

Israel's Strength and Consolation

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[0 : 0 0] And Brian, if you're willing and able, would you please come and serve us? This is Isaiah chapter 40, and Brian is going to start at verse number one, and he's going to read down through verse number 11.

Isaiah 40, number one, down through verse 11. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway of our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low, and on even ground shall become level, and rough places in plain, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. A voice says, cry, and I say, what shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades. When the breath of the Lord blows on it, surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord shall stand forever.

[1 : 2 0] Go up, or go on up to a high mountain, O Zion. Herald of good news, lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem.

Herald of good news, lift up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judea, Behold your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him.

Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend to his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lamb in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Thanks, Brian. Let's pray. Father, we are grateful for the privilege to be here. We're grateful for this season of the calendar year when we consider the first coming of our Savior, the Lord Jesus.

We're grateful to sing songs that we don't get to sing all that often that remind us of the incarnation of the wonder of God made flesh. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for humbling yourself and becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

[2 : 3 5] Thank you for showing us the glory of God. Thank you for being the glory of God. We're so humbled and in awe of you, Lord Jesus, in your condescension, in your kindness, in your grace, in your gentleness towards sinners like us.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thank you for calling us to worship this morning. Would you help us to worship in spirit and in truth? And as we continue in this time of worship, would you help us to hear and to understand and to believe and obey those things that are written to us in your word?

Help us to see our Savior, the Lord Jesus. It is in his name that we pray and give thanks. Amen. Authors and directors often use time travel to add intrigue or interest to a book or a movie plot.

Maybe you are familiar with some of these, like Quantum Leap. That's a little bit old school for some of you perhaps, although I think it has had a bit of a revival.

Quantum Leap, Doctor Who, The Terminator. I understand the movie Tenet. There are those people who are moving forward in the timeline, and then there are some who are moving backwards through the timeline.

[4 : 09] I think Harry Potter had something called the time turner. Can someone confirm? Okay, good. So there's this idea of a time turner where you can turn back time.

I think it has something to do with a necklace or a pendant of some sort. Now here's the thing with time travel. While it is a useful storytelling technique, it is also always unpredictable, right?

As soon as you realize there's going to be time travel happening, it's unpredictable. It makes for chaos and therefore a good story. But we remember that when the DeLorean malfunctions, Marty McFly ends up going from 85 back to 55.

And Peter and Susan and Edmund and Lucy, they rule in Narnia for years and years. Kings and queens of Narnia, they enter the wardrobe, rule there for years and years, come back through the wardrobe, and no time has passed on earth at all.

And Phil Connors meets insurance salesman Ned, Ned Ryerson, over and over and over again as he relives Groundhog Day.

[5 : 24] Time travel is often unpredictable. Now, the first 39 chapters of Isaiah are primarily focused on God's impending judgment.

This includes very specific warnings about the Babylonian exile. And you can read about this, for example, if you look at chapter 39 and verse number 6.

Isaiah speaking to Hezekiah, hear the word of the Lord of armies. Look, the days are coming when everything in your palace and all that your predecessors have stored up until today will be carried off to Babylon.

Nothing will be left, says the Lord. Some of your descendants who come from you, whom you father, will be taken away and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.

Okay? So 39 chapters of this type of material, impending judgment, primarily gloom and doom, Babylon's coming, repent.

[6 : 29] If you don't repent, you're going to suffer for it. 39 chapters. And, as God promised, and Isaiah prophesied, the exile did happen about a hundred years after chapter 39.

But when we get to the end of chapter 39, the exile has not yet occurred. But something very interesting happens when you go from chapter 39, we stopped reading at the second to last verse of chapter 39.

Chapter 39, something very interesting happens when we arrive at chapter 40. Isaiah travels into the future.

It's kind of like Ebenezer Scrooge visiting Christmas future in Charles Dickens' classic. By the Spirit, Isaiah sees God's people in their exile a hundred years into the future.

And there, in exile, they are afflicted, they are perplexed, they are persecuted, they are struck down, their world stinks, and they are discouraged, disillusioned, despondent, and depressed.

