

The God Who Comforts

Isaiah 40:1-8

Introduction:

In the year 1562, Elector Frederick III ordered the preparation of a new catechism for his territory. Frederick had previously been devoted to the Roman Catholic church but had recently embraced the theology of the Protestant Reformation. In an effort to unify his people, Frederick commissioned a group of professors and pastors to prepare a new catechism as a tool for teaching children the Bible AND as a guide for pastors.

This catechism would quickly become one of the most widely circulated book in the world. Like the Westminster Catechism, the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, as it would be called, soon became its most well known feature. Now, you'll remember that the first question of the Westminster Catechism is: "What is the chief end of man?" A: "To glorify God, and enjoy him forever." But the Heidelberg Catechism begins like this:

Q: "What is your ONLY comfort in life and in death?"

Notice that the question is NOT, "What is A comfort in your life and in death?" But, "What is your ONLY comfort in life and death?"

I wonder how you would answer that question today. Well listen to how these brothers in Heidelberg over 450 years ago, answered it: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" Answer: "That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my father in heaven: in fact, all things MUST work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by His Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

Isn't that a rich statement? And why is it so rich? It's rich BECAUSE its brimming full with God's unchanging PROMISES to His people. Every line is underwritten by God's unchanging devotion and care for those whom He loves. And that reality ought to bring such a sweet comfort, that it can rightly be called our ONLY comfort.

That's true with the Heidelberg Catechism. And it's also true with Isaiah 40:1-8. And what I want to show you this morning is that at the foundational level, the believers ONLY comfort in life and in death are the promises of God.

Now, we are parachuting into Isaiah here, and we need to get our bearings on the context of Isaiah 40. You'll remember that Isaiah was a prophet in the OT, who ministered from 739 to 686 BC. That's over 50 years. For over 50 years Isaiah proclaimed the word of God over and against the rising tide of idolatry, apostasy, and sin in the nation.

Remember that Isaiah was called by God in Isaiah 6, where he saw the Lord sitting on his throne and fell to his face in shame. God provided an atonement, and when Isaiah rose, he heard the voice of God saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" And Isaiah said, "Here am I. Send me!" He had been profoundly humbled and was ready to serve the Lord in whatever capacity God should use him.

The next scene, God responds to Isaiah by telling him that he would spend his life preaching to a people who would not listen to him. They would reject God's message, and ultimately reject Isaiah the prophet. (In fact, tradition states that Isaiah was martyred by Manasseh, the King of Judah). And in Isaiah 6:11, God gave Isaiah a sort of timeline for his ministry. He was to keep preaching, "Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, Houses are without people and the land is utterly desolate..." That is to say "Isaiah, go and preach my message of repentance, and I'm telling you ahead of time, that the people will reject it. And

what's more, I will send them into captivity because of their idolatry, apostasy, and rampant sin against me.”

And if you remember the history, that's exactly what happened. Isaiah preached. The people rejected it. Israel was taken captive and years later Judah and Jerusalem was destroyed. And at this point The hope of the people of Judah, and Israel was gone. They are held captive in a foreign land. Their city is destroyed. Their temple, representing to them the presence of God, is also destroyed.

This was a devastating time. The prophet Jeremiah , who lived to see both the captivity and destruction of Judah wrote the book of Lamentations to express his sorrow over what took place. He captures the spirit of the day well when he wrote in chapter one,

- V.1 “How lonely sits the city that was full of people! She has become like a widow who was once great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a forced laborer!”
- V2. “She weeps bitterly in the night and her tears are on her cheeks; She has none to comfort her among all her lovers. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; They have become her enemies.
- V 3. “Judah has gone into exile under affliction, and under harsh servitude; She dwells among the nations, but she has found no rest; all her pursuers have overtaken her in the midst of distress.”
- V 5. “Her adversaries have become her masters, her enemies prosper; for the LORD has caused her grief because of the multitude of her transgressions; her little ones have gone away as captives before the adversary.”
- V 9b. “She has no comforter.”
- V 11. “All her people groan seeking bread; they have given their precious things for food.”
- V 14. “The yoke of my transgressions is bound; by His hand they are knit together. They have come upon my neck; He has made my strength fail. The Lord has given me into the hands of those against whom I am not able to stand.”
- V 16. “For these things I weep (says, Jeremiah); My eyes run down with water; because far from me is a comforter, one who restores my soul. My children are desolate because the enemy has prevailed.”
- V 17. “Zion stretches out her hands; there is no one to comfort her...”

This is a tragic scene. The people are exiled. Oppressed. They feel abandoned by God and have no hope. By all appearances God has left his former people to suffer, with no comfort.

So, here is the question: What will God say to these rebellious, suffering people? Well in verse 1 of Isaiah 40, we are brought into the hidden counsel of God. We get to peak into his heart, as it were, and see what God delights to do with rebellious sinners who repent and trust in him.

