

Good news of great comfort

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[0:00] Know that soldiers in distant lands were coming home.! What comfort that news brought.!

I'm going to ask three questions. Why do they need comfort? What comfort is being brought? And thirdly, who assures them of comfort? So first of all, why do they need it?

What is the comfort? And who's bringing the comfort? So first of all, why do they need this comfort?

This is what it says, chapter 40, verse 1. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

Why do they need that comfort? Let me explain to you why they need that comfort. This chapter is written addressing a certain period in Israel's history.

[1:31] It is written to the nation of Israel because they are the people of God. They became the people of God through God's promises and through his covenant.

And a covenant is a little bit like a marriage, a close engagement of the people with their God. And that covenant helped to define the people.

It was way back in the time of Moses that this covenant was made. It is what Christians call the old covenant or the old testament. Testament and covenant are exactly the same thing.

And that is why our Bibles are divided into the old testament, that's the old covenant bit, and the new covenant, the new covenant bit through Jesus.

Well, these people were in the old covenant. And the covenant meant that they were given the gift of a land to live in.

[2:34] A land flowing with milk and honey, God said. They were given a gift of land. They didn't deserve it, God said. I'm not picking you to give this land to because you're smart or big.

In fact, you're pretty rubbish, you lot. But I'm going to give it to you anyway. It was given to them without deserving it, but it was given conditionally. And the condition being that if they were grateful and glad and respected the God who had given them this gift, if they were loyal and obedient, they could stay in the land.

But if they were disloyal, if they spat in God's face, they didn't care about him and didn't trust him, then God specifically promised, you will experience defeat in battle, scattering all over the four corners of the world from your home and particularly exile.

You'll be taken off not as tourists but as prisoners. And the chapter addresses the situation where God has actually done this.

It's looking at the exile in Babylon, which is, as you know, part of the history of Israel. Just as the Holocaust is part of the history of Israel, so the exile in Babylon is part of the history of Israel.

[4:03] And God did what he had said. And before you say, oh, that was very impatient of God, that was very harsh of God, let me tell you that God put up with this disloyal people for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years.

And actually, it's a story of enormous patience and enormous kindness, which just got spat back into God's face. So he did send them into exile.

And we are to imagine this chapter that was written before the exile is written for the exiles.

For them to read, they're in that foreign land, they're as exiles, sent away from their home, abandoned, it would seem, by God, full of questions.

How did this happen? Why did this happen? Has this happened because our God was too weak to look after us?

[5:22] Has this happened because military power, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, really is too strong for God? Has this happened because the gods of the Babylonians are stronger than the God of Israel?

All sorts of questions they would have had. Is our sin so bad that the promise God gave to take us home will actually never, ever be fulfilled?

Is our sin too bad for his promises to overcome? And there they are in a distant, dark dungeon and that's why they would value comfort.

That's their situation and this word comes to them, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

It literally says, speak to the heart. Speak down in that part of that being where those people had lost hope perhaps, lost a sense of any security.

[6:36] Perhaps, well who knows what was going on in there but he says, speak to their heart. Comfort. comfort my people.

That's why they needed comfort. And of course, this idea of being in a distant, dark dungeon is simply a reflection of not only the situation of historic Israel but really the whole human condition. The idea of being, so it applies to Jews and non-Jews alike. We are like them in that whatever nationality, ethnicity we have, we've been given so many good gifts by God.

And human beings are, you'll correct me if I'm wrong but I don't think you will correct me, by nature ungrateful to God. You might find it in your heart this morning that God's given you so many good things yet you don't feel grateful to him.

Irreverent to God. Not bowing before someone who is greater than they are but sort of quietly pushing him out of their mental picture.

[7:51] Disloyal to God. Not feeling I have any obligation to please him, to do what he says, to fit in with his ways. That's the human condition. And the writer of Isaiah 40 says in verse 6, all men are like grass and their glory is like the flowers of the field.

The grass withers, the flowers fall because the spirit of the Lord blows on them. And he says that all, all people are like this. They are like grass.

They just dry up. They wither away. They don't, they're not, they don't last forever in that sense. And that's what human beings are.

And maybe you've come to church and maybe the people sometimes come to church for the first time. Maybe you've come for the first time and you are just hearing God saying this is your condition.

Without me you are distant, dark, imprisoned. That's what human nature is. If you haven't yet been touched by God's spirit you are like grass because all flesh is like grass.

[9:11] It withers and fades. It dries up. That's why they needed comfort. Second thing, what comfort does he bring?

Now please notice again comfort, comfort my people. When things are repeated in the Bible it means emphasis. So if you like this is comfort squared.

