

Isaiah 40:1-11 – Living In-Between The Advents

Translation and sermon by Nate Wilson for Christ the Redeemer Church on 24 Dec. 2006 & 27 Dec 2015

Translation

(1) “Y’all Comfort!

Comfort my people,” says your God.

(2) “Speak to the heart of Jerusalem

and call out to her

that her warfare has been fulfilled

that her iniquity has been paid for

that she has taken from the hand of Jehovah double in all her sins.”

(3) A voice is calling,

“In the wilderness, y’all face the way of Jehovah

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God

(4) Every valley will be raised

And every mountain and hill will be lowered

And it will be that the crooked becomes even

And the ridges become a cleft.

(5) And the glory of Jehovah will be revealed

And all flesh together will see

For the mouth of Jehovah has spoken.

(6) A voice is saying, “Call out!”

And it says, “What shall I call out?

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like a flower of the field.

(7) Grass withers and a flower fades,

when a breath of Jehovah blows in it –

surely the people are grass.”

(8) “Grass withers and a flower fades, but a word of our God will stand forever.

(9) Go, get up on a high mountain, evangelist of Zion;

Raise your voice with strength, evangelist of Jerusalem;

Raise [it] - don’t be afraid!

Say to the cities of Judah,

‘Look, your God!

(10) Look, the Lord Jehovah will come in might,

and His arm rules for Him.

Look, His reward is with Him,

and His work before His face.

(11) Like a shepherd He will shepherd His flock:

With His arm He will gather lambs,

And in His bosom carry;

Those who are nursing He will lead gently.

The source of comfort

Chapter 40 here starts with “Comfort,” but it is in the context of the previous 39 chapters of judgment. As the commentator E.J. Young put it, “True comfort consists in setting forth the entire truth of the people’s tragic condition and causing them to see God as their only hope.”

The Heidelberg Catechism opens with, “What is your only comfort in life and death?

I am not my own in body or soul, in life or death.

I belong to my faithful Savior who

with His precious blood fully satisfied all my sins

and delivered me from all the power of the devil,

and preserves me so that without the will of the Father, not a hair can fall from my head,

and makes all things subservient to my salvation.

By His Holy Spirit, I am assured of eternal life and made willing and ready to live for Him.

Question two: What must I know to enjoy this comfort and to live and die happily?

I must remember three things;

First , my sins and miseries are great,

second how I am delivered from these sins and miseries,

and third, how grateful I am to God for this deliverance.

I think that Ursinus and Olevianus may have been looking at Isaiah 40 when they wrote the first set of questions for the Heidelberg catechism, for they copy Isaiah’s three reasons that God’s people should be comforted – in chapter 40, verse 2:

1) One: **“that her warfare has been fulfilled”**

a) This word for “warfare” is from the same root as the word “Hosts” in the title “Lord of Hosts,” or in Hebrew “Jehovah Sabbaoth” it can also be used for the misery and affliction and captivity of being governed by soldiers. This would correspond with “my sins and miseries are great” in the catechism.

b) But there is good news: the time of fighting is over; now is the time for peace

c) The verb Isaiah uses here has to do with being full – “her warfare is filled full.” It reminds us of Gal 4:4 where Paul writes, “but when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son.”

2) The second reason for comfort is: **“that her iniquity has been paid for”**

a) This would correspond with the Heidelberg’s second point in question #2: “What must I know to enjoy this comfort and live and die happily?” The second part of the answer is, “I must remember... that I am delivered from these sins.” Isaiah says “her iniquity has been atoned.”

b) Most English versions translate the verb as “pardoned;” other synonyms would be, “satisfactorily paid,” “made pleasing.” Generally this word is used in Old Testament Hebrew to indicate that the sacrifice of an animal or the “sacrifice” of a (Sabbath) day has been made and that it has been accepted, so that there is now peace between man and God.

c) But had an offering really been made by Isaiah’s time that would atone for Israel’s iniquity? Ephesians 1:4 and I Peter 1:20 speak of Jesus choosing to save us “before the foundation of the world.” Isaiah could speak in the past tense of iniquity being “paid for,” because Jesus had already been planning to pay for sins with His death before anybody had even been created, so it was as good as done. Even Isaiah could proclaim forgiveness of sin almost a millennium before Jesus died on the cross in fulfillment of this promise.