Listen to what he says, “Comfort, Comfort my people,” says your God.” Now there is a world of comfort just in that sentence. “Comfort” is a plural imperative verb, meaning that God is speaking to multiple people. What we have here is a sort of prophetic commissioning, where God is in council and he is speaking to several prophets. He’s giving them a message to take to his exiled people. What is the message? COMFORT. Comfort.

Now this is a remarkable statement on its own because the people are worried that God has abandoned them. They think He has forsaken them – that he is done with them because of their sin. Their thought is expressed in Isaiah 40:27, where they say, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God.” The idea is that God has forgotten us. He is not aware of our plight. He has abandoned us. That’s the thought.

Its into that sort of depressed, dark, hopeless thinking that God commands the prophets: “Comfort! Comfort MY PEOPLE!, says your God.” Despite their incessant defiance of God. Despite their failure. Despite their unfaithfulness which led to their captivity and immense suffering, God still calls them his people, “my people.” It’s incredible. It’s one of the great wonders of the OT how God so patiently bears with Israel. Time and again God proved himself to be just as He said, “Patient, Merciful, gracious, and abounding in steadfast love.” Bearing with the infirmities of His people.

God wants His suffering people to be comforted. But How will he do it? How will he bring comfort to these people who have suffered so immensely? Well, what we see Him do in verses 2-8, is to proclaim to His people His precious and unchanging promise. It is the promise of God that is to bring them ultimate comfort. And it is the promise of God that is to bring us our greatest comfort as well. What promises, specifically? What promises will God give in order to bring the greatest comfort to his suffering people? He gives them three. Three specific promises aimed to bring them ultimate comfort in life and in death. Let me give them to you and then we will walk through them one by one:

The promise of a certain salvation (1-2)
The promise of a cosmic king (3-5)
The promise of a changeless word (6-8)

First, the promise of a certain salvation. Look at verse 2, God tells these future prophets to do this: “Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

These are, in essence, promises of a future salvation that are aimed to comfort a suffering people. Let me show you what I mean. The prophets are called to speak kindly to Jerusalem. Not harshly, not ruthlessly, not in judgement. But tenderly. The word is literally, “speak to the heart.” And what are they to speak so tenderly? First, they are to “call out to her, that her warfare has ended.”

The word “warfare” actually speaks of the type of military service one entered into in order to pay off a debt. That’s why some translations call it a “hard-service.” The idea is that Judah had entered into Babylonian captivity because of her own debt, her own sin. BUT now, the prophet is commissioned to proclaim that Judah’s hard service is complete.

Notice the next line: "That her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins." The word double, refers to "the two halves of something that is folded in half." So you take a piece of paper, fold it in half, and both sides are equivalent (if you're good at folding paper). And so what God means here is that the people of Judah have suffered justly for their sin. The punishment of exile was perfectly measured and exactly what their sin demanded. The double. They have born the punishment for their own sin. That is just. In this sense the Babylonian captivity was the perfectly measured punishment for their sin and it would come to an end some day.

BUT remember, Isaiah is writing this prophecy, at minimum, 80 years before the people of Judah would actually enter into Babylonian captivity. So Isaiah is looking forward. And as we read through Isaiah, especially chapters 40-66, Isaiah's message shifts to one of future hope. A hope of salvation for Judah AND Israel, AND also the NATIONS at large.

And in Isaiah 42, the prophet introduces the key figure, the Messiah, who will bring this future salvation about. In chapters 42-53, Isaiah calls this Messianic figure, "The Servant of God" and there are four "songs," as they are called, that reveal who this Messianic-Servant would be and what He would accomplish for the people of God. The crowning work which Isaiah's future Messiah would accomplish is detailed in Isaiah 53. And it has a direct correspondence to Israel's bearing of sin.

Of this Messianic figure, Isaiah writes:

- V.1 "Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?"
- V 2. "For He (the Messiah-Servant) grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; he has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.
- V 3. "He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face he was despised, and we did not esteem him."

- V 4. "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted."
- V 5. "But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed."
 - Do you see that?! Isaiah is looking forward. He is telling Judah in Isaiah 40 that they will certainly bear their own sin. But a day is coming when the Servant of God, the Messiah will step in and bear the iniquity of His people. There is coming a day when you will no longer bear the iniquity for your sin, but the Suffering Servant will bear it for you! He will be pierced through for your transgressions. He will be crushed for your iniquities!
- V 6. "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on HIM."
- V 7. "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth."
- V 8. "By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?"
- V 10. "But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief..."
- V 11. "As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities."

