

Reasons for Comfort

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[0 : 00] If you'd like to turn back with me to that passage that Annie just read, that's the passage we'll be looking at this morning. You might find it useful to have it open in front of you. As James mentioned, my name is Daniel Sloddick, and I teach at Edinburgh Theological Seminary.

Some of you may also know that we've recently revised the program there, and one of the results of the changes that we're making is that some of the classes will be delivered in three-hour blocks.

So three hours of teaching. James was delighted. He's so happy. I promised this morning, even if I'm used to talking for a long time, I promised not to preach for three hours this morning.

It might feel like it, but it won't actually be that long. And joking aside, I mention that to draw attention to the fact that this is a tremendously rich passage, and we could spend a very long time considering what God says to us here.

So I want to highlight the fact that we're only really scratching the surface of this passage, but I trust that God will bless us through his word as we turn to consider it. This is a very famous chapter.

[1 : 09] It's famous at the end. If you look at verse 31, those of you who are fans of Eric Little, the marathon who's going by our house this morning in Muscledboro, the runners going by.

If you're an Eric Little fan, if you've seen Chariots of Fire, you'll know there's a famous scene. He quotes this passage. He's reading this passage, and there's sort of particular emphasis on verse 31.

They shall mount up on wings like eagles. They shall run and not grow weary. It's famous at the end. It's also a passage that's famous at the beginning. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her. One commentator speaking about this passage says that it opens like the overture to a great musical composition.

He doesn't mention this, that commentator, but surely what he has in mind is that that happened. These words are quoted at the beginning of Handel's Messiah very famously.

[2 : 08] So it's famous at the end. It's famous at the beginning. I'd like us to focus this morning particularly on that bit that's quoted at the beginning. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

That that opens the great theme of this chapter, and that's what I'd like us to focus on. And I'd like to suggest to you four reasons why you can be comforted.

Four reasons, four things that we see in this chapter. But before we do that, it's important that we understand why we would need to be comforted. I think you can say that there are different kinds of comfort.

Sometimes people need comfort because of tragedies that have befallen them that are completely outside of their control. Sometimes things happen to somebody.

Maybe it's a bereavement. Maybe somebody loses their job. They may get a very bad diagnosis from the doctor. Sometimes things happen to us, and it's outside of our control, and people need comfort.

[3 : 09] And it's natural to comfort them in that situation. It would be kind of monstrous not to show compassion for them. That's not the kind of comfort that's being spoken about in this chapter.

Because sometimes we are in difficult situations that are of our own making. Sometimes our life is a mess, and it's our fault.

We're suffering the consequences of what we've done. And that's the kind of situation that this chapter is dealing with. It's maybe helpful to have some appreciation of the context of this.

Last week, we had been looking a couple chapters before this, particularly chapters 36 and 37. At that point, and really up until this point, Isaiah the prophet has been focusing largely on things happening in his own day.

And so back in those chapters, Isaiah was focusing particularly on the threat of Assyria. And that was a live issue in his day. That was what they were facing.

[4 : 16] But if you notice in chapter 38, God has delivered his people from the Assyrians. And then in chapter 38, Hezekiah, who was king in Isaiah's day, he was ill.

He was delivered. Envoys from Babylon, a distant kingdom, had come to visit him. And Hezekiah naively was overly nice to them. And then in chapter 39, it is rather, in verse 5, Isaiah said to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord of hosts.

Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried off to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord.

And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away. And they will be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. So the kind of tragically comedic comment then in verse 8, when Hezekiah said to Isaiah, The word of the Lord that you've spoken is good.

For he thought, There'll be peace and security in my days. It seems rather short-sighted and selfish, his comment at that point. What's not explicit in those verses is the reason the Babylonians will come is because of the repeated sinfulness of God's people.

[5 : 52] You don't need to turn to it, but in the next prophet, in Jeremiah, there's a passage where Jeremiah describes this. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, You have seen all the disaster that I have brought upon Jerusalem and all the cities of Jerusalem, that is, Babylon.

Behold, this day they are a desolation, and no one dwells in them, because of the evil they have committed, provoking me to anger, in that they went up to make offerings and serve other gods that they knew not, neither they, nor you, nor your fathers.

Yet I persistently sent to you all my servants the prophets, like Isaiah, saying, Oh, do not do this abomination that I hate.

But they did not listen or incline their ear to turn from their evil and make no offerings to other gods. Therefore, my wrath and my anger were poured out and kindled in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem.

And they became a waste and a desolation as at this day. These people needed comfort or would need comfort, not because they were innocent victims, so to speak.

[7 : 13] They needed comfort because of what they had done, because of the way that they had provoked God to anger repeatedly in spite of his warnings. And Isaiah, in chapter 40, is anticipating that day.

He's anticipating a day 150 years in the future, when all of this will have happened and when the people are away in exile. And it's to those people that he is saying that God will offer comfort.