[8 : 00] They think God has abandoned them. You can find this in chapter 40, verse 27. They think God has abandoned them. God is not with us anymore.

Have you ever felt that way? As though God has abandoned you? Like he has forgotten about injustice done to you?

Like he has turned a blind eye to some slanderous lie that was spoken? Like he doesn't care about your grief? Like he has sent you to your room and then forgotten you there.

Well, everybody else in the family is continuing on with a happy life. If you felt that way, like God has abandoned you, listen to God's word.

Chapter 40, verse 1. Comfort. Comfort. Comfort my people. Says your God.

[9 : 07] Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and announce to her that her time of hard service is over. That her iniquity has been pardoned.

And she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. Notice how God speaks these words of comfort to his people.

This is very good news. But notice also how God speaks. Do you see that there? Speak, verse number 2, tenderly. This is the same word that we saw in Dan's text last week in Isaiah 61 where the Messiah will come and bind up the brokenhearted.

God speaks to his people with a broken heart, with compassion, with empathy.

God is like a parent soothing a child who has run on the pool deck after being warned, don't run on the pool deck. And now the child has run, has fallen, has hurt themselves, and the parent has come scoop them up.

[10 : 26] Shh, it's going to be okay. You're going to be okay. I know it hurts, but you're going to be okay. And though they haven't yet actually gone into exile in Babylon, God assures them that their suffering, their affliction there, will have an expiration date.

You can see this at the end of verse number two. The CSB says double. She has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

This does not necessarily mean two times like we think about double. It could also just mean complete, full, the suffering is over, it's done, it's been satisfied.

Maybe this is helpful. It's as though God sings at the end of verse two, your sins, which are many, but my mercy is more.

now let's not forget this. The context for God's promise of comfort here, comfort, comfort, the context for this promise is not their holiness.

[11 : 44] The context for this promise is their sin. It is not their strength, but their weakness, not their successful, fruitful ministry to their nations around them, but their failure to be a blessing to the nations.

This is the context for God's promise of comfort. Even when we don't act like his people, God still identifies with us.

Do you see that there in verse number one? My people. Comfort, comfort, my people. Says who?

Says, your God. Even in our sin and our weakness and our failure, he identifies with us.

What grace. Do you see God this way? Do you see God moving towards you with this kind of comfort?

[12 : 47] With tenderhearted, brokenhearted compassion for you in your moments of grief and sorrow and suffering. Oh friend, God's words of comfort are just beginning.

Look at verse number three. A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness. Make a straight highway for our God in the desert.

Here's the promise. The king is coming. The king is coming. And we need to get ready for him. He comes to his people where they are, as they are, and he sends ahead of him his messengers like John the Baptist in John chapter one, crying out, prepare the way of the Lord.

The king is coming. his messengers urge his people to prepare for his arrival by repenting.

But look, even if their repentance is incomplete and inadequate, and let's be honest, our repentance is often incomplete and inadequate.

[14 : 04] Look at what God is going to do. Verse four, every valley will be lifted up, and every mountain and hill will be leveled, and the uneven ground will become smooth, and the rough places a plain.

Do you see the word will there in your Bible? God is doing the work. This will happen. As surely as the king will come, God will do this work.

What kind of work? You know what happens when tectonic plates push against and rub against each other? We get earthquakes, and sometimes it turns into mountains, and sometimes you'll see these cracks and so on.

Not so much here, because we live in the Midwest. We have blizzards and freezing cold and other things like that. No earthquakes here, I don't think. Very shockingly rare, I suppose.

This is like an earthquake, but in reverse. These tectonic plates that have pushed up against each other and have now formed mountains and hills and valleys that have been formed.

[15 : 23] This is in reverse, an undoing of brokenness, and God is going to do this. He's going to lift and lower and level and smooth.

What? All of your sin, all of your weakness, all of your failure, all of your incomplete, inadequate repentance.

The King is coming. Repent. Prepare for Him. And when He arrives, He will do the work that is necessary to prepare your heart for His arrival.

God promises to flatten pride. He promises to soothe personalities that cause disorder and division.

He promises to lift depression. He promises to make difficult, disagreeable people agreeable. He promises to straighten every crooked injustice that you have endured.

