

*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. (Isaiah 40:1-11)*

This is God's Comfort

What do these three situations have in common? Someone unloads on you about their relationship with a family member. They tell you how hurt and frustrated they are because of what that spouse or sibling or child has done and then they fall silent. Or someone's husband has died and you have to go see her at the funeral

home. Or a young person feels alone and unpopular and confused by the hurtful things that other young people say and do and they come to you. In each of those situations, someone is hurting. And in each one, you have to comfort them. How do you feel about that? While it's hard for all of us, at the risk of sounding sexist, I'm going to state that we men in particular struggle with those situations. I often feel inadequate to comfort. Of course, it's my job to do that. But it isn't just my job. We are a family of believers. The Bible speaks of us as sharing our joys and our sorrows. God gave us this congregation so that we have people to go to for comfort. But what do we say? What do we do? Certainly, one important way of offering comfort is listening. Sometimes people just need someone who cares about them to listen while they unload their feelings. But sometimes, they need more. Sometimes they expect us to say something. Today, in the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, God reminds us of his message of healing. **This is God's comfort:**

I. There is an end to the hardships of this life.

II. There is a better life to come.

I.

The truth is we have very limited ability to comfort anyone. We can listen and put an arm around them and let them cry on our shoulder. We can let them know we care and that we're praying for them. But we don't have the power to heal the hurt in their hearts. Only God has that power. So we need to rely on God's comfort. **This is God's comfort: there is an end to the hardships of this life.**

That was part of the message Isaiah offered his people. Isaiah chapter 40 is the turning point in his book. The first 39 chapters are dominated by a message of disaster and hardship that was coming on Israel. God was preaching the law to a stubborn and unrepentant people. They were going to be conquered. Their armies were going to be defeated, their cities burned and the survivors were going to go into exile for seventy years, all because the nation was unfaithful to God. But Isaiah 40 brings God's comfort.

Now, this chapter isn't really directed at those unfaithful people who were going to cause all that suffering. Rather, it was directed at the believers in a society that had turned away from God. They were going to suffer because of the sins of the whole nation. They were going to lose their homes, too. Some of them were going to die and the survivors were going to be dragged to a foreign country and only the very youngest of them would live long enough to return home in their old age. But it wasn't going to last forever. Isaiah says, **"Comfort, comfort my people, says your 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."** God said this more than a hundred years before it even started. God was telling the believers that it wasn't always going to be "hard service." Even in this life, God often grants us relief from the suffering that sin causes.

Then Isaiah went on to speak of the voice crying in the wilderness. This is the true comfort God was offering and it wasn't the end of the exile in Babylon. The truest and greatest comfort that God would give his people was Jesus. The voice crying in the wilderness was John the Baptist. 700 years before John was born, in a very poetic way, God promised he would come and announce the imminent arrival of Jesus.

John would be a voice crying in the wilderness. That's exactly what John did. He didn't work in Jerusalem. He was out at the Jordan River and the whole city trekked out there to listen to him and be baptized. Isaiah said that John would call on the people to prepare the way for the Lord. The mountains would be leveled and the valleys filled in so that a straight and level highway could be built. What does this mean? God was not talking about building an interstate. The highway runs into our hearts. The mountains are the sinful pride that every one of us is guilty of. The valleys are the despair we suffer in this life. Both of them lead us away from God. But in repentance, the pride is cut down. We see that we are sinners and we fall before God. And the despair is filled in. We see his love for us in Christ. The highway into our heart is repentance. That's what John preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

What happened as a result of John's ministry? Isaiah says, **"And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."** What did John have to do with that? He baptized Jesus. He pointed to him and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Through John, the whole nation of Israel saw Jesus. Then the whole world came to see him in the preaching of the gospel. In Christ, we have the glory of the Lord. When the Son of God laid aside his power and glory and entered the womb of a poor Jewish girl, when the Son of God was born in a stable and laid in a manger, when the Son of God lived as a poor, traveling preacher and finally allowed himself

to be accused and convicted and nailed to a cross – in all that love, we see the true glory of the Lord. John opened the door to 2000 years of ministers revealing that glory to the world.

What does all that have to do with us? Every one of us has “hard service” just like Israel did. We live in a society that doesn’t take God seriously. The sin of the people around us hurts us. How many times don’t we see children suffer for the sinful stupidity of their parents? How many times don’t we have to deal with other people’s sinful choices? Like the believers in Israel, we often suffer because of the sin of the people around us. And we have plenty of sin of our own. How many of our problems are our own fault? How many times have we said things that got us into trouble? How many times have we been thoughtless and careless and hurt people we care about? Every time we sinned against those other people, we sinned against God who commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves. We suffer “hard service” in this life in part as a consequence of our own sin.