Comfort multiplied by comfort. Speak tenderly to these people. People whose home is Jerusalem. Now then, what comfort does he bring?

Well you find it in verse 2. There's a list of things which I'd like us to think about. Your hard service has been completed.

The word for hard service hard surface no hard service hard service is linked with the word for army hosts.

[10:16] So one translation of it says your warfare has ended. That ties in very well with Armistice Day doesn't it? Your warfare has ended.

The war is over. The strife is over. The conflict is over. The days of suffering and trauma are finished. Your hard service has ended.

Your sin has been paid for. And I think we'll come back to that but just notice what he's saying here. That was a problem.

Your sin wasn't just geography. It wasn't just military. There was a moral and spiritual thing at the bottom of this and that sin has been paid for.

And you have received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. I'll just point out the word double here. Again there's different translations of it but I think the one that's most helpful is to think I don't know if you have done this if you take blotting paper let's divide it in half like that put a splodge of ink on there fold it over and then you get blodge on one side and an equal blodge on the other and it might look like a butterfly and children might make butterfly pictures out of doing that because when you fold it in half when you double it up like that you get the exact copy on one side and the other and the thought of this I got this from Alec Mateer you've received!

[11:55] the exact match for your sins your sins were that and you've received the double meaning the exact war is over hooray the prisoners can come home and this is addressed to the people in Babylon and they had a 70 year period where they were away and after that 70 year period the Lord brought them back and this is anticipating that and he's saying somehow in God's eyes that 70 year period has paid the price and you can come back and it's a glorious thing that's the comfort let's just think about it a little bit more the root cause is that matter about the sin her sin has been paid for the way that the nation of

Israel was always set up was to say this is in a world run by God a personal God a moral God and the thing that really determines the way the world works is not the economics and it's not the geography and it's not the politics but it is the relationship with God I was listening not long ago to a history of a world in a hundred objects listen to that radio program it's a few years ago now some very interesting things and one of the one of the episodes was on what we looked at just last week the attack against Lashish and the way that Hezekiah as he prayed saw the huge Assyrian army retreat and the person giving the radio program was referencing the sculptures in the British Museum which depict the Assyrian army it's very interesting that the writer saw it entirely sorry the writer the person giving this episode saw it entirely in terms of military power and politics he says there is something in the Bible about it but and the Bible says don't see the world like that there is politics there is geography those things are real but they're not the big force they're not the bottom line they're not the real truth about this world the real truth is God who's made everything and runs everything and how we relate to him so she was sent into exile not because the Babylonians had a bigger army but fundamentally because of her sin and we're invited to think that in some way that's she paid the price herself by suffering those 70 years of suffering and forsakenness and she received that from the

Lord's hand and in some way the Lord was able to say prepared to say I'll accept that as the payment for that sin you can now come back and what good news to hear that the penalty is paid we sang it didn't we the penalty was paid a pardon bought oh dear what did he say after that sinners sinners lost at last to him were brought let the praises my heart be thine the sins been paid for what wonderful good news and they were invited to look then at the release from exile and the return brought back from a dark distant dungeon and you'll see as the chapter goes on it says in verse 11 God tends his flock like a shepherd he gathers the lambs in his arms he carries them close to his heart he gently leads those that have young and the picture that seems to certainly be in my mind is of

God going to this distant country and scooping up in his wonderful arms the whole family of his people the young and the old and the families and the like a shepherd would bring his flock with particular attention to the baby lambs particular attention to the mums that have got babies to look after and he very tenderly brings them home and that's what God does he brings them back like a caring shepherd what a wonderful picture that is in verse 30 there's another picture of this coming home this time he's looking at the young men who set off on this journey and although they're coming home it is quite a long journey saying no problem we can do this and actually finding that even young men grow tired and weary it's in verse 30 the youths grow tired and weary you've got teenage children you'll find this is actually true they start very late but they sleep for enormous amounts of time wish I could even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall and God says even they have they need help coming home but those who hope in the

[18:01] Lord will renew their strength they will soar on wings like eagles they will run and not grow weary they will walk and not be faint and God gives them the strength to come back home well that's what was addressed to them in those days but we look at it as Christians and we

say yes there's a deep truth here the root of sin is the root of our human problems and when sin is paid for there is a release and a return safe home but but even when the people got home they found it was still only a foretaste of the real thing you think in the time of

