

The Glory of the Lord

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Scripture:
Isaiah 40:1-5

Series:
Waiting for the Lord (2/4)

By:
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Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem... Isaiah 40:1-2

Notice that God is speaking. He is speaking through Isaiah the prophet, and he is calling on someone else to speak. God revealed to Isaiah that in future years God's people would go through a terrible time of trial. The first 39 chapters of the book of Isaiah lay this out. It makes grim reading.

Enemies would come to the gates, and the city of Jerusalem would be plundered. The temple would be destroyed and the survivors would be taken as prisoners of war to Babylon. This happened long after the time of Isaiah. But when it did, godly people needed to know what to do.

What we have here is God giving direction, through Isaiah, to those who in the future would speak the Word of the Lord. Godly people in future generations would look in the Scriptures to find what they should say and do in their time.

Imagine the joy as the exiles studied a scroll of Isaiah the prophet: They would plow through 39 chapters that anticipated everything they were experiencing. Then they would come to chapter 40 and find that the Scripture is speaking to them directly with a word of hope.

Godly leaders must bring a message of hope to their people: "Comfort my people! Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..." These are directions given first to those who would speak the Word of God in the time of the exile. But they are also directions for us. They lay out how we are to speak for God.

I have two stopping points in these marvelous verses that are before us today: 1. The messenger: How we are to speak for God, and 2. The message: What we have received from God.

The Messenger: How We Are to Speak for God

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her... (Isaiah 40:1-2)

Because these verses speak about ministry, and because they speak about Christ, it follows that they speak in a special way about the ministry we share as those who bear witness to Christ.

Like the exiles, we are called to minister in a world torn by war, a world in which men and women live at a distance from God, far from the blessings of the Promised Land.

Here's what godly fathers are to say to their families. Here's how godly teachers and Bible study leaders are to speak to the people you lead. Here is direction for faithful pastors and preachers. Here is how all Christians are to communicate when we speak in the name of the Lord.

Here we are, preparing for Christmas, when many of us will spend time with family members, neighbors, colleagues, and friends, many of whom are facing great difficulties. God has given to us a message of comfort and hope. We must be ready to speak

a. Speak from the heart and to the heart

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem... (Isaiah 40:1-2)

Speak tenderly! Speak lovingly. Literally translated, this says "speak to the heart." We are living in a time when many people are convinced that if God exists at all, he must be against them, and that God, if he exists, is out to kill their joy and impose impossible demands.

That's the conviction of a lost person, and alongside it you need to put their experience—an unrelenting battle, constant warfare! Notice how Isaiah speaks about "her warfare" (Isaiah 40:2).

Remember, every person you speak to is in a battle. Think about the exiles: They're far from the Promised Land. After 70 years, most of them have never even seen the Promised Land. All they've ever known is captivity in Babylon.

Do you remember what Christ did when he looked out over the city of Jerusalem? He had compassion for sinners. They were like sheep without a shepherd. He felt sorry for them.

I was very struck by something I read from Martyn Lloyd Jones this week. He was writing in 1954, almost 60 years ago:

"I do not agree with those who think that the modern craze for pleasure and entertainment is to be denounced – and I will tell you why. People are living on pleasure and are hungering and thirsting for it, in order to get out of this terrible struggle if they can for an hour or two. They act as they do because life has defeated them and got them down...

They cannot spend an evening at home happily with their own thoughts... I can understand them. They find this boredom unutterable and insupportable. They have nothing they can rest on within themselves, so they must have some pleasure outside themselves. It is warfare." 1

Do you feel sorry for the person who is on drugs, the person who moves from one partner to another? Do you feel sorry for the person who is consumed with work and with money?

Speak tenderly. Try to display the love of God that reaches out into this broken world in Jesus Christ. People who are tired of the battle don't need your condemnation. They need to hear a word of hope.

b. Remember you are only a voice

A voice cries... Isaiah 40:3

There is a voice but there is no name. You have this in verse 3: "a voice cries," and in verse 6: "a voice says cry," and in verse 9: "Go up to a high mountain... lift up your voice with strength..."

We know from the New Testament that "the voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord" was fulfilled wonderfully in John the Baptist. When John began his ministry, people wanted to know who he was. Priests and Levites were sent to him:

They said to him, "Who are you? ...What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (John 1:23).

The world never changes. The people want to know "Who are you?" and "What do you say about yourself?" John says, "I am only a voice. It doesn't matter who I am. All that matters is that I am speaking the Word of God. It comes straight from the prophet Isaiah."

What matters is not who I am or what I say about myself, but who Christ is, and what God says about him. I go back to this hymn so often:

May His beauty rest upon me as I seek the lost to win
and may they forget the channel seeing only Him. 2

This is of huge importance in a celebrity culture, where people want to know who you are and what you say about yourself. Remember, you are only a voice, not a name. What matters is not who we are, but the message that we bring.

c. Listen to what God says in Scripture

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Isaiah 40:1

If we are to be effective in speaking for God, we must speak what God has said. Your ministry to others will be an overflow of your own walk with God. You cannot give what you have not received.

The word of God must come to you before it can come through you. Paul says: God comforts us in our trouble so that we may be able to comfort others in their trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God (2 Corinthians 1:4).

Here is a great incentive for living in the Word of God: Grow in your walk with God, not only for his glory and your own good, but also for the good of others. Where's the good in being a Christian whose own experience is so shallow that you have little or nothing to commend to others?

