

A Promise of Comfort

The Surprising Way of The Lord / Isaiah 40:1-11

Introduction:

Today we are starting a new series through Advent titled “The Surprising Way of the Lord.” Advent is a season on the church calendar, covering the four Sundays leading up to Christmas which has celebrated by most churches for centuries. The term Advent comes means “coming,” or “arrival,” and, in church life, advent has typically focused on two things: remembering the anticipation of Christ’s first coming and building an anticipation for His return. As the Welch poet, R. S. Thomas, says of this season, “the meaning is in the waiting.” Over the next four weeks, leading up to Christmas, we will seek to guide our hearts towards an awe filled wonder at the incarnation of Jesus Christ and a hope filled anticipation of His return. We begin our series, today, with an Old Testament prophecy delivered originally by the prophet Isaiah for the comfort of Israel while under Babylonian rule. The immediate fulfillment of these words took place as the remnant of Israel returned to Jerusalem following their Babylonian captivity. Yet, as the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John reveal, over and above this immediate fulfillment was a foreshadowing of the greater deliverance God would provide, through the birth of Jesus Christ around 700 years later, for all who trust in Him. It is the immediate fulfillment in Israel’s history that confirms the certainty of its later fulfillment in Christ. What I want to do today is to consider the greater fulfillment in Christ, to begin building in our hearts a wonder at the surprising way of the Lord. Our passage is centered around a particular message, being,

A PROMISE OF COMFORT

The words of verse 1 speak immense hope to the heart of all God’s people who hear 1 “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Let those words ring in your ears church, “comfort, comfort.” We all long for comfort, don’t we? This life is constantly filled with seasons of struggle and strife. If you are in one today, hear these words, “comfort, comfort.” This can speak volumes to a heavy heart, but it can only do this for a particular kind of heart. Pay attention to the end of verse 1, “comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” This is a promise by God for His people. When it was first delivered, this pertained solely to Israel. Yet, the amazing reality of the gospel is that it now pertains to all who are in Christ. To hold onto these words for yourself, you must know and embrace the gospel message, a message declared in these verses before us. We see it in verse 2, 2 “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.” Oh, don’t miss the announcement here, spoken first to Jerusalem and now to those in Christ. Your warfare is ended. Your iniquity is pardoned. For Israel, this warfare was its Babylonian captivity. But what is our warfare? Warfare, simply defined, is a time of trouble. It is forced hard labor and fighting. Look around us, warfare is the state of this world. Consider the scope of your life before Christ, was it full of peace? How about your relationships, did they lack any strife? God’s promise of comfort is your warfare is ended or accomplished. The point is the battle has ultimately been won. Notice what the battle is. Consider the two terms used in verse 2, “iniquity” and “sin.” Iniquity is our bent to do all that is wrong and sinful. It is the guilt of sin that condemns us. Sin is missing the mark. Sin and iniquity are what causes of our warfare, and the promise of comfort says yours are pardoned. They have been paid for, and God is pleased to accept that payment. Now, it is unclear whether the end of verse 2 is punitive or gracious in the original Hebrew, where it says, “she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” If it is punitive, it is saying God has given ample punishment for sins. If gracious, it is saying God has given greater grace than the sins committed. I lean towards it being gracious because the statements before it points to this greater grace. Your warfare is ended. Your iniquity is pardoned. You have received grace upon grace!

Either way you take it, the promise of comfort is that the sin and iniquity that cause our warfare have been fully dealt with. Consider this promise of comfort, sin and iniquity are dealt with, a full pardoning exists for them, and the warfare caused by them will end. That is the gospel message. What hope! What grace! What comfort! The rest of our passage answers the question of how this can happen, as it shows us three things about this promise through three voices. Starting with,