[16 : 31] He promises to triumph over slander with truth. He promises to absorb soul-crushing shame with His delight and acceptance.

And on that day, when the King arrives and He lifts and lowers and levels and smooths, on that day, the glory of the Lord will appear.

Verse 5. The glory of the Lord will appear and all humanity together will see it for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Now, we should ask this question. When? When? When will the glory of the Lord appear? Is this glory coming here in verse 5?

Is this in the past? Or is this in the future? Where are we at in this timeline that Isaiah is talking about? Because are we thinking in chapters 1-39 about the coming exile?

[17 : 44] Where are we at here? Well, this definitely doesn't seem like present, does it? That the glory of the Lord is revealed and all flesh will see it together?

It doesn't seem like present. And then we realize that Isaiah wrote this looking 100 years into the future. And we look back now, some 2700 years, to when Isaiah wrote this, and perhaps doubt begins to rise in our hearts.

promise. Maybe God has forgotten his promise. I mean, 2700 years is a long time.

I might forget a promise after 27 days, or 27 minutes, or 2.7 minutes. But we're not talking about a promise that we keep.

Notice at the end of verse 5, going into verse number 6. How can we be so sure about this promise? The mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

[18 : 59] And God is not feeble. He is not fickle. He is not frail like we are. Look at verse number 6. A voice was saying, cry out.

And another said, what should I cry out? Here's what you're going to cry out. All humanity is grass. It's grass.

What do you know about grass? It is weak. You give grass too much sun, it will die.

You give grass too much rain, it will die. You give it too much fertilizer, it dies. You don't give it enough fertilizer, it dies. Grass is helpless.

It can't move out of the sun. It can't get out of the way when you drop your cornhole board on it and you just crush it all down. It's not putting up its hands to defend itself.

[19 : 58] There's nothing that grass can do. You walk on a path from your yard back to your chicken coop over and over and over again, the grass is gone.

There's no more grass there. You've killed it. humanity, humans, you and me, we are like grass.

All humanity is grass and all its goodness, the very best of it, is like the flower of the field. But notice verse 7, the grass withers, the flowers fade when the breath of the Lord blows on them.

Indeed, I'll say it again, the people are grass. The grass withers. Are you getting the point here? The flowers fade. All of this to get to this point, but the word of our God remains forever.

Even if we have waited 2,700 years for the glory of the Lord to be revealed. Brothers and sisters, we keep waiting.

[21 : 15] Why? Because the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. He is not fickle, frail, or feeble like grass like we are. His word, his word remains forever.

forever. Zion, verse 9, herald of good news, go up on a high mountain.

Jerusalem, herald of good news, raise your voice loudly, raise it, do not be afraid, say to the cities of Judah, here is your God.

Without shame, as loudly as you can, tell everyone you meet, your king is coming. But notice this, he is unlike any ruler that this world has ever experienced.

He is a ruler who will shepherd. Do you remember that from Micah's prophecy? The ruler who will shepherd.

[22 : 22] Verse number 10, see, the Lord comes with strength and his power establishes his rule. His wages are with him, his reward accompanies him.

How does he rule? Verse 11, he protects his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in the fold of his garment.

and he gently leads those who are nursing. Unlike any ruler this world has ever known, he is a ruler who will shepherd.

Now, remember the time travel. Isaiah writing chapter 40 as though God's people are already in their exile. The setting for this promise of comfort is his people's sin and weakness and failure.

They are in exile because of their sin, weakness, and failure. And yet, do you notice what is missing from verses 10 and 11? No word of judgment.

[23 : 44] judgment. The king comes with power to establish his rule and who could ever stand in his way?

The king comes with strength to free captives. He comes with power to protect his flock and who will harm them if he is protecting them?

The king comes with power to gather and who would ever dare scatter what he gathers together. The king comes with power to carry those who are weak and power to gently lead those.

And now maybe you are thinking this is a beautiful promise in the book of Isaiah written to God's people, the Jews.

God's love to love to God's love to God's love to God's love to us. What makes us claim this promise? How do we get in on this promise of comfort?

