

God's Greatness, Our Comfort

TEXT: Isaiah 40

PHBF 10.16.16

Scr. Reading: Isaiah 40:1-9

Behold Your God!

E. Stanley Jones (mid-20th century missionary to India) told of a missionary who lost his way in an African jungle. He could find no landmarks and the trail vanished. Eventually, stumbling on a small hut, he asked the man living there if he could lead him out. Rising to his feet, the African walked directly into the bush. The missionary followed on his heels. For more than an hour they hacked their way through a dense wall of vines and grasses. The missionary became worried: "Are you sure this is the way? I don't see any path." The African chuckled and said over his shoulder, "Bwana, in this place there is no path. I am the path."

Isaiah 40 brings us to an experience like that for God's people. It's a chapter for those times when life feels like a jungle—chaos and uncertainty and unknown threats in the dark. You look around and would like something tangible to bank your hope upon: a path, some sign of civilization, maybe a clearing in the undergrowth. In a moment of desperation you speak into the void, "Are you sure this is the way? I don't see any path!" The voice of God answers back: "In this place there is no path. I am the path."

Isaiah 40 confronts us with this claim: God's greatness is our only sure comfort. And then it forces us to ask ourselves if we're OK with that. If your whole experience of life were reduced to this one thing—if you lost friends and family, career and accomplishments, home and possessions, retirement and health... If all you had left were God, would that be enough for you?

The chapter opens with a command to offer comfort to God's people:

v1 *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

And then, as we'll see, the next 30 verses proceed to describe the greatness of God. The point is obvious: the comfort God offers is Himself! That's all. "Comfort" implies peace, cheer, assurance, hope. Can you have all that if all you have is God? If your team never wins, your friends never "like" your pics, your portfolio never grows, the politicians never enact your policies, can you still have comfort?

Isaiah 40 comforts us with three assertions of God's greatness:

- God is the gospel
- God is incomparable
- God is humble

God is the GOSPEL (vv1-11)

The biblical word "gospel" literally means "good news." It has to do with forgiveness and reconciliation with God and the reversal of the curse of sin and the restoration of God's kingdom on the earth. It's what verse 2 is all about:

v2 *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.*

All our discomfort ultimately arises from this—we are sinners, and sin has awful consequences. The best word of comfort God could possibly offer is that He has done away with all of it! Precisely HOW He does away with sin is a mystery not fully explained until chapter 53:

53:4-5 *Surely he [God's servant 52:13] has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.*

God's plan was to punish a substitute in our place and, through Him, offer us forgiveness. We know now, located as we are here 2700 years after Isaiah, that this Person's name is Jesus! Friend, if you are not a Christian, we are so glad you are here. But I need to explain something very important to you: all the comfort of this great chapter God extends *to His own people*—those who trust in Him, obey Him, love Him. But there is a single word of comfort here for you: God has dealt with your sin in Jesus. "He was wounded for your transgressions, crushed for your iniquities, chastised so you could have peace, scourged so you could be healed." Trust Him!

Why is this forgiveness (v2) such good news? Or, to put the question a different way, what is it that our sin prevents us from enjoying? The next verses explain:

vv3-4 *A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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.

Sin and God are eternal opponents. We can have one or the other, but never both. **Until sin is out of the way, we can never enjoy the presence of God in our lives.** These verses put it in a word picture: a construction crew, preparing a road for God's approach. All this dramatic imagery is meant to convey the worth of the Person coming. When an ancient city heard a king or dignitary was coming to visit, an advance team would go out into the countryside and literally "prepare the way." They'd remove boulders and fill in gullies. The greater the king, the more extensive this road prep would be. So what does it say about the worth of this Person that whole valleys are filled and mountains lowered?

Verse 5 abandons the word picture and makes the point explicitly:

vs *And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

Whenever God shows Himself, what people always see is "glory"—i.e., radiant beauty. It's what our hearts were made for. THIS is the good news of the gospel: we get to see God in all His glory!

How and where do we see God's glory today? Well, let's think about this text again... Where else in the Bible do we see these exact words: "A voice crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord"? In Matthew (3:3), Mark (1:3), Luke (3:4), and John (1:23). All four gospels tell us this text is fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist, the preacher who prepared the way for... Jesus! **Today, the glory of God is perfectly revealed in the beauty of His Son.** Wanna see God? Look to Jesus, the final Word "the mouth of the Lord has spoken":

John 1:14 *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Here is a solid ground for our comfort: God has come to us, He has shown us His glory, and He has kept all these promises for us in Jesus. Do you feel like your life is fragile? Fading? Fleeting? You're right! It is:

vv6-8 *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. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.*

Everything in your life is temporary, except this: "the word of our God." That stands forever. And, as John just reminded us, the Word became

flesh and dwelt among us. Do you see how everything in the Bible is designed to help you look to Jesus, love Jesus, enjoy Jesus, and trust Jesus? HE is the gospel, the greatest good God could possible offer you!