Jesus in the time of Jesus the people were back home weren't they but there was a sense this isn't the full fulfillment of God's kingdom this isn't the full fulfillment of his promises we've had a foretaste but we still haven't got the fullness of this and so when John the Baptist comes and he says now the kingdom comes now the kingdom draws near now get ready for the fulfillment of it all whatever was done in those 70 years in terms of payment of sin it was only a partial payment it was not possible at the end of that 70 years to say sin finished because it wasn't they were released from the evil power of Babylon but they were still under the evil power of

Satan being back in Judea didn't automatically mean that they were nearer to God bit of a disappointing lesson to learn but nevertheless one that they would learn what the return from Babylon brought them was a foretaste of the comfort that this chapter speaks about and the chapter that he and the comfort that he speaks about is still being advertised when John the Baptist comes into the desert as a voice crying in the desert God is coming to save his people and the coming that he announces is Jesus the forerunner who who are you

John the Baptist I am the voice crying in the desert prepare the way for the Lord that's what I'm talking about says John and this is what's coming is Jesus the Jesus who brings comfort to his people in the fullest permanent deepest sense comfort security let's use the word rest that Jesus uses he is the one who can say come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest rest for your souls he's the one who can fully fulfill the promises in this wonderful chapter and the Christian claim is that Jesus brings this comfort and Jesus will bring this comfort in its fulfilled form because we're still not in heaven yet so there's still work to be done and the promise is that if you engage with Jesus

Christ by faith you will be brought from the distance and the darkness and the dungeon of sin to the home near the heart of God it's a promise for you if you will trust him and turn to him that's the promise that he makes what comfort does he bring thirdly who assures this comfort comfort my people says your God speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed that her sin has been paid for that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins notice God does want his people to be comforted if you've come along this morning as a Christian not really sure whether God's got you in his hand come along not really sure whether that means that he loves you not really sure whether you can feel safe in this world in that sense hear these words comfort my people comfort my people so who's bringing the comfort then who's bringing this assurance well there are a variety of answers to that if you take a look we go a little bit further into the chapter of the voices so in verse 3 a voice of one calling in the desert so this voice seems to be in the desert prepare the way for the

[24:05] Lord make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God every valley shall be raised up every mountain and hill made low the rough ground shall become level the rugged place is a plain and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh together will see it for the mouth of the Lord has spoken so there's a voice we don't know who it belongs to but they're in the desert crying out there's another voice verse six a voice says cry out and someone said I don't know whether it is an I I think the NIV says I said what shall I cry so here's a voice what am I supposed to say and the answer comes all flesh is like grass all their glory is like the flowers of the field the grass withers the flowers fall because the breath of the

Lord blows on them surely! and just to stop on that what this voice says all it contrasts humanity and something we'll see what something is in a minute all flesh is like grass verse six and their glory like the flowers of the field and I'd like to stop on the word glory because I looked it up and the translators have a little bit of a conundrum with this the word is hesed and if you were here on Wednesday for the prayer meeting you will know that hesed is a very special word and it means God's steadfastness and dependability and loyalty and you count on him and that's the word here about human beings and what's their hesed like translated glory well it's rubbish actually human hesed by itself is like a flower that pops up looks good for a little while and then after a few days it

wilts have you ever experienced that you buy flowers for some loved one

I actually do this from time to time and you put them in a vase and you put all the water in make sure it's topped up and everything but after a while yeah it's what happens isn't it and that's what human hesed is like it's like the flowers of the field and God would be saying this from bitter experience with the people that he had taken to himself and found that their loyalty was just withered the grass withers the flowers fall because the spirit of the Lord blows on them surely the people are grass the grass withers and the flowers fall but in contrast with human witherability we have the word of God and he says but the word of God stands forever and the word used for stand is not just sort of be plonked in a place it means rises up it's a very wonderful contrast isn't it you compare human fickleness with but the word of

God stands forever if God's promised something he'll do it if God says something he means it if God commits himself to something in his word God swears an oath he'll keep it the word of God stands forever what other voices have we got we've got verse nine you who bring good tidings to Zion so is this the same voice or is a different voice it's somebody who's shouting out to Zion go up on a high mountain so we had a voice in the desert we had a voice not quite sure where they are and here we've got another person who is on a high mountain and what's this person what's this voice saying this voice brings good news to Zion you who bring good tidings to Jerusalem lift up your voice with a shout lift it up do not be afraid so here is some more comforting news again with the translation it could be you who bring good tidings to

Zion or it could be Zion you who bring good tidings good news why does it say tidings I only just noticed that it means good news anyway so it's either somebody speaking to Jerusalem and then they go on and tell the news to the towns of Judah or maybe it's Jerusalem herself who's brought the good news and is supposed to pass that on to the other members of the community here's good news from this voice and the good news is three times it says see so see your God if you like behold your God here's good news see your God behold or see verse 10 the sovereign Lord comes with power his arm rules for him the sovereign