THE PREPARATION FOR THE PROMISE

Look at verses 3-5 with me. After receiving the promise of comfort, Isaiah moves to a prophetic voice in verse 3, 3 “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” A voice will come in the wilderness that cries out of preparation needed for the way of the Lord. Verse 4 speaks of the preparation. Look there, 4 “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.” This is alluding to a common practice at the time of heralds sent ahead of rulers to make the path ready for them to travel. This often involved creating roads to travel on by leveling hills and smoothing out rough terrain. The goal was to make sure the way was prepared for the coming King. Notice the extensive language here though. It is every valley that is lifted up. Every mountain made low. All uneven ground becomes level, and all rough places a plain. This is a unique event. Someone great is coming, and preparations must be made for His coming. Then, verse 5 reveals the result, 5 “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” The result of this preparation is that everyone will see the glory of the Lord. The preparation for the promise is the mark of something spectacular arriving. The glory of the Lord will be revealed in such a way that it is inescapably obvious. Think of the grandeur of this pronouncement and the anticipation of who this voice might be and what will follow it. This is pointing to a monumental occasion like nothing anyone had seen before. Now, consider these words from each gospel record. Matthew 3:1–3, 1 “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” 3 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.’” Mark 1:1–4, 1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, 3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” 4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke 3:2–6, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” John 1:19–23, 19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ... 23 He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” Each gospel points back to Isaiah and proclaims John the Baptist, a man who arrives nearly 700 years after this prophecy, as the voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. Though the nation of Israel received an immediate fulfillment of this prophecy, when released from Babylonian captivity, we discover there is a greater deliverance and comfort that comes, requiring preparation to open eyes to the glory of the Lord. Next week, our goal will be to examine this preparation closely. As we continue in this passage, we see Isaiah’s voice sharing a personal struggle in believing how this is possible and the strengthening answer from the Lord that reveals,

THE POWER BEHIND THE PROMISE

Pay attention to the dilemma faced in response to this great promise in verses 6-7, 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." The prophet hears the call to cry out and wrestles with what to proclaim. His wrestling is because he looks at humanity and all he sees is weakness and frailty. How can this be when people are like grass and flowers that can't even stand under the powerful breath of the Lord? He is lamenting the hopeless state of humanity. Yes, the promise of the Lord is powerful, but man continues to live and die with no visible changes. Isaiah has seen the people of God and he understands the weakness of their flesh to follow God's commands. Won't they just fall back into the same patterns and return to captivity again? We know the answer. They will, and they do. What Isaiah is wrestling with is not wrong. Man is incapable of serving God faithfully on his own, as Romans 3:10-12 says, 10 ... "None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." This is the truth, but praise God the power behind the promise is not found within our frail humanity. Look at how the prophet concludes in verse 8, revealing the strengthening answer he received from God, 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Isaiah is saying, "yes, the people are weak and frail, but God's word will never fail. It will stand in spite of our weakness." The power behind the promise is God's trustworthy word. That brings us to the third thing we see about this promise, with a new voice called to reveal,

THE PROVIDER OF THE PROMISE

The next movement in this passage is a call for God's people to speak. Start in verse 9, 9 "Go on 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!'" The prophet speaks to Zion and Jerusalem, a representation of the holy city of God, filled with the true remnant of Israel. He calls for them to go on a mountain, lift their voices without fear, and proclaim good news to the cities of Judah, as a representation of the rest of Israel. And what is the good news they proclaim? Three simple but powerful words, "Behold your God!" The good news is, "look, your God coming! He is the provider of your comfort! He is the one who will end your warfare. Look!" Oh church, that is one of the most surprising aspects of the gospel we should marvel at in this season, the one who came to secure our comfort was God Himself. And for all who are in Christ, He is our God, and we are His people. So, we are now the ones saying, "Look! Behold the provider of comfort!" We are now the heralds of this good news. And then, verses 10-11 focus on two vital characteristics for us to understand about our provider. First, in verse 10, that