[24 : 53] Comfort says your God for my people. How do we get in on this promise of comfort? Because I'll tell you what, I want in on Isaiah 40. You? I mean, we want in on this.

I want God moving towards me with a tender, broken, empathetic, compassionate heart in my sin, weakness, and failure. I need these promises and I got to know that these promises are for me or not.

Luke chapter 2. Luke chapter 2. And verse number 22. Start at verse 21.

It might not be on the screen. When the eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus. The name given by the angel before he was conceived. And when the days of their purification, according to the law of Moses, were finished, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

Just as it is written in the law of the Lord, every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord. How intriguing. Whole sermon there. Fascinating. And to offer a sacrifice, according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

[26 : 14] There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout looking forward to Israel's consolation.

Simeon Simeon knows Isaiah 40. He knows this promise of comfort, comfort for my people, that the glory of the Lord is going to be revealed.

And Simeon has realized it hasn't happened yet. We're still waiting for Israel's comfort, for their consolation.

looking forward to Israel's consolation. And the Holy Spirit was on him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the Lord's Messiah.

Guided by the Spirit, third time the Spirit has been mentioned here, he entered the temple. And when the parents brought the child Jesus to perform for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him up in his arms, praised God, and said, now, master, now, Lord, you can dismiss your servant in peace as you promised, for my eyes have seen your salvation, you have prepared it in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation salvation to the Gentiles, and glory to your people, Israel.

[28 : 12] Do you see what happens here? We want to know if we get in on this promise of Isaiah 40, and Simeon takes the largest, thickest, most permanent black marker you can find, and by the Holy Spirit, he connects these dots for us, he says, I'm waiting for the consolation, Isaiah 40, and it hasn't happened yet, but the Holy Spirit told me I would see the Messiah, and then here he is, the Messiah, big black marker, from Isaiah 40, consolation, down to Jesus, the Messiah.

So far, so good, right? We've got this connection from Isaiah 40 to Jesus, but we're not in on it yet, but then by the Spirit, Simeon prays and prophesies and worships God, and he takes that marker one more time, and he says, this Messiah, this anointed, promised one that the Spirit told me I wouldn't die until I see him, this is God's salvation for the Gentiles too.

Jesus is Israel's strength and consolation, like we sang this morning.

Israel's strength and consolation, and Jesus is your strength and consolation, beloved child of God.

When you sing that song the next time, you just remember that big, thick, black, magic marker, and Simeon connecting these dots for us, and when you sing Israel's strength and consolation, you say, and mine too.

[30 : 24] And if there is a longing in your heart, if there is a longing in your heart for consolation, an itch that this world can't scratch, friend, that is God's grace.

Young one, that is God's grace preparing you to receive Jesus. When you look at this world and you realize this seems hopeless, you're right, it is, but Jesus is Israel's strength and consolation, and he's mine too.

When you feel that brokenness, that emptiness, that itch that this world can't scratch, it's God's grace preparing you to receive the Lord Jesus.

don't seek comfort anywhere else except but him. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

God's promise is comfort for God's people. How do you respond when your world stinks?

[31 : 40] Perhaps you have said nothing will ever change. Others may get justice but I won't. Shame will always be part of my story.

my sin makes me undeserving of grace. I have failed God. I have let him down so hard and so many times that I am unfit and useless.

What is happening here? Your perspective is shrinking and as your perspective shrinks so does your hope and the result of this type of thinking is the same thing that God's people in exile experienced.

Discouragement, disillusionment, despondency, despair, depression. It can feel nearly impossible to break free from these chains.

But then we need to remember the context for this promise of comfort in Isaiah 40 is not holiness. It's sin.

[32 : 45] The context for this promise of comfort is not strength but weakness. The context is not success but failure.

God speaks comfort with tenderness to those in exile, to imperfect, broken, suffering, weak, sinful people like you and me.

Hear the promise one more time. One day Jesus will be revealed in all of his glory. Isaiah 40 verse 5 and the glory of the Lord will fill the whole earth.

And listen, if you will wait in faith on God to make good on this promise, if you will wait in faith on God to make good on this promise, the joy of the Lord will force discouragement and disillusionment and despondency and despair and depression to shrink.

