

Advent - Isaiah 40:1-11 - ADVENT 2-Emotions of Christmas: Grief & Comfort

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- [0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- Amen. Thanks, y'all. Thanks, James. It's a beautiful arrangement of those beautiful words straight from Isaiah chapter 40, which we're going to be reading here in just a minute.
- Remember, we're trying this Christmas season to slow down a little bit, to consider our hearts, how the reality of the Christmas story, the incarnation of the Son of God speaks to and should shape the deepest parts of who we are.
- And so last week we started by talking about our deep longings, our desire for fulfillment, for the things in this world to be as they should be.
- We saw in Isaiah 11 that the promise of Christmas is an eternal hope for those longings one day, someday to be truly met as Jesus comes to make us and the world everything we were created to be.
- [1 : 13] Christmas gives us an eternal hope, not a hope placed in a temporary change of circumstances or improvement in life situation, but rather hope in an eternal Savior and His complete and lasting fulfillment of our deepest longings.
- And you may say, and you may have said to yourself last week, well, that's nice. That's all well and good. That's true. I believe that. But my life is hard. Things are tough.
- I'm looking forward to eternity, but today is really difficult for me. What I'm facing now is still overwhelming to me. Does God care anything about that?
- Does Christmas have anything to speak to me in this life at all? Well, it does. And it's never less than that eternal hope, but it's also a message of comfort for us right where we are today as well.
- That's what we'll hear this morning in Isaiah chapter 40. This passage is written to God's people in exile, taken away from the promised land under an oppressive foreign ruler, without a home, seemingly without a God to care for them.
- [2 : 31] Listen to God's message for those people in Isaiah 40 at verse 1. The message is comfort. Comfort. Comfort. Comfort my people, says your God.
- Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.
- Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain.
- And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. A voice says cry. And I said, What shall I cry?
- All flesh is grass and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers. The flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass.

- [3 : 38] The grass withers. The flower fades. But the word of our God will stand forever. 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. Behold the Lord God comes with might.
- And his arm rules for him. Behold his reward is with him and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms.
- He will carry them in his bosom. And gently lead those that are with young. Thus far God's holy, inerrant, infallible word.
- As we just read, the grass withers. The flower fades. But the word of our God will indeed stand forever. Let's ask for his help now as we look to his word together this morning.
- [4 : 39] Pray with me. Father, we are so grateful for the gift of your word. For the privilege of holding it.
- Of reading it. Of hearing it. And then of your spirit working it into our hearts. Changing us by it. That it would be what shapes our hearts.
- More than anything else we read this week. More than anything else we watch or experience this week. Would you, Father, open our hearts.
- Soften them to your word. And speak to us clearly. I need to hear from you. We need to hear from you. And so would you speak through your word.
- As you love to do. We thank you for that. In Jesus' name. Amen. Kids, some of you will know my friend Alexander.
- [5 : 40] Alexander had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Some of you have read about his day before. Alexander looks like that all the time.
- That's the kind of face you have when you have a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. I'm not going to read you his whole story this morning. But I want to give you just a taste of the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.
- It goes like this. I went to sleep with gum in my mouth. And now there's gum in my hair. And when I got out of bed this morning, I tripped on the skateboard. And by mistake, I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running.
- And I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. At breakfast, Anthony found a Corvette Stingray car kit in his breakfast cereal box.
- And Nick found a junior undercover agent code ring in his breakfast cereal box. But in my breakfast cereal box, all I found was breakfast cereal. I think I'll move to Australia.
- [6 : 42] At school, Mrs. Dickens liked Paul's picture of the sailboat better than my picture of the invisible castle. At singing time, she said I sang too loud. At counting time, she said I left out 16.
- Who needs 16? I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. I could tell because Paul said I wasn't his best friend anymore.
- He said that Philip Parker was his best friend. And that Albert Moya was his next best friend. And that I was only his third best friend. There were two cupcakes in Philip Parker's lunch bag.
- And Albert got a Hershey bar with almonds. And Paul's mother gave him a piece of jelly roll that had little coconut sprinkles on the top. Guess whose mother forgot to put in dessert? It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.
- That's what it was because after school, my mom took us all to the dentist. And Dr. Fields found a cavity just in me. Come back next week and I'll fix it, Dr. Fields said. Next week, I said, I'm going to Australia.