3) And now the third reason for comfort: **“that she has taken from the hand of Jehovah double in all her sins.”** Isaiah does not explain this clearly, so it is understandable that different people interpret it differently:

a) In the Heidelberg catechism the third thing we must remember to enjoy this comfort is our “grateful[ness] to God for His deliverance.” Isaiah mentions “the hand of the Lord” in this third reason, this is the direction that the catechism looks – to God – with gratefulness for deliverance.

b) But the word “double” seems to be significant also – “she has taken from the hand of Jehovah double.” Some people take this word “double” literally to mean the two captivities of the Jews, where Assyria carried off the Northern Kingdom and then Babylon carried off the Southern Kingdom, so “a double [captivity] for her sin.”

- c) On the other hand, some people, correlate this phrase with Isa 61, where it says (7) “Instead of your shame there shall be a **double** portion; instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot; therefore in their land they shall possess a **double** portion; they shall have everlasting joy. (8) For I the LORD love justice; I hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.” In other words, God will give them the blessing compared to all the hardships, so God will bless their socks off!
- d) One commentator I read took the word “double” in the sense of “folding in half,” just like a... choke sandwich: You take that piece of bread and you slather it with peanut butter and honey and sprinkle some raisins on it, then you fold it in half and Mmmmmm. But you can’t see the raisins any more because they were all covered when you doubled up the sandwich. So the picture goes that our lives are hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:3) and all our sins are covered from God’s sight forever when Jesus folds Himself over us.
- e) However, this word “double” could just be taken in the sense of “plenty.” In other words, the Jews have suffered a lot in God’s wrath against their sin and all the beatings and captivities they have endured from other nations. BUT the oath from Isaiah 22:14 that their sin would not be atoned for without the ultimate price of death still stands. They can never suffer enough for their own sins. Yet, Jesus was a Jew, and He did suffer on the cross completely adequately to cover the sins of the world. Jesus’ suffering was infinite and thus more than double what was needed to satisfy the demands for justice for Israel’s sins. Yes their miseries were great, but Jesus has taken more than enough of the punishment for their sin upon Himself and so the comfort of being forgiven and being right with God can be offered. This is good news! This is the Gospel!

The good news

Now, after describing the good news of comfort in terms of what will cease to be (warfare, iniquity, and punishment), Isaiah turns to look at the good news in terms of something good that is coming. The good news is that God Himself is coming! But this is introduced gradually:

- It starts with a vision of a herald for an important personage. We see this fulfilled in Mat 3:1-3. In those days John the Baptizer came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.'"
- Then in verses 3-4, there is a picture of a highway being made for God to come in on
- This gives way to the promise in v.5 that the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
- Then finally the mind-boggling words of v.9 arrive, “BEHOLD YOUR GOD!” In Isaiah’s mind, He has finally arrived!

First and Second Comings

At Christmas we celebrate the arrival of Jesus in the flesh, when, for the first time in history, man could behold his God. Mary and Joseph and the shepherds of Bethlehem looked down into that manger at that newborn baby and they were looking at God, because Jesus is God. Isaiah speaks many times of this “first coming” of Christ:

- Isa 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.
- Isa 9:1-2 But there shall be no gloom to her that was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali; but in the latter time hath he made it glorious, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. (2) The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.
- Isa 9:6-7 For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (7) Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the

throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of Jehovah of hosts will perform this.

- Isa 11:1-2 And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots shall bear fruit. (2) And the Spirit of Jehovah shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of Jehovah.
- Isa 52:9-10 uses much of the same wording as chapter 40: Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem; for Jehovah hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. (10) Jehovah hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

Illustration on Perspective, and Second Coming

But how could Isaiah say in v.5 that “all flesh will see it together”? The number of people who saw Jesus at His first coming in the New Testament times couldn’t have numbered even a million. The people living in China and Europe didn’t see Him.

