takes no satisfaction in a person dying in their rebellion. It would require a different study to investigate the uses of the word "will" in scripture regarding to God. But God gets no kick out of destroying people. He will do it. And His justice requires it. But what God seems to get a kick out of is saving people.

So here are all these people who are tasting the consequences of abandoning their God. And the God who they have abandoned reaches out to them with a word of comfort. A message bringing some relief to their pain.

There is something we must all understand here. No person will ever respond to God if they do not feel that **God is offering them a chance to get right with Him.** No person will respond to a God that is all anger and no forgiveness. No person will come to God in the face of God's resistance. What we must believe, what it is impossible to not have when we come to God is to believe what Hebrews 11:6 says. (And I prepared this before Church Camp.)

Hebrews 11:6 (NKJV)

⁶ But without faith *it is impossible to please Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*

We must believe that God wants relationship. God wants to restore relationship. God is all about showing off His grace to have a people who will truly enjoy His company forever in the proper perspective that His Holiness demands.

God does not discipline believers for sin because he just loves spanking his children. We aren't good people. But **even we** don't do that. We only spank our children because they need it. It is not our primary purpose. It is a means to an end. When we think they have gotten the point, we are glad to stop and to restore fellowship. That is what we are doing it for. Do we really think that we are better than God? Of course not.

God wants to grant us comfort. God wants to grant us a chance to start again. Are not our lives a clear example of this. What did **we deserve** by the sins we committed in our pasts? We know clearly what that is. But what did God **grant us**? He granted us a chance to start over, to start afresh. Oh there are consequences to our sin, but it is amazing how many of **even those** He has not demanded from us.

And look how God refers to the people He is addressing. **"My people"** is what He calls them. How wonderful is that? These people that have messed up so badly the He had to send them into exile. These people who still really weren't what they should be. Yet He says "My people". Oh how fortunate we are to have a God like this.

That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins."

Is this not the salvation message? The word for warfare could also mean hard service. This is probably talking about the end of the Babylonian exile and the return to Jerusalem.

We need to think about this a little bit. What happens when we come to Christ? Our heavy load is lifted. Christ's burden is light. The warfare or heavy service is over. Our iniquity is paid for by Christ. And we have received all the penalty we are going to get.

These Judeans had committed sins enough to be kicked out of Jerusalem. They had inspired God's anger. God had much better in mind for them but

they chose to rebel. They completely deserved to be destroyed. But God did not. His intention was salvation. And He did everything that it took to bring the people around. Certainly these are not the same human beings who went into exile. But in our case, often it is. We are the same people who have deserved God's penalty but we receive His gracious salvation.

³ The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth;

We begin to be told about the salvation that will be provided. Here is the comfort that is being announced by the prophets.

Let's look at this. The voice cries out in the wilderness. The wilderness is where we live. We live in the barren spirituality of our souls. We live in a land that has little of God's richness in it. Our lives, apart from God, are nothing if not barren. We need someone to cry out to our emptiness. We need someone to announce to us something better than what we can see and touch and feel. We need a voice that comes from somewhere else.

We know that this prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist telling people about the coming of Christ. But it speaks a message about God's call to any of His children. We are all in the same boat. We need a voice from outside ourselves announcing something of God to us.

And what does the voice say?

I have always thought of this as a highway **for people to reach God**. But that is not what it says. It is a highway **for God to reach us**. It is the way of the Lord. It is a highway for our God. Do you know what this means? The King is on His way. The King is coming to us where we live. He is coming to us as we are. And He is not going to allow any human obstacle stand in His way of getting to all of His people.

Look at the imagery here. Here are a people living in a wasteland. They have little to offer. They are not people of status or wealth. They are, for the most part, outcasts. Yet what does God do. He gives us the imagery of massive road building. Years ago it cost the government a million dollars a mile to build an expressway. I am sure it now more than that.

When Carla and I travel east on Rt 68 we are always amazed at Sideling Hill. And now that there are no little kids she gets to look at it. The mountain was leveled to some degree for the ease of the travelers. This is the imagery we

are seeing here. God is doing whatever it takes to make His trip to His people unimpeded.

Mr. Ortland presents a very reformed view. He says this.

He is talking about the disruptive advance of salvation. He is saying that lifting and lowering and leveling and smoothing are necessary to the kingdom of Christ. He is talking about depression being relieved, pride being flattened, troubled personalities becoming placid, and difficult people becoming easy to get along with. And he is also implying that if we cling to the status quo and refuse God's upsetting but constructive salvation, we risk having no part with Christ

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God will pull down the proud and lift up the trodden. He will do what it takes in our world and in our lives to provide salvation. His highway to get to us will be effective.

⁵ The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

What is this glory of God? How would we answer that question? How would we describe the Glory of God? What do we really think?

