

ISAIAH: **THE GLORY OF GOD IN A WORLD OF CHAOS**

Part 7: “My One Comfort”

Isaiah 40:1-14, 28-31

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Scripture Reading

“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 for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a 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 said, ‘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 our God will stand forever. 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 it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘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 his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?” (Isaiah 40:1-14, ESV).

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:28–31, ESV).

This is God’s word. Thanks be to God.

Introduction

We are in the midst of a series called *Isaiah: The Glory of God in a World of Chaos*. For the last several weeks, we have been delving into the first section of the book of Isaiah, which spans from Isaiah, chapter 1 to Isaiah, chapter 39. The historical context of this section is the Assyrian Crisis [show [1The Assyrian Empire](#)]. During Isaiah's lifetime in the 8th century B.C., the Assyrian Empire is invading much of the Ancient Near East. In chapters 1 through 39, Isaiah, the prophet, speaks the word of God into this chaotic situation. Much of the themes of this first section revolve around God confronting and disciplining his people for putting their hope in the kings and kingdoms of men, rather than putting their hope in God.

Once we get to chapters 39 and 40, we encounter a major turning point in the book of Isaiah. The Assyrian threat comes to a sudden and unexpected end. God saves the kingdom of Judah from the Assyrian invasion (Isa 36-37). In chapter 38, God even miraculously saves the life of Hezekiah, the King of Judah. But then an ominous moment of foreshadowing comes in chapter 39.

After King Hezekiah of Judah narrowly escapes the Assyrian invasion and recovers from a nearly fatal sickness, he receives a visit from diplomats from Babylon. Babylon is a big deal, and the kingdom of Judah is relatively insignificant. And even though Hezekiah has been a remarkably godly king, he gets star-struck by the important Babylonian ambassadors. He decides to show off his wealth in an attempt to impress his guests [Show [2"King Hezekiah Displays his Treasure" by Vincente López Portaña \(1789\)](#)]. He shows them his palace, he shows them the temple of Jerusalem, and he shows them all the treasures inside the temple of Jerusalem.

Isaiah, the prophet, hears of this state visit, and he goes to confront Hezekiah. Even after all, God has done for the kingdom of Judah, Judah is still trying to find security and significance by putting their trust in the kingdom of man. God's people are continuing to breach their covenant with God. And as a result, God's judgment and discipline will come. Isaiah announces that Babylon will be the very nation who will conquer the kingdom of Judah [Show [3"The Destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem" by Francesco Hayez \(1867\)](#)]. The very same treasures that Hezekiah has shown the Babylonian diplomats will be carried away by Babylonian armies. And in the year 587 B.C., long after both Hezekiah and Isaiah are dead and buried, that prophetic promise of judgment comes to pass. The nation of Judah is conquered and exiled.

But fascinatingly, this is not where the book of Isaiah ends. There is an entire second half of his book that is still to be explored. And the whole second half of his book – from chapter 40 to 66 – is primarily directed to God's people who are living after the exile, centuries after Isaiah's life and ministry!

Even more fascinating, whereas the first half of Isaiah is primarily about confrontation, judgment, and discipline, the second half of Isaiah is primarily about restoration and hope!

God's people broke their covenant with God, and God was faithful to discipline them. But the God who is faithful to discipline his people is also faithful to redeem his people

Chapters 40-66 are about that promise of redemption. And this section begins with a message of comfort: "*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God*" (Isaiah 40:1, ESV).

For centuries the people of Israel and Judah had sought to find their comfort in the kings and kingdoms of men. But God has taken away their kings, and the kingdoms of men have only been a source of tyranny, oppression, and seduction to sin. It is time for the people of God to turn to the one true comfort.

And what is the comfort that Isaiah offers? It is the comfort of knowing the reality of God. Isaiah spends the whole of chapter 40 reviewing the truths of various attributes of God.

We, too, need to hear the words of Isaiah the prophet. Like God's people in the ancient world, we too often have a vision of God that is too small. But when we allow the words of God's revelation to shine into our hearts – when we look to God for who he is, not who we would prefer him to be – we will find that he indeed is "*Our One Comfort.*"

So, for the rest of our time, we will look at various attributes of God that are taught here in Isaiah 40, and we are going to show how those attributes give us comfort.

Exposition

1.) God is gracious.

The beginning of our comfort is the revelation of God's grace. Look again at the first two verses of our text: "*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*" (Isaiah 40:1-2, ESV).

Judah has experienced suffering and pain. They have sinned and borne the consequences of their sin. They have lost their land, their temple, and their kingdom. They have endured the shame of being under the tyranny of foreign rule.

But now, God announces that the time of judgment has ended. The time of warfare is over.

Something has changed in the relationship between God and his people. God has made a way to end the power of evil without ending his people. God has made a way for the penalty of sin to be paid, but in a way that does not require the death of his people.

