

INTRODUCTION:

This morning, I would like for us to start a series of three lessons from a very encouraging chapter in the Old Testament book of **Isaiah**.

- As I started reading the entire chapter, I realized that it contained a number of significant verses that most of us will probably find to be very familiar.
- I am referring to **Isaiah 40**, and this morning I'd like for us to start by looking together at the first 11 verses.
- We'll look at the rest of the chapter next Sunday for the morning and evening lessons.

The prophet Isaiah is rather unusual, because he is writing sometime around 700 BC, and yet he constantly refers to the destruction of Jerusalem that would not happen for more than another hundred years.

- Not only that, but he also spends a great deal of time predicting the return to Jerusalem another 70 years after that.
- Because of this, the book itself is rather unusual, because it has some rather strange similarities to the entire Bible.
- The Bible, of course, has 66 books. The book of **Isaiah** has 66 chapters.
- Of those 66 chapters, the first 39 basically relate to judgment, and failure, and condemnation, and the final 27 basically relate to restoration, and redemption, and hope for the future.
- We remember, of course, that there are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 in the New—and so there is a natural division between chapters 39 and 40.

If we were to go back and take a look at **Isaiah 6:1-8**, we would find the record of Isaiah's call to be a prophet.

- Before Isaiah accepted that call, with the words, "**Here am I, send me,**" Isaiah served as a court historian and writer for King Uzziah and King Hezekiah of Judah.
- Isaiah was married and had two sons. He was a fervent patriot. He was a well-educated man with a massive vocabulary, a skilled writer, and a man with a deep reverence for God.

One scholar had this to say about Isaiah, "**Never perhaps has there been another prophet like Isaiah, who stood with his head in the clouds and his feet on solid earth, with his heart in things of eternity and with his mouth and hand in the things of time, with his spirit in the eternal counsel of God and his body in a very definite moment of history.**" A very true statement!

Isaiah served God faithfully, and according to tradition, Isaiah was one of the faithful in **Hebrews 11:37**, who was "**sawn in two.**"

- Tradition says that wicked King Manasseh had Isaiah placed inside a hollow log and then had that log cut in half with a saw. It must have been a horrible way to die.

And yet the book of **Isaiah** is an amazing piece of prophecy. **Isaiah** ranks second only to the book of **Psalms** in the number of verses that speak directly about the coming of Christ.

- Out of the 66 chapters in **Isaiah**, 47 of those are either quoted or alluded to by either Christ or the Apostles.
- And with more than 400 references, **Isaiah** again stands second only to the book of **Psalms** as the Old Testament book most quoted in the New Testament.

And so this morning, we come to **Isaiah 40**. We leave off in chapter 39 with Isaiah's promise to King Hezekiah that all of his treasures would end up being carried away to Babylon.

- But then in chapter 40, a page turns—almost like turning from the Old Testament to the New Testament—and Isaiah changes his tone.
- No longer is he predicting doom and gloom, but he starts predicting the time when the nation of Israel would return to the land of Canaan.

We need to remember that although this book was written more than a hundred years ahead of time, that this book would survive until the captivity itself.

- The book itself would also be read in captivity, and would certainly provide a great deal of hope to those who were prisoners of war in Babylon.
- Those who had survived the 600-mile forced march through the desert had ended up being abused in a completely pagan society.
- You might remember the story of Daniel, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego.
- Those stories took place during the Babylonian Captivity.

Isaiah, therefore, was warning the nation of Israel about the judgment of God that was coming more than 100 years in the future.

- The people would not listen. And so this morning, we will study a message of comfort that was written to those who would survive God's punishment through the captivity. **Isaiah 40:1-11**.

- 1 *“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God.*
- 2 *“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.”*
- 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.”*
- 6 *A voice says, “Call out.” Then he answered, “What shall I call 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.*
- 9 *Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; Lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”*
- 10 *Behold, the Lord God will come with might, With His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him.*
- 11 *Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes.*

As we look back at these 11 verses, I'd like for us to focus on several aspects of **COMFORT** that can also apply to those of us who have just now looked at this passage—more than 2700 years after it was first written.

- I. First of all, though, let's consider the fact that **GOD WILL COMFORT HIS PEOPLE...BUT ONLY WHEN HIS PEOPLE REPENT OF THEIR SINS** (verses 1-5).

We notice right away in **verse 1** that after 39 chapters of doom and gloom we open up into what we might describe as the “New Testament” section of Isaiah with an incredibly positive message.

- God speaks to Isaiah and says, **“Comfort, O comfort My people.”**
- And so we are reminded that God’s love never fails.
- Even in the New Testament, we are reminded again that God loves to comfort His people.
- In the words of **2 Corinthians 1:3**, Paul describes God by saying, **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.”**
- God, therefore, loves to comfort His people.

And yet we find in **Isaiah 40** that God’s comfort was conditional.

