

Isaiah 40: Comfort My People

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In Isaiah 39:6-7, the prophet Isaiah told King Hezekiah of Jerusalem that in the future, Babylon would attack Jerusalem, destroy the city, and carry the survivors off to Babylon as captives. All the nobles of Jerusalem would become servants to the king of Babylon. Isaiah predicted this about 700 BC, and it actually happened between 605 and 586 BC. In this context, the rest of Isaiah, chapters 40-66, is futuristic and pertains to the redemption and restoration of the people of Judah. The time period of the Jews being captives in Babylon ended in 536-539 BC when the Persians under King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild. Over a hundred years in advance, Isaiah wrote chapter 40 to the Jews who would be in captivity in Babylon from 605 until 536 BC. Isaiah's purpose was to encourage the Jews in captivity with God's promise to redeem them and restore them to the land. Be comforted by the message that God is with you and still has a wonderful plan for your life. In the same way, all God's people today can be comforted with this message that in spite of appearances, God is not absent and God cares about your situation. Therefore, be comforted by the promise that God has a plan for your future blessing. You may be going through some really hard times, but God has a wonderful plan for your life.

The God of all Comfort, Isa. 40:1-2

In Isa. 40:1-2, we read Isaiah's message to a futuristic Israel living in captivity. They will have to go through tough times of trial and violence against them, but should take comfort that God is disciplining them according to what they deserve, yet God will forgive them and restore them. About 100 years later, the prophet Jeremiah wrote similar reassuring words to Jerusalem in Jer. 29:10-14 and 31:10-14, "I will bring you back to this place (Jerusalem). For I know the plans that I have for you...plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope" and "He who scattered Israel will gather him and keep him like a shepherd keeps his flock, for The Lord has redeemed him from the hand of him who was stronger than he...for I will turn their mourning into joy and will comfort them and give them joy for their sorrow".

Paul gave a similar message of comfort to the church in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11. Paul had been beaten and thrown in jail, and was explaining to the church why he had been delayed, yet he expressed rejoicing about his circumstances saying, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction." What comfort is there in being beaten and thrown in jail? How can he say "God of all comfort"? Don't we find comfort in friends and family, or even alcohol or tranquilizers? The comfort from God is that we know what the future holds—God's plan to bless us eternally. Any worldly comforts are temporary and fleeting, but the comfort God offers is eternal and permanent.

A Prophetic Voice to Clear the Way--Isaiah 40:3-5

In 700 BC when Isaiah wrote this, the roads were rough and obstructed, so when monarchs or dignitaries were coming, a city would go out and clear and level the road so they would be prepared for the arrival of the VIP. Isaiah used that image to tell the people to get ready for the coming of the Lord. The New Testament makes it clear that this was fulfilled by John the Baptist preparing the people for the Messiah Jesus. We read the fulfillment in all four Gospels which quote Isa.40:3. John the Baptist was the prophetic voice that prepared the way of the Lord. In Mark 1:2-8, John called the people to confess their sin, and repent and be forgiven in order to prepare the way for a greater baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism that Jesus gave them through His Spirit would save their souls and change their lives. Therefore the process to prepare, smooth out, and get ready--was to clean up your life, realize you are a sinner who needs a Savior and repent.

Isaiah's prophetic message had both a near view towards his audience in 700 BC, and a far view to John the Baptist's audience in about 26 AD. The near view was that Israel would be taken in captivity to Babylon for about 70 years but they should prepare themselves for God to restore them to Jerusalem by getting right with God. This happened in 605-536 BC. The far view was to John the Baptist's audience who needed to prepare themselves for the Messiah. I think it also applies to us today as we look forward to the second coming of Christ. No matter how bad the world is, or how many troubles we have, Jesus is coming back to end all evil and set up His kingdom. Therefore we need to get on the path to God and let Him rule in our hearts now, and we need to "clear the way for the Lord" as Isaiah 40:3 says. In a sense, we are all in captivity to sin in a fallen

broken world full of trouble. Isaiah is proclaiming that there will be a deliverance one day at the return of Christ, so be ready.

Isaiah 40:6-11

God is calling His spokesperson Isaiah to "call out" the difference between people and God. People are temporary, changing--they come and then fade away. Isaiah uses the images of grass and flowers that come in season but later fade away to say that people are short lived, change their mind, and often don't fulfill their promises; but God never fades, God never fails, and His Word endures forever. A promise is only as good as the person giving it, and God's promises never fail. In Israel's case, God's Word to restore them was guaranteed. In spite of their exile, they would be restored. In our case, we can rest assured that Jesus is coming back. Therefore spread the news, announce to everyone the good news of the redemption of mankind.

