

Isaiah 40:1 – 11 Comfort my people – I am coming soon. **(11.04.10 am)**

Art – what **is** it all about? What is the point of art? I can appreciate a well-drawn sketch, or a beautifully accurate and life-like painting, where it shows something I know what it looks like and I can see that the artist must have amazing skill in recreating it on canvas.

But so much of what's hanging in our art museums, **I** would call rubbish, I'm afraid. Perhaps I'm uneducated, but a mishmash of colours splattered on a wall isn't art, it's the living room of a house lived in by students! Unless I can see what it means, it does **nothing** for me.

If you look at a painting from close up, you just see blobs of paint. As you step away from it, you begin to see how another part ties in with what you've already made out. Step further away and you begin to see how the whole picture works together. Then you can focus on the full meaning of the picture, it makes sense, it's complete, and it all works together.

The Bible is a bit like that. You pick and choose a bit here and a bit there, you **will** find, with the help of God's Spirit, important nuggets of meaning. But gradually as you read other bits, God will reveal more and more to you. You may have favourite parts of the Bible where you feel God is particularly blessing **you**. But it's not until you read the **whole** Bible, it's not until you've read the whole Word of God, only **then** will you see the full picture of God's purposes and plans for you.

Then you can see what holds the whole thing together, Old Testament and New Testament, history and future. And the thing that holds the whole of Scripture together is God's promise of relationship with him, through a Messiah, a Saviour, even his one and only Son, Jesus. The 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 in the New, all draw us in to see the character at the centre of this masterpiece – Jesus.

This morning we're going to consider a section from the book of Isaiah, because he writes more about the Messiah who was to come than any other Old Testament prophet. And I find it fantastic that here was a man writing about things that were going to come true 100 years later, 700 years later, and some which are **still** to happen. How exciting is **that?!**

Let's read together then from [Isaiah chapter 40:1–11](#)

To put this into context, you'll remember that in the first 39 chapters of his prophecy, Isaiah has been told by God to speak to his people Israel about coming **judgement** for their wandering away from the ways of God. They'll be taken **away** from the country God has given them and carried off into exile.

We read these words in Isaiah chapter 6 ... [read 6:9-12]

Isaiah has a devastating message to bring to the people, a message of disaster. And, as I've already said, this prophecy **did** come true some hundred years after this message was given. Israel taken off into exile in Babylon. Isaiah asks God in chapter 6 verse 11, '*For how long?*' – how long do I have to give this message of destruction, and the answer is '*Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant.*' There was to be no half-measures here but utter **ruin** for Israel, its people held captive.

But here in chapter 40 we see the beginning of a **new** message about what is to happen **after** the captivity. At this point in his prophecy, Isaiah is told that he should give his people a **new** message – **a message of comfort**. And what greater message could there be than this for those will who have suffered a long way from home. Remember, this message is coming in **advance** of their being taken off into exile, so when it happens, they'll remember these words of hope, they will cling to these words of promise, that their suffering will not go on forever.

Sometimes, you know, we can try to help a friend or a brother or sister who's in need, they're going through painful times, they're suffering loss, they're going through difficulties. We get alongside them, talk to them, offer them understanding, considerate words. We comfort them as best we can. But sometimes there's a limit to how much comfort we **can** give, because we've not been where **they** are – we've not experienced what they're going through.

God says '*Comfort my people*'. **God offers the only true comfort**. Only God's people can know this true comfort. Because it comes from God. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he writes this, '*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles,*' (2 Corinthians 1:3). He is the God of all comfort – he is the one we should turn to in times of need, because he is the God of all comfort. Why?

Because he created us, he knows us inside out, he knows what we're going through, he identified **with** us when Jesus lived on earth, **he** went through every emotion common to man – **his** comfort is the only true and lasting comfort. '*Comfort my people*'. Seek comfort from God, in his Word, from God's people, **that's** where you'll find **real** comfort.

There may come times of darkness, perhaps, when we feel that the only comfort we can know is that we are Christians, and that one day we will be with our Lord and Saviour in heaven. But what wonderful comfort! To know that **whatever** this world throws at us, we know that our future is **safe** in God's hands, forever.

'*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God*', verse 1. Who is this God offering comfort? Look at verse 13, '*Who has understood the Spirit of the Lord, or instructed him as counsellor?*' the implied answer – 'No-one'; '*Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him and who taught him the right way?*' – No-one; '*Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?*' – No-one. Verse 25, '*To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?*' – No-one.