God sends hurt and suffering to disciplines us – to teach us to turn from sin and to live for him. God allows the sin of other people to complicate our lives to teach us to rely on him alone. God tells us today where to find our comfort when he does those things: in his promise that all things work to bring us to heaven. And the proof of that promise is the glory of the Lord revealed in Christ. The proof of that promise is the Son of God letting Roman soldiers nail him to a cross. The proof is our Savior hanging on that cross while his Father poured all the sins of all the world on his head. He poured your sins and my sins on him there. Jesus paid for all those times we failed to love God and our neighbor. Then he rose and told us all that sin is gone and we will rise from the dead and we will live with him in a perfect world forever. Until that day comes, God will discipline us when we need it. He will let hardship come when that is what’s best for us. All he does, he does to bring us home to heaven.

II.

This is God’s comfort: there is a better life coming. Right now, we live here in this sinful world and we struggle with what hurts. We can’t see heaven yet. So Isaiah reminds us that all that what we see here is temporary. He says, **“All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them.”** On Thanksgiving Day, I went outside and looked at my wife’s garden. The tomato plants are dead and brown. The cucumbers and zucchinis are withered. Everything is dead now. That’s the way life is here. Isaiah is not talking about plants, he’s talking about us and all that we accomplish and all that we achieve here. It’s temporary at best. How many people will even remember our names a hundred years from now? **“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”** That’s the point.

Sometimes, it might seem to us like talking about Jesus and his love when someone is hurting is missing the point. But Jesus and his love are the only things that last here. That good news is what brings eternal life. That life will erase all that we suffered here. God has established the ministry so that guys like me can keep pointing you to that good news. Isaiah speaks of those who bring good tidings to Jerusalem. Jerusalem here represents believers of every age. He’s talking about ministers of the gospel. God appoints us to proclaim good news to you. In this world, you need to hear that good news.

What is the good news? Isaiah points to three things. First of all he says, **“Say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”** Where do I point at when I say that? At that manger in Bethlehem. At that cross outside of Jerusalem. Now, if we had been in Bethlehem, if we had stood by that cross outside of Jerusalem, it would not have looked like God was there. It would’ve looked like a poor baby was born in a stable without even a midwife to help. It would’ve looked like a rebel was getting the most humiliating punishment the Romans knew how to dish out. While he was dying, we would’ve heard his enemies taunt him and tell him to come down if he really was the Son of God. You can’t see the God in Christ at those moments. But he is there. The Son of God was born for you. His life is your life. God the Son died for you. His payment is your payment. But in his resurrection, we can see him for what he is. My friends, in Christ, here is your God!

Then Isaiah reminds us that he will come in power. He will rule over all things and he will reward his people. That’s the next time he comes. Right now, it’s hard to see that, so God sends guys like me to keep telling you that he *is* coming. Keep focused on that promise while you struggle with life in a sinful world. It isn’t always going to be a sinful world. One day soon, this will all be over and we will experience life eternal with Christ.

Until that day comes, God sends pastors and teachers to remind us that Jesus is our good shepherd. **“He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.”** That’s what Jesus is doing right now. We operate a school here because Jesus carries his lambs in his arms. We baptize our children because God gives them the gift of faith and Jesus cares for them. That’s such a comfort for us parents who are still sinners. How many of our fears for our children are quieted by knowing that they are in Jesus’ arms, not ours? He loves them. He cares for them. He even calls them to repent when they sin. Jesus gently leads those who have young. The picture is moving a flock to pasture. Nursing mothers can’t move as fast. They’re caring for the lambs. They require special attention. All of us parents require that attention because our children do. Jesus gives it.

In the end, we are all his sheep, and our shepherd will never stop caring for us. No matter how difficult it is for us to understand what he’s doing, he knows our needs and he loves us. We need to hear that message over and over again for as long as we live here. When we hear it, the Holy Spirit brings comfort to our hearts. He gives us strength and healing and courage in the dark days that this world brings us. No one else can do that. Comfort, comfort my people. What a terrifying command! I cannot do that and neither can you. But God can and he does. And he gives us the tool that he works through: the good news about Jesus and his love. Take comfort in Christ today. Give comfort in Christ always. Amen.