

Topic	Comfort in Sorrow
Reference	Isaiah 40: 1-11
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The light shines bright when the darkness in the background is very dark and so many of us we come to this Christmas season and a lot of us are actually a lot more joyful and happy, but in the background of it comes a whole lot of pain. Isaiah was speaking to a group of people that were going through a time of darkness. The people of Israel were being kicked out of their home country and to go into a foreign land of Babylon and they were given these words of encouragement in Isaiah chapter 40, which also shadows and mimics the person that is Jesus that came on that blessed Christmas Day and that hope that was given to war stricken people is now given equally to war stricken Christians today and also for us Christians who are stricken in the daily battles that we have with our sin, with the evil in this world and in this community. So in this text we therefore see what the Christmas season is for. The Christmas season is all about Jesus, his birth and his reason for coming. There is a reason about this Christmas season is for. There are four things that I will say.

CHRISTMAS IS THE SEASON FOR COMFORT

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

So in the midst of the war strike and turmoil, God is not telling them to get back on your feet, he is not telling them to be glad that you are alive, no God actually is calling and saying, comfort, comfort my people and we see suddenly out of all the judgment and anger and wrath that God had on the people of Israel, he suddenly became so gentle. So we see the gentleness here despite the fact that they deserve God's wrath. We see that God has atoned the sins of Jerusalem and we also see God is not just blessing once but also twice. Now of course a lot of preachers out there, they manipulate this text saying that God will not just give you single, he will give you double of what you possess but actually this is the one time in Isaiah's time that God will redeem the people from Babylon back to Jerusalem and then there is that second time where God will reconcile people from all over the world who are seeking for salvation through Jesus Christ. He therefore pays it and pays it in full.

When we think of comfort we think of things that will make us feel comfortable. So people of my age and younger, the way they find comfort in the middle of the business of their work is, they go on vacation, which is a way to get away from it fall, but this is not the kind of comfort

that God is calling upon his people. A lot of us we try and find comfort in that way and unfortunately it ends up being very bad habits to try to relieve stress.

We try and seek comfort in this world to relieve us from the problems in our lives but we find two major problems in the comforts which this secular world is giving us. Number one, it's all an illusion. The problems are not solved and those comforts do not solve the problem, it only gives you a temporary reprieve. People who take temporary reprieves comes back with the problems even far worse because we have prolonged it. The comforts of this world is not what the comfort God gives. God gave the ultimate relief by saying, it is done. God promised, he who come after me will have eternal life. Friends what sort of comfort are we looking for in our lives today. Jesus said where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Where is the first place that comes to your mind when you feel that you need to get a wave a little bit and be comforted.

God is coming this comfort in this way, He tells us that you cannot do it, let me help and that feeling of relief, the moment he says I am here to help. Have you received that knowing that no matter what wrong that you have done or what evil had come upon you, God that you put your trust in him, he will see it all come to fulfillment in His will. Christmas is a season for comfort, don't find comfort in just the turkey leftovers, don't find comfort in just the season and the decorations in the shopping malls, come and seek comfort in the very hands that says I will lift you up just as I am lifted up and that is in Christ. This comfort is very empowering.

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. **7** Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. **8** But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. **Romans 5:6-8**

This is the comfort that we have knowing that we do our very best before Almighty God, his grace will look upon it as worship and he will be glorified. Christmas is the season for comfort.

CHRISTMAS IS THE SEASON FOR CAUTION

We need to be cautious because we are not just talking about the season when God came down once, we are waiting for the day when all the candles are lit then He will light His in the heavenly realms and then begins the end of this world and the beginning of the whole new world and whole new life, so we have to be cautious and ready.

