

Comfort My People: Isaiah 40 and the Exaltation of the Valleys, part 1 by Ward Fenley

One of the great prophetic texts of Scripture is that of Isaiah 40. It is well-known for its clear prediction of John the Baptist. And it is also well-known as a Christmas text. Even Handel's Messiah has at least two arias that cite texts within the passage. With abundant metaphor the prophet describes the longing of God to have His people comforted. But from the very beginning of the text God has us understand the meaning behind the metaphor.

Isaiah 40:1-2 Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins.

The message is simple: John, tell the people that Messiah has come. Tell the people, "Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29)

In a time of persecution from the Babylonians, God's manner was to speak not only to their deserved captivity, but also to bring words of promise reminding His people of the time when their iniquity would be pardoned. Whatever metaphor is used in vv. 1-11, God gives us the meaning of the blessings that follow the initial outcry. From the onset, however, we learn much of God's desire: He wants to comfort His people through His people.

Though we acknowledge God's monumental sovereignty, His justice, power, holiness, and all the attributes that, from the human perspective, seem to be lofty (and indeed are), we infrequently visit the grandeur and loftiness of God's attribute of comfort. We speak of His mercy, but we must recognize the correlation of mercy and comfort. As Christians it is imperative that we try to understand this attribute if we are to become more intimately familiar with the God we love, and understand His historical workings toward Israel to set forth the love He would bring to all nations through her: that God would one day comfort not only Israel but also the people that persecuted her, be they Assyrians, Babylonians, Grecians, and yes, even the dreaded Romans and those who would follow. The Apostle Paul refers to God this way:

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; 4 Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. 5 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. 6 And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. 7 And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation.

What would the Israelites have been thinking upon receiving Isaiah's prophecy? Knowing that captivity was certain, what would a passage like this have meant to them? For Paul the answer was simple: He was undergoing (along with the rest of

his brethren) the worst persecution that had ever been endured by the true Israel of God. He was writing to an afflicted people. But the words he spoke were not words of an unfulfilled prophecy. They were words of a fulfilled prophecy. The God of all comfort had finally fulfilled Isaiah 40. He wanted His people to know that in the midst of thick turmoil and trial that Jesus Christ had brought about the removal of warfare and the pardon of iniquity. To the minds of a 21st century generation, far-removed from the advent of Messiah, we have a tendency to view iniquity, or sin, with a little less severity. We must remember that under the Old Covenant the day of atonement was a yearly reminder that God's people were in fact guilty sinners and under the curse of death and separation from God:

Hebrews 10:1-4 For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. 2 For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. 3 But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. 4 For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.

The true believers of God understood that the sacrifices were offered not to *take away* their sins but rather were offered to remind them of their sins. Watching only the high priest enter the holiest of all was the reminder that they could not enter into that place themselves; that they were indeed separated from God:

Isaiah 59:1-15 Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: 2 But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear. 3 For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue hath muttered perverseness. 4 None calleth for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth: they trust in vanity, and speak lies; they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity. 5 They hatch cockatrice' eggs, and weave the spider's web: he that eateth of their eggs dieth, and that which is crushed breaketh out into a viper. 6 Their webs shall not become garments, neither shall they cover themselves with their works: their works are works of iniquity, and the act of violence is in their hands. 7 Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths. 8 The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths: whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace. 9 Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us: we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness. 10 We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noonday as in the night; we are in desolate places as dead men. 11 We roar all like bears, and mourn sore like doves: we look for judgment, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far off from us. 12 For our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us: for our transgressions are with us; and as for our iniquities, we know them; 13 In transgressing and lying against the LORD, and departing away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood. 14 And judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter. 15 Yea, truth faileth; and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a

prey: and the LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no judgment.

God's command: Comfort My people...Cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished. That her iniquity is pardoned. God's people were at enmity with Him. Regardless of His display of law, statutes, judgments, ritual, ceremony, and communication with them through a prophet, priest, or king, God made it clear that Israel had violated Him. She had defiled herself and was covered in her blood. She was guilty of offending the Holy God. God made this known to her through law and prophets. But most particularly God made this known through sacrifice. We in the 21st century often think of Old Testament sacrifice as mere ritual. But to the mind of an Israelite sacrifice spoke of separation, warfare, transgression, enmity, and death. Every year this took place: a reminder that they were unholy, defiled, filthy, sinners in the hands of an angry God. And suddenly, in the midst of an exile because of that very sin, God prophesies, "Comfort ye My people." All Isaiah could do was pen the command; foretell the coming good news; the good news that the God of all comfort would one day comfort them through the removal of their sins. So to the mind of a first-century Christian Jew the statement that God is the God of all comfort meant the world, for nothing could be greater than knowing that in spite of the tribulation they were enduring, they were assured that their iniquities were gone and that their warfare with the eternal God was over. The God of all comfort had accomplished peace for them. We must remember that God's usual manner of dealing with them was to place them under persecution *because* of their sin. Now they were under persecution *because* of their innocence. So it is understandable that they would be wondering: Is this wrong? Is this real? Am I truly innocent? Have I truly been made the righteousness of God? Did Christ actually become sin so that I would become the righteousness of God? These thoughts to a people used to a 1400-year history of law, guilt, punishment, exiles, and omens, would certainly plague the first-century Christian-Jewish mind.

Paul frequently wrote of this warfare and the former standing of the people of God, even specifically, the Gentiles who had no hope prior to the cross:

Ephesians 2:12-17 That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: 13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; 15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; 16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: 17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.

He also wrote to the Colossians:

Colossians 1:21-22 And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled 22 In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight:

And also to the Romans:

Romans 5:10 For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

Romans 8:7 Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

Through Christ, the cry of John the Baptist was sure: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

So then, we see how warfare is accomplished, or finished: through the removal of sin or the pardoning of sin. This pardoning was frequently predicted in Isaiah:

Isaiah 53:5-6 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

But Micah is just as specific regarding this pardoning:

Micah 7:18-19 Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. 19 He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.

Many Christians, particularly those who believe in the present kingdom and power of Christ, are often confused concerning our message to our brothers and sisters. That is, how do we strengthen them? How do we encourage them? How do we help them in their walk with Christ? The answer is fairly simple: we are called to model Christ to each other. If the message of Christ is, "speak comfortably to Jerusalem," and "cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished," then it is indeed the crying need of Christians to be reminded of the great truths of peace with God and pardon from sin. So many Christians believe it is their task to remind God's people of their sin. But God tells us to tell each other that our sin is pardoned. John the Baptist obeyed that command. Obeying that command is obeying the royal law. That is how we love one another: by reminding each other that there is no more enmity. One of the greatest struggles in the lives of Christians today is over feeling guilty. The feeling of a guilty conscience. This feeling is initially introduced by bad teaching. Then that teaching becomes imbedded in the heart as doctrine and produces guilt. This is a false teaching or doctrine. The doctrine of guilt (and of course guilt manipulation) is a tactic to get people to 'go to church,' serve in the church, abstain from vices, give tithes, etc. But God uses different language:

Colossians 3:12-17 Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; 13 Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. 14 And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. 15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to

the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. 17 And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.

Everything we do toward each other is to be patterned after the love of Christ demonstrated through forgiveness. We sing with grace in our hearts and forgive. This is the demonstration of love. This is how we obey the Evangel: Cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished and that her iniquity is pardoned. Nothing is more rewarding and joy-inducing than a clear conscience. And if we can somehow be a part of encouraging each other to experience that clear conscience, then we have royally fulfilled the royal law.