[7 : 47] On the way downstairs, the elevator door closed on my foot. And while we were waiting for my mom to go get the car, Anthony made me fall where it was muddy. And then when I started crying because of the mud, Nick said I was a crybaby.

And while I was punching Nick for saying crybaby, my mom came back with the car and scolded me for being muddy and fighting. It's a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, I told everybody.

No one even answered. There were lima beans for dinner and I hate limas. There was kissing on TV and I hate kissing. My bath was too hot, I got soap in my eyes, my marble went down the drain and I had to wear my railroad train pajamas.

I hate my railroad train pajamas. When I went to bed, Nick took back the pillow he said I could keep and the Mickey Mouse nightlight burned out and I bit my tongue.

The cat wants to sleep with Anthony, not with me. It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. My mom says some days are like that.

[8 : 52] Even in Australia. Those hard days happen, don't they? Even in Australia. Kids, have you ever had a really, really hard day?

Anybody had a hard day? Yes, some of you have had. And all of your parents are thinking, no, you've never had a really, really hard day before. You have, we've all had hard days.

The things that are hard for us may be different from the ones that are hard for Alexander. But we've all had really hard days, haven't we? Sometimes we feel like day after day after day for a season of days.

God's people, as I said earlier, are facing some of those really hard days when God speaks to them in Isaiah 40. It's written to people in specific, difficult situations in their lives.

Their whole world has been shattered. They're far away from home in exile. Nothing around that is comforting to them. They're feeling alone and abandoned by the God who has promised them good.

[10 : 02] Many of them are depressed about themselves because they know that their idolatry has led to this. The darkness has gotten so great around them, they describe that in Isaiah, that they've begun to wonder if God even cares about them and their plight.

In verse 27 of this chapter, they say, Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, My way is hidden from the Lord, and my cause is disregarded by my God?

Why is God not fixing this? Where is He in the disappointment that I'm living? Does He even care and know about how hard this is?

Those are only some of the questions that we ask in our grief, aren't they? Why is God not solving the problems I'm facing in this world? Where are you, God?

Are you even there? Do you even care about my pain, about the deep disappointment I feel with where I am, with how things are?

[11 : 11] Some of us are asking those questions this morning. Some of us have asked them in other particular situations in our lives, when the grief has mounted in our hearts.

Most of us will ask them again, when the pain and the grief comes back, and we weren't planning on it or expecting it, and these questions will come quickly to our hearts.

Something happens and your world is shattered. You feel alone and overwhelmed with grief. Your husband abandons you, and you grieve the loss of a dream of family life.

You suffer a life-changing illness or injury, and you grieve the loss of normalcy and functionality. You fall into that sin again, and you feel beaten down, and you grieve the loss of self-worth, and your hope for ever being different, or ever overcoming this.

You feel the darkness of depression closing in around you, and you grieve the loss of joy in life, and the hope of having a good day ever again.

[12 : 35] Getting out of bed may be hard. Laughing may be hard. Praying may be really hard. And we say things in those moments like, no one has been where I am.

I just feel so alone. No one understands or cares about how I feel. And when we say those things, we quite naturally start to feel the same things about God, don't we?

Just like the Israelites, feeling, He's abandoned me too. He doesn't care about me. Perhaps I don't even deserve for Him to care about me after what I've done.

How could He possibly still care about me? And He can't be trusted anyway. I become a Christian. I start going to church.

I really start trying to live for Jesus. And then all this happens? I mean, here I am. I find myself, God, is this how you treat people who try to live for you?

