

The Beginning of Comfort

Isaiah 40:1-11

To understand the writings of any Old Testament prophet, we need to know a little about where they lived and the time in which they wrote. Palestine lies between Mesopotamia and Egypt, and in Isaiah's day the world's superpowers arose from the great fertile valleys of those two areas. The army of the nation of Assyria rampaged over the Middle East for two hundred years, and were opposed only by the Egyptians. Later on the Babylonians conquered the Assyrians, but they still had to contend with the power of the Egyptians. Meanwhile, little Israel and Judah found themselves caught between the powerful nations from the Mesopotamian and Nile valleys. Unfortunately for Israel and Judah, the political situation brought them almost continual tension and problems. Both Assyria and Babylon demanded their submission and ruthlessly suppressed any hint of rebellion. Yet even in the middle of such trying times, the rulers of both Israel and Judah stubbornly refused to follow the leading hand of God, and their people paid dearly for their disobedience. Israel was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and the ten tribes were taken into captivity as slaves. Judah was forced to be a satellite state for several decades, and was finally overrun by the Babylonians and Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C. Most of the people in Judah were taken captive and exiled to Babylon. During this turbulent time, God's prophets had the lonely job of calling their people to repentance and faithfulness. With wisdom given to those that God calls to speak, these faithful preachers spoke boldly of the people's sin, unfaithfulness, and injustice, but their messages were seldom heeded by the Jewish people. This passage of Scripture shows a prophet speaking words of hope and comfort to his discouraged countrymen who would soon be going into Babylonian exile. Their last view of their beloved city of Jerusalem would be of the magnificent temple in flames and their great capitol lying in ruins. During their more than half century in captivity, the Jews would learn a terrible lesson: God will punish disobedience. But Isaiah also told his people that God still loved and cared for them. Isaiah chapter 40 begins a great proclamation of God's comfort to His people, and it still brings hope to Christians today.

God gives instruction to Isaiah concerning comfort. - *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.* -Isaiah 40:1. Isaiah chapters 40 through 66 is sometimes referred to as the New Testament section of the book of Isaiah. It has 27 chapters as the New Testament has 27 books. It begins by relating to the ministry of John the Baptist in verses three and four as compared to Mathew chapter 3 verses one through three. The emphasis in this section of Isaiah is Christ and salvation through Him. The first 39 chapters emphasize God's judgment on His people, and chapters 40 through 66 give a message of comfort and redemption. That comfort begins for Israel with Isaiah's message concerning their deliverance from the bondage of slavery. It was written to encourage the Jewish remnant that would be delivered from Babylonian captivity after 70 years of bondage. We need to notice that Isaiah wrote this prophecy over 150 years before those Jews would need it for encouragement. Isaiah chapter 40 also gives us a contrast between the

greatness of God and the feebleness of man in verses six through eight and the weakness of idols in verses eighteen through twenty. Here in verse one God tells Isaiah to comfort His people. Notice that He says “my people”. They had sinned, been stiff-necked, rebellious, and had turned away from God; and yet God still calls them His people. Despair filled the hearts and homes of those Jews that had been exiled to Babylon. Their faith had weakened, and doubt had filled their hearts. They had started to believe that Babylon’s gods were stronger than Israel’s God, and many began to turn away from the one true God. But through Isaiah comes a message of new hope, and God Himself speaks and tells Isaiah to proclaim comforting words to His people. Comfort means to offer help in the midst of suffering and to actively intervene. The Hebrew word used means “to draw the breath forcibly”. It indicates deep emotion and the obtaining of relief. Isaiah is promising an end to the suffering, because of the One who is coming; the One who will fulfill Isaiah’s prophecies and bear all the burdens mentioned in the first part of the book of Isaiah. The comfort that Isaiah is promising is a comfort that comes from the heart of God who truly is a God of all comfort. - *Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.* -II Corinthians 1:3-4.

