

The God of All Comfort

Isaiah 40

Pastor Christopher Coffman

Comfort in Hopeless Times

The book of Isaiah was written during Israel's darkest hour as a nation. The threat of Assyrian invasion and God's impending judgment hung over the people like a dark thunderhead. No sooner had Israel escaped Assyrian annihilation than the worst forecast of all came to King Hezekiah: "Your people will be taken away as slaves into Babylon" (Isaiah 39). The great nation that God had led out of Egypt was reduced to nothing. The temple in Jerusalem was ransacked (2 Kings 24-25) and, with it, the hopes of the nation. The book of Lamentations gives us a window into the dismal soul of God's people:

"How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are upon her cheeks. *Among all her lovers there is none to comfort her.*" (Lamentation 1:1-2)

Thankfully, that's not the end of the story. God refuses to leave His people without hope in Babylon. The Lord tells Isaiah to preach a good news message—a gospel—to comfort His broken-hearted people.

The Comfort of God's Abundant Grace (Isaiah 40:1-2)

Isaiah preached to a congregation whose world had come to an end. They were without hope and without a place to sacrifice and worship their God. These men and women woke up each morning to the dehumanizing reality of slavery. If anyone has ever needed a message of comfort it was these folks. But, behind the awful reality of their exile, Israel also understood *why* they were slaves. They knew deep down that their sins against God resulted in their "hard service" in Babylon (2b). Would God forgive them or allow them to suffer the just consequence of their sin? Would grace win or would they remain slaves in Babylon?

We tend to think of sin as a series of mistakes we make in life, don't we? But sin is much more than a moral hiccup here and there. When Jesus described sin in the gospel of John, He put the issue to rest: "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." People who sin are not just missing the mark of God's absolute holiness. People that sin are enslaved to their dead way of life. That is why when the Bible speaks about sin the metaphor of choice is slavery. However it is here, against the backdrop of our enslavement to sin, that God's abundant grace shines brightest. When someone experiences God's grace we are forgiven for our grossest sins. There is no greater comfort in life than to know that our sins have been forgiven! The grace of Jesus Christ does not stop at forgiveness. His grace is not only sufficient to deliver us from the *penalty* of sin, but His grace sets us free from the tyranny of sin's *power*. His grace not only forgives us...it frees us!

The Comfort of God's Coming Kingdom (Isaiah 40:3-5, 9-11)

Aside from a handful of psalms, Jeremiah's letter and his Lamentations, Israel's exile in Babylon was accompanied by a long silence. No one knows how long for sure—fifty years is an educated guess. No prophets proclaiming good news. No harps playing Israel's salvation songs. Israel's hopes for a kingdom hung next to their harps alongside the rivers of Babylon (Psalm 137). And then, out of this silence, the voice of the living God emerges once again (v 1-3,5,9). God is speaking again. God is reassuring His people that He has not abandoned them. In spite of Babylonian taunts, they are still His people and He is still their God. Most of all, He wants to comfort them with the hope of His coming kingdom. He is still absolutely King and the rulers of the world are still absolutely not.

In Isaiah 40, God introduces a Comforting King that would rule his people and restore everything that's gone wrong in our fractured world (v 4). Unlike the rulers of this world, this King would not rule with terror. Instead, He would rule with the tenderness and compassion of a Shepherd (Psalm 23). When the Comforting King came singing He would replace the sorrow and sighs of their exile (Isaiah 35). He would gather Israel into His arms and carry them close to His heart like a tender shepherd (v 11). He would do what the kings of this world only dreamed of. In a word, He would save the world! He would rule and redeem the world! The most beautiful thing about this passage of scripture is that we know that Jesus came to fulfill these words. He is our "God of all comfort" who came to lay His life down for us! (John 10:11)

The Comfort of God's Everlasting Word (Isaiah 40:6-8)

We live in a fragile world where everything around us withers. Stock markets wither. Relationships wither. Our bodies wither (even with the help of Botox injections). All men are still just grass (v 6) and grasshoppers (v 22) compared to the living God of Israel. In an impermanent world, there is only one thing that does not fade with the flowers of the field. Only thing stands forever: The Word of God.

Where do you turn for comfort when everything falls apart in life? Do you turn on the television and zone out? Do you open up the newspaper and freak out? Do you turn inward and allow feelings of hopelessness to have the final word in your life? Instead of turning to these hollow things, open God's Word and wait for Him to speak tenderly and comfort you. As you do, watch what happens. "...those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not grow faint." (Is 40:31)

Tonight!

Sunday • El Salvador Mission Trip Information at 7pm @ the Community Center

We have a team traveling to El Salvador this fall-November 1-7. If you are interested in going, come to this meeting to get informed! . Applications are due by June 30th. For more information contact Chris Coffman at 699.2226 or chris@riverwest.org

Wednesday, June 25th • Global Missions Prayer Group at the Nave's Home @ 7:00pm

This is the perfect opportunity to find out how God is reaching out to other parts of the world through River West Church. Join Pastor Chris at the Nave's home on the last Wednesday of each month. Contact Pastor Chris at 699-2226 or chris@riverwest.org

FitBody • Saturdays 8-9am River West Fellowship Hall

Please plan on joining us for FitBody! This is an ongoing fitness class offered every Saturday morning at RW. FitBody is for every "body"! If you are looking to "jump start" your fitness program, or add to your ongoing plan - this may just be the right place for you. You must be 18 or older to attend. For more information, contact Gina Kulper @ 636-8294

July 14th-18th •

Vacation Bible School K-5th

Register now...forms are in the lobby & at the church office. Contact Lindsie at 699.2226 or lindsie@riverwest.org

Don't Forget your BOX FAN!