

The God of Comfort - Part 1

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Date: 04 February 2018

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[0 : 00] I don't know if you realize this or not, but you just sang the sermon this morning.

Far more eloquent and far more uplifting, I'm sure, than my inadequate words, but what a rich time of just being settled, reminded of the wonder of God, the hope that we have in Him, and the comfort that He desires to bring to us through His Son and through relationship with Him.

Well, I don't know about any of you. Would any of you, I'm not looking for a show of hands, just check your own heart, how many of you would say you excel at compassion?

Or how many of you would say that comfort is your key spiritual quality, your key spiritual gift? I think even for the best of us in this room, my guess is that when you're wronged, there isn't just a little hint of justice in you, in wanting to get a little vengeance, perhaps, on that individual who's hurt you in some way.

As I was thinking about this for myself, one vivid activity or event kind of flared up or flashed up in my mind, and it happened while I was in California.

[1 : 47] See, in the early 2000s, I was living in Southern California, about 30 miles away from the Master's Seminary. And so in order to get to the seminary, there was one of two options.

I could either drive a car and fight the traffic there and back, which would be about an hour both ways, sometimes as much as two hours both ways, or I could hop on a motorcycle and take my life in my own hands and split lanes there and back, which means that you're allowed to drive between the cars.

That's actually legal in California. And do it in half the time so that instead of a four-hour chunk or block of time, it was somewhere around, you know, an hour and a half there and back.

So I chose option number two. Well, you know, God was just really gracious to me, but in one specific instance, I was getting onto the 101, heading southbound back to my home, and I was just next to Universal Studios going up the hill.

And if you understand, the highways or freeways in California are five lanes both directions. And in addition, there were two lanes that were merging.

[3 : 10] I was in the number one and number two lane, actually between the two, splitting lanes going down in rush hour traffic. And it was bumper to bumper, and the person ahead of me didn't like the fact that I was going to be getting ahead of him.

Right? He sees this motorcycle kind of cutting up between the cars, and so he decides that because this is not fair, and he's got to wait in traffic, that I should wait too.

So he kind of crowds me out and comes and hugs that center lane so I can't get by. Well, fortunately, the car next to him decides to move over and give me a little space, and I'm going to take it.

So I begin to take this space, and as I'm looking over at this car, I notice that in the driver's seat is this young teenage...

I was going to say punk, but I shouldn't say punk. Bad word. There you go. You see? There's my flesh coming out.

- [4 : 17] There it is. This young teenage juvenile, and just imagine, okay, he is sitting back in his seat, arm extended, and he's got this leather jacket.
- He's looking back at me. You know what's going on in his head, okay? Well, I make my way by, and there's just a little chuckle in my heart because I know he's got to wait.
- I get right on his front bumper, and then all of a sudden, boom! He runs into the car ahead of him because he was paying attention to me and not paying attention to the traffic patterns that were taking place in his lane.
- Now, for someone, again, who is a little fleshly, there was this flash of vindication in my heart.
- Justice! Ha-ha! He got what he deserved. Serves him right. Now, what was not going through my mind was, oh, I should pull over and make sure he's okay.
- [5 : 29] I should pull over and make sure that everyone is doing fine in this situation.
- No, for me, it was, ha-ha! I'm out of here. See you later. Well, fortunately, that's my heart, but that is not the heart of our God.
- The heart of our God is a heart of overflowing compassion for people. And here we come to Isaiah chapter 40.
- That's where we're going to be this morning. And what we find in Isaiah chapter 40 is this dramatic transition that has taken place. If you remember in our study, you remember that the first 39 chapters of Isaiah dealt with this holy God, with this righteous, unwavering standard, who is addressing his corrupt and ungodly people and seeks to call their heart to the unchangeable and unwavering standard.
- He confronts them and rebukes them with their wickedness. He even challenges their corrupt worship, working through and moving through the superficiality of worship, this veneer that had coated their heart, thinking that perhaps they were doing things that made God happy when in fact they had made him hurt and sorrowful and grieving over their sin.
- [7 : 10] You would expect that a God who had been so gracious with his people leading up to that point would say, it is over.
- I am through. It is done. But we come to chapter 40 and we see not what we would expect, but we see the gracious, comforting, glorious God who desires to show up and to give his people comfort.
- Look with me, if you will, to Isaiah chapter 40. And I just want to open with the first few words as an introduction to our study this morning.
- Isaiah chapter 40. Let me just read the first couple of verses to give us a path into this study today. It says, Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
- Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her heart. Excuse me. 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 of her sins.
- [8 : 31] This morning I want to look at comfort. That really is the anthem, not only of Isaiah chapter 40, but becomes this anthem throughout the rest of the book. From chapters 40 all the way to chapter 66, we see this comforting hand and comforting heart of God that seeks to come to his people and to minister to them in a tangible and physical and emotional and spiritual way.
- Wants to deal with them in every aspect of life and lead them to true comfort. And that's what we see here. And so as we look at comfort this morning, I want us to ask some questions this morning.
- And I want to begin with this question. And the question is, why does comfort come? Why do we have the option for comfort in the first place? Why is it available to us?