3 A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. **4** Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made

low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. **5** And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

So we see a voice of a herald. So this Christmas is a season where we are going forward and giving that message, “Christmas is coming and Christ is coming” that’s what it means and then we also see that nothing will stop the gospel and the kingdom from coming. What you thought were obstacles to prevent people from coming to receive, He will see it through and He will fulfill it. He is willing to even level down the mountains and bring up the plains, so that the gospel and the kingdom can come into this world much-much quicker and when He comes there will be nowhere to hide from God’s glory. You will see the fullness of His salvation. Now the people of Israel during the time of Isaiah, they thought a king will come and the king did come and they brought back Israel and it became a nation again but again this is a 2-level vision. The second vision is the coming of the glory of God in human form and so then we ask this question, who is the mouth of the Lord?

Now some people debate that it could possibly be during Jesus’s time ‘John the Baptist’ but if you notice the title, the mouth of the Lord has spoken, we are talking about the very word and power that made all creation. That same power that made the whole world is the same power that will save the whole world and John chapter 1:18 says, *And the word became flesh and dwelt among men.* The voice and the mouth of the Lord that will speak is in the person that is Jesus. It then makes sense that when John the Baptist was preaching the fore-coming of the son of God and preaching a ministry of baptism, people had asked him,

19 Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. **20** He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.” **21** They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.”. “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” **22** Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” **23** John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

Why do we need to be cautious in this time because we cannot celebrate Christmas thinking it is just another nice reason to celebrate, we celebrate Christmas because we are actually making a public testimony to the world to be warned, because the next time Jesus comes, it will be with grace but will also be with judgment. In fact, John the Baptist elaborated in Luke’s gospel.

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. **16** John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his

threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

So John is giving this vision that Jesus will come. He comes this time like the voice of the Lord, bringing in salvation and an opportunity to be reconciled with God, but there will come a time when he comes again, the reason why we celebrate this Christmas is because we celebrate a twofold advent; he came before and he will come again that is our testimony and we are telling the world we celebrate Christmas because we are celebrating a coming king; a king that is coming to take his place in this world.

Jesus tells us of a story of where the bride comes in is a reflection of revelations, the bride comes into the heavenly realm and the bride and bridegroom are wed. The Jewish tradition is that the bridegroom will go to the Bride’s house, but this story is a bit different, it takes some time for bridegroom to come to the house. While they were waiting for the bridegroom to come, give or take one to two days, there will be women that will keep the oil lamps on day and night to keep the place in a celebratory mood but also to help the bridegroom identify which house to go to. Now there were 10 of them in this case; five of them were diligently making sure there was enough oil in the pot, waiting faithfully celebrating and also cautiously, waiting and seeking out for the bridegroom to come and then there were another five who were a bit lazy, some end up sleeping, some led their oil lamps burnt out and then there is no more oil, they didn’t go to the shop and buy oil. It came one dark night that the bridegroom came and all those who had the oil lamps ready, they were invited into the feast, the other five when they found out the bridegroom has arrived, they went to find the oil and when they came back, they could not go into the banquet because the bridegroom didn’t see them at the entrance. Jesus is saying that prepare for my coming, prepare cautiously, prepare celebrating but also enthusiastically waiting.

CHRISTMAS IS A SEASON FOR CONFIDENCE

6 A voice says, “Cry out.” And I said, “What shall I cry?” “All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. **7** The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. **8** The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.”

Isaiah is taking this context and putting it in this verse and saying, okay yes you are suffering but one day it will end, yes evil is ruling right now but when Jesus come all that will end too. This is not a passage for misery, this is a passage for hope. So we see:

1. The prophet himself was not so confident. The voice cries out and I say what should I cry, what should I talk about and a lot of us here as Christians we find it very difficult to talk about hope in the middle of all the troubles that we are having in our lives. The Holy Spirit calls in us, cry out the truth which is eventually everyone will meet the same fate,

whether you would be a millionaire with access to the finest medication in the world or you are begging in the street without a job, all of those will end because those things are only temporary.

