

ISAIAH

40:1-11

Introduction

"Comfort" is a potent word. It derives from a Latin root, *fortis*, which means *strength* or *stronghold*. It can refer to being strengthened emotionally or physically or spiritually. Whatever your emotional sorrow... or physical suffering... or spiritual slumping... You need comfort.

People try to **get** the comfort they need in a variety of ways. For example: There are comfort foods. A survey for the American Institute for Cancer Research, completed two months after the 9-11 terrorist attacks, found that thirty-three percent of Americans had turned to eating more "comfort foods," such as fried chicken, steak, stews and lasagna. We rely on such foods to ease stress and bring back positive memories. *It's not a very permanent source of comfort!*

People try to **give** the comfort others need in a variety of ways. Clichés are the most popular. We say things like "*Time heals all wounds*" and "*It can't get any worse*" and "*Cheer up.*" Well, it can and often does get worse... And time has a way of rubbing salt in your wounds rather than healing them, leaving you without much to cheer up about.

You need a source of comfort that is not *food* or *foolishness*... And you have it:

Isaiah 40:1 "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" says your God.
Isaiah 40:2 "Speak comfort..."

God wants you to both *get* and *give* comfort; and He tells you how in these verses. It involves being influenced by the coming of the Lord. It's no secret that these verses were applied by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament to John the Baptist. John stepped out of the Judean wilderness and began to *proclaim* the Lord's coming so that the people would *prepare* for His arrival.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Get Comfort By Preparing For The Lord's Coming, and #2 You Give Comfort By Proclaiming The Lord's Coming.

#1 You Get Comfort
By Preparing For The Lord's Coming
(v1-8)

Before we get into the application of these verses for our lives I should give you their original context. In chapters one through thirty-nine Isaiah addressed his own generation of Jews. He told them that God would defend them against the Assyrians; but, since they were rebelling against God, He would *not* defend their children against the Babylonians. Chapters forty through sixty-six address the future generation of Jews that would be taken captive to Babylon. The prophecies Isaiah gave them were words of comfort during their captivity. Knowing that their captivity would definitely end, they could be comforted by preparing for the Lord's coming to deliver them.

The prophecies take on another level of meaning as we see them applied to Jesus in His first coming some centuries later; again the people were encouraged to be preparing for the Lord's coming.

The prophecies also look beyond Jesus' first coming to His *Second Coming* when He will establish a kingdom on the earth and rule over it from Jerusalem. The future generation who is alive before His Second Coming is also encouraged to be preparing.

Let's first look at God's **comfort**:

Isaiah 40:1 "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" says your God.
Isaiah 40:2 "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."

Whatever you think of God must be subordinated to what He reveals about Himself. In the Bible God the Father is presented as the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3). God the Holy Spirit is spoken of four times as "the Comforter" (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). God the Son, Jesus Christ, is called our Advocate - and that is exactly the same word for Comforter (1John 2:1).

God's desire is to see you comforted. It's an important reminder because life is a hardship in which you will most definitely need supernatural comfort.

There is a problem, a huge problem, in the human condition. It is summarized in verse two by the use of three words: "warfare," "iniquity," and "sins."

"Her warfare" refers in context to the future Babylonian captivity. The word can be translated *hard service* or *enlistment* to refer to the hardships of war. It is used in a broader way to describe the general hardships of humanity. For example:

Job 7:1 "*Is there* not a time of **hard service** for man on earth? *Are not* his days also like the days of a hired man?"

Job 14:14 "...If a man dies, shall he live *again*? All the days of my **hard service** I will wait, till my change comes."

The human condition is definitely *not* what God originally intended when He created man and gave him dominion over the earth. Adam and Eve sinned; they rebelled against God. As a result, life is a hard service, one long enlistment in a severe spiritual war - a **hardship** - involving emotional sorrow... physical suffering... and spiritual slumping. You need God's comfort.

In what sense has your "warfare ended?" For the Jews Isaiah was addressing, it ended in the sense that their captivity in Babylon would end. In a greater sense **your** warfare has ended if "your iniquity is pardoned" by your "receiv[ing] double for all [your] sins."

"Iniquity" and "sins" are used interchangeably in this verse. You need God's "pardon" and it comes through receiving "double." In order to know what is meant you must understand a Jewish legal procedure. When there was an indebtedness or a mortgage on a house in Israel, the fact was written on a paper, a legal document, and put on the doorpost to make public the announcement of the debt. Another copy was kept by the person who held the mortgage. When the debt was paid, the second copy was nailed over the first on the doorpost so that everyone could see that the debt had been paid in full. This is the meaning of "received double"; it means the debt was **paid in full**.

Your debt is sin; the payment is death. How could you ever be paid in full? Only if God assumed your debt and died in your place... Which is what He has done for you through Jesus Christ!

Being comforted assumes you have a relationship with God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. **There can be no real comfort apart from personally knowing God.**

Knowing God does not guarantee you will experience God's comfort. Plenty of believers remain disheartened and discouraged. You get comfort that is available to you by preparing for the Lord's coming.

Isaiah 40:3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Isaiah 40:4 Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth;

Isaiah 40:5 The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see *it* together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

As we said earlier, these verses were applied to John the Baptist as he announced the first coming of Jesus. He literally cried out from the Judean wilderness. His message of preparation was simple:

Matthew 3:2 ... "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

Matthew 3:8 ... "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,"

Repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change in behavior. If you are not a Christian, you need to repent of your sins and receive the Lord as the One Who died in your place to pay in full your debt of sin.