Well, we see here in the very first verse, and in the verses that follow, what we're going to find is that this chapter is separated out into stages of proclamation.

The first stage of proclamation there in verse 1 is the stage of proclamation where God is initiating comfort. Because it is God's desire for his people.

[9 : 54] So why does comfort come? Well, comfort comes initially because it is God's desire for you. God wants you to know and enjoy his comfort.

He says, comfort my people. He says, a voice is crying. I want, again, to get your attention.

We've seen this a number of times throughout our study already, that the repeating of the words and the repeating of the command is to draw emphasis to the urgency of God in seeking to bring to his people something that they lack.

And now their heart needs to be ministered to. Their lives need to be touched by something outside of them, something that only God can bring, the comfort that only comes from him, and comfort that comes because that is God's desire for them.

Everything that follows in this chapter is because of the initiating comfort of God. We have comfort because the God of all comfort has made comfort accessible.

[11 : 10] It shows up for you. You can have it for yourself because God has chosen to make it available. Now, certainly we look for comfort in a lot of different venues, a lot of different places, but make no mistake, comfort can only be found in him.

So if you need comfort this morning, don't waste your time looking anywhere else. Comfort is available to you, but comfort can only be found in him.

There is no true comfort apart from him. And so we can't find comfort apart from him. And he wants to give it to us.

There is this eagerness of God to let us participate in this comfort that he gives to us, that he makes available to us.

One might think that Israel had exhausted all of their opportunities. One might think that they had used up all of the grace that was available to them, but we find yet again here God showing up to say, you haven't moved too far away.

[12 : 26] Comfort is still available to you. God's desire for their comfort that we find here in this first phrase that initiates the rest of this study through this chapter.

He renews his covenant love for them. We have access to comfort because he yearns for us to enjoy it.

Second, we see that comfort comes because of a pardoning God. God chooses to forgive. First, God desires comfort for you.

And second, God chooses to forgive. We sang about that earlier in our worship together. We have a pardoning God. He chooses to forgive.

You know, a common misconception about comfort is that comfort is all about how I feel. Comfort is about an attitude. Comfort is about making me feel accepted.

[13 : 29] It's about something that is relational for sure, but it's more external in nature. What God wants the people of Israel to understand is that although there are some external components to comfort, what God is really interested in is not the external so much as he's interested in the entire life, the entire person, the core person that you are.

He doesn't care so much about the externals. He cares about your heart. He cares about everything in your life. He wants to change it all. And so, in showing up in terms of comfort, he needs to correct the initial and he needs to correct the thing that corrupts comfort in your heart, that disrupts it to the very core, and that is the sin that gets in the way of your enjoyment of fellowship with the God of comfort.

If God is comfort and comfort only comes through him, then your sin always gets in the way of you enjoying true and lasting comfort that God would seek to provide for you.