How so? How is that going to happen? Look again at Isaiah 40 and verse 9. Remember the command, get up on a high mountain, tell everybody as loudly as you can, don't be ashamed about it, don't be afraid, tell everybody this is your God.

[34 : 19] Why is this important? Because sharing your expectation of God's promise being fulfilled will amplify your joy.

Suppose you are planning a surprise birthday party. you get this idea in your head that we should have a surprise birthday party.

You begin thinking and ruminating on this idea, reflecting about how you might pull it off, who would be invited, what would we do for gifts, what would we do for activities, and this excitement rumbles a little bit inside of you.

And then you realize, I'm not very good at food, I'm going to need some help. So you tell somebody about this surprise birthday party and you say, hey, would you help me with the food?

And that person, a little rumble starts happening inside of that person and there's some excitement that now begins to grow between the two of you. And then you realize, you know what, I'm not very good at party games, it's not really my thing, we're going to need to invite someone else into this surprise party.

[35 : 38] And now there's a committee, there's a team, there's a cohort, there's a group of people, and all of you are bouncing ideas off of each other, and the anticipation and the excitement goes from just being a rumble, you can barely contain it.

And as you tell other people and get them there for the surprise, and everybody's parking all over the place so that the person doesn't know, and you're all sneaking in, and you get down and you're hiding, man, the excitement and the anticipation is just palpable.

I wonder if you would tell someone this week about the hope that you have in Jesus. I wonder if you would tell someone this week about the comfort that they can find in Jesus.

I wonder if you would ask them, do you have an itch that this world can't scratch? That's God's grace preparing you to receive Jesus. I wonder if you would tell them that this week because you know what will happen when you get yourself up on that high mountain and you proclaim loudly and boldly and without shame to anybody who will listen, I want to point you to my hope in my God.

Your joy is amplified. and all of that despair and discouragement and disillusionment and depression, I'm not saying it goes away overnight, I'm saying the joy of the Lord begins to shrink that down because hope is flourishing because faith has anchored itself to God's promise in the future and pulled it into the present and you are now living as though God's promise that the glory of the Lord will be revealed is already true.

[37 : 41] Brothers and sisters, you have every reason to hope. Because of your Savior Jesus, God's anger towards you is in the past.

Isn't that good news? God's anger towards you for your sin is in the past and God's heart for you right now in the present is tender.

It is full of comfort, compassion, grace, kindness, ruling like a shepherd, gently leading, carrying you close to his heart.

That's your present child of God. God. And because of Jesus, your future is secure.

Now, I admit waiting on God's promise can feel lonely. I suspect this is the way it has always been for God's people.

[38 : 46] that as we wait on God's promise, it can feel lonely. And even when we anchor our faith to this promise, and hope begins to flourish, and joy begins to rise inside of us, your circumstances may not improve.

But believe this, waiting on God to keep his promise does not mean you are doing something wrong. Waiting on God, having faith in God to fulfill his promise is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

And God will not disappoint those who wait for him, no matter how long they wait. How do we know this? Because the word of our God remains forever.

God's promise is comfort for God's people. So watch for Jesus' return.

Watch for his return. Work wherever God places you. Witness to anyone and everyone who will listen. Worship with those who will share your anticipation and the growing excitement for the glory of the Lord to be revealed.

[40 : 20] Israel's strength and consolation is Jesus and he is your strength and consolation dear child of God.

Let's pray and ask God to confirm these things these truths to our hearts. O Father we are grateful for your word. Humbled to have it in our language multiple versions written copies of it how kind and gracious you are to give us your word.

Thank you for including the story of Simeon so that we can connect these dots so that we can find ourselves getting in on this promise of comfort in Isaiah 40.

Would you please help us to live like we believe this is true? Father where we have been prone to despondency and disillusionment and discouragement would you by the power of the Holy Spirit settle these truths deep in our hearts so that hope flourishes!

The joy of the Lord becomes our strength Father we ask this for your glory and our good and we pray with all of God's people with all of your people down through time including the bride at the end of your word come Lord Jesus come long expected Jesus for your glory and our good we pray amen