If you are a Christian... It's possible you have become slack in your preparation for the Lord's return. You and I have frequent need of repenting!

The key is to believe that the Lord is coming and let His coming influence you. If you really believed the Lord could arrive at any moment, what would change in your life? **He is coming at any moment - so change it!**

The description of the Lord's coming in verses three through five has its ultimate fulfillment in the Lord's Second Coming to rule the earth.

In the mean time, in light of His imminent coming, we should accomplish these things spiritually. The picture is that of repairing the roads a dignitary would travel when he came to visit. Today we would say, "roll out the red carpet."

"Valley... mountain... hill... crooked places... rough places..." also speak of obstacles in your life that keep you from experiencing the comforting presence of God. These can be leveled out and made "straight" and "smooth." You'll have to do the meditations in your own life. For example: Are there "mountains" in your life in the sense that you are exalting something or someone above your relationship with God? Are you in some "valley" and wallowing in its depth instead of receiving the strength to walk through it with God? Are you involved in "crooked" things - things you wouldn't want known or discovered? What are the "rough" places in your life that you make excuses for rather than repenting of?

We are such foolish, feeble, and frail creatures - and Isaiah pointed it out in verses six, seven, and eight:

Isaiah 40:6 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.

Isaiah 40:7 The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people *are* grass.

Isaiah 40:8 The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever."

You are like a flowering grass that appears then is dried-up. You are only here on earth for a brief moment; and it is to determine your eternity. The apostle Peter quoted this verse from Isaiah to describe your need of being born again. God's Word is "forever;" it can give you eternal life.

While you are waiting for eternity, your life will involve hardship. You'll often need comfort; but not from food or foolish clichés. God may not remove the hardship but He will give you the grace to bear whatever you are called to endure. The Lord is coming; believe it and let His coming influence you to prepare for His arrival.

#2 You Give Comfort
By Proclaiming The Lord's Coming
(v9-11)

The longer the Lord delays in returning, the more you ought to anticipate it. As a practical matter, however, the longer His delay, the more we tend to neglect it. We turn our attention to what we consider more practical matters... But nothing is more practical than prophecy and the doctrine of imminence.

I've used the word "imminence" at least twice. We believe that Jesus promised to return for His Church in an event called the Rapture. The Rapture is always presented as an imminent event - it could occur at any moment without the need for other prophecies to be fulfilled.

If you want to be a comforter you need to offer your words and deeds in the context of proclaiming the imminent return of Jesus.

Isaiah 40:9 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!"

"Zion" and "Jerusalem" describe the people of God. In context, it's the Jews. They were to "bring good tidings." They were to shout it from the mountaintops.

"Good tidings" are what we would call the Gospel, the Good News. We are to proclaim to people the Gospel, inviting them to "*Behold your God!*"

Jesus has already come the first time; it's an historic reality. He lived and died and rose from the dead. He's in heaven today, poised to return from heaven to Rapture His Church.

Isaiah, like the other Bible prophets, often spoke of events that would be separated by centuries in the space of a single verse or a few verses. Verses ten and eleven seem to anticipate the next two yet future phases of the Lord's coming *after* the Rapture: The first, "with a strong hand," and the second, "like a shepherd."

The Lord is coming "with a strong hand:"

Isaiah 40:10 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.

"With a strong hand" is a summary of what we would call the Tribulation. Sometime after the Lord Raptures His Church, a seven-year period of judgment will come upon the whole earth. It is a frequent topic of Scripture; it is most fully developed in the Revelation of Jesus Christ, in chapters six through eighteen.

The Tribulation ends with the Second Coming of Jesus to the earth. When He comes the second time, "His arm shall rule for Him." He will set-up a kingdom on the earth. We know from Scripture that this kingdom on earth will last one thousand years.

Isaiah notes that "His reward is with Him, and His work is before Him." Commentators who fully understand the original languages insist that the word "reward" refers to the believers whom Jesus brings back with Him in His Second Coming. **You are His reward!**

The "work... before Him" is the renovation of the earth and His reign of righteousness. You and I will assist Him.

That overlaps into verse eleven and His shepherding:

Isaiah 40:11 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.

The character of the kingdom on earth will be that of a Shepherd leading and tending His sheep. We have trouble seeing the scope of this metaphor since we are not much familiar with shepherding. It is, however, a most comforting picture. There is coming a time upon this earth when Jesus will be the one true Shepherd Who watches out for His sheep, to give you peace and pasture in a time of unprecedented prosperity.

There is no hope in this world if Jesus is not returning soon to rule and reign over it!

From the perspective of giving comfort I would offer these two observations:

1. In light of the certainty and severity of these future things, if a person is not a Christian, **nothing is more important than their**

receiving the Lord as Savior. Regardless their particular hardships, the comfort they need above all else is knowing they are saved for time and eternity.

2. If a person is a Christian, they need to keep their mind on the future prize. The things that discourage and dishearten you are overcome by setting your affections on the future and remembering you are serving the Lord in all things and at all times. You are comforted knowing that your Lord Has promised to fill you with His Spirit; to never, ever, leave you or forsake you; to prepare a home in heaven for you; and to return for you, that where He is you may be also.

Conclusion

Whatever your emotional sorrow... or physical suffering... or spiritual slumping... You need comfort.

You get comfort by preparing for the Lord's coming... You give comfort by proclaiming the Lord's coming.

Be comforted; become a comforter. Isaiah says to you what you are to say to others, "*Behold your God!*"