So, if he's going to clear the way for comfort to come in and to pour into your life, it needs to happen through pardoning, through forgiving, through cleansing.

God deals with the real issues of life. He's not so interested with the externals as much as he is interested with the core parts of who you are.

[15 : 10] As we read this language, he says in verse 2, look with me, it says, speak tenderly to Jerusalem. And the Hebrew actually says, speak to their heart.

Make a heart connection with them. Let them know that I'm interested at the deepest levels of who they are. Let her know that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.

Notice, and maybe unless you're an English major, notice the passive aspect of these words. Her iniquity is pardoned.

It's done by another party. We are participants. We enjoy the aspects of activity outside of us. And every time this word is used in the Old Testament in a passive way, it's always dealing with the offering of blood.

It's always dealing with what God is doing through the sacrifices and through the blood sacrifices to forgive and to pardon sin. To deal with the punishment that comes as a result of sin, the consequences of sin.

[16 : 24] Blood is the only way for that to be dealt with. But make no mistake, Israel was never going to be able to atone for their sins through the sacrificial system.

If you keep your finger in Isaiah chapter 40 and turn with me back to chapter 1, we'll be able to see at the very onset of this book how God feels about their sacrifices.

Look with me at verse 11. Isaiah chapter 1, verse 11. It says, So what is God talking about?

What kind of pardoning is available? And if the offering of blood and goats and lambs and bulls is not sufficient, what offering is it going to take?

And as we'll look at in a few weeks from now, in pointing forward to the perfect servant who will come and offer the perfect sacrifice, we come to understand in Isaiah chapter 53 what that sacrifice will look like and who that sacrifice will be.

[18 : 03] He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Surely he has borne our grieves and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted, but he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.

Upon him, the chastisement was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his wounds we are healed. Pardoning happens because of a perfect sacrifice.

God initiates comfort, he offers it to his people, and then he makes a way for it to be experienced through pardoning, through his son, through the perfect sacrifice.

That's the only way. For pardoning and comfort to happen through the means of Christ. So God makes it available to us. He has a desire for his people to experience it.

He's made a way through forgiveness. And he's also made a way, as we'll find here in the second part of verse 2, he's made a way through discipline.

[19 : 24] God chooses to discipline. Now, maybe you're asking the question, that doesn't sound like comfort to me.

Being disciplined isn't something that I find very comforting. I don't find that very reassuring to be quite honest with you. How in the world can discipline and comfort go together?

Well, the reason that comfort and discipline go together is because comfort of God shows up through his love for us in not letting us get away with the sin that we are so easily beset by.

Rather than continuing to wander down the path without consequence, God seeks to get our attention, help us to see the bankruptcy of the path that we're on, corrects us through discipline so that we can enjoy the real value of him and be truly satisfied by the things that make us truly satisfied.

He gets in the way so that we can enjoy him instead of enjoying all of the other things that we tend to fill our life with. But the other question is this, and as I was looking at this verse, I had to scratch my head a little bit and ask this question.

[20 : 53] It says, she has received from the Lord's hand double for all of her sins. She has received from the Lord's hand double for all of her sins.

What in the world is going on here? Is this to suggest that forgiveness and payment go hand in hand? Is this a statement of God that he finds some fairness in exacting some sort of retribution on us and only when we've paid double that he will then forgive us for our sins?

What we find here and what we find throughout the book of Isaiah is this is the code language for God saying it's enough.

They have paid enough. My purposes for discipline have been accomplished. The thing that I intended to do because of this hard discipline in their life has served its purpose and the purpose is to call attention to me, to call them to me as the God who alone can bring comfort.

We understand that sin against an eternal God requires eternal consequences. We understand that and so Israel could never begin to pay even a fraction of what they owed to an eternal God.

[22 : 31] That they could go through an eternity without having paid up the debt that they owed because of the sin that they had incurred in their lives.

No, what God is talking about here is that what has happened to their life to bring discipline and judgment into their lives has served its purpose to call attention to me.