Verses 9-11 say it again another way:

vv9-10 *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!"*

A preacher of the gospel—"a herald of good news"—is sent up on a high mountain with a special message for all God's people. What is his message? "Look! It's God!" The good news is that God is coming to rule, and He has rewards and recompense with Him. But His rule isn't harsh like most kings; it's tender like a shepherd:

vs11 *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.*

Another obvious picture of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who cares for His sheep so carefully and completely, He ultimately laid down His own life for them. Can't you see? The good news you need for your comfort is this: God offers you Himself. He is the gospel.

APP: There are three commands in verses 1 and 2: "Comfort, speak, cry." All three are plural. God isn't sending Isaiah by himself with this good news on his lips. He's sending you, too. Comfort God's people. Speak tenderly. Cry out wherever you can that the war is ended and God offers peace to all who will come to Him through His Son.

God is INCOMPARABLE. (vv12-26)

Charles Misner is a physicist and an expert in general relativity, the theory of gravitation pioneered by Albert Einstein. He once speculated on Einstein's problems with most forms of religion:

[The design of the universe is] very magnificent and shouldn't be taken for granted. In fact, I believe that is why Einstein had so little use for organized religion, although he strikes me as a basically very religious man. He must have looked at what the preachers said about God and felt that they were blaspheming. He had seen much more majesty than they had ever imagined, and they were just not

talking about the real thing. My guess is that he simply felt that religions he'd run across did not have proper respect... for the author of the universe. (quoted in Piper's *Think*)

Whether or not Misner is right about Einstein's thinking, his complaint stands. Just given the sheer magnitude of the universe, if there really is a Designer for all of that, many of our songs, statements, and sermons do not show proper respect for the Author of the universe. We're apparently "just not talking about the real thing."

Isaiah is not open to that accusation. His sermons definitely show respect for the Author of the universe:

vv12-14 *Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? ¹³ Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? ¹⁴ Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?*

Our oceans contain over 330 million cubic miles of water = over 350 quintillion gallons (350 with 18 zeros). A gallon of salt water weighs 8.6 pounds, that's... a lot to hold in one hand. The observable universe is estimated to be 93 billion light years in diameter = 14¼ gigaparsecs = 550 sextillion miles—a pretty wide span to measure with just the breadth of your hand.

Obviously, these questions aren't designed to be answered. They're making a point: ***you cannot possibly quantify the greatness of God!*** To us, these numbers are massive beyond comprehension. To Him, it's nothing.

I love these next verses. Instead of showing us how great God looks to our eyes, Isaiah flips the perspective around and shows us ***how we look to God's eyes***:

vv15-17 *Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. ¹⁶ Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. ¹⁷ All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.*

If you were carrying a bucket of water across the yard and bumped it against your knee so one drop sloshed over the side, would you go back

and refill it? Of course not! A single drop is nothing.

If you could pile up all the lumber from the finest forests in the world, top it off with the bodies of all those woodland creatures, and light the whole thing on fire like a mountainous altar, would that offering be worthy of God? Hardly. ***There was one sacrifice worthy of God in human history, but it was offered up 2000 years ago on a Roman cross.***

If you could consult with God about every international crisis roiling our world right now—nukes in North Korea and Iran, refugees in Europe, viruses in South America and Africa, fragile financial systems, food shortages, climate change, natural disasters, terrorism, elections, racism—would He be wringing His hands and scratching His head? Never. God isn't running around like a helpless, frustrated parent, exclaiming aloud, "These crazy children of mine! Why did I ever get myself into this?"

Don't misunderstand—none of this means God thinks we are unimportant. ***It just means He is far more important than we could ever understand or appreciate!***

Next, Isaiah moves from boggling our mind to convicting our heart. The greatest desire in the fallen human heart is to find a God we can control, a God who will do our bidding and bless us and protect us. C. S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*: "Nearly all that we call human history... [is] the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy." Isaiah shows the utter foolishness of all that:

vv18-20 *To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? ¹⁹ An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. ²⁰ He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move.*

Notice, Isaiah doesn't even critique idolatry. He just describes it. That's all he has to do to make us see how ridiculous it is—carving a figure out of metal or wood, calling your carving "god," and then trusting it to help you? Good luck with that.

vv21-24 *Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the*

earth? ²² It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; ²³ who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. ²⁴ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

All the greatest world leaders, power brokers, politicians with their massive egos and limitless funding and pretentious ambitions and supersized promises are less than a puff of air to God. In fact, **a puff of air from His mouth is all it takes to blow them away like a hurricane.** In the face of this important, troublesome election in our own nation, aren't you glad you know the Prince of Peace and the King of kings?

