

"A CERTAIN COMFORT"

Without a doubt, this is one of the greatest passages in all of Scripture.

Isaiah's message of comfort is one of the Bible's most eloquent summaries of the gospel. This is why these verses were employed as the opening for Handel's great oratorio, *Messiah*. I imagine that there are some of you who cannot hear these words without thinking of how they are sung in that beautiful work. Isaiah 40 marks the beginning of a new section in this prophetic book, a section in which the dominant theme is God's promise of deliverance to a people who are in bondage because of their sin. This is the bondage that was foretold at the end of chapter 39, where Isaiah told Hezekiah that Israel would be carried into exile sometime after his death. Chapter 39 ended on a low note, which makes chapter 40 all the more glorious. It is with this in mind that commentator E.J. Young writes, "When one turns from the thirty-ninth to the fortieth chapter it is as though he steps out of the darkness of judgment into the light of salvation." That is quite right.

The one thing that is made very clear by the way salvation is described in this chapter is the fact that the gospel is an announcement of what God has done for us. It is important to make this clear, because the term 'gospel' is sometimes misused. For example, you have probably heard people talk about how

Christians need to 'live the gospel' or 'bring the gospel to bear' in all areas of life. The problem with such statements is that they confuse the gospel with the law. It is God's law, not the gospel, that tells Christians how God wants them to live. In the words of theologian Michael Horton, "While God's commands in Scripture are to be presented, explained, and obeyed, the *gospel* does not exhort us to do certain things, but announces what God has done in his Son." [*The Christian Faith*, 529] This is a crucial point, because if we confuse the law with the gospel we have no hope. It's true that God's law serves as a guide for the redeemed, but apart from the gospel the law is an unbearable burden. It crushes us and leaves us under God's curse. The gospel stands in contrast to the law because it is the announcement of what God has done to secure our salvation. As we sang earlier in the service, "he has hushed the law's loud thunder." The gospel is not at all dependent upon our performance. It is entirely dependent upon God's word of promise. This is what we see in the great passage that is before us this morning. Here is *God's gracious announcement of certain comfort to a people whose sin has left them utterly devastated*. As we study these verses today, I will expound them under three headings: *the announcement of comfort; the dependability of this comfort; and the basis of this comfort*.

The Announcement of Comfort

We begin by considering Isaiah's *announcement of comfort*, which is the focus of verses 1-5. These words are addressed to the people of Judah about one hundred years after Isaiah's lifetime, in the time after the Babylonians had destroyed the temple and carried God's people into captivity. Judgment came upon Israel, just as God said it would. Back in chapter 6, the Lord commissioned Isaiah to speak that message of judgment to his people. But in this passage, as God looks into the future and sees his people in misery, he brings them a message of comfort.

Everyone looks for comfort when they are suffering. And there are a variety of sources of comfort in this world. When Jonelle was having her chemo infusion this week, a volunteer came through with a cart of treats that was labeled the "Comfort Cart." There was also a sign offering free massages to chemo patients. Hospitals do a lot of things to try to help people through their cancer treatments. I am glad that they do these things. I am sure that most of the patients there derive some degree of comfort from them. And we could point to all sorts of other examples of how people comfort one another in meaningful ways.

That being said, there are a number of factors that make the comfort that the Lord is talking about in this passage utterly unique. To begin with, there is the

fact that God refers to the recipients of this comfort as “my people” and to himself as “your God.” The comfort that is being announced in these verses is not for everyone, even though it is announced to everyone. This is a comfort that belongs to the people of God, the people whom God graciously calls his own. If you confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then you are one of God’s people. These wonderful words of comfort are addressed to you.

The comfort that is announced in these verses is also unique because it deals with our most fundamental problem: it deals with our sinfulness. All of the sorrows that we experience in this life are symptoms of this fundamental problem. Other forms of comfort only address the symptoms, but this comfort goes to the source of all our troubles. It deals with the disease of our souls.

In verse 2, the Lord tells his people three things about sin. First, he says that our warfare is ended. To understand what this means, we need to remember that these words were originally addressed to people who knew warfare firsthand. The people of Israel had been conquered and taken into exile by the Babylonians. And that warfare came about as a result of their sin. Sin leads to misery. When God says that our warfare is ended, he is telling us that the gospel brings an end to all of the misery that sin brings into our lives. Think about that for a moment. God is telling you that the gospel really is the answer to all of your problems.

Everything that troubles you, everything that makes life difficult, everything that makes you angry or sad or worried -- the gospel is God's promise that all of these things will come to an end. None of them will prevail over you.

The second thing that the Lord says about sin in verse 2 is that our iniquity is pardoned. That is a truly amazing statement. Sin brings a penalty upon us, a penalty that God cannot simply set aside. God is just, and his justice has to be satisfied. Your sins have to be paid for. There is nothing that you can do to get God pardon your sins. But Isaiah will tell us how our sins can be pardoned in chapter 53, where he says that the sins of God's people have been paid for through Christ's suffering on our behalf. "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed." [53:5]

The third thing that the Lord says about his people's sin in verse 2 is this: "she has received double from the LORD's hand for all her sins." What does this mean? There are two main possibilities. It could mean that the amount of blessing that God pours out on his people is double in proportion to the amount of punishment that their sins deserved. More likely, it means that God's people have received more than enough punishment for their sins, so that the demands of God's justice have been fully met. If this is the meaning, then it too points us

to the Suffering Servant of chapter 53, because it is only through Christ's substitutionary death that God's justice is satisfied.