God not only tells Isaiah to comfort His people, He tells him how to speak, to whom, and what to say. - *Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her; that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins.* -Isaiah 40:2. First, Isaiah is told to speak comfortably. The Hebrew word used literally means “to the heart”. The heart is where sorrow and joy are felt, and it means to speak in a way to remove the troubles of the heart and to give consolation and joy to replace the troubles. Then God says to speak to Jerusalem. He tells Isaiah to speak not just to the exiles in Babylon, but to comfort Jerusalem itself which was lying in ruins. God is giving a promise of an end to the bondage, that Jerusalem would be rebuilt, and that the worship of the one true God would be restored. Then God tells Isaiah to give the people a three-fold message of comfort: (1) their term of slavery is complete, (2) their guilt is pardoned, and (3) they had received ample punishment for their sins. The word “warfare” is used to denote an appointed time of service. Their sentence of slavery was over, and they had paid double for their sins. The destruction of Judah and the fall of Jerusalem and their captivity had paid for the people’s sins. When God says their iniquity is pardoned, the Hebrew word used for “pardoned” means to “delight in”. Their sins were removed and dissolved by the price that had been paid. They had been removed to the point that God could now “delight in” His people.

God says that He will prepare the way for that restoration of His people. - *The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places*

plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. -Isaiah 40:3-5. How could this feeble remnant of Jews ever return to their land and reestablish that great nation again? They were a broken and defeated nation that was in bondage to slavery. God is telling them that He would go before them and open the way. Israel's comfort would start with the preparation for God's coming leadership. In that day and age, especially in Babylon, highways were prepared for the triumphant entry of a god or a king. The function of the road was to display the power and majesty of the god or king through the procession. In effect, the highways were considered the god's or the king's highway. Now Isaiah says that a road was to be prepared through the desert that would allow God's people to return home. God, Himself, would lead the people home, revealing His glory and holiness for all to see. All obstacles in the way would be removed: every valley would be lifted up, every mountain and hill would be made low, every crooked way would be made straight, and every rough way would be made smooth. Once the road was prepared, God would come and His glory would be revealed to all. That "voice" was partially fulfilled at Christ's first coming by John the Baptist, and will ultimately be fulfilled with His second coming. - *For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. -Matthew 3:3.* When all of this is accomplished spiritually in the hearts of the Israelites, the glory of the Lord will be revealed to all flesh. God is telling them don't look at what you can do, trust in Me. The same practical application can be made to us today: don't look at what we can do. Trust in God and what He can do. Salvation is of the Lord.

We see a heavenly voice and an earthly voice. - *The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. -Isaiah 40:6-8.* The heavenly voice orders Isaiah to cry out, and Isaiah asks what his message should be, and then he tells us. He is to cry out about the greatness of God and the insignificance of man. He compares the beauty and duration of man with flowers and grass, and says that man will soon wither and fade away. - *But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways. -James 1:10-11. Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. -James 4:14.* But in contrast to man, Isaiah says that the Word of God will stand forever. - *For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you. -I Peter 1:24-25.* From the human point of view, the situation probably looked hopeless for the Jews at that time, but God's Word is permanent and offers hope to all that believe.

The Jews are ordered to proclaim a message for all to hear. - *O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.* -Isaiah 40:9-11. God tells the Jews to go upon a high mountain and proclaim with a loud strong voice a three point proclamation: (1) behold the coming of your mighty God, (2) that He is coming as a king to rule over you and to reward you, and (3) that He comes as a shepherd to tenderly feed and lead you. Their message shows us the love and care of God the Savior for even the weakest of people. He is coming again, and as Christians, God has given us the same message to proclaim. Isaiah goes on to say again, don't look at yourselves and what you can do, look at your God. He created the universe. Isn't He able to strengthen and sustain you? Look at the blessed promise of God that closes this chapter of Isaiah. - *Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.* -Isaiah 40:28-31. Israel had to come to the realization that true comfort begins with deliverance, and we, today, must do the same. Their deliverance came as they looked forward to the coming of Christ and His sacrifice on the Cross and trusted in Him. Our deliverance comes as we look back to the coming of Christ and His sacrifice on the Cross and trust in Him.