

## Comfort for God's People

### Isaiah 40:1-11

Chapter 40 marks a major turning point and a dramatic shift in the tone of the book of Isaiah. The preceding chapters have been filled with warnings of impending judgment. Now, however, Isaiah begins to focus on the majesty of God, and on the righteousness and justice of Messiah who is coming to rule the earth and judge all people. Messiah, however, will also bring mercy and grace and strength. His arm will not be too short or too weak to save; hence, by the sacrifice of his own matchless life, a seemingly numberless host of the redeemed will eventually gather around his eternal throne.

At this time, Judah still had about 100 years of trouble waiting in the wings before Jerusalem would fall, then another 70 years of exile. The warnings in chapters 1-39 will surely come to pass because the southern kingdom of Judah refuses to repent. Nevertheless, God tells Isaiah to speak tenderly and to comfort his people. In this, there is a valuable lesson that we can learn right from the outset; *namely that the seeds of comfort may take root in the soil of adversity*. When life seems to be falling apart, when the winds of change seem to be blowing away all we have known and relied upon, and when there no longer seems to be any basis for comfort or hope, it is then that we may find unexpected comfort from an invisible source – God himself. We may not escape adversity, but if we are willing to stand before the Lord in humbleness of heart and repentance, then in his presence we will surely find renewed strength and courage to face both the present and the future, however uncertain and hopeless they may appear.

The images of the Lord in verses 1-11 are striking. He is the warrior-king who comes with strong arm to rule, but who also comes with reward, bearing gifts for all who will receive (v. 10). He is also a shepherd who comes to gather, to carry, and to lead his sheep (v. 11). King David of old had been a shepherd-king, but Messiah will take this role to new heights.

So the message is one of comfort because even though the Lord is about to punish and discipline his people, he will not destroy them. The impending exile in Babylon will be an awful chapter in the history of God's people, fraught with difficulty and filled with wailing and weeping, but it will not be the last chapter. In the words of David, the Lord will eventually *"turn their wailing into dancing; he will remove their sackcloth and clothe them with joy"* (Psa. 30:11). *"For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning"* (Psa. 30:5). This is the destiny of those who turn to the Lord in repentance; great blessing coming out of adversity!

Another striking feature of this passage is the voice crying out in the wilderness (vs. 3-5). He is a mystery figure! Isaiah didn't know his identity. He merely paints a general picture of someone making preparation for the Lord's coming. Three centuries later, the Lord speaks through the prophet Malachi about the same voice in the wilderness:

**"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.**" (Mal. 3:1)

We now know, thanks to the Gospels, that this mystery voice would belong to John the Baptist. He laid the groundwork for the appearance of Jesus Christ by preaching a message of repentance. The first words we hear from the mouth of John are, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near*” (Matt. 3:2). Immediately Matthew informs us that, “*This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah*” (Matt. 3:3).

Let’s take a brief look at the substance of this message from the voice in the wilderness. What does it say? Simply put:

- Prepare the way for the Lord in the desert,
- Make a straight highway in the wilderness,
- Make level what is rough and rugged and uneven.

A little historical context will be helpful here. In ancient times it was customary for a herald to precede the arrival of a monarch. He would announce the coming of the King and warn the local residents to make appropriate preparations. The roadway was to be as smooth and uncluttered as possible. Potholes were to be filled in, rocks and debris were to be removed, and unsightly litter was to be burned or hidden.

This is not difficult for us to understand when we consider the elaborate preparations now underway for the 2010 Olympics. The Sea to Sky Highway is being rebuilt to make Whistler Village more accessible and travel on the highway safer. Everyone knows about all the work being done in and around Vancouver to improve the infrastructure. We also remember the government’s promise to clean up east Hastings Street and look after the homeless. After all, we will be hosting the world! All eyes will be on Vancouver! We want to make a good impression by demonstrating that we can not only host successful Games, but can also provide collateral benefits for non-athletes, for the general citizenry - even the homeless.