Lord, speak to me that I may speak in living echoes of Your tone. 3

d. Ask God to fill you with his Spirit

Comfort, comfort my people says your God. (Isaiah 40:1)

How can I comfort God's people? How can I bring hope and help to others? One of the great titles of the Holy Spirit is "the Comforter."

Jesus said, "I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Comforter" (John 14:16 KJV). Ask God to make you a Christian who is filled with the good of your own message.

One of the most tragic pictures in the Bible is when Jonah is asleep on a boat in the storm. Sailors who know nothing of God are desperate for hope, and the one man who knows God has nothing to say because he is locked into his own futile argument with the Almighty.

How can you pray for others if you do not even pray for yourself? How can you bring God's word to others if you do not live in it yourself? How can you bring the comfort of the Spirit if you are not filled with the Spirit yourself?

Ministry to others is the overflow of what God is doing in your own life. Live in the Word of God. Be filled with the Spirit of God and God will use you to bring help and hope to others.

The Message: What We Have Received from 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. Isaiah 40:2

a. Peace established

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem... that her warfare is ended... Isaiah 40:2

These people have been in a great conflict with God. They have always been the object of his love, but they have lost his blessing. Their constant idolatry has brought them to this

desperate place. They are exiles, prisoners of war! Now the Word of God comes: Her warfare is ended!

Here is the purpose for which Jesus Christ came into the world. When he was born, the angels said "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, goodwill towards men."

Here is God reaching out to end a war that goes back to the beginning of time, God giving amnesty to his enemies, and reaching out to make his enemies his friends.

The Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to resolve the conflict that lies deeper in you than any other. How does he do that? Peace with God comes through a pardon...

b. Pardon secured

Her iniquity is pardoned... Isaiah 40:2

This God, whose claim on our lives we have been resisting; this God, against whom we have been sinning, reaches out in love to forgive you, to embrace you, to reconcile you.

To a paralyzed man, lying on a bed that is carried by four friends, Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). Why does he say that? Because while the problem of his paralysis was plain for all to see, the man's need for pardon was greater by far.

Christ has the authority to forgive sins. He has secured the pardon. How? How can a holy God, perfect in holiness and righteousness, reach out to forgive sins? Peace is established and pardon is secured through the payment of a price.

c. Payment made

She has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:2)

This is a marvelous statement. Literally, Alec Motyer 4 points out, it says: "She has received from the Lord's hand the double." Another way to say that is: The mirror image, a carbon copy, or an exact replica.

None of us can ever make payment for our sins. So here's what God has done: God took flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. He came to us. He took his stand with us. He came to act for us.

Here is what God did in his Son: Taking our nature to himself, Jesus lived a sinless life. Then freely and willingly he laid down that perfect life as a sacrifice for us.

Let me put this in a personal way. Jesus Christ took the guilt and the wages of my sins into himself. He made the exact payment for all my sins: The double, the mirror image, the exact replica.

“He bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). All that was due to me was borne by him. He paid the price. He took the rap. As Isaiah puts it later: He was wounded for our transgressions; bruised for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him (Isaiah 53:5).

Christ absorbed in himself the full extent of divine justice, the full extent of the law’s penalty for every sin of every one of his people. The cumulative load is unimaginable. He carried every sin, and he paid the price for every single one.

The Son of man came to seek and save the lost and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Christ made the payment for the sins of his people. That’s how he secured the pardon. That is why there can be peace with God.

Sing, O sing of my Redeemer, with his blood, He purchased me
On the cross, he sealed my pardon, paid the debt and made me free. 5

That is what Jesus Christ is able to do for all who come to him in faith and repentance.

Peace established, pardon secured, payment made through a Person: Jesus Christ

In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3)

All of the good described here will be achieved and offered through a person: Take away Jesus Christ and you have no payment. Take away the payment and you have no pardon. Take away the pardon and you have no peace! All this good, all this comfort, hangs on this unique person, Jesus Christ, who is unlike any other person born into the world before or since.

Prepare the way of the LORD! Great people have advance parties to prepare the way for their visit. Prepare the way for the President of the United States, or for the Queen.

But look who is coming here: Prepare the way of the LORD (four capital letters). God himself coming into his world! Here is something that had never happened before, and it has never happened since. Isaiah said it will happen, and in the birth of Jesus Christ it has happened!

What will happen when he comes? “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low” (Isaiah 40:4). Think how this is fulfilled in Jesus himself: He comes down from the heights of all that it means to be God. Leaves glory, and humbles himself, taking the form of a servant... he takes our humanity to himself and lifts it up.

Wisdom unsearchable, God the invisible,
 Love indestructible, in frailty appears.
 Lord of infinity, stooping so tenderly,
 Lifts our humanity to the heights of His throne. 6

No wonder Isaiah says, “The glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”

1. Have you received this comfort?

If not why would you hold back from Jesus Christ today? He has made the payment. He has secured the pardon. He has established the peace. All of this can be yours in him.

2. Will you bring this comfort to others?

Comfort, Comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly about the peace, the pardon, and the payment that have come through this person, Jesus Christ.

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¹ Martyn Lloyd Jones, “God the All-Sufficient: Sermons on Isaiah 40,” p. 8, Banner of Truth, 2005

² Katie Wilkinson (1859-1928), from the hymn, “May the Mind of Christ, My Savior”

³ Frances R. Havergal, from the hymn: “Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak” (1872)

⁴ J. Alec Motyer, “The Prophecy of Isaiah,” InterVarsity Press, 1993

⁵ Philip Bliss, from the hymn, “I Will Sing of My Redeemer” (1873)

⁶ Graham Kendrick, from the song, “Meekness and Majesty,” ThankYou Music, 1986