Though it is not yet clear at this point in the Old Testament, the only way this is possible is because of what will happen at the cross of Jesus Christ.

Because Christ has died, is risen, and will come again, we too can have hope that our warfare has ended and our iniquity is pardoned. So now, for all who are in Christ, when we approach our God in prayer, we are coming before not a throne of judgment – but a throne of grace (Heb 4:16).

Isaiah is saying if you want to know true comfort, there is no greater comfort than knowing that you have been loved by God at your very worst, with a love that cannot be earned by human effort. It is a love that can only be gratefully received with the open hands of faith.

If we are ever to have a true hope of knowing God, trusting God, loving God, and obeying God, we must first believe that he is a God who has saved us by grace and grace alone. As the great protestant reformer John Calvin once wrote: *“...man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God’s grace.”*¹

2.) God is just.

Let’s take a look back at our text: *“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a 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”* (Isaiah 40:3–5, ESV).

These images of valleys being made high and mountains being made low are not meant to convey a literal reality. Rather, Isaiah is using symbolic prophetic language to describe God’s intention to put the world to rights.

The Bible teaches us that when sin entered into the world, God’s good creation was fractured. There is a deep knowledge within every human heart that the world is not as it should be; that it is broken. The brokenness that flows from sin is evidenced by the human individuals are often captivated by sin. But even more, this brokenness is also evidenced in human society and the systems of society.

This is why governmental systems can be used to promote oppression for the powerful, instead of promoting justice for all. This is why economic structures can be used to promote the greed of the wealthy, instead of promoting flourishing for all. This is why academic institutions can be used to promote the ideology of the elite, instead of promoting a pursuit of knowledge. This is why even the church can promote worldliness and self-interested heresy, instead of preaching the truth of the gospel. All of these examples are fundamental forms of injustice.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion & 2*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 594.

Now, I know that whenever the topic of injustice is mentioned, that for some, injustice is an immediate trigger word that denotes a political ideology. But justice is a word that the Bible talks about a lot. And injustice is an enduring reality of a world broken by sin.

I think we can look at an economic reality in which the half of the world's entire wealth is owned by the top one percent of the world's population, and say, "There is something fundamentally wrong and broken with this situation."

So, for the millions of people who are among the poorest of the global poor, and for the millions of people who are in situations of inescapable poverty due to injustice (many of which are our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ), the news that God is just gives comfort indeed.

There is a day that is coming when all tyranny, greed, and oppression will be brought to an end. And King Jesus will make right all that is wrong.

This lens of justice gives us some fascinating insight into Jesus's earthly ministry. When Jesus began his ministry, he declared that the kingdom of God was at hand (Mk 1:15). And then, he validated that claim by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and other displays of power.

In his book *The Reason for God*, Timothy Keller argues that these miracles were not mere displays of power, but rather glimpses of true justice. Jesus's miracles, in other words, were meant to give us the comforting hope of his just kingdom that is coming. Keller writes, "*Jesus's miracles...were never magic tricks, designed only to impress and coerce...Instead, he used miraculous power to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and raise the dead. Why? We modern people think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order, but Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order. The Bible tells us that God did not originally make the world to have disease, hunger, and death in it. Jesus has come to redeem where it is wrong and heal the world where it is broken. His miracles are not just proofs that he has power but also wonderful foretastes of what he is going to do with that power. Jesus's miracles are not just a challenge to our minds, but a promise to our hearts, that the world we all want is coming.*"²

3.) God is powerful.

It is certainly encouraging to know that God is gracious and just. This means that he is truly a good God. But a God that is only good is not enough. God must also be powerful.

That's why in this next section Isaiah contrasts the frailty and fleetingness of men and women with the eternal power and might of God. Mankind is like a grass that will wither and a flower that will fade (Isa 40:7). But "the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa 40:8).

² Timothy Keller. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. (New York: Dutton, 2008), 77.

Our God is a God of infinite “might” (קִיּוֹן) (Isa 40:10). Isaiah asks, “*Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?*” (Isaiah 40:12, ESV).

There are 362 trillion gallons of water on earth. God is big enough and powerful enough to fit this in the hollow of his hand, Isaiah says. The observable universe measures 93 billion lightyears wide. Yet this is smaller than when God stretches out his arms.

Obviously, Isaiah is not trying to give us literal dimensions to God’s size, as if he were a physical entity within creation. Rather, Isaiah is trying to give us a glimpse of the unfathomable bigness and the infinite power of the God we serve.

Now, such absolute power might be a fearsome reality. And we should certainly worship God with an awestruck wonder that the Bible elsewhere describes as the “fear of the Lord.” But we should not be concerned that God possesses such power. For the one who is infinitely powerful is also infinitely good.

In fact, Isaiah tells us that the Lord will channel this gloriously unimaginable power to love and lead his people, as a good shepherd leads his sheep. Look at verse eleven: “*He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young*” (Isaiah 40:11, ESV).

