

Isaiah 40:1-8

Comfort, comfort my people,

says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

What really comforts us?

The whole world is looking for comfort. We have whole industries devoted to our comfort. We have comfort TV, comfort shopping, comfort eating. We surround ourselves with comfort but our anxieties are through the roof. We live in an age of anxiety, depression and addiction greater than any we've known. And it seems the more prosperous the country, the greater the anxieties. Developed western nations report FAR more anxiety disorders, far more depression and far more general stress than less developed nations that do not enjoy our creature comforts. So what kind of comfort do we have, *really*?

Let me suggest that for a culture obsessed with comfort, we know nothing about REAL comfort. The kind of comfort we seek is the sugar-rush of a Gingerbread Latte, or the distraction of a new favourite TV programme, or the brief thrill of owning the latest gadget. Our comfort is here today, gone tomorrow.

And when REAL trouble strikes in life, what comfort is a Gingerbread Latte?

What comfort do we actually have for the realities of life?

Our comforts don't really work. WHY? Because they don't go deep enough or high enough.

But Isaiah 40 gives us true comfort. [SLIDE] It meets us in the depths and raises us to the heights.

At this point in the book, the prophet Isaiah really changes gears. In the first 39 chapters Isaiah was speaking warnings to Israel. Israel in the first 39 chapters was a bit like us – they were comfortable and complacent, feeling very secure. But that was *before* catastrophe struck. Two world super-powers came against Israel – first the Assyrians attacked and then the Babylonians who sacked Jerusalem and carried off the people into exile. So from chapter 40, the people *are* in exile but now Isaiah is speaking to a suffering people and here he promises a future hope. When they were comfortable,

he preached destruction. Now that they are suffering, he preaches true comfort - comfort *beyond* the exile.

Here is a comfort that's not false, ephemeral comfort. Here's comfort that holds true even when you've been over-run by a foreign army, even when your friends, family and countrymen have been brutally killed by militants, when your city has been destroyed and now you're kicked out of God's promised land under God's curse. Isaiah's comfort plumbs the depths but it also promises the heights. Let me tell you how he does it. He says

[SLIDE]

“TAKE COMFORT. JUDGEMENT IS COMING. YOU'RE ALL PERISHING.”

He says slightly more than that, but that's the gist of it. In these 8 verses God tells someone to preach 3 different times. Three mini-sermons to be delivered by a human voice. The first mini-sermon in verses 1-2 is meant to proclaim comfort. Then from verse 3, God wants a human voice to preach about judgement. The third mini-sermon from verse 6 says remember that you are like perishing grass, soon to be blown away. Those are the three mini-sermons and if you get them you'll be properly comforted. Sounds nuts I know – but if we follow Isaiah we'll see that it's true. Let's follow him, verse 1:

Comfort, comfort my people,

says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and proclaim to her

that her hard service [warfare] has been completed,

that her sin has been paid for,

that she has received from the Lord's hand

double for all her sins.

Here is real comfort but it's comfort that plumbs the depths. Isaiah speaks of Israel's "hard service" – really it's the word for military service. The Israelites have been at war. But ultimately it's not the Babylonians they've been fighting. They've been fighting God. That's ultimately why they've been kicked out of their land. It's a problem of their SIN, verse 2. Their real enemy has been God.

Here Isaiah is going deep with his comfort because he's diagnosing their real problem. What do we think our real problem is?

When things go wrong we always misdiagnose our problems. We think our real problem is: that person, that situation, that diagnosis, that redundancy, that bill. The Bible says no, it's you. It's us. It's our war against God. And every time we point the finger at our circumstances we're testifying to our real problem. Our real problem is: We ignore God in His world. Our problem is the broken relationship with HIM. It's our sin. And the only lasting comfort we can ever receive must face THAT. So Isaiah plumbs the depths. He says: it's worse than you thought. But it's also better than you imagined.

Because a payment has been made for your sins. Look, verse 2. In fact it's an overpayment. It's twice what you owe.

Imagine the bailiffs knocking on your door, you keep pretending you're out but you can't keep the debt collectors at bay any longer, they've burst into your home, the children are screaming, you're about to lose everything and a friend turns up – He's built like a brick out-house, and he's carrying an envelope stuffed with cash. It's far more than you owe. But he doesn't care, he just wants the debt collectors off your back. So your friend stands between you and bailiff and shoves the money into the bailiff's top pocket saying "Take it and leave this family alone forever. Go on, go!" Imagine that.

Isaiah says "Be comforted: Your God has done that for you." Whoever wants a piece of you because of your sin? They must go. The devil wants to accuse you? He must go, the debt is paid. Your conscience wants to accuse you? It needs to quieten down because the debt is paid. Your God has become your friend and your ransom. He has paid off more than you owe. Now no-one can collect a spiritual debt off of you. Ever. Your God – the One you were at war with, He has made the payment.

How does that work? How can the God we are at war with NOW provide a ransom payment.

We'll read on to verse 3 and the second mini-sermon of our passage. Here's the next VOICE. Verse 3:

3 A voice of one calling:

'In the wilderness prepare

the way for the Lord;

make straight in the desert

a highway for our God.