[13 : 42] Is that the way you work, God? So deep, deep grief is something that we're all familiar with in one way or another.

It may be different for each of us, but we know the feeling. Now Isaiah in his prophecy has already promised eternal hope in a coming Messiah.

But here in chapter 40, the focus of his ministry shifts from talking to people about a potential coming exile and warning them about that to actually speaking to those who find themselves in exile.

And for most of the rest of this lengthy prophetic book, that's what he's doing. He's addressing those people, offering comfort to those who are in exile, grieving their difficult plight.

And that's how Isaiah starts this section at the beginning of chapter 40, right? Comfort! Comfort my people, says the Lord.

[14 : 49] And the comfort is not complex. I'm not going to pretend like it is this morning, but it's exactly the comfort that we need. The essence of comfort in Isaiah 40, the comfort of Christmas, is God is with us.

You are not alone. You have not been abandoned. Your pain is not purposeless. God is with you.

That's actually the essence of comfort, isn't it? Think about it. What's most comforting to you in your low, dark places?

What does comfort feel like? Who's been comforting to you? Comfort is the person who just shows up with you, isn't it? Who enters into your pain and your grief and who stays with you while it hurts.

And even if it keeps hurting, they stay with you. They stay there with you. They're for you. And God Himself shows up with us.

[16 : 08] I'm not going to make it more complex than that. But as you walk through these verses and see more of who God is, it makes it perhaps even more beautiful and even more comforting to us.

Tell me more about this God who's there with me, who shows up. How can I know He's with me and for me? Because, well, it does not feel like that.

That's not what I feel in those moments. I don't feel like He's with me or for me. Who is He? Well, the God promised to be with us first is the God whose commitment to His people is unwavering.

Look at just the first verse of this chapter. There's enough comfort in these two pronouns alone for the whole sanctuary of us this morning. Look at that. Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God.

Comfort, my people, says your God. They've done nothing to earn the status as His people and everything to lose it.

[17 : 22] God has even had to send them into exile, into agony, apart from the things that He has promised for them. But as I do that, He says, you are still my people and I am still your God.

He says, speaking tenderly to us, verse 2. It's the comfort of a crying child who has failed and fears the rejection of everyone being scooped up by a parent and told, oh my sweet girl, your daddy is here.

I've got you. My beloved friend, I'm your friend. I'm here for you. I'm not going anywhere.

God says, our relationship hasn't changed because you ran the other way or because life made you feel like I had.

It didn't change our relationship. I'm your God and you're my people, my children. Then the God promised to be with us is the God whose arrival coming to us is promised and prepared for.

[18 : 42] Remember from our study of Luke recently the very words of these next few verses being used of John the Baptist? Verses 3-5, he came to prepare hearts to welcome and receive the coming Savior.

That's what's meant by these verses. 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 be made low. The uneven ground shall become level. The rough places a plain. What can happen? What's all the geographical description for?

The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. The way for God to come to us is being prepared and made smooth.

God's coming to us is so certain and so important that it's been carefully prepared for so he can come quickly and surely to us.

[19 : 40] a smooth straight path has been made so God's glory can be revealed in our midst. God is showing up with us.

But how do I know for sure? Can I trust that promise? The one that it says the mouth of the Lord has spoken that this is going to happen.

Will it? Really? Because I mean lots of people promise things to me only to let me down. I've experienced that. Will that's even some of the people I've trusted the most and that's a large part of where my grief is coming from this morning.

even the ones I thought would always be here with me are not anymore. The God promising to come be with you is the God whose word can be trusted when nothing and no one else can.

It's what Isaiah tells us in verse 6. A voice says cry. I said what shall I cry? All flesh is grass and all its beauty like the flower of the field. The grass withers the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it.

[20 : 56] Surely the people are grass. The grass withers the flower fades but different from all of those from all those people from everything in creation the word of our God will stand forever.

People are weak right? They may lie. They may die. A spouse may abandon you.