Eventually God will end all things. Don't think the end is something unfortunate. In the Christian faith, to be scared to die is wrong. We are ready to go to a mighty God on the day that he calls us. We will wither but God's word will continue. What the apostles have said from the very beginning until now, his word never fails. So Christmas then is a time to courageously and confidently share the good news of Jesus.

Charles Colson is an evangelical preacher, before that he was also the special advisor to the president of United States some years ago and he was unfortunately involved in the whole Watergate scenario. He served seven months in jail, turned a new leaf, came to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and continues to minister in his ministry that he founded called Prison Fellowship. Here is what he says, *"I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Everyone was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."*

Friends how confident are we in our celebration of Christmas. How confident are you in sharing the good news with others? Romans 10 tells us very clearly,

13"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." **14** How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? **15** And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Christmas is the time where we can confidently go into the public sector and tell anyone in their faces Merry Christmas and let me tell you, why we celebrate it, do it. We have to take this opportunity to share the gospel with others.

CHRISTMAS IS A SEASON FOR COMPASSION:

It is amazing to see in this text and that two-level prophecy that when God brings his hand out, he doesn't bring it out in the fist, he brings it out with an open hand. He could have annihilated Israel forever, but He decided to bring them back and again and again He brings it back.

9 You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!” **10** See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. **11** He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

We the Christian faith can point to a particular person in history and say here is our God, which the other religions don't have the privilege. We have been given this opportunity exclusively. *Now this is eternal life that they may know you the one true God and they may know the Jesus the Messiah whom you have sent.* When you want to point towards God and what does he look like we can point to a person that is Jesus.

See this great and mighty power of God, he is coming almost with a vengeance. It is almost as if he is like a general in armor and a spear, ready to through the spear and hit where it hurts the most and annihilate everything but then you see verse **11** he tends to the flock like a shepherd, he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart, he gently leads those.

Scholars today or in the past have asked, why the great difference and the answer is, the greater the might behind the grace, the gentler the grace can become, the greater the might of the Lord that we see, the greater then we can appreciate his compassion and grace. So when John the Baptist said that he will baptize you with fire, the crowds were expecting someone awesome magnifying, a king that will overrule Jerusalem, kill Caesar and rule the world physically and then if you were facing your back towards John the Baptist and then you heard him say, look the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, you turn around you expect to see the king and then you see a carpenter son. It is quite an anticlimax. He did that because he did not come with malaise and anger, he came with grace. He came like a shepherd. He is pulling His sheep towards him. Athanasius of Alexandria said,

“The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men. For one who wanted to make a display the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for Him Who came to heal and to teach the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it, not vitiating the value of the Divine appearing by exceeding their capacity to receive it.”

The reason why Jesus came in the way that he did because that will be the only way that we will be able to fathom who God is, Jesus came in this way because God did not want to display himself in what we think he is, angry, malicious, vengeful God. To give us all a new fresh picture, he comes down and say I come to give you grace, love, mercy and compassion and don't

think for a moment that when Jesus came on this earth He was weak, no, He submitted to the will of God but that didn't make Him weak, it made His grace much stronger.

This is a season for compassion, this is a season where we like sheep gather together to receive his kind hand to tend towards him. God in His mighty way had come and He knew what it takes for us to follow him. He didn't come therefore with anger, he didn't come therefore to his threats, the world has enough evil for us to be worried of ourselves and so God comes as a shepherd calling people by name, follow me and you will have life.

This Christmas season what attitude are we giving towards our friends

- Are we showing our houses and the beautiful Christmas decorations?
- Are you giving compassion, are you displaying compassion?
- Are you displaying that gentle caution to those who have yet to know Jesus?
- Are we showing compassion this season?

Take comfort in knowing that although we are unworthy vessels, we are made worthy by the sacrifice of his son Jesus. Be cautious that because with that kind of power, with that kind of help and faith comes also a responsibility to reach out. Be courageous, don't be afraid with what you have to say because what you had to say is the hope of all mankind, but do so with compassion.