John Piper says this:

In the church, our view of God is so small instead of huge, so marginal instead of crucial, so vague instead of clear, so impotent instead of all determining, and so uninspiring instead of ravishing that the responsibility to live to the glory of God is a thought without content. The words can come out of our mouths, but ask the average Christian to tell what they know about the glory of this God that they are going to live for, and the answer will not be long

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This is a huge thing. This is what the road is built for. We exist for the Glory of God. God saves people, not because He is a begging Savior **so in love** with His creation that he cannot bear their rejection by them. God saves people because He deserves Glory and He is filling people with those who recognize His value. If you don't like a God like that, you are going to have to pick another religion. That is what our God is like. He is glorious. He deserves glory. And He will be glorified by all those He chooses. Salvation is never about **those who are being saved** but about **the one who is saving them** and **the one He is saving them to.**

Now if you are dealing with someone who speaks ill of God. If you are dealing with someone who appears to hate God. If you are dealing with someone who makes fun of even the very idea of a God that the Bible describes, don't get too bent out of shape. Every single one of those people will one day face that very same God. **All flesh shall see it together.** This will be a shared experience of all humanity one day.

6 The voice said, "Cry out!" And he said, "What shall I cry?" "All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades, Because 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."

Now the prophet is to lay out the real contrast. God is to be glorified. That is true. That is wonderful. That is what gives life purpose. But what is the other side of this message?

There is a truth about humans that needs to be understood. This is truth to us this morning.

We human beings are both **naturally idolatrous** and **naturally desiring of worship**. We are idol factories and longing to be the replacements of the idols we produce. You say, that isn't me.

Look at a photograph. What do you look for? You look for you. And how do you determine if it is a good photograph? It makes you look good.

How do you determine if your family get together is a good one? Isn't the first question the question of "How was I treated?" Oh we may give a passing concern about whether Jesus was glorified. But ultimately how we were treated, how we were praised, how our contribution was lifted up is our natural concern.

Our hearts are so very tricky. And they are even trickier when we will not admit the worship desiring tendencies of our own souls. And this isn't **ok** because it is **normal**. It is wicked.

We are grass. We need to understand this. This is the point of the prophet. We are not worthy of worship. If there is anything good about us, guess where it came from? It came from God's work in our lives. If we spend one moment moping for how our contribution has not been praised for all its value, that is a moment wasted. We are a flower that is fading fast. The span is measured in just a few hours. That is the point we are supposed to be

getting. There is nothing in the flower to be praised. It can be enjoyed. But **praise for any beauty in the garden goes to the gardener.**

We can never get the idea that the focus of the human beings around us should be on lofting up **our glory**. As soon as we think such a thing we are sinning. And when we react negatively to the failure of those around us to worship us, we are sinning doubly. We need to call that what it is and we need to tell the truth to those around us when we see this happening. This is Isaiah laying out the words of God.

What lasts forever? What is worth worship? **But the word of our God stands forever."**

We really need to get this. And we need to incorporate it in our daily lives, in our family and church expectations, in our marriages. In everything. We need to tell the truth to each other. Only the word of the Lord stands forever. Only what God has to say is worth orienting to and being concerned about in our social circles. How **our name** is honored is a worthless concern. How **God's word** is honored, now that is something else.

What do we get miffed about? What do we get upset about? What gets us off the tracks? Is it how **God's word** is treated? The word that lasts forever? Or is it how **we** are treated? The ones who fade like the grass? We believers always need to fight this desire we have to be worshipped.

9 O Zion, You who bring good tidings, Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, Lift it up, be not afraid; Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

10 Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong *hand*, And His arm shall rule for Him; Behold, His reward *is* with Him, And His work before Him.

11 He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry *them* in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young.

This was addressed to Zion, but it is equally applicable to us. This is a call to be bold about the goodness of God. Isaiah is saying get conspicuous in your glorying to God. Make it loud. Make it obvious. Make it visible. Make it un-hidable and unignorable. And say it to the people who say they are God's. When is the last time you had a conversation with a non believer more than 10 sentences? When is the last time you had a conversation with a non believer about Jesus? Isaiah is telling us that we do not have time to always worry about being appropriate. (Remember, this was prepared prior to

Church Camp. This is clearly a message the Holy Spirit wants us to hear. I had no idea where Jason was heading in Church Camp.) Jesus is worthy of praise. Will we praise Him. Will we be congruent with what we really think and feel and believe? What are we going to do?

Verses 10 and 11 tell us another reason this is so important. God is the only source of ultimate reward. God is the only way people will last forever in any kind of bliss. God is this kind of God. Why do we hold back? We have the only good news the world will ever hear. We cannot hold back.

But maybe the truth is we really don't believe it.

Is this how you respond to God?

If people watched how you responded to day to day situations in this last month, would the onlookers say this:

"They believed that God would richly reward them when He saw them. They trusted that checkbooks and financial security were not a gauge of their security. They trusted that God would feed His flock like a shepherd so they did not worry about how they would make it. They trusted that their shepherd would carry them when they could not take care of themselves so they did not worry what harm God would allow to intrude into their lives. They trusted that God would only require from them what they could handle, He would gently lead those who are with young, so they refused to be anxious about what bad might befall them in this life."

Is this what we are displaying. Is this the trust in God we are living out. Is this one way in which we are making much of God?

You see, this is real spirituality. Being able to sermonize means nothing.

Getting a multiple choice test correct about the attributes of God means nothing. What matters is **do we believe God? Do we trust God?** Does it make our responses different than the worlds? Does it make our responses different than they were a year ago? Faith acts. Faith trusts. Faith expects good from God. Faith does not fear. We can make whatever excuses we want, but this is the truth. This is the message Isaiah is putting out. He is telling us about the real God. We can take it or leave it. The message itself demands that a believer takes it and lives it.