Does that verse sound familiar? It should do, it was part of our first reading. John the Baptist claims to BE this person promised in Isaiah 40. 700 years after Isaiah wrote this prophecy, John the Baptist stands up and says “I’m the Voice. I’m the one Isaiah was writing about and here I am.”

But if John the Baptist is the Voice. And if John was preparing the way for Jesus, then who is Jesus? Well verse 3 says in no uncertain terms: Jesus is “The LORD.” Jesus is “Our God.”

And this is the extraordinary answer to the question “How can God pay off our debt to God?” Well step forward the LORD Jesus. Step forward God the Son. The Eternal Word of the Father became flesh 2000 years ago. At Christmas He came as our Brother. And He came to take responsibility for us – even to take responsibility for our debts. That’s what He does on the cross. As our Sacrificial Lamb, on the cross Jesus paid double for EVERYTHING we owe – so that now nothing stands against us in the court of heaven. We are MORE than spotless. Through Jesus’ death we’ve been ransomed twice over. No wonder John the Baptist repeatedly pointed to Jesus and said “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” That’s how John, the Voice calling in the wilderness, prepared the people for the coming of the LORD.

But John’s words (and Isaiah’s words) echo on down through history. Because Jesus didn’t just come ONCE. He rose again and will one day come back in an Almighty Victory Procession. That’s how verse 3 goes on. *Make straight in the desert*

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 people will see it together.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’

The LORD Jesus will return like an emperor along a highway. Imagine a Victorious King returning from their conquest and a special road is built for their victory procession – that's the image here. And everything will have to make way for this King, this LORD, this God.

Here is a picture of judgement day. Here is the time when the glory of God will be seen by everyone, and on that day every wrong will be righted and every evil will be punished. Isaiah says "Take heart, judgement is coming."

I wonder how you feel about judgement.

It's funny, in the west – the *comfortable* west – we generally HATE the idea of judgement day. We live in comparative ease here. And we can pretty much trust the rule of law in this country, we don't suffer huge miscarriages of justice and so we're not like the rest of the world. The rest of the world LONGS FOR PEACE and LONGS FOR JUSTICE. We're spoilt. We don't really. Until something happens like in Peshawar. And then we all cry out for justice.

After the school massacre in Peshawar a friend of mine on Facebook – not a Christian – linked to the school massacre where 141 people died and he said (well I can't say what he actually said because there was some serious swearing in there but he said): "I *really* hope there's a hell." I REALLY HOPE THERE'S A HELL.

When we're confronted with the evil and injustice of this world, even non-Christians say "I hope there's a hell. I hope there's judgement. I hope there's a righting of wrongs."

Yesterday my hairdresser – again, not a Christian - was telling me how much he hated hospitals. I said, one day Jesus is going to come back and there'll be no more hankerchiefs, no more hearses and no more hospitals because crying and death and disease will be gone. He said "I want that NOW. Why can't He come now?" My hairdresser is not ready to meet his Maker. My friend on Facebook is not ready to meet his Maker. They don't know the Judge, they haven't been reconciled to Jesus yet, but fascinatingly, they still want something of judgement day. They want evil punished, they want a fallen world put right.

Actually in the Bible, people LONG for judgement day.

Hear this from Psalm 96:

11 Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;

let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

¹² Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

¹³ Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Psalm 98 is similar. As are whole tracts of Revelation. And of course in the NT one in every 13 verses *looks forward* to the return of Christ. *Looks forward* to it!

How you feel about judgement? When “the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together.”

How should we understand judgement? If we were to go to any place in the Bible to understand judgement, where would we go? Surely the book of Judges would be an obvious place to go. There we see human evil, gross injustice, people cry out to God and He gives them a Judge – a ruling king who brings justice. The Judge is raised up by God, filled with His Spirit, he takes his people’s side, fights for his people, defeats the wicked enemies and brings peace to the land. That’s what judges do.

Jesus is Judge. What does this mean? Well, biblically, it means He is raised up by God, filled with His Spirit, He takes His people’s side, He fights for us, He defeats our wicked enemies on the cross and rises again to bring peace to the earth. Jesus is Judge.

¹³ Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness. (Psalm 96:13)

Take heart: Judgement is coming! And when the Judge comes He will bring reversals to this natural world order.

Verse 4:

Every valley shall be raised up,

every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

Valleys are dark places, fearful places, places of death. “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”. That’s what valleys are in the Bible. Those places will be raised up.

On the other hand mountains are pictures of kingdoms and kings, of earthly strength. They will tumble.

Isaiah teases out this thought in chapter 2. Here’s what will happen on judgement day.

The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled
and human pride brought low;
the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.

¹²The LORD Almighty has a day in store

for all the proud and lofty,
for all that is exalted
(and they will be humbled),

¹³for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and lofty,

and all the oaks of Bashan,

¹⁴for all the towering mountains

and all the high hills,

¹⁵for every lofty tower

and every fortified wall,

¹⁶for every trading ship

and every stately vessel.