The solution to this lies in that Isaiah, can’t see much difference between the first and second comings of Christ. When you stand in Denver and look out to the mountains, you see a bunch of mountains in one line, running North to South, but if you actually drive into those mountains on I-70, you start seeing how far apart those mountains really are. You realize, for instance that even though Dinosaur Ridge appeared to be right in front of Mt. Evans, Dinosaur Ridge is actually miles and miles East of Mount Evans and thousands of feet shorter, but you can’t see that until you’re inbetween the mountains. Now that we are inbetween the two parousias, we feel the difference between Christ’s first and second coming more distinctly. The following verses speak more of the second coming and explain how Isaiah can say that “all flesh together” will see God:

- Mat 24:26-27 If therefore they shall say to you, “Look, He is in the wilderness!” do not go out there: “Look, He is in the inner chambers!” don’t believe it. (27) For as the lightning comes out of the east, and is seen even unto the west; so shall the coming of the Son of man be.
- Rev 1:7 Look, He comes with the clouds; and every eye shall see Him, including those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over Him.
- 1Th 4:16-18 For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; (17) then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (18) Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

When Jesus comes back, EVERYone is going to see Him then. And that’s why everyone needs to hear about Him first. The second coming is going to be the final reckoning for every human being.

Facing the Commands of God

This passage is full of words that generate cozy feelings of getting ready for Christmas: “comfort... prepare the way of the Lord...” However, we need to face the fact that they are commands, and they are not commands just to Isaiah. The first imperatives are all in the second person plural, in other words, this is not just addressed to Isaiah, it’s addressed to you all.

- (v.1) Y’all comfort my people
- (v.2) y’all speak to the heart of Jerusalem
- y’all call out to her
- (v.3) Y’all face/prepare the way of the Lord
- Y’all make a straight highway

This is the work Jesus gives us inbetween Christmas and His second coming. How can we faithfully obey this set of commands?

First, we are to speak to our fellow believers in Christ.

- I Thess 4:18 says to “comfort one another” with words to the effect that Jesus is coming back and we will meet the Lord in the air and be with Him forever!
- We speak to the heart of Jerusalem by speaking kindly to our brothers and sisters in Christ. “Let your graciousness be known to all” says Paul in Philippians 4. We must be people who speak gracious words that encourage and build up the body of Christ for God’s purposes.
- Like Isaiah, we need to remind our brothers and sisters that their sins are forgiven. We begin by “forgiving one another just as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven” us (Eph. 4:32). When we forgive our brother, it reminds him that God also can forgive him.

Secondly we are to speak into the places where faith does not exist.

- The desert and the wilderness are spoken of in v.3 as being in need of clearing a way through. Does it mean that we need to all invest in earthmoving equipment and spend our lives making the world look like Western Kansas? I believe that the desert and the wilderness are a symbol of the sin, corruption, rebellion, and unrepentance of the human heart. “Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.” (NASB)
- “Let every valley be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low” Figuratively, valleys are depressions where we lose hope in God and focus on our misery, figuratively pride is a high place in the heart. We are to be spiritual road crews, “casting down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.” (2Cor. 10:5)

Speaking out and taking this kind of initiative can be difficult. We have all sorts of excuses why not to speak up, and so, in God’s mercy, He gives us the encouragement we need to pipe up and talk about the message of Christmas – that God has come and is coming again.

Countering Isaiah’s excuse – God’s word will stand forever

In verses six through 8 we have a little dialogue, and although it is difficult to say dogmatically who is speaking, I think it is Isaiah struggling with obeying God. In the first few words of verse 6, we have a command in the singular addressed to Isaiah, as if to say, “Well, you’ve heard the message, and I’ve already told you in v.2 to call out and proclaim it, so PROCLAIM it already!”

But there is a little bit of hesitance in Isaiah’s mind. It’s as though he looks back over however-many years of ministry - 39 chapters of prophecy, considering how poorly the people of Israel have responded to his words, and he says, “These people are never going to get it. People are like grass – here today, gone tomorrow. Is there really any point in going on? Is this worth living for? Every year, Isaiah watched the dry Sirocco winds blow in from Saudi Arabia and wither the grass. Is this all there is to look forward to?

And then it comes to him, “Yes, the grass withers and the flower fades, BUT the word of our God will stand forever!” It is the word of the Lord that he is living for. And not merely the perfect words of some deity out there, but the words of our God, the God who has given Himself to us in Jesus, who has chosen to love us and make a covenant with us and be ours. It’s about God. This gives us the “get up and go” (v.9) we need to proclaim the good news that Jesus has come and He is coming again.