Isaiah and John the Baptist are both saying, “Should we not want to make a good impression on the King of kings and Lord of lords when he comes? When Christ comes should he not find that our spiritual house is in order?” It’s not merely that we should clear the roads and highways of obstacles, but rather that we should clear our hearts of any obstacles that keep us away from Christ. The way of the Lord is the way of repentance, of turning from sin to righteousness, of turning from spiritual and moral paths that are crooked to ones that are straight. The voice calling out to us is telling us to clear any obstacles out of our lives that might hinder our reception of the Lord. If Isaiah or John were here in Canada today, they would shout this message from the rooftops: People of Canada, get yourselves ready, and prepare your hearts and lives for the arrival of the Coming One with the kingdom of heaven.

In chapter 57, Isaiah returns to this theme of comfort for the contrite:

**“Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people. For this is what the high and lofty One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy:**

**‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me – the breath of man that I have created ... I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him’ ... ‘Peace, peace to those far and near,’ says the Lord. ‘And I will heal them.’”**

Then, in chapter 62, the Lord continues to drive this message home:

**“Build up, build up the highway! Remove the stones. Raise a banner for the nations ... See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord”** (from 62:10-12).

Did you hear it? “They will be called the Holy People!” This is what our King is looking for whenever he inspects us. He expects us to be holy people. He expects us to be willing to examine our own lives to discern what spiritual obstacles and hindrances may lurk beneath the surface – hindrances to our being fit to keep company with the King and to serve Him effectively! We must make no mistake about this unpopular business of repentance. Our God is not speaking only to those living in blatant sin, or those we look at sideways as “backsliders.” He is speaking to everyone!

- He is speaking to those who may profess His name, but still be too proud to humble themselves before Him. They want Christ as Savior, but not as Lord.
- He is speaking to those who may profess Christ as Lord, but who are nevertheless putting something else before the Lord, whether it is money, possessions, career, family, or any number of subtle idols.
- He may be speaking to those whose heart has apparently been given to the Lord, but whose tongue has yet to come under the Master’s control.
- He is speaking to those who long ago may have uttered a prayer asking for forgiveness and inclusion in the family of God, but who through carelessness or laziness have never progressed beyond spiritual infancy and have never gone on to spiritual maturity ( see Heb. 5:11-6:3).
- He may be speaking to those who profess Christ as Lord, but then harbor secret thoughts or habits, ones that are impure and unworthy of the Master’s example. David wanted to be so sure that this wasn’t him that he prayed:

***“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting ”*** (Psa. 139:23-24).

We could give example after example, but the point is that we are all to examine ourselves. We are all to realize that true repentance involves more than regret or sorrow. It means to turn around, to change the direction of one’s life, to change the mind and the will. It denotes a clear and discernible change from the wrong to the right, away from sin and to righteousness.

When the New Testament speaks of repentance it virtually always means a changing of the mind and the will from sin to holiness. It results in a change of thinking, a change of desire, and a change in the whole conduct of life.

This passage - and those parallel passages to which I have referred - is truly wonderful. It is not threatening. It is comforting because it assures us that while the Lord does indeed allow adversity, nevertheless the seeds of comfort often take root in the soil of such adversity. It assures us that indeed the Lord will not accuse forever, nor will he always be angry. He has seen our ways, but rather than wanting to destroy us, he wants to heal us, to guide us, to lead us, to comfort us, and to restore peace and freedom.

These are the things our God offers: healing, guidance, comfort and strength, peace, and true freedom. Once we have made sure that we have sought and found these blessings, then we are in a position to go out into our world as salt and light. Then we can be voices calling out in the wilderness of sin and suffering, tragedy and turmoil.

The call this morning is for each of us to make sure that we have truly repented of anything in our life that is a hindrance or an obstacle to genuine fellowship with God. The Bible promises that if an individual cleanses himself or herself from these, then they will be “*an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work*” (2 Tim. 2:21).

Let us all take the time to ponder these things as we listen to this message in song entitled, *In This Quiet Moment*.

*In this quiet moment, still, before your throne,  
Conscious of your presence, knowing I am known.  
In this quiet moment set my spirit free.  
In this quiet moment make a better me.*