It has done what I intended it to do. Throughout the book of Isaiah and if you still have your finger there in Isaiah chapter 1 you can see the whole point of discipline here in this chapter.

Isaiah chapter 1 beginning in verse 24 it says this therefore the Lord declares the Lord of hosts the mighty one of Israel I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy and I will restore your judges as the first and your counselors at the beginning afterwards you shall be called the city of righteousness the faithful city discipline is the purging instrument of God to get the attention of his people and to draw them again to himself to help them understand the bankruptcy of where they are how it has separated them from God and to draw them back to what truly matters to draw them back to himself this is the mercy of God this is the grace of God to stand in the way of sin to get our attention through discipline and to call us back to him if we were to look at Romans chapter 1 we would see that judgment is to do the opposite the judgment of God is actually to let us continue to carry out the bankruptcy of our heart without ever calling attention to it listen to this language from Romans chapter 1 it says although they knew God they did not glorify him as God nor were they thankful but they became futile in their thoughts their foolish hearts were darkened therefore listen to this

God gave them up to uncleanness then in verse 24 God gave them excuse me verse 25 who exchanged the truth of God for a lie for this reason God gave them up to vile passions and in verse 28 God gave them over to a debased mind to do those things which are not fitting the judgment of God on a life that he hates is to just give them up but we know what the character of God is towards those whom he loves whom the Lord loves he chastens he corrects that is a grace of God it's a grace of God because it calls us back to himself and God is initiating this process so that his mercy and grace can flow that's God's part of this equation unfortunately we don't always respond to the initiating work of

[26 : 15] God in our lives and so we need to ask this next question how does comfort come and what is my response how does comfort come we find that in the next several verses it says in verse 3 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 every mountain and hill shall be made low the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places 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 I was beginning to study this section this week and of course it's familiar we know that this points to John the Baptist ministry the ministry of the forerunner who would prepare the way for Christ's ministry and what

Christ would accomplish but I began to ask myself this question is this referring to the ministry of John the Baptist in preparing for Christ or is this referring to the work of Christ and what he will do to prepare us for salvation or is this the work that we need to do are we being called to prepare our own hearts our own way so that we can receive the ministry of the gospel which one is it I was in a quandary so as I look through the book of Isaiah and as I begin to understand the context in which these words are given I begin to recognize that it is talking about the preparation of your heart it is talking about how to make your heart ready for the message that's to come the message of the gospel it comes through the preparation of the heart that is point number one this morning how does it come it comes through the preparation of the heart it's repentance versus hardness it is repentance versus crookedness he's calling to these people the initiating call and proclamation of God in verse one now has this echo this voice who is calling his audience to further preparation

God has begun this work he has initiated comfort and he's made it available how does comfort come it comes as our hearts are ready to receive it now living in this day and age we are maybe a little distant from what would need to happen in that ancient culture in terms of preparing a way for a dignitary or a king making his way from one part of the country or empire to another and any of you who have driven in places like Pennsylvania or Kentucky or maybe in the hills of southern Ohio or Tennessee you would know that as the road is making its way through the various places that there are huge sections of the mountains that are just chopped away and there are these chasms where roads can make their way across and to do it with relative ease and you know that there are some massive bridges that you cross in order to span from one valley to the next this is the concept that we're talking about the same kind of thing would take place in the ancient culture as a king was making his way from one place to the other he would send representatives who would prepare the way before him in order for his path and for his trip to be as efficient as possible we're making a way for comfort to come and we make the way for comfort to come and it shows up in startling reality through the ministry of John the Baptist and if you remember anything about John the Baptist ministry you will remember that it was a ministry of repentance it was a ministry of calling the people to remember their bankruptcy in themselves in calling attention to a bowed heart that was receptive to the message of Christ there needed to be humility there needed to be repentance there needed to be a willingness to receive and to be taught understanding the significance of the sin in their life making way making the comfort of God to have accessibility in their lives the difficulties of life can break into with salvation and healing that is the message that we're hearing here and we have seen this over and over again throughout our study in the book of Isaiah we've seen that humility of heart opens the channel for God's comfort and grace to flow why is that because God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble and as

