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Isaiah 40:1-11

### Comfort my people

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."

*"Comfort, comfort now my people; tell of peace!" So says our God.  
Comfort those who sit in darkness mourning under sorrow's load.  
To God's people now proclaim that God's pardon waits for them!  
Tell them that their war is over; God will reign in peace forever!*

*(LBW 29 "Comfort, Comfort Now My People")*

Have you ever tried to speak a word of comfort to someone who was suffering? It is difficult. I remember having to assist at a funeral of a college student who had committed suicide. This young man was a friend. His family was a special family to me. I remember driving with them from the church to the gravesite. I desperately wanted to comfort them. However, when I got the change I could not find the words to console them and their deep loss.

In Hebrew, the word comfort literally means to "breathe deeply." This makes sense. You comfort someone by speaking a deep word into a deep hurt. This also works for the idea of comfort food. Comfort food is simple food that carries with it deep memories that bring comfort. McDonalds is brilliant in calling their kids meal a "Happy Meal." For the rest of our lives, we are tempted to stop at McDonalds when we need a little happiness and comfort.

When God comforts us, he comforts us through his promises. As Psalm 119:82 tells us, “My eyes long for your promises, they bring me comfort” (Psalm 119:82). The promises of God are promises that we can hold onto in the midst of despair and suffering. They are a compass for us.

There is an old Jewish story about a little boy who went to a prophet and said, “Prophet, don’t you see? You have been prophesying now for fifteen years, and things are still the same. Why do you keep on?” And the prophet said, “Don’t you know little boy, I’m not prophesying to change the world, but to prevent the world from changing me.”

The promises of God are deep words meant to speak to the depths of our need.

In our reading from Isaiah, we find the people of Israel in need of comfort. Israel was annihilated, its holy temple profaned, the capital destroyed, and people shipped to Babylon. Psalm 137 expresses how it felt to be one of God’s people during this time:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept... If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you... O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

Israel was in a dark place.

In the midst of such darkness, a ray of hope shines forth. In Isaiah 40:1, we hear the words: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Many of you might think of the second song of Handel’s Messiah where a solo tenor recites the words of Isaiah 40. “Comfort, ye my people.”

The language in this verse is beautiful. It begins with a double comfort. “Comfort, comfort my people says your God.” The language is also relational. “Comfort, comfort *my people* says *your God*.” This is covenant language. It is the language of Ruth to Naomi who said, “Where you go I will go... your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). It is the language of Hosea 11 that says, “When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1).” This is the language of love. You can see why Handel would use these words. God is calling Isaiah to comfort the people.

But how is Isaiah supposed to comfort a people in exile? It is hard enough to comfort one person who is mourning. How is Isaiah supposed to comfort a whole nation in mourning? Even more, the exile is only a symptom of the deeper problem of the fall. How is Isaiah supposed to preach a word that can address sin, death, and the devil? No wonder Isaiah in verse 6 says, “What shall I cry?”

God never leaves us without a word of hope. God answers Isaiah with the words, “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. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever” (40:6-8).

With these words, God is reminding Isaiah that the Word of the Lord never fails. If the breath of God can wither the flowers, then the breath of God can also bring life. The promises of God can comfort us. “My eyes long for your promise, they bring me comfort” (Psalm 119:82).

This passage is full of promise:

- Verse 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."
- Verse 3: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."
- Verse 5: "And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it."
- Verse 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."

These promises of course refer to Jesus:

- Jesus brings peace with God: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).
- Jesus reveals God's glory: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).
- Jesus is the shepherd, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). With the shepherd, there is comfort: "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

These promises also tell us something about God. God truly desires to comfort his people. That is why he gives to us these promises. That is why he sent Christ. That is why he sends the Holy Spirit the Great Comforter. And that is why he gives us the ministry of consolation to those in need.

Reformation, do you need comfort today? Look to God's promises for comfort. In the waters of baptism, God has promised that you are united to Christ. You are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus promises to be in this meal for you, for the forgiveness of sin. You can trust these words. All God's promises find their "yes" in Jesus.

*"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word" (1 Thessalonians 2:16-17).*

**In Jesus Name,  
Amen**