The other thing that the Lord says in this first section of our passage is that he will come to his people and reveal his glory to them. And he says that the proper preparations have to be made before he can do this. This is similar to the preparations that are made when a foreign dignitary visits another nation. When I was in Uganda several years back, one of the things that we noticed was that they were making a lot of improvements to the main road. We later learned that this was because the Queen of England was scheduled to visit the country sometime in the near future. Her visit was a big deal. Preparations had to be made. It is the same with the coming of the Lord. And God ensured that the proper preparations were made for the coming of Christ by overseeing all that took place in Old Testament history and by sending John the Baptist ahead of Jesus to call people to repent. This is why the apostle Paul says that Jesus came into the world when the fullness of time had come [see Gal. 4:4].

Verse 5 tells us that "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed" when God comes to his people. This is what took place when Jesus came into the world. As John writes in the first chapter of his Gospel: "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father,

full of grace and truth." [Jn. 1:14] Jesus came into the world to reveal God's glory. God's glory is the sum of all of his attributes. It is what distinguishes him as God and sets him apart as transcendent. The comfort that is being announced in this passage is the comfort that comes from knowing the true and living God, a knowledge that is only possible through faith in Jesus Christ. As we read earlier in our service, God "has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." [2 Cor. 4:6]

The Dependability of this Comfort

In the second part of our passage, verses 6-8, the emphasis is upon *the dependability of the comfort that is being announced* here. To make this point, God sets a contrast between his Word and the things of this world. He declares that all flesh is like grass and like the flower of the field. It is not very hard to see the point of these analogies. Flowers are pretty, but they only last for a season. Grass is pleasant, but it quickly dries up, especially under a scorching Middle Eastern sun. God is using these analogies to stress the fleeting nature of human life. No matter what a man accomplishes over the course of his lifetime, no matter how much happiness he experiences, no matter what promises he makes to others, there is no getting around the fact that his days will eventually come to

an end. Listen to the way Christina Rossetti expresses this in her poem “The One Certainty”:

*Like early dew, or like the sudden breath
Of wind, or like the grass that withereth,
Is man, tossed to and fro by hope and fear:
So little joy hath he, so little cheer,
Till all things end in the long dust of death.*

Those words certainly are gloomy, but there is no disputing their truthfulness.

The Bible says essentially the same thing in any number of places, most notably in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes.

God is not impressing this point upon us because he wants to depress us, but because he wants us to see that our hope cannot be founded upon man or any of his accomplishments or anything else in this world. The only true hope is that which is founded upon what God promises in his Word. This is what makes the comfort that is being announced in these verses so certain and so dependable. Every word uttered by God reaches its fulfillment. His purposes cannot be frustrated. All of his promises reach their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In the

words of the apostle Paul, “all the promises of God find their Yes in him.” [2 Cor. 1:20]

It is the certainty of God’s Word that makes the Bible such an inestimable treasure. Only in the Bible do we find food for our souls. This is why your appetite for the Scriptures is an indicator of the state of your spiritual life. In the words of John Owen, “Spiritual life shows itself in a healthy appetite for the Word, grounded in an experience of God’s grace in it. How healthy then is your spiritual appetite? If you have no appetite for God’s Word, then your spiritual life is in a bad state.” [*The Glory of Christ*, 158] The thing that causes the Christian to hunger for God’s Word is the fact that he has experienced the Holy Spirit’s gracious work through it. The Christian can testify that the comfort offered in the Scriptures is of an entirely different quality than any of the comforts that can be found in this world. Those comforts will eventually fade away, but God’s word will stand forever.

The Basis of this Comfort

In the third part of our passage, verses 9-11, the focus is upon *the basis of this comfort*. This section begins with the Lord commanding his prophetic messenger to get up on a high mountain to proclaim his good news. This is to be a public

announcement. It is a message that is to be heard by all peoples. It is to be boldly proclaimed to the ends of the earth. This is why the church always needs to get the gospel message out there. The Lord has commanded us to go and make disciples of all nations.

What is the message that we are to declare? This passage makes it clear that it is not a message that focuses upon the interests and concerns of man. It does not say to people, 'Have you ever thought about how a little religion might enhance your life?' No. It is a message that says, "Behold your God!" It announces the coming of the Lord to defend, save, and care for all of those whom he has appointed to eternal life.

Let me call your attention to how God is described in these verses. This is the most important thing in the passage. God is the basis of the comfort that is being announced here. It is his presence in the midst of his people that makes the difference for them. Notice that God is described as both powerful and tender in these verses. He rules in might while also leading with gentleness. He is the perfect shepherd. He has all the power necessary to ensure the safety of his flock, but he is gentle in the exercise of this power. Look at how Isaiah describes God's shepherding work in verse 11. He says that the Lord tends his entire flock, that he gathers the lambs in his arms, and that he gently leads those that are with

young. This shows us that the Lord cares for his sheep in a comprehensive manner, making sure that none of them are overlooked or neglected. It shows us that he takes special care to ensure the safety of the weak and immature members of his flock. And it shows us that he takes the individual circumstances of each one of his sheep into account as he tends them. This is a picture of how the Lord cares for you, if you are one of his sheep.

This passage reminds us that the gospel is not about God telling us to haul ourselves up from our miserable condition. There is no comfort in that kind of message. Instead, the gospel is God's announcement that he has sent his one and only Son into the world to bear our iniquities and secure our salvation. In Christ, God reveals his glory. And Isaiah tells us that all flesh will one day see this glory. This is why it is so urgent that the gospel be proclaimed in all the earth. It is why it is so important for you and me to behold the glory of God in Jesus Christ. In the words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

“every man and woman who has ever been born, in any time, at any place, will have to see God's glory. And what you will feel at that moment

is determined by what you know about his glory now... The glory of the Lord has been revealed [in Jesus Christ and his gospel.] See it. Begin to glory in it, and be eternally saved by it." [*The All-Sufficient God*, 46, 47]