You need to know this comfort: the shepherd who walks with you through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps 23:4) is a God of infinite power. The shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to search for the one is a God of unfathomable might (Lk 15:1-7).

Absolute power is only scary if the one who holds it is not absolutely good. But our God is absolutely powerful and absolutely good. And that is the best news imaginable.

4.) God is wise.

Remember, the audience that Isaiah 40 is geared toward is the Jewish people in exile. It is an audience who has suffered great personal loss. When we endure such suffering, it is common and understandable to ask God, “Why? Why would you allow this to happen?”

To such questions, Isaiah responds, “*Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?*” (Isaiah 40:13–14, ESV).

Here Isaiah is reminding us of the wisdom of God. He is reminding us that we can only view our reality from a limited vantage point. We did not witness the beginning of creation, and we cannot know the end of history. But God possesses no such limitation of knowledge. That means that God can possess reasons for what he does and does not allow that we could never know or understand. We cannot fathom the wisdom of God, but we can learn to trust it.

I remember when my son was three years old playing in the backyard, and he attempted to climb our wooden fence. Thankfully, he wasn't able to make over the fence, but he did succeed in lodging a massive wooden splinter in his hand, just beneath his thumb. He wept at the pain, but he wept even more when I told him I was going to have to dig that splinter out his hand. Even though his mind could not possibly understand what was happening in that moment, I knew the only way I could save him from an even greater problem and an even greater pain was in that moment to wound him. And he raged against my wife and me, as my wife held him, while I pressed the shard of wood from his body. And I wasn't angry at him for his weeping or fear. But I remember longing for the day when he would be mature enough to trust me.

We will endure great pain and hardship as the people of God. At times we will be called to suffer with and for Christ. But we can draw comfort from the fact that our God is infinitely wise, and he is bending history to his glory and our good.

5.) God is infinite.

Isaiah 40 ends with these words: *"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint"* (Isaiah 40:28–31, ESV).

As we are now entering into the seventh month of a pandemic, with no end in sight and local numbers rising, I think there is not a person listening to this sermon who does not relate with feelings of weariness and exhaustion.

We've all probably reached our limit and then some. Even young people have a limit to strength and energy, Isaiah says. But our God cannot be exhausted. He possesses no limitation. We are finite. He is infinite.

The attribute of God's infinity amplifies all his other attributes described here by Isaiah. God is not just gracious – he is infinitely gracious, infinitely just, infinitely powerful, infinitely wise.

We will be exhausted if all we can do is take matters into our own hands and white-knuckle our way through life. But we will find our strength and restoration when we rest in the infinite strength of our God.

Conclusion

The words of Isaiah are the words of one who has seen the glory of the Lord high and lifted up. He is reminding us who God is because he wants us to have eyes to see the

bigness of the God we serve when our world seems to be falling apart. This is the truth we need, but it is not always the truth we want.

We live in a generation that has created an endless market of self-help books and life-hacks. We want practical solutions and good advice so that we can get to work fixing what is wrong with ourselves and our world.

But the primary message of Isaiah – and the primary message of the Bible – is not good advice, but rather, good news. Isaiah proclaims, “*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 it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’*” (Isaiah 40:9, ESV).

I’ve heard it explained like this.³ Imagine that you are a watchman on the wall of an ancient city, and your king has ridden out to with his army to defend the kingdom from an invading army. If the king is defeated and is forced into retreat, he would send ahead of him a military advisor to instruct the citizens of the city how to prepare for attack and how to muster the defenses. The advisor would tell the people of the city how to save themselves.

But if the king goes into battle and he prevails against the enemy, if he wins the war, he will not send a military advisor back to the city. He would send a herald to proclaim the good news of who the king is and what the king has done. And the city would respond with a sense of great joy, great relief, and great comfort.

This is how we, too, should respond to the truth of the gospel. This is how we should respond to the God of the gospel.

As the words of the old Heidelberg Catechism teach: “*What is thy only comfort in life and in death? That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me, that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto Him.*”⁴

Redeemer Christian Church, may we know, believe, and rest in the comfort of our God.
AMEN.

³ I believe in a sermon by Timothy Keller.

⁴ Heidelberg Catechism, *Heidelberg Catechism*, Revised Edition. (Cleveland, OH: Central Publishing House, 1907), 19.

Discussion starters for Gospel Community

- 1.) Read Isa 40:1-14; 28-31. If you have the time, consider reading all of chapter 40.
- 2.) Take some time to list and discuss various the various attributes of God that Isaiah refers to in this passage.
- 3.) What is the connection between the “comfort” in Isa 40:1 and the attributes of God listed in the rest of the chapter?
- 4.) Is there a particular attribute of God found in Isa 40 that gives you a sense of comfort in this season?
- 5.) Is there a particular attribute of God found in Isa 40 that you struggle to believe? Why?