Dealing with fear

In verse nine, God says to Isaiah – and to us, “Do not fear, raise your voice!” Are there things that you are afraid of that make it difficult to talk about how Jesus came and is coming again? Are you afraid of what other people will think? Are you afraid of being made fun of? Are you afraid of proclaiming a promise from God and it not coming true and you looking like a fool?

- Prov. 29:25 The fear of man bringeth a snare; But whoso putteth his trust in Jehovah shall be safe.

God instructs us on a few things to help us deal with fear:

- First, he reminds us in v.9 that we are a “bearer of good news” – an “evangelist” (LXX). It is our job to tell this good news that Jesus has come and is coming again. The word “evangelist” is feminine here, indicating not just Isaiah, but the feminine bride of Christ – Zion/the church. It’s who we are; it’s our job -our calling. To do anything else would be untrue to what God has now made us to be! (cf. Isa 52:7, Nah 1:15, and Rom 10:13-15 “how beautiful are the feet of them”)
- Second He encourages us to go whole hog and throw inhibition to the wind. Don’t just make a discrete announcement, raise your voice and yell it! Don’t wait for the proper time and place, run up now to the top of the mountain and proclaim it! Don’t be afraid!
- And finally, God reminds us of the great power He has to fulfill His promised word in v.10. The “arm” is symbolic of a man’s strength and ability. God reminds us that He is coming with sufficient power to do whatever He wants. He has the ability to reward the righteous and punish the wicked and He will do it, so don’t be afraid that the promise you are proclaiming is somehow going to fall flat and not come true.

*Ye shepherds shrink not with affright, but heed the angel’s warning;
this child now weak in infancy, our confidence and joy shall be,
the power of darkness breaking, our peace eternal making.*

The words in verse 10 “His reward is with Him and His recompense is in front of Him,” can be taken two ways, one is the view that Jesus will come, carrying rewards for faith and punishment for sin. This is the way it flows in Rev. 22:12-15: “Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to render to each man according as his work is. (13) I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. (14) Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may have the right to come to the tree of life, and my enter in by the gates into the city. (15) Without are the dogs, and the sorcerers, and the fornicators, and the murderers, and the idolaters, and every one that loveth and maketh a lie.”

Motivations from the person of God

However, it might be more fitting to understand the phrase “His reward” as the things which belong to Jesus because He has earned them. The words “reward” and “recompense” are really synonyms for “compensation” or “pay.” So, what has Jesus earned by His work that He would want to bring with Him to accompany Him at His second coming? He has bought for Himself a people with His blood shed on the cross! In this view, Jesus is coming back from heaven, accompanied by the people that He has redeemed. Isaiah 62:11 flows in this direction of meaning: “Behold, Jehovah has proclaimed unto the end of the earth, ‘Y’all, say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Look, your salvation is coming; Look, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. And they shall call them, ‘The holy people,’ ‘The redeemed of Jehovah.’””

In verse 11, we are given the motivation to lift up our voice about the coming of Jesus based upon the character of God Himself. He is a shepherd. He has His flock with Him, and He is the sort of person in which true comfort can be found. John Calvin put it, “the sum of our happiness... consists solely in the presence of God.”

Those strong arms mentioned in v.10 are not striking the sheep, no, they are powerfully gathering the sheep and holding them safely to the shepherd’s chest. Think of it:

- all that awesome power, directed toward the comfort and protection of the ones He loves.

- All the omniscient wisdom and knowledge of God directed toward knowing you and making sure you are cared for, gently leading those who are pregnant and nursing.
- Psalm 80:1 speaks of the “Shepherd of Israel, who leads Joseph like a flock,” yet is gloriously “enthroned upon the cherubim”
- In Ezek 34:22-24, God says, “I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. (23) And I will set up over them one Shepherd... He shall feed them and be their shepherd. (24) And I, the LORD, will be their God...”
- Psalm 23:1-2 “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. (2) He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.”
- John 10:14-16 Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, (15) just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. (16) And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.
- Heb 13:20 calls the Jesus, “the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant”
- Peter also calls Jesus the “Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” who “bore our sins in his body on the tree” 1Pe 2:24-25

This is Jesus. “Behold, your God!”