Almighty God who made all things, sustains all things, knows all things – **he** is the one who tells Isaiah, '*Comfort, comfort my people*'. **He** knows what is to come, he knows **all** things, so his people know that they can be comforted, because **God** says so.

God's people know God's comfort then, because of who he is; but they can also know comfort because of who **they** are. He is **their** God, and **they are his people**. '*Comfort my people, says your God.*' What a great reminder after 39 chapters foretelling coming judgement, that no matter what God allows to happen to them, they are still his people. The covenant still stands. The promise God made to their forefather Abraham in Genesis 12 still stands. God made a promise to his people through their representative Abraham and he will not go back on that promise.

God is the only God, he is unique; God's people are **special** to him. Those who are in relationship with God are **special** to him, and Romans chapter 8 has those wonderful words, doesn't it, '*... neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*' Romans 8:38-9. That's great isn't it?

Even in exile, they will still have a heavenly Father who loves them, and the link between the people and the city of Jerusalem in verse 2 of our passage, shows that they will always have a place to come back to, people and city will survive. Psalm 103 tells us, *'The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. ... For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.'*

Do **you** know anything of this? Do you know of his mercy and compassion towards **you**? *'Do you not know? Have you not heard? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth'* verse 21 of Isaiah 40 says. He is almighty God, but he is the God of his people, those who **know** him, and **we** can know him today through Jesus. The letter to the Colossian church tells us, *'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, ... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.'* Jesus has made it possible through his death on the cross and his rising to life again, for us to know God personally. Do you know him? You can. He wants you to. God doesn't want **anyone** to perish, he wants you to know him. Now is the time.

What else does our passage tell us about God's people?

They are **a forgiven people**. Verse 2: *'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for.'* What? Are they hearing **correctly**? After hundreds of years of rebellion, and going their own way and totally **rejecting** God's way; after years of compromise and idol-worship; after flouting God's law for generation after generation; God says their sin has been **paid for** in these comparatively short years of exile? It must have sounded too good to be true!

But here God tells Isaiah to pass on the good news that their King, their Lord, their God has pardoned them. **Forgiven** because the price has been paid in full. Free, released. Surely there couldn't be any more comforting news for them – that the punishment in judgement for their rebellious ways is now **over**.

And because they were a forgiven people, they were **a returning people** – the consequence of their sins being paid for is that they will return to the land that God promised to them. In verses 3 and 4 we see God having a highway prepared through the desert; *'Every valley shall be raised, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.'* **God** will return, but he will also bring his **people** in a procession through the desert places.

And look at the way he will do it in verses 10 and 11: *‘See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers his lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.’* He is the almighty God, all-powerful, nothing is too difficult for him. But the heart of God is **loving**, like a shepherd, guiding, caring for, tending, looking after his flock.

Throughout the Bible this image is used of God – Psalm 23 *‘The Lord’s my Shepherd’*; Jesus says in John 10:11, *‘I am the Good Shepherd.’*; in Hebrews 13:20, he’s the *‘great Shepherd of the sheep,’*; in 1 Peter 5:4, he’s the *‘Chief Shepherd’*.

‘Comfort, comfort my people, says your God’, he’s the great Shepherd who will remove all the obstacles in your path, he will tend you, care for you, guide you. He has forgiven you. He is returning you to where you belong.

This can’t be true can it? It sounds too good to be true. You say, ‘how can it be true – I’ve not wanted God in my life, in fact I’ve done some awful things, I’ve been in some terrible places and I’ve done the worst things – this message of forgiveness and restoration of a relationship with the God I’ve totally ignored just **can’t** be true.’

That’s what God’s **people** must have thought – but this message of comfort was true for them. In fact those of you who’ve been following the Explore Bible Notes have been reading recently of the fulfilment of this prophecy – the time when God’s people returned to Jerusalem and started rebuilding. In Ezra chapter 1 verse 2 we read Cyrus king of where the Israelites had been kept captive say this: [\[Read Ezra 1:2-3\]](#) This must have **amazed** God’s people, release, freedom to return to the city God had given them.

You imagine the excitement of God’s people returning to Jerusalem after 70 years in exile. Can it be **true**? After all these years? Being led across the desert, a procession of God’s people – they’re all named in that first chapter of Ezra. What excitement. God’s people forgiven, released, restored to their home, Jerusalem. **Shout** about it from the highest mountains, verse 9. But this message of comfort is **equally** true and relevant for us too, you know. The Jews had been in captivity to sin, they needed to be saved; likewise **we** are captive to sin, and we need to be saved too. Too good to be true?