Verse 25 is the point of all this:

v25 *To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.*

Our God is utterly incomparable!

v26 *Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing.*

Imagine the sky just after sunset. Light fades. Darkness deepens. Up there overhead, one by one, hundreds and hundreds of stars slowly come into view. Every night it happens. But don't imagine for a second that this just happens. God brings them out. He calls them by name. He holds them all in place.

None of this is a stunt. God isn't showing off. **He's trying to comfort you.** If God is this great, how we should rest in Him! How we should fear Him and love Him and trust Him! What a comfort simply to "Behold Your God!"

God is HUMBLE. (vv27-31)

Sometimes we might wonder, "With a God this great, what kind of time could He possibly have for me?"

v27 *Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"?*

The greatness of God is not seen only in His power. In fact, God's greatness is not essentially, primarily seen in His power but in His servanthood. **God loves to show His greatness by acting in humility.** By stooping low to help small little nothings like us:

vv28-31 *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. ²⁹ He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. ³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; ³¹ but they 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.*

Look at all the words for weakness: v28 "faint, weary" / v29 "faint, no might" / v30 "faint, weary, exhausted" / v31 "weary, faint." That's us. That's YOU! Weak in faith. Weak in body. Weak in joy. Weak in courage. Weak in hope. Weak in understanding. Weak, weak, weak, weak, weak.

God, as we've seen, is strong in every way imaginable. Even better, no cause is too small to matter to Him. He says to you: "I see you. I know you. I see the mess you're in, the fears you have, the doubts you feel. I know you are weak. But I am strong. Stronger than you know. Stronger than you hope. Stronger than you could ever imagine. Let's get together, shall we?"

ILLUS: Steve Hayner's final trust walk (past pres of IVP and Columbia Theological Seminary), died of pancreatic cancer last year, *Joy in the Journey* – he and his wife's journal entries during the final 8 months of his life. I read a good portion of that book yesterday and was struck by how much *weakness* he felt – mind, body, heart. During that time, they received a letter from one of Dr. Hayner's dearest friends with a special memory and encouragement:

Steve, my favorite unique memory with you was years ago at Wellspring Retreat Center. You remember we were given various iterations of the "trust walk." In one of those exercises we were supposed to guide our blindfolded partner from behind using only our voice. You walked in front of me and I directed you with only words into a small thicket of woods. I had you stepping over logs and ducking down below strong branches. You went slowly and could feel dead wood snapping beneath your feet and all of the twigs on your face as you brushed past them. You knew that you were walking through a very thick and tangled terrain—a precarious path for someone blindfolded and having to trust

only the words spoken to them.

Then I brought you almost out of the woods to the very edge of a large, flat, grassy field and stopped you six inches from the grass—you were still standing in the woods blindfolded (you remember, right?). You had no idea that all the tangles and tripping hazards and undergrowth and slapping branches and hard trees were behind you and that before you was only a broad, flat, lush field of green grass. You were imagining yourself still in the woods, stuck in the midst of all the tangles and hazards. Only I knew that before you it was all level and open and free of any encumbrance or danger or fear.

Then I said, “At the count of three, I want you to run straight forward as fast as you can. I counted to three and, with great trust, you took off running, charging ahead, screaming your lungs out, flailing your arms—worried that you were still careening through the woods but also suddenly laughing to find out that you were out of the tangled danger and running easily into a flat field full of soft and forgiving grass.

This is the journey ahead for you, my friend, whenever it is that you take it. The Word is behind you but also goes before you; the Word-made-flesh walks with you and is within you. And therefore all shall be well, and all shall be well—and all manner of things shall be well. The nausea and the discomfort, the fear and weakness, the tears and the treatments (the tripping hazards and the threatening thicket) will be over and you will run full speed screaming and laughing into the forgiving arms of grace and the healing heart of God.

Isaiah 40:29-31 He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. ³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; ³¹ but they 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.

Keep running, friends. Keep trusting. Keep waiting on God. Someday we will all run, charge ahead, screaming and flailing and laughing right into the strong arms of God.

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