Robert Southwell wrote a poem in the late 1500’s that captures a great deal of the feel of Isaiah’s meaning in the context of Christmas. I want to close with some excerpts from it:

Come to your haven, you heavenly choirs, Earth has the haven of your desires!
 Remove your dwelling to your God, a stall is now His best abode.
 Sith men their homage do deny, come, angels, all their fault supply...

This little Babe, so few days old is come to rifle Satan’s fold;
 All hell doth at His presence quake, though He himself for cold do shake,
 For in this weak unarmed wise, the gates of hell He will surprise...

His camp is pitched in a stall, His bulwark but a broken wall
 The crib his trench, haystalks His stakes, of shepherds He His muster makes,
 And thus as sure His foe to wound, the angels’ trumps alarum sound.

My soul with Christ join in the fight; stick to the tents that He hath pight;
 Within His crib is surest ward, this little Babe will be thy guard;
 If thou will foil thy foes with joy, then flit not from this heavenly boy!

Chapter 40 begins the second major section in Isaiah.

There has been much debate in the last century or two over whether Isaiah wrote both the first and second parts of this book. Delitzsch offers many proofs of integrity. The perspective from here on is as though Isaiah were in Babylon with the captives etc. through this years into the future.

Isaiah Chapter 40

"Isn't it good if there is peace?"
Seek to find something good in God's dealings with you & thank Him for it.

Commands in four sets v. 1-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-11 - understand

Opposites to Isa 22 noted in green

LXX addresses v. to the 'Priests'; Targum to the 'Prophets'

Young: Comfort repeated b/c of (1) sinners and (2) richness of the comfort. Tree canopy consists in setting forth the entire truth of the people's tragic condition & causing them to see God as their only hope. v. 2 = good news from negative standpoint, v. 3-11 give positive.

נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי - אֵל הַיְכֶם

דַּבְּרוּ עַל-לֵב יְרוּשָׁלַם, וְקִרְאוּ אֶלֶיךָ - כִּי

מְלָאָה צְבָאָה, כִּי יִרְצָה עֲוֹנוֹ: כִּי לִקְחָה מִיָּד

יְהוָה, כָּפְלִים בְּכָל-חַטָּאתֶיהָ.

קוֹל קוֹרֵא בַּמִּדְבָּר, פִּנּוּ דֶרֶךְ יְהוָה; יִשְׂרוּ

בְּעֲרֵבָה, מְסֻלָּה, לְאֵל הַיַּנּוֹ.

כָּל-גֵּיא, יִנְשָׂא, וְכָל-הַר וְגִבְעָה, יִשְׁפְּלוּ; וְהָיָה

הָעֵקֶב לְמִישׁוֹר, וְהָרְכָסִים לְבָקְעָה.

הַיַּגְלָה, כְּבוֹד יְהוָה; וְרָאוּ כָל-בְּשָׂר יִחְדּוּ, כִּי פִי

יְהוָה דִּבֶּר.

וְהָיָה כָּל-חַטָּאתֵינוּ, וְכָל-עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ, כִּי יִשְׂרָנוּ

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1. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God

2. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and say 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.

3. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Like Moses in the Exodus, fulfilled in John the Baptist but can also be done by us today. How can we prepare the way of the Lord? Jesus = God! Desert Arabia's wilderness.

4. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; and the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. will heaven be like Kansas? The Bible speaks elsewhere of a mountain in heaven. This describes the grading process of a road. Figuratively, pride is revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. "so it is certain" fulfilled in part by Jesus' birth & life, but consummated in this second coming, which will be seen by the entire world. Rev 1:7, Matt 24:27, 1 Thes 4:16-18

5. And the glory of the LORD shall be high place revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

6. 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.

7. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass.

8. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

9. Get you 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!"

10. Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and His arm rules for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him.

11. 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.

"Behold your God!"

"the sum of our happiness... consists solely in the presence of God" Calvin

Imperatives change to singular - Isaiah

LXX 1s - also one of the DSS vulgate

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This verse is omitted in the LXX

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Apollon, Symmachus, Syriac, Targum, Delitzsch & Young agree with this translation but LXX & Targumists & KJV

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Jesus as shepherd: Ez. 34:23 Psalm 22 Job 10:10 1 Pet 2:25

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