Now the people of Judah would bear the just punishment for their sin (Isaiah 40). And they would go into exile for it. BUT the day would come, when the Messiah, the Suffering Servant of God, would enter into the world and take the full weight of punishment for His sinful people. Now friends we know that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the one who lived and died on behalf of all sinners who unite to him by faith.

And His substitutionary death, on our behalf, is the ultimate comfort. The promise of a full pardon of our sin because Christ bore the punishment in our place! He accomplished a full salvation for sinners.

And that full, promised, future salvation is so absolutely certain that we are accustomed to speak of it in the past tense. We say, "I was saved," or, present tense, "I am saved." When we do

this we are actually looking at the future as if it is so certain we claim its realities in the present.

And we have good grounds to do so, because that is exactly what Paul does in Romans 8:30

30 and those whom He predestined, He also called; and those whom He called, He also justified; and those whom He justified, He also glorified.

But wait, Paul, glorification is a future reality. A reality wherein the believer is completely conformed to Christ. That is not true of me. And I don't think it is true of you right now, in the present. So, how can Paul speak of future glorification as a past tense reality? He can do so because the promised glorification of the saints is so absolutely certain, so immovably fixed by God that it is as if it has already happened. That is what Paul is saying in Philippians 1:6 when he writes, "I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

Oh friend, the promise of a certain salvation, guaranteed by Christ who bore the iniquity of His people, brings a world of comfort in death, and it will sustain your walk in life as well.

The second promise that God gives, aimed to comfort His beloved people, is the promise of a Cosmic King. Look at verses 3-5.

3 A voice is calling,

"Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness;

Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

4 "Let every valley be lifted up,

And every mountain and hill be made low;

And let the rough ground become a plain,

And the rugged terrain a broad valley;

5 Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,

And all flesh will see *it* together;

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

There is perhaps nothing more visibly devastating than the failed leadership of a Nation. The people of Israel and Judah, had been utterly let down by their leaders. Prophet, priest, and king had completely failed to lead as God required. The leaders had “blood on their hands,” and were largely culpable for the peoples rebellion against God. Speaking of this, the prophet Hosea wrote,

(4:7) “The more they multiplied, the more they sinned against Me; I will change their glory into shame. (8) They [the religious leadership] feed on the sin of My people and direct their desire toward their iniquity. (9) And it will be, like people, like priest; so I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds. (10) They will eat, but not have enough; they will play the harlot, but not increase, because **they have stopped giving heed to the LORD.**”

The priest, the prophets, and even the kings would bear the punishment with the people and enter exile because they were all guilty. They fed on the sins of the people, that is they capitalized on their sin for their own benefit, and they stopped giving heed to the LORD. But that would not be the end of the matter. God promised the coming of a Cosmic King, who would make things right. That’s what we see in verses 3-5.

The common practice for a visiting king in the Ancient Near East was to send emissaries ahead of him in order to prepare the way for his arrival. These ambassadors would run ahead of the king and ensure that the path was clear for him and that the appropriate pomp and circumstance accompanied his arrival.

In our text, though, the coming dignitary is no ordinary king. Verse 3 says, “Clear the way for the LORD [all caps covenant name of Yahweh] in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.” Isaiah is saying that, in the future, God will actually return to His

people. Therefore, “every valley” would need to be “lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.” The “rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley.” This was necessary for God, the King of Kings, to make his entrance

Now this language should be familiar because it has a measure of fulfillment in the ministry of John the Baptist, where we learn that in one sense the preparation for the coming Messiah-King was actually the repentance of the people. That is, the leveling of mountains and valleys was the repentance of the nation. Listen to Matthew 3:1-3

- 3:1 Now in those days John the Baptist *¹came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying,
2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said,
“THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS,
'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD,
MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!' ”

John the Baptist called the people to repent in order to be ready to receive the coming Divine King. And who was that? Jesus.

Now, what was not disclosed to Isaiah, or subsequent prophets, was the timeline for Jesus’s established/or consummated kingdom. He came to earth. To His people. The way was prepared, and He entered Jerusalem as the King of Israel. BUT he was rejected and despised by the people (just as Isaiah 53 prophesied) and he was crucified according to the “definite plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23). All this took place in order that the Messiah, the Servant of God, Jesus, could fulfill the role of the suffering servant who would bear the sins of His people on the cross.

In His first coming, the way was prepared by John the Baptist. And rather than glory, it was marked by humiliation. BUT, he will return in glory! And when he does, Isaiah’s prophecy

will reach its complete fulfillment, “And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and (notice verse 5) ALL flesh will see it together.” All Flesh. When the King returns, his reign will be cosmic. ALL flesh will see him. And “the government will rest on His shoulders” and “of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end!” He will sit on “the throne of David” and “His kingdom will be established and will be upheld in total justice and righteousness from “that point on and forevermore”(Isaiah 9:6-7).