- God did not comfort until the punishment was complete...until the debt had been fully paid.
- Comfort was not given in **Isaiah 1**, not in **Isaiah 2**, or **3**, or **4**...but God waited through 39 chapters of destruction and punishment—until the people had turned away from their sins.
- I think we learn from this that only when sin is confronted can we truly appreciate the comfort that God offers.

We notice that the picture continues in **verses 3-5**.

- These verses should already be very familiar to us, because **Matthew**, **Mark**, and **Luke** all use these words to describe the work of John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus.
- We need to ask ourselves this morning: **How did John tell the people to prepare?**
- Well, we look at the gospel accounts, and we find that John had one basic message...he told the people to repent and be immersed in water for the forgiveness of their sins.
- John’s basic message was, **“Change! Turn away from sin, and turn your hearts back toward God!”** Over and over again, John called out the need for repentance.
- In fact, his message was so severe and so straightforward, that John was eventually beheaded—most likely because of his teaching on divorce and remarriage.
- It is not okay just to sweep sin under the rug.
- It is not okay just to pretend that sin is not as serious as it really is.
- But to truly prepare the way for the Lord, we must make some serious changes in our lives.

Repentance is not for the faint of heart. It is not a process for wimps. But repentance is serious work.

- And as the nation of Israel learned after 70 years in Babylonian captivity after 70 years of death, and disease, and torment, repentance is the most painful step in God’s plan of salvation.

And after those 70 years of captivity, Isaiah describes repentance as preparing a way for the Lord to come.

- Today, we know what it means to prepare for company.
- Whenever we have family coming over, my family goes into a cleaning frenzy for sometimes hours.
- The floors have to be cleaned, things have to be dusted, all of the clutter has to be put away—all of these things have been taken care of, because we wanted everything to be ready when they got here.
- There is an old Portuguese proverb that says, **“Guests always give pleasure—if not the arrival, the departure.”**
- I’m not saying that applies to my family, but all of us understand that preparation can be very hard work.

I don’t know about you, but I have appreciated the Staples’ commercials with the concept of an **“Easy Button.”**

- A guy gets into a tough situation, and a woman from Staples comes along and hands him the **“Easy Button.”**

- But when it comes to preparing a way for the Lord in our own hearts, when it comes to repentance, there is no **“Easy Button.”**

In the New Testament, Zaccheus paid back four times all of the money that he had stolen.

- Our sinful lives will be corrected. And yet many people today think that we can live as **“Christians”** and still have ongoing sin in our lives.
- But Isaiah would tell us that every valley must be lifted up and every mountain must be made low.
- We don’t need to make a laundry list here, but all of us know that there are some things we need to do that we are not doing, and there are also some things we are doing that we should not be doing.
- Isaiah would tell us to make those changes.
- Isaiah would tell us to get out our construction tools and prepare a road into our hearts.
- Isaiah would tell us to prepare for the Lord to come by changing our hearts and minds—just as the nation of Israel would apparently do before being comforted and welcomed back to Jerusalem after those 70 years in Babylonian captivity.

First of all, then, God will comfort His people when they repent.

II. Now, we also learn from this paragraph that **GOD PROVIDES COMFORT THROUGH HIS STEADY AND NEVER-CHANGING WORD** (verses 6-8).

Isaiah is painting a picture for us: As everything around us fades and passes away, we find that the word of God stands alone at the end.

- Certainly for those people in Babylonian captivity, they would have been surrounded by the huge pagan temples, and I am sure that the situation seemed hopeless at the time, but Isaiah says that the word of God will outlast everything that we see around us.

Please think for a moment about what we look for when we are making a major purchase.

- When we go shopping for a major appliance, or a car, or even a house, we may consider many different factors, but when it comes right down to it, we are usually interested in longevity.
- When we look for a car, we look for something that will last for several years.
- When we look for a dishwasher, we are looking for a reliable model that will last for a long time.
- When we look for a house, we are looking for something that is durable and will keep our family warm and dry for many years.
- We often look for durability in the things that we purchase.
- Since this is the case, then what should be the most important thing in our lives?
- What is it that will last forever? Our houses and cars and appliances are actually very temporary, aren’t they?

But Isaiah says that ***“The word of our God stands forever.”***

- Our money, our clothes, and even our earthly lives are here today and gone tomorrow, but the word of God is eternal.
- What a wonderful reassurance! What a comfort it is to know that God’s word is always true!

In other words, Isaiah was not comforting these people with just another empty promise, but he was comforting these people with the word of God.

- What is it that makes God’s word so comforting? I’m not exactly sure...except that it is God’s word—and (as the writer of **Hebrews** says) it is ***“living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword.”***
- The word of God brings great comfort in difficult situations.

I find it interesting that Peter quotes from **verses 6-8 in 1 Peter 1**.