[30:12] Lord meaning the master the master of everything your God who is the master of everything he comes with power and his arm it's the idea of God rolling up his sleeves to get on and do something do you ever roll up your sleeves perhaps a gentleman roll up their sleeves to dig trenches in the garden or something like that roll up and this is a God who has rolled up his sleeves to save his people and it talks about his reward being with him his recompense and accompanies him and not only is he powerful and strong but he's tender and his arms and carry them close to his heart and he gently leads those that are young and all of these voices whatever they're a bit mysterious and I'm not going to try and make them unmysterious they're a little bit mysterious the Lord sends all these different voices to say take comfort my people now you hear lots of voices and you actually there's an email that's come through to the church email just a couple of days ago which said something like this

I am your uncle from Nigeria and you have won \$500 \$500 thousand dollars please send me your bank details now with the exception of Vicky and Anna who probably do have uncles in Nigeria most of us know that that's not to be believed sceptical about this promise of comfort the spokesman the voices that are sent here are telling the truth and we know in the New Testament the Holy Spirit adds his testimony to say you can believe this these words are true they come through human voices in the desert on the mountain pass from one to another but the message is true and not only is this a true message to you if you're a

Christian but it's a message that you too can pass on yourself to other people like Jerusalem passes this on to the cities of Judah you too can pass on this good news you're just a human being I know that God knows that and your voice perhaps is just a voice but you can pass on this good news God there are at least two points that are made in this chapter to give comfort to God's people and one is his faithfulness so we've touched on verse eight already the word of our God stands forever so the God of the Bible is a God who makes promises and keeps them and it's essential for Christians to believe that because there are so many other voices outside us and inside us that say we're going to tell you the truth about things our feelings will say this is the truth about things and the media will say this is the truth about things but we have to believe that when

God says something he's telling us the truth about things all flesh is as grass and the hewed of is like flowers of the field but the word of our God stands forever his faithfulness and another thing that this wants to emphasize to us is his almighty power so just look at for example verse 26 where God says please do this simple exercise go outside when it's dark verse 26 lift your eyes and look to the heavens and look at the stars now even in Brighton we can see stars if you go somewhere less built up if you go into the countryside you'll see even more stars if you go to Trinkham Lee in Sri Lanka when they've turned the lights out you'll see masses of stars and God says just look at those I can recognize the pole star the great bear the little bear the Pleiades full stop that's it Orion yes Orion okay Orion God knows all the stars he knows all of them by name and because he is the creator they are there because he likes stars and so he says let's have loads of them and the writer says take a look at those stars whose attention to detail whose power do they speak about and the answer is

[36:15] God look at them with the right eyes look at them through the correct glasses they're there because God likes stars they're there because God is powerful enough to fling stars into space as the song says and God is faithful enough to make sure that not one of them is missing they're always there regular as anything and he says think that therefore in verse 27 why do you say oh Jacob and complain oh Israel my way is hidden from the Lord my cause is disregarded by God how can you say that here we are in Babylon God's forgotten us here we are in Brighton God's forgotten me how can you say that look at the stars think of God's faithfulness and his almighty power do you not know have you not heard the

Lord is the everlasting God invites us to get a big big view of God and this God is our God too if we're Christians he's the God and father of Jesus Christ our God is this God and we have advantages over those people in Babylon we've got better promises clearer commitments more benefits and we've seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ so let us be assured! of this comfort and let those words of comfort that came to them come to us comfort my people say to them that the warfare is over say to them that their sin is paid for say to them they're going home say to them I'll keep them I'll take them there I won't let anything get in my way I won't even let their sin stop me I'm going to bring them home God has rolled up his sleeves he comes this so we've looked at why do they need comfort well they need comfort because without it they would be distant dark in a dungeon prisoners of sin and Satan and until you become a Christian that's exactly where you are what comfort is being brought well the the comfort that's brought is that sin is paid for and this triggers their release and their return and who assures them of comfort well voices messengers from

God but behind those voices God himself and who is he he's the creator of the ends of the earth he's the everlasting God almighty and that's a word should say dependable hundred years ago when war was ended who would not have been out in the streets waving a flag and rejoicing shepherded home by God what Christian is going to turn up their nose at that what Christian is going to say I've got nothing to rejoice about today what good reasons to be comforted what good reasons to be amazed what good reasons to be grateful and if you're not a Christian what a good reason to become a Christian let's sing together number 776 6