God is the God of comfort he will come to those who humbly receive him and repent and ask him to do his work in their life they say we can't do this on our own we need something greater than us something better than us something outside of us to rescue to save to deliver us rescue comes comfort comes through the preparation of the heart but it also comes notice here at the at the at the verse 5 it comes through the presence of the Lord when the way has been made we find the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken when the heart is ready the vacuum has been opened and the rush of comfort of God who desires to show up in comfort in your life rushes to fill the vacancy he rushes to come and to give you the comfort that only he can bring his presence shows up in your life in Luke when he is recounting the message and helping to understand helping make the connection between John the Baptist ministry and the words of

Isaiah he recounts the entire passage but he changes this last phrase instead of saying the glory of the Lord shall be revealed he says all mankind will see the salvation of God we see the correlation between salvation and glory John puts it this way the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen it seen his glory glory the glory the glory is of the only son from the father full of grace and truth Jesus came to reveal the glory of God he came to bring salvation and thus came to bring comfort to us so that any who participate in him through faith will be able to experience the comfort of God so that all flesh will see it together we will experience the comfort of God through the salvation that we have through faith in Christ the purpose of God's comfort is not just external change it is an entire transaction of life it is to meet you at the deepest levels and to change everything about you and then you'll be able to really experience the comfort that God has to bring that leads us to our last question this morning what does comfort accomplish it's great that comfort is available it's great that we can experience through

[35 : 12] Christ but what does comfort do what does it accomplish in my life and we see this from verses 6 to 31 and I just want to point out three specific things because we have the answer in verses 6 to 31 but we don't have time to read the whole passage so I want to just pick out three things here initially and then we'll finish with five more questions first we find in verses 6 to 8 that it leads to confidence in God what does comfort accomplish well it leads to confidence in God let me read verses 6 to 8 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 what had been so true of the people of Israel is that this call to comfort in God this call to security in him had been so misplaced because they looked for comfort and security and confidence in every other avenue they found through their own misfortune that all of those things led to disappointment their confidence in Egypt their confidence in other foreign gods their confidence in superficial worship their confidence in going through the motions their confidence in raising up an army and preparing the city of Jerusalem all of that didn't matter at all but what

God is trying to help them understand is my message to you can and will stand it stands because it is coming from the enduring word of God man will fail you but the word of God will never let you down God is dependable God is able to comfort God is able to overcome the temporal nature of what we find to be comfortable and to bring us some salve for the moment God can bring the eternal and enduring comfort of God to bear on our life it leads to confidence in God second it leads to proclaiming the good news we find that in verse 9 notice what it says go 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 it leads to proclaiming the good news notice another channel of proclamation initiated by God and now flowing through the prophet and now springing up in the people as this comfort continues to make its way and touch and impact the lives of the people in concentric circles we find that those who experience comfort gush with the good news of God this morning one of my kids came bounding down the stairs and as they were looking outside the window they were singing this song about the snow it just kind of flowed out of them the smile on their face and the spring in their step and just the happiness of life I didn't have to tell them to do that it was just gushing out because of their love for the snow the winter time that is what's going to happen in the life of a person who is so deeply impacted by the grace of

God and the comfort of God it will just rush out of you kind of like what the psalmist says in Psalm 32 he says blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven whose sin is covered this gushing out of praise to God because of a recognition of the work of God to overcome the deficiencies of his life as we evaluate our lives what usually marks your speech what usually comes out in the workplace what usually marks the discussions in your home or the interactions that you have is it this praise to God for his goodness and not some again superficial sappy kind of artificial praise I'm talking about deep heartfelt expression of love to him knowing what we deserve and being overwhelmed with his grace notice it's expressive it's public it's on the high mountains it's lifting up your voice with strength not being afraid but it centers on beholding

