

“God Comforts His People”

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

It has been rightly explained that all good, biblical theology has two things in common. First, it gives glory to God. Secondly, it gives comfort to people. On the other side of the coin, all false teachings ultimately do the opposite. They rob from God the glory he deserves, or they steal comfort from the souls of people, or what is most likely the case, they do both.

Certain portions of Scripture absolutely shine with the truth that God wishes to offer comfort to people. I quoted a passage earlier from 2 Corinthians. As many times as those verses mention comfort, the verses that follow add to it. But perhaps no verses of Scripture speak as clearly about God's interest in bringing comfort than the words of our sermon text today from Isaiah chapter 40. Every word offers us the assurance that God comforts his people.

The people to whom Isaiah's message was first addressed needed God's comfort. The words of our text are the first words of the second major division of Isaiah's prophecy. The first portion of the book, 39 chapters, record Isaiah's prophecies concerning his contemporaries, the kings who ruled and people who lived while he did. Those chapters of warning conclude with the ominous prediction that the Babylonians would one day defeat and carry away Jerusalem and its people.

The second part of the book of Isaiah, then, looks ahead to that Babylonian captivity and beyond. Because God through his prophet had predicted the captivity, it was as certain as if it had already happened when Isaiah wrote. However, it didn't occur until about a hundred years later. In any case, the change from what came before to the words of our text is abrupt. So much of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah had been spent threatening punishment and reprimanding sin. The almost unthinkable circumstance of God's people being removed from the land of God's promise was a direct result of those people consistently turning their backs on God. Instead of following his decrees and commands, they had chased after false gods and done what their own interests and desires determined.

Anyone who was listening to these prophecies, really paying attention to them, would have needed the comfort of what came next. Those who paid attention would have come to despair of their own works and their own ability to solve the problems they faced. Like those who would be carried away into Babylon, those who listened attentively to the prediction of this exile would have been blown over by the gravity and significance of such a captivity.

But that was not the end of this story. The words of our text introduce 27 chapters primarily of comfort and encouragement. **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”** God had not abandoned his people. They were still his people and he was still their God. **“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.”** The comfort comes from God and his grace. The hard service, the exile of God's people, would end not because they had paid off or done away with their sins, but because of God's mercy. Their time was done because God would send a Savior to take away their sins. All sins would be paid for. Again, since this was God's promise, it was as sure and certain as if it had already been carried out. God's people would receive a double portion of blessing, far more than they in their sinfulness could have ever earned or deserved.

In rich and picturesque poetry, the words of our text picture God coming to the rescue of his people. To prepare for his coming, a royal highway ought to be constructed through the wilderness. Low places should be raised up. High places should be lowered so that his way might be smooth and easy. God would come and God's people would be set free.

Today's Gospel tells us clearly that a major fulfillment of this prophecy was the work of John the Baptist. He was sent by God with words of comfort, announcing to the people that it was time to prepare a royal highway for the Savior. The way that this would be accomplished was through repentance and faith. The heights of human pride would be brought low. The sinful hardness of the human heart would be smoothed out to receive the Savior. God sent comfort to his people through his special messenger, and God himself came to rescue his people.

And God's message of comfort is still vitally important today. Sure, some don't feel that they need comfort. Many in our world today live their lives without concern about their relationship to God or the end of their lives. But God's Word is clear, and all of human experience bears out what it says. All men are like grass. Their glory is as short-lived and fleeting as the flowers of the field. One day they are here; the next they are gone. Those who truly pay attention to what is going on around them are keenly aware that this life will come to an end. It is an uncertain end. We can in only rare cases anticipate with any precision when the end will come, but it will come.

And when our end comes, we will stand before God to answer for all that we have done. The perfect, holy, all-powerful, all-knowing God will judge. Oh, to be sure he has been patient, but this is God who sent his chosen people into exile for their wickedness. This is God who threatens the fires of hell against all who transgress his holiness and perfection. Those who don't realize the need for a message of comfort have deluded themselves. If we don't feel that we need a message of comfort, we are sorely mistaken. If we don't feel that we need a message of comfort, we are lost in our own sinfulness.

But this message of comfort is for us, just as surely as it was for the people of Isaiah's time and for the people of the exile and for the people at the time of John the Baptist and the Savior to whom he pointed, Jesus.

God continues to send messengers with his words of comfort to bring comfort to his people. Just as with the voices we hear in our sermon text today, the messengers themselves are much less important than the message that they proclaim. Sure, we know John the Baptist as the most famous fulfillment of these words from Isaiah, but even he was always so careful to minimize his own importance in order to focus on the message, in order to point people to Jesus. This is as it should be. Christians don't follow messengers because of their personality or their style or even their popularity with others. Christians listen to God's messengers because through them they hear God's message. Christians listen to God's messengers because through them they hear about Jesus.

Jesus is at the center of the message of all of Scripture. He is the center of John's preaching and the center of Isaiah's prophecy. He is the message of comfort on which all of God's people rely. The promises of our text have been fulfilled in him. The Lord has come to save his people. He tends his flock like a shepherd, gently and tenderly. His Word stands forever, the word of forgiveness won on the cross and distributed to us in the means of grace, in the message about Jesus.

As Isaiah prophetically looked ahead to the Babylonian captivity and to the release of the captives, he also looked ahead to the preaching of John the Baptist and to the coming Messiah. But his vision didn't stop there either. He also saw the ultimate and final rescue of God's people. God did come to save his people from the hands of the Babylonians. God did come to carry out his rescue plan for all people trapped in sin. And God will come again to release the captives from this life in a sin-filled world and to ultimately bring us to the eternal, heavenly Promised Land.

Though there are many times that we may be tempted to forget that we need God's comfort, there are other times when that need is all too evident. In times of pain and loss, in times of grief or shame, in times when we feel the burden of our sin, we have God's own word of comfort. Through faith in Jesus, we are God's people. Our sin has been paid for. God will come. To him be all praise and glory.

40 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. ⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

⁹ You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.