1) OUR PROVIDER HAS THE STRENGTH TO REIGN

Let the words of verse 10 ring in your ears this morning, 10 "Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him." The one who came, has the power of God almighty. The arm of the Lord represents His strength to rule and reign. The battle that we wage against sin, Satan, and death is a battle we could never hope to win. We are weak and frail, but God is full of strength and power. Christ Jesus won the victory over sin, living as a man in perfect obedience. He bound the strong man, overthrowing Satan's rule. He absorbed the wrath for sin and conquered death, leaving death with no sting. He is mighty to save. And Isaiah says, verse 10, "behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." His recompense is his work or labor. God, in Christ, came to do a work that we can barely imagine. His reward is most likely the reward He received for this work. Hebrews 12 tells us it was for the joy set before Christ that He endured the cross. Philippians 2 tells us God highly exalted Jesus. Christ's reward was His own glory being known and praised by His people. God came in the flesh to conquer sin and death, opening the eyes of the blind to His glory for our joy. See that His might has provided all you need and trust in Him alone. The second characteristic is found in verse 11, that

2) OUR PROVIDER HAS THE TENDERNESS TO SHEPHERD

Power to free us from our bondage is not the only thing we need, we need continual guidance, or shepherding. Notice the way our provider guides us in verse 11. The beginning of verse 11 is the main idea, 11 “He will tend his flock like a shepherd.” Hear the care of our provider in those words. He tends His flock. Tending involves giving His flock everything they need. The rest of verse 11 expounds on that care, “he will gather the lambs in his arms.” The picture is a shepherd gathering the helpless lambs of the flock. His tenderness to shepherd is shown through gathering His flock to Himself in order to tend to their every need. Continue in verse 11, “he will carry them in his bosom.” He doesn’t just gather the flock in his arms but picks them up and carries them close to his chest. Church, your provider knows your condition. He sees that you are weak and struggling, and He cares for you like a shepherd that stoops down to pick up a baby lamb and carry it close to his chest. Can you imagine that? The same God with the strength to reign has that level of tender care for His people. Haven’t you experienced that in life? Finally, verse 10 again, “and gently lead those that are with young.” Our provider is so patient and gentle with us. It says he leads us like we are female sheep weakened by childbirth.

Conclusion:

Oh Church, Behold your God! Consider the promise made. Consider the preparation for it, power behind it, and provider of it. This is what we remember God securing over 2000 years again through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Yet, there is more to wonder at because the story isn’t over. Christ’s first coming was the inauguration of the kingdom, which He accomplished by overthrowing the rule of sin, Satan, and death by securing the pardoning of sin through His blood shed on the cross. But that is not the end of the story, there is a day when our provider will return and consummate the kingdom, a day when everyone will see the glory of the Lord. Revelation 1:7 says, 7 “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.” On that day everyone will have one of two responses. For those trusting in the work of Christ in His first coming, which we celebrate in this season, that day will be one of joyful celebration. If that is you, this passage is calling you to build in your heart an anticipation for Christ’s return that changes the way you approach life in this world. Let it sink deep into your heart to loosen your grip in the puny treasures this world offers during this Advent season. However, Revelation 6:16 records a vastly different, and dreadful, response of those who do not trust in the provider who came, Jesus Christ, as the apostle John sees them 16 “calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.” Those not trusting in the work accomplished with Christ’s first coming would rather have mountains fall on them than face the wrath to come. If you are here, or listening online, and not trusting in Christ, the call of this passage is to behold the God who came to provide comfort for all who believe. Let this passage sink into your heart and turn to God today. Turn to God in prayer right now, asking him to pardon your iniquity and sin, and trust in Christ’s death on the cross as the payment for your sins. Today is the day of salvation. Let me end with this challenging set of questions for us all to consider today, given by a preacher named Martin Lloyd-Jones. “Do you desire this blessing from God? Or do you think you have had the blessing of salvation? Do you regard yourself as a Christian? If you do, there is a simple test that you can apply to yourself to make quite sure that you are not mistaken. It is this: Where does Jesus Christ come in? Is he absolutely essential? If he were taken away, would your whole belief and your whole situation collapse? That is the Christian position.” The Advent season reminds us that Christ’s coming fulfilled a promise of comfort for all who see His glory and know that He is absolutely essential to that comfort. Nothing more and nothing less than Christ alone will bring that comfort. Let us embrace Him for tastes of that comfort now and wait in anticipation for the long-expected Jesus.