In Isaiah 43:11, God says, *'I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no saviour.'*

Compare those words with Acts chapter 4:12 *'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.'*

You say, 'how can it be true – I've had no regard whatsoever for God in my life, in fact I've done some awful things, I've been in some terrible places and I've done the worst things – this message of forgiveness and restoration of a relationship with the God I've totally ignored just can't be true.' But it **is** – **believe** it, my friends – no matter what you've done, no matter where you've been, God wants to forgive you and make you clean.

God's people are a forgiven people. God forgives his people. And as he forgives his people here in Isaiah and restores them to Jerusalem, he reveals his glory to the world, verse 5 – God shows the world who he is; he's holy, no one can compare to him; he's righteous; he's powerful. Verse 25 of chapter 40 says, *'To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?'* says the Holy One. *Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: who created all these?'*

All he does in salvation, in forgiving and releasing people from their sin, saving people from an eternity without God – that is, hell - is to reveal his glory to the world.

Let's move on. How will God's people be able to **sustain** their restored lives, now they're forgiven and free? **By God's word.** Verse 8, *'The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever.'* God's people are to believe the word of God and build their lives according to it.

You see, God's word is like God himself – it stands forever – it never changes, it is totally reliable – just like God. His word teaches everything we **need** to know about him, the one who created us to live in relationship with him, the one who loves us, who is committed to us, and the one who has everything we need to live lives as they should be. You want to know how to live a life pleasing to God? Build a life on the things you find in the word of God. In God's **word** we'll find the lasting solutions to our problems.

We've talked about the immediate application for the Jews in their return to Israel, but of course we remember that there is a **New Testament application** here too. When beginning his gospel, Mark could do no **better** than use God's word, words from this passage in Isaiah to talk about John the Baptist who came announcing the arrival of Jesus, *'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your [that is Jesus'] way – a voice of one calling in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."*

The words take on a fuller meaning now, much deeper than before. The message of Jesus and his coming to seek and save the lost, to heal the sick, to release the prisoners and to give them new life, gives Isaiah's words a new and higher significance. The exile will be forgotten, the price is paid, God's people restored to Jerusalem.

Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians, [\[read 1:21-3\]](#). Jesus died on the cross so that our punishment for sin was **paid for**, the guilt of our sin swept away. God's people – those who believe in salvation through Jesus – God's people restored to heaven. The price paid, lives restored.

But there is also a future application, I believe. A **final application** of this message. In John 14 Jesus is telling his disciples, you'll remember, that he's going to be leaving them soon, and he comforts his them with these words: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."* John 14:1-3.

'I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.' Jesus himself is **clearly** saying that sometime in the future he will return and take his disciples, his people, to be with him. God's people forgiven, returning to where they belong.

Paul in his letter to Titus, Paul writes that God's grace teaches how to live holy lives, *'while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.'* Titus 2:13.

The writer to the Hebrews writes, *'so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.'* Hebrews 9:28.

The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus will come again. The Bible also says that no-one knows when he will come again, he will come like a thief in the night, when no-one expects. But there are signs – Paul writes in his second letter to Timothy – listen to this, my friends – *‘There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.’* 2 Timothy 3:1-4.

Can it be just co-incidence that I see so many of these characteristics in our world today?

Make no mistake, the Bible teaches that Jesus **will** come again – do you believe it? Or is this a step too far for you? You can believe all that has gone on in the **past** – it’s history, it’s happened. But Jesus coming **back** to take his people to be with him, wherever he is? Perhaps you can’t accept that.

It’s what the Bible **says**. It’s what Jesus **himself** says. Can you afford **not** to believe it? The fall of Israel was foretold by Isaiah – it happened. The restoration of Israel was foretold – it happened. The coming of the Messiah in Bethlehem was foretold – it happened. The Saviour would have to suffer to bring forgiveness for sins was foretold – it happened. That he would rise again was foretold – it happened. That Jesus will come again has **also** been foretold – do we **dare** not believe it? Wouldn’t that just be plain silly, considering that the whole of eternity depends on it?

‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ – these words had an immediate application for the Jews, that they’d return from exile to rebuild Jerusalem; it had a deeper application in Jesus coming and bringing forgiveness for sins, restoring all who believe in him to the kingdom of heaven; it has a final application yet to come when Jesus will come again, to take his people to be with him

Isaiah spoke in chapter 65 of new heavens and a new earth. Listen to these words from the book of Revelation, from John’s vision of God’s kingdom, and I’ll finish with this: [\[Read Revelation 21:1-5\]](#)

The Bible has foretold it – it will happen – will you be there?