The angel Gabriel put it this way to Mary (Lk 1:31-33):

- 31 “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.
32 “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;
33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”

And in Revelation 1, John writes, “BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and **every eye will see Him**, even those who pierced Him...”

Jesus’s second coming will be a global event and His consummated kingdom will be cosmic. When he sits on His consummated throne, the lion will lie down with the lamb, and peace will be established on earth.

How does this bring comfort to God’s people?

-When we experience injustice, we resign our case into His hands, trusting that he will carry out proper justice. He is not blind to our suffering and has appointed a Day for the vindication of His people (Romans 12:17-21; 1 Thess 1:5-8). We yearn for the day when Christ comes to establish true justice on the earth, understanding that until that period, we will continue to be ruled by imperfect rulers and function in a broken system.

-We remember that only of Christ’s kingdom is it said that there will be perfect peace.

-We look forward to the day when all that is broken in the world will be made right. The challenges of living in a broken world will be gone. Brokenness will no longer be the norm. Until then, we remember that our “light momentary afflictions, are preparing for us an eternal weight

of glory far beyond all comparison.” So, “we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor 4:17-18).

There is a coming cosmic King who will make all things right! And that promise is a wonderful comfort for us, as we navigate life in a fallen world.

Lastly, God comforts His people in the present by the promise of His changeless word.

Notice the grounds of the promised King in verse 5, “For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” Now, in verse 6, we hear another prophetic voice calling out:

“All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.

- 7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
- 8 The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.”

One of the perpetual tendencies of Israel and Judah was to find their ultimate comfort in the people around them. That is, they found security in their political alliances with other nations and often turned against God in order to cement relationships with these people. In Isaiah 30:1-2 Isaiah speaks of this

- “Woe to the rebellious children,” declares the LORD,
“Who execute a plan, but not Mine,
And make an alliance, but not of My Spirit,
In order to add sin to sin;
- 2 Who proceed down to Egypt
Without consulting Me,
To take refuge in the safety of Pharaoh
And to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!

And in the next chapter, he writes:

- 31:1 Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help
And rely on horses,
And trust in chariots because they are many

And in horsemen because they are very strong,
But they do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the LORD!
3 Now the Egyptians are men and not God,
And their horses are flesh and not spirit;
So the LORD will stretch out His hand,
And he who helps will stumble
And he who is helped will fall,
And all of them will come to an end together.

Time and again , Israel was let down by the people they had entrusted themselves to.

But God would not have his people trust in the arm of the flesh any longer. Their failed alliances did not keep them out of Babylonian captivity and they needed to see clearly, the immeasurable gulf between God and man. Between God's everlasting word and man's helpless frailty. So, God gave them a word picture in verse 6: "All flesh (mankind) is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field." Now, the word loveliness or beauty here is the same word that is used to describe God's covenant faithfulness and it is frequently translated as "steadfastness, or lovingkindness." My point here is that, the emphasis is NOT man's beauty or loveliness, compared to God's, rather it is on man's faithfulness versus God's faithfulness.

When God considers the best illustration to convey this chasm, he compares it to eternity versus a wild flower in the desert. It's a powerful illustration.

In the deserts, the rain would help germinate the grass seed and it would shoot up quickly and often with a bloom. But its shallow roots could not handle the sun's heat and it would quickly wither. That is the flesh. That is God's analogy for the most powerful of nations.

Now, what would happen in Israel is that the people would see the beautiful budding flower of a nation and think, "Ah! They are really something! Let's throw our lot in with them and they will keep us safe!" But God said to them, "You are putting your hope in something that is utterly transient and has no power to comfort you or to keep you safe." In fact, when the

breath of the Lord blows on that kingdom in judgment, it will wither and what will become of those who trusted in it? The most powerful reliable kingdom consists of men whose life and breath are borrowed from the everlasting God. He gives life to his creation and the best of men, the greatest of kingdoms are absolutely dependent upon God for their existence. Why would you ever place your hopes in a feeble creature? Or as the puritans would say, in a worm?

But notice, as “the grass withers and the flower fades,” verse 8 states that, “the word of our God stands forever.” Through endless ages; while great kingdoms and their leaders rise and fall; while philosophies come and go; the word of God stands fast and immoveable. It is a constant and it is unchanging.

And this my friends, is what undergirds all of God’s precious promises to us! He will not fail and therefore His word will NOT fail!

“God is not a man, that He should lie,
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;
Has He said, and will He not do it?

Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” (Numbers 23:19)
All that God has spoken, all that He has promised, will surely come to pass just as He said. Why? Because His word is unchanging. His promise is immutable.

Conclusion:

The promises of God are the believers only comfort in life and death. And these precious promises are undergirded by an immutable, faithful God.