- Peter quotes those verses about the word of God enduring forever, and then he says, *“Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.”*
- In other words, once we know that the word of God will endure forever, it means something in our lives.
- Once we know that the word of God will endure forever, we know we can use that word as a steady and never-changing guide in our lives.
- And Peter says that instead of longing for those things that are temporary, we should be longing for the pure milk of God’s word.

As a preacher, I can’t help but think that this passage must have been quite comforting for Isaiah.

- Here was a man of God whose words were being rejected by his own generation.
- The nation was headed for destruction. They did not see it at the time, no one seemed to be listening, but Isaiah knew that even after the captivity, God’s word would still be there.
- Long after Isaiah was gone, God’s message would still be available.

It seems that this should also be a comfort for us today.

- Here we are teaching God’s word, and sometimes it doesn’t seem like it really does any good.
- It’s hard to tell if our generation will ever really listen.
- Sometimes it’s hard to tell if we’re really having any impact here in the Salem area.
- But Isaiah would encourage us to keep on preaching and teaching, because the word of God will still be here for the next generation!
- And so we find that God will provide comfort through His word—a word that will never wither or fade.

III. There is one more concept I’d like for us to notice from this section of **Isaiah 40**, and we see it in **verses 9-11** with the idea that **GOD WILL ALSO PROVIDE COMFORT THROUGH POWERFUL REASSURANCE THAT HE IS STILL IN CONTROL.**

As these people get taken off into Babylon, they would need to know that God had not abandoned them, but that God was still active in the world.

- They would need to know that God was still in control, that He was still acting as a shepherd and a ruler over His people.

And so as Isaiah thinks about this message, he says, *“Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”*

- We notice that the nation was not to just think about this message, but they were to proclaim it—not just from a mountain, but from a *“high mountain”*—not just with a voice, but with a mighty voice!

In the New Testament, of course, the good news is referred to as the **“gospel.”**

- And in a similar way, good news is not something that should be kept quiet.
- Good news is something that people need to hear.
- Good news is something that brings hope and comfort to those who listen and obey.

Isaiah goes on to describe the Lord as a mighty ruler and also as a shepherd.

- And again, these are also pictures that are continued in the New Testament. Jesus is the good news!

- In **John 10**, Jesus referred to Himself as a good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.
- On the other hand, in **2 Timothy 4:8**, Paul also describes the Lord as a *“righteous Judge.”*
- But in all of this, the news about the Lord is always good.
- The Lord is not a ruthless leader, but rather, His power is in His care.
- To his children, the Lord is a shepherd, but when those sheep are threatened, there is no limit to his strength and power.

Take special note of the tender loving care that we find in Isaiah’s comment in **verse 11** that the Lord *“...will gently lead the nursing ewes.”*

- In other words, the Lord has a special place in His heart for those who are vulnerable, for those who are perhaps caring for others to the extent that they cannot really care for themselves as they should.
- **Verse 11** also points out that *“...He will gather the lambs and carry them....”*
- He takes those who are spiritually young who are just learning to walk, and the Lord personally carries them and keeps them safe.
- And so the Lord is our Shepherd. He is strong, and yet tender at the same time.
- We think of David as a shepherd. He certainly cared for the sheep, but David was also famous for killing lions and bears as he protected his flocks.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION & INVITATION:

As I look back over **Isaiah 40:1-11**, it seems to me that **COMFORT** is the main theme.

- God will comfort those who turn away from their sins—no matter how difficult it might be. Isaiah pictures repentance as a huge construction project, with the idea of a road being built through the desert—mountains are brought down, and the valleys are lifted up.
- We also find here that God will provide the necessary comfort through His steady and never-changing word. The things of the world will come and go—just like withering grass and fading flowers—but the word of God stands forever—bringing comfort to those who are willing to trust and obey that word.
- And then finally, we have seen that God will comfort his people by reassuring them that He is always in control. The Lord was not about to abandon His people, but the Lord is pictured as a powerful and loving shepherd.

In light of this good news that we have heard through Isaiah, all of us here this morning need to ask ourselves where we are in terms of our own salvation.

- Are we headed in the right direction, or do we need to turn around?
- If you have already obeyed the gospel at some point in the past, but things are not quite right between you and God, then I would suggest that you need to think back in your past—to a time when things were good between you and the Lord...and go back and reestablish that relationship.
- What is there that could possibly be worth going home this morning without making things right?

On the other hand, for those of us who are Christians, let us celebrate with the good news!

- There is nothing that can compare to the happiness we know.
- In the words of one of our hymns, **“O I want to see Him, look upon His face, there to sing forever of His saving grace; On the streets of glory let me lift my voice, cares all past, home at last, ever to rejoice!”**

If you are ready to obey the gospel—by putting your faith in the Lord, by changing your life, and by being immersed in water for the forgiveness of your sins—you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let’s stand and sing...