A best friend may move away. A pastor may fall into moral failure. Ultimate trust can't be placed in any person.

So ultimate comfort can't come from any person. But the word of our God will stand forever. you can count on what he says he's going to do happening in your life.

Even when you feel everyone else has left you your God promises he's moving towards you. He's with you and for you.

[22 : 04] We got to keep moving because it's just getting better and I'm going to keep talking more. Here's the great announcement of comfort that God wants everyone to hear. What's it going to what's the whole thing building towards God's being revealed.

He's here. You can trust him. Go up on a high mountain Zion. Herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength. Jerusalem herald of good news. Lift it up. Fear not. Say what's the announcement?

Behold your God. That's the big news. It's short. It's simple. God's here. Ta-da!

That's the announcement. commitment. That's what Isaiah has to declare. The tidings of comfort and joy. Behold your God.

Behold your God comes with might. And his arm rules for him. He's coming. He's strong and mighty. The rest of the chapter here in Isaiah is going to go to great lengths to talk about God's awesome power.

[23 : 09] Nothing can keep him from us. He's the sovereign creator and ruler whose might is incomparable. Nothing in all of creation could keep him from us.

But what I want you to see even more so, before I get distracted by that more, before God goes into all of that about his great might, is that it is matched only by his tender care.

Verse 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.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. And we say it that way because that's the way we talk. He gathers the lambs in his arms. Actually, in the Hebrew, the word arms is the exact same word from verse 10.

His arm that rules for him is again singular down here. He will gather the lambs in his arm. In the same mighty arm.

[24 : 18] God's strong arm is his tender arm. It's the same mighty arm that demolishes kings that also scoops us up when we're broken and holds us close to his heart and cares for us.

The arm that provides ruling power for the whole world provides resting peace for his lambs, for his little children.

It controls the stars and the seasons and carries us at the same time. Wow. You know why?

You know why God does that? You know why his mighty arm can be his tender arm? Why do we get that kind of attention from the ruler of the universe?

You know. Because he loves us. No, no, it's not possible. If he loved me, he wouldn't let...

[25 : 23] No, listen. He loves you so much that he would lead you into those dark places partially so you'll experience and know for sure that he will never leave you.

Even there. He hasn't led you there so that you'll prove to yourself he doesn't care about you. He's walked with you there so that you can know if he's there, he'll never leave you anywhere, that you can always trust him to be with you.

He didn't stop short of death itself for you. He's with you when you don't feel it. His heart treasures his people personally.

Look back at verse 10. The Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him. Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense, the thing he's getting back, is before him.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd, gather the lambs in his arms, carry them in his bosom, gently lead those that are with young. Who's his reward? What's his recompense?

[26 : 38] It's his flock, right? That he will gather and carry and not just as one big group that he has gathered to himself but with intimate personal care and gently lead those that are with young.

He is most tender with those who are most hurting. What a good God. Most tender with those who are most hurting and he knows them.

If you're thinking that your grief might be too deep, that your sin might be too big, that your pain might be too devastating, it's not.

You can actually expect him in your life to be especially present there. Especially forgiving.

Especially comforting. He is most tender with those most hurting. You will experience over time what Joseph learned when he was being sold into Egypt away from the promised land.

[27 : 54] What Corrie ten Boom articulated after enduring a Nazi prison camp. There is no pit so deep that he is not deeper still.

Dear ones, listen. This is the good shepherd. You may have known some bad ones. This is the good shepherd. He calls his sheep by name and they hear his voice.

Your name is written on the palm of his hand. He will never forget you. No matter how bad your day has been, no matter how terrible your life circumstances are and what they're telling you, he has not abandoned you and he never will forget you.

He will always, always be with you wherever you are. Dare I say even in Australia. This last image here of God as the tender shepherd, I couldn't help but think of Psalm 23.

Right? The Lord is my shepherd. And so even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are what?