[41 : 02] God he is the focal point for praise and worship for those who have come to grips with the immense mercy of God in their lives this is going to be the refreshing life giving soul satisfying words of kindness that mark us as people will be people who are committed to a life that is resting in him and speaking of him and as people see our lives they will notice the distinctiveness a life that is marked with peace in the midst of hardship you'll say what is it about that person they're able to respond that way when life is so hard for them it's the comfort of God or when there's a crisis of finances in your life and the people looking at you would say how in the world are they making ends meet how in the world can they be so settled so comforted so at rest how is that possible in their life when!

things are so broken and what points to their life is not an inner strength but a divine strength a strength outside of them a peace and a comfort that fills them from the outside when there are health issues in your life and there's uncertainty about the future and you're sitting in the hospital you've been there for days and you don't know what the future will hold whether things are going to turn for the best or turn for the worst and yet there's still this settled confidence and peace in life that's a testimony to a God of comfort a God who saves a God who is able that's when God shows up in our lives to help make us look distinctive as God's people marked by the comfort of him and finally it leads to commitment of waiting on him a commitment of waiting on him this isn't easy to wait on him my guess there are a lot of questions in your life as there have been in mine it's not easy to wait on

God because I wonder if he really cares about me there are questions that come to mind that are answered in the remaining parts of this passage I'm going to pose those questions to you this morning and I'm going to answer those questions for you next week okay because we're running out of time and I want to be careful the first question and we'll pick this up next week the question of a heart that is wrestling with waiting on God does God care about me I don't know anything else about him but what I do want to know does he care about me that answer shows up in verses 10 and 11 God cares about your situation the second question is this does

God know what's best in my life is he wise enough is he smart enough does he know the end from the beginning does he know what the future holds is God wise enough and can I trust him to make the right decisions does God know what's best we find that answer in verses 12 to 14 the third question is this is God able to help me he might be he might care about my life he might know what's best for my life but but does God really is God really able to show up and to fix my crisis we find that answer in verses 15 to 26 question number four is is God watching does God take interest with the things that are happening for me or is he off some other place dealing with other problems because those problems are worse than my problems is

God watching we find that answer in verses 27 and 28 and the fifth question will God help me if I trust in him will God help me if I trust in him is he faithful is he victorious will he give me the inner strength to persevere and the answer to that is found in verses 29 to 31 and as you can imagine all of those answers are affirmative God will do all those things for you and because of that you can wait and trust in him and you can experience the comfort that only comes from him do you know it have you tasted it are you enjoying it right now the comfort of God in your life he wants it for you come back next week and we'll finish out this part of our study I look forward to sharing this it's something that God has had to work in my own heart for the last several years is

[47 : 08] God trustworthy and there are moments in life where we know who God is we know what he can do and all we have to do is just wait for him to do it it's certain it can be expected and anticipated he will do what he intends to do in your life he is faithful he is God the question is will we step back and wait for him and let him have his way in our life let me just finish with this encouragement from Isaiah chapter 40 in verse 28 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 the youths shall faint and be weary and young men shall fail and be exhausted but those 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 that is what the comforting God intends to do for your life will we let him we have to wait and let him show up so that he can work out his plans instead of us getting in his way but requires some confidence in the now comforting in the here and now so that we can anticipate the power of God and the presence of God showing up later it will come if we let him let's pray God we thank you that you are the God of all comfort who intends to comfort your people thank you for the ways in which you pursue comfort for us the ways in which you make comfort available to us through the pardoning and through discipline help us

Lord to be those who prepare our hearts make it ready through repentance and make way and accessibility for your presence to show up in our lives so that we can experience your comfort and so that we can we can herald the good news of our great comforting God we pray in Jesus name amen this morning if you need comfort we have comfort to give not because not because we have comfort at our own disposal but because God has made his comfort available to us through faith in him we would love to pray with you and encourage you however you need it we'd love to just hear what your burdens might be and to try to provide some measure of comfort to you from the Lord maybe this morning you don't know Jesus as your Savior and today is the day where you'd like you'd like to make him the

Lord of your life and experience that comfort in a fresh new way so as we sing this song why don't we stand as we Thank you.