¹⁷ The arrogance of man will be brought low

and human pride humbled;

the LORD alone will be exalted in that day,

Notice that judgement day is not primarily a division between the goodies and the badies. It's a division between the good LORD and a bad human race. The division on that day is not between those who can stand in their own strength and those who are swept away in judgement. Only the LORD Jesus stands on that day. The difference is between those who hide themselves in the LORD in repentance and faith and those who try to stand alone, and trust in their own lofty powers. They will be brought low. And Christmas is the proof that all who are lofty will be brought low.

Christmas is the time of THE Great Climb Down – all so that He can raise the lowly. Remember Mary's song when she learns that she's pregnant? She sings

Luke 1:51-53

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

This is Christ's right-side-up kingdom. We spend our lives climbing the ladder, take, grab, scratch, kill, get ahead, get out from under. The LORD's own philosophy is different. Because – think of Christmas – He had it all and traded it in for love. Down He comes into the womb of Mary, into the manger, into a hostile world. On that first Christmas Jesus descended into a genocide (Matthew 2:16-18). And He was very nearly slain right away. Nonetheless, what does a Judge do? He joins His people. He takes their side, and filled with God's Spirit, He fights for us – all the way through the

valley of the shadow, He keeps fighting for us and enters our darkness at its most fearful point on the cross.

The King is crucified as a criminal. So how can we try to raise ourselves up? How can we want to be mountains? Jesus brings down rulers from their thrones. And then He rises again on Easter morning to raise up valleys.

You want to know what a Christian is? A Christian is someone who abandons the high ground of their own righteousness. We claim NO high ground WHATSOEVER. Instead we are found in the valley, confessing our sin and trusting in our Good Shepherd who meets us in the valley and raises us up. That's how judgement works – the right-side-up Judge Jesus, brings down the lofty and self-sufficient and raises up those who have nothing but simply hide themselves in Him. That's how judgement works.

So then it's very important to realise we have nothing. It's very important that we don't mistake ourselves for great high mountains, isn't it. That's what the third voice in our passage is all about. From verse 6

6 A voice says, 'Cry out.'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

'All people are like grass,

and all their faithfulness 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 endures for ever.'

Take Heart: judgement is coming and you're all perishing.

We are like grass. Pretty but insubstantial. When you see the heather on a Scottish hillside you become aware that wild grasses can look breath-takingly beautiful. But they're completely ephemeral. Here today and gone tomorrow.

Like Christmas trees.

The breath/Spirit of the Lord blows on us and we fall. We cannot handle the Truth.

But Jesus is like a vibrant, living tree. He was described like that back in Isaiah 6 and in Isaiah 11. Jesus is like a tree that got planted into our soil at Christmas. We are perishing branches that can be grafted into Him.

He is the eternal Word of God who took our flesh. He joined Himself to us, so that if we are joined to HIM, then we share in His life, now and forever.

This is our only option. We are perishing – like grass withering. Like Christmas tree boughs, going brown – we have no future. But Jesus, the eternal Word of the Father endures forever. He ALONE will stand on the last day. He ALONE!

THEREFORE abandon all hope in yourself. Your achievements, your experiences, your goodness is like tinsel on a perishing tree. But Jesus is the Word of God, made flesh. He's the true Life Source planted into this world. And He's offered to you. Isaiah 9:6

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

Isaiah wants to give us comfort. But first he strips away our false comforts. He says the Judge is Coming to right every wrong and YOU – YOU are simply grass that perishes. Don't take your comfort from ANYTHING in you or ANYTHING in this world. If you do, that comfort will be taken away.

But there is true comfort. There is a Word of God who became flesh at Christmas. He's the true **Judge** of the world. The One filled with the Spirit, who came to take your side, fight your battles, to PAY YOUR DEBT and to rise again to victory. THIS JESUS is coming again to set the world to rights. To eradicate evil and to raise up the world just like He was raised from the dead – raised up to immortal, feasting joy. THAT'S COMFORT. And you can know right now whether you have this comfort or not. Let me ask you a simple question. How do you feel about Jesus returning to judge the earth?

Maybe you're not a Christian and you think: "I'd rather He didn't return. I'm quite enjoying my life right now." Can I remind you that you – like me – are grass? You're withering. You do not have a future. Not by yourself you don't. And can I point you to Jesus: I promise you, no-one else is offering a future for planet earth. No-one. Muslims want to get zapped off to paradise, Buddhists and Hindus want nirvana, atheists think

the sun's going to explode and that's that. Only Jesus actually promises life – REAL LIFE. If you want life, come to Jesus. You are perishing, you desperately need Him.

Maybe you *are* a Christian but still you're unsure about judgement day. Maybe you think your life is too bad for Jesus. You're not sure how you'll go in the final judgement and actually, if you're honest you *don't* rejoice that the Judge is coming, cos frankly you're afraid it would be curtains for you.

Well friend, you've forgotten that the payment has been made. It's been paid twice over at the cross. If you had to pay for your own sins then you and everyone on earth would HAVE to go to hell. But Christ has paid. He's the Judge who takes your side, who pays your debt, who defeats your enemy, who rises to victory and gives it all to you for free and forever. "To YOU the Christmas child is born. To YOU the divine Son is given. And the government WILL be upon His shoulders."

(That's true Christmas comfort)