[29 : 19] With me. Your rod and your staff, they do what? Comfort me. Because you're with me. Even there, even in the darkest places David has been, you're with me.

And so I'm comforted. That's the comfort of Christmas for our grieving, hurting hearts. God is with us.

Emmanuel. That's what it means. Ron read the verse, the angel telling Joseph, his name will be Emmanuel. God with us. In the person of Jesus, the baby in the manger, God has broken into our pain and endured the worst of it with us and for us.

The message of Christmas is that God loves us so much that nothing can keep him from us. He will come and find us wherever we are.

From the lowly manger to the sorrowful shedding of tears at the grave of a loved one, to the horrific pain of the cross, he knows our grief, doesn't he?

[30 : 39] He knows our grief. That's why it's tidings of comfort and joy that in Bethlehem was born the Son of God by name.

The God of heaven was right there with them, the angels telling the shepherds. He's over there in Bethlehem, right over there near you. God himself in Bethlehem.

Tidings of comfort and joy. You can behold your God with you. As we prepare to come to the Lord's table together, let me see if I can connect last week and this week in one really important way.

Last week we talked about our hope for eternity, right? that we still long and await the coming of Jesus again to make us and all creation as we should be.

And this morning we've been talking about comfort for today that God is with us now. But you see those two things can't be separated entirely.

[31 : 53] When we experience the comfort of God with us, we are experiencing eternity today. That's what is happening this morning.

Part of the comfort we receive is that the God who is with us today has made our eternity sure. Verse two says he's not just going to hang around, just be here with us.

He's bringing peace to our warfare. He's a mighty God. He's doing something for us. He's forgiving our sins so that he can be with us forever.

And we get a foretaste, a glimpse, a taste of that eternal reality today in his being with us.

The communion table that God sets before us today is a picture of the wedding feast of the Lamb that will go on and we will enjoy for eternity with our God.

[33 : 01] This is a picture of that. This is a rehearsal dinner, if you will, where there is a wedding feast to come with God. Those who will be seated at that table at the wedding feast of the Lamb are those seated at this table today tasting just a little bit of eternity because that's true.

true. It's true that Jesus has gone to the cross so that our sins can be forgiven. That's an eternal reality that we taste a little bit of this morning at this table even while we still struggle with our sins.

There's an eternal reality that God is with us forever and you get to taste just a little bit of God being with you today even while you still wait to be with Him forever.

We already sit today at this table and experience the comfort of God with us that He would come and eat with us. May that eternal hope and that comfort today both give us great joy as we come to celebrate together.

These are the words of institution of this supper in 1 Corinthians 11. Paul writes, I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you that the Lord Jesus on the night He was betrayed took bread and when He had given thanks He broke it and said, this is my body which is for you.

[34 : 40] Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also He took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me for as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

This table is the Lord's table. He has said it. He comes to eat with us. It's not the table of Southwood or the Presbyterian church.

So if you know by trusting in Christ the hope of eternity with God come and celebrate a foretaste of that this morning at this table.

And if you don't know Jesus, if you don't know the eternal hope of having your sins forgiven, if you're not willing this morning to turn from your sins and trust Him again, believer, don't come to this table.

I'd encourage you not to come to the thing that's temporary and try to have a foretaste of something that's not eternally true for you. Rather, come to Jesus and have eternity dealt with.

[35 : 57] Then come and celebrate with us something that for you will then be truly a foretaste of an eternal reality. If you trust Jesus, if He secures your eternity, your God meets with you now.

Come. Come and meet with Him. Let's pray. Father, that you would have ever moved towards us is astonishing to us.

We ran from you. We run from you. And you've set the table again this morning. Day after day, you invite us home.

Moment by moment, you remind us that we're your children. And we're so grateful. Might these common elements have a very sacred purpose this morning.

Father, in our hearts, would they remind us deeply, would they comfort us with the knowledge of your presence and your love, that you're with us and that you're for us always because of Jesus.

[37 : 07] And we ask it in His name. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

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