God's Attributes Taught Through Rhetorical Questions

How can we be sure that God will come through for us? How do we know that God has the power to accomplish these things? God's omniscience, creative power, uniqueness, and omnipotence guarantee that God can and will fulfill His promises. In Isa. 40:12-17, he uses a series of rhetorical questions to point out that God preexisted creation and He is bigger than creation. How big is God? He is so big He can measure the immense universe He created, and He can count the specks of dirt in the earth, weigh mountains, and hold the great bodies of water in the palm of His hand. Before we continue, it is valuable to contemplate how big God's creation is. The observable universe is about 46 billion light years in diameter. Including the part we can't yet see, it is estimated to be over 93 billion light years. Keep in mind a light year is how far the speed of light travels in a year. Since light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second (yes I said per second), one light year is about 5.8 trillion miles. Our galaxy, the Milky Way is 100,000 light years wide, and there are over 100 billion galaxies that contain about one trillion stars each. In order to get some perspective, consider that one of our jet airliners

traveling at 600 mph would take 100 billion years to cross the Milky Way galaxy. Nevertheless, God is bigger than the creation. In comparison Isaiah 40:15 says that our whole nation is just a drop in the bucket or a speck of sand on the beach compared to Him. At this point, we may ask the question, "Then why does God care about something as tiny and insignificant as me?" I recall David's musings on this subject in Psalm 8, "When I consider Thy heavens, your work of creation...what is man that God takes such thought of him?...Yet God has made man a little lower than God and has crowned him with glory and majesty". What David was saying is that it is awesome that God made man in His image, holds man in high regard, and has appointed man to rule over His creation. Wow, as puny as we are, God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives. God knows everything about us, wants a loving relationship with us, and plans to allow us to serve Him and glorify Him in eternity.

How does God Compare to all the Religions and Idols of Unregenerate Mankind?

Knowing Israel's problem with idolatry, Isaiah compares our awesome God to all the silly idols that man makes and worships in Isa. 40:18-26. Puny men take metal or wood and shape it or cut it into a likeness, then they overlay it in gold or silver and fix it so it can stand erect. How ridiculous that mankind would worship something that puny men have made out of God's creation. He goes on to say, "Don't you get it? Don't you listen? Have you no understanding?" God made all things, sovereignly controls and sustains all things. The Lord is like a huge king that sits above creation ruling over His people who are like grasshoppers in comparison. All the great rulers like Alexander, Caesar, Attila, and Hitler all lived short lives and were reduced to nothing. Alexander the Great died of alcohol poisoning, Caesar was murdered, Attila was probably killed by his wife, and Hitler committed suicide and ended up as road kill. No one is like God, He created all things, knows all things, and sustains all things. There are trillions of stars yet God made them all, knows them, and named them.

Isaiah 40:27-31, WAIT ON THE LORD

In this passage, Isaiah submits the natural humanistic response of Israel in captivity. Since things are so bad, it seems that God doesn't know or care. They must remember that God does care, but He has His own timing. What God has promised, He will do, but in His own time. God will give strength to the weary and helpless. No matter how bad things seem, if you wait on

the Lord, He will strengthen you and lift you up. Isaiah uses beautiful imagery of God's people being lifted up with the "wings like eagles", and the tired and weary will gain new strength to persevere. The idea of waiting on the Lord is common in Scripture, and it may be valuable to review a few passages in Psalms to ascertain just what it involves. In Psalm 27:14, David wrote that he would have despaired and given up if he didn't believe in the goodness of the Lord. Therefore he gained strength and courage through his faith. In Psalm 37:34, David advised to wait for the Lord by being obedient to God's Word. The wicked appear to be winning and we are tempted to fight fire with fire, but David says to wait on the Lord and your obedience will be vindicated. In Psalm 40:1, David says he waited patiently for God when he was threatened and fearful. In Psalm 46:10, the author says, "Cease striving and know that I am God." Other translations say, "Be still and know that I am God". The context of this Psalm comes from the historical situation in Jerusalem in 701 BC. Assyria was coming to attack Jerusalem, and the temptation was to trust Egypt to defend them, but Egypt got whipped by Assyria, so now the temptation was to give up and surrender. Isaiah told them to stop trusting other pagan nations, and don't give up, but turn to the Lord and watch Him deliver them. The Psalmist was advising Israel and all God's people to cease manipulating, give up your own will and your own evil ways, and put all your trust in God.

David is a great example of "waiting on the Lord" in 1 Samuel 24:6. King Saul was chasing him in the wilderness with a large force. David was hiding in a cave where Saul unknowingly entered to relieve himself. David had the perfect opportunity to sneak up and murder him, but held off. He knew that God had promised him the kingdom in the future, and by faith he decided to wait on the Lord to provide. Therefore David endured about 10-15 years of hardship, but God fulfilled His promises and David was vindicated as innocent before the people.

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