And that provides a point of contact with us, doesn't it? Because we face many different difficulties and problems in our life. Some of them are things completely outside of our control.

But one problem that we face is something that is inside of our control, and it's our sin. You have a conscience, don't you?

And your conscience tells you that you have rebelled against God and that you have done things that would alienate you from this God. And that is the problem that we face.

[8 : 20] So notice in verse 2, when Isaiah says, Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended. That is, that her iniquity is pardoned, and that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

The fundamental issue that Isaiah is dealing with is the people's sin. And that's our fundamental problem. And it's in that context that God commands people to comfort his people.

So with that in mind, I want us to look at four reasons why you can have comfort. The first reason that I would suggest to you, and it's very clear in this passage, you can take comfort because God is great.

Sometimes it's useful for us to have a proper sense of perspective, a proper sense of scale, because sometimes we don't fully appreciate something because we don't see it.

If you were to go to Dubai, I've never been to Dubai, but if we were to go there, you could potentially see the Burj Khalifa. I don't know if you know what that is. The Burj Khalifa is the tallest building in the world.

[9 : 39] It's 800 meters tall. It's almost a kilometer. That's insane. 800 meter tall building. And if you were to see that, if you're standing at the foot of it, you would think, this is a massive building.

If we were to go to Siberia, you could potentially see Lake Baikal. And if you were to stand at the shore and look at Lake Baikal, you would probably think, well, this is quite a big lake.

But you almost surely wouldn't properly appreciate it. Because you could take the Burj Khalifa and you could begin to lower it into the lake and lower it a bit and a bit and a bit.

And you could just let it sink all together and it would be completely engulfed. You could take two Burj Khalifas and you could drop them into Lake Baikal and you would never see them again.

Because Lake Baikal is 1.7 kilometers deep. That's massive. It's such a big lake that apparently 20% of the fresh water on earth is in that one single lake.

[10 : 46] You would never know that if you were just looking at it. You couldn't see it and you wouldn't have a proper sense of perspective. That's what God is doing in so much of chapter 40.

By comparing himself to things that we can see, he's helping to give us perspective. If you look at verse 12, who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?

God is so great, he could hold Lake Baikal, as it were, in the palm of his hand. God is vast, his vastness we see when we consider it in comparison to the waters.

Who has marked off the heavens with a span? Again, God is so great, it's like he could measure the infiniteness of the heavens, of the universe, just with his hand.

Who has weighed the mountains in scales? If you were to see, imagine weighing a mountain. God is so much greater than anything in this universe that he could do that.

[11 : 53] Notice verse 17. This is perhaps when it becomes particularly humbling for us because now this is talking about us. All the nations are as nothing before him.

They are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. There's a certain sense in which God can say that all of the peoples on the earth are so utterly insignificant that they're like nothing.

It's like dust on a scale. Now, this is a profoundly important point, but there are two corrections, I think, that I need to make at this point.

First of all, if you look at verse 18, I began by suggesting that we can compare God to other things, and it gives us a sense of perspective. But look at verse 18.

To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness compare with him? We can get a sense of perspective if we compare God to these things, but in another sense, God is utterly incomparable.

[13 : 00] There is nothing that is like God. And then the second correction, notice verses 21 and 22. Again, earlier on, I had said that we can't see God, so it's difficult for us to have a sense of his scale.

Well, obviously that's true. We can't see God. But when you think about Lake Baikal, you have no idea how deep it is, do you? It could be 10 meters deep, it could be 1.7 kilometers deep.

We can't really tell. That's not really the situation with God, is it? Because although we can't see him, that's not to say that we have no sense of him. Look at verse 21.

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?

Those are rhetorical questions, and obviously the answer is, well, actually, yes, we do know. We all have an innate sense of God. sometimes we suppress that knowledge.

[14 : 07] Sometimes we ignore it. But there isn't actually one of us here today who could say, I didn't know God was that great. Because he created us, and we have that inbuilt awareness of his existence, of his glory, of his majesty.

It's revealed around us, even in the vastness of the universe around us. So that's another point of correction. And this is a profoundly important lesson, because sometimes the world around us can seem so powerful to us.

The world can seem so overwhelming. And when we say world, we can mean different things by that. Sometimes we have in mind the forces of nature. I already mentioned that we live in Musselboro.

We live right beside the river, which normally is kind of nice and picturesque, maybe. Maybe on Thursday, there was a massive rainfall, and the river came right up, right at the, well, over the banks, really.

And you start to worry, maybe it's going to flood us. And I checked that I was thinking, well, maybe it's high tide. I sort of took comfort in the fact that maybe it was particularly high because it was high tide. And I checked the timetables and found that actually it was the lowest tide.

[15 : 21] And then you look at the forecast, and it's just forecasting more rain. And you think, oh, no. Thankfully, it's going down now, so that was a relief. But sometimes the forces of nature can seem so overwhelming and terrifying to us.

By world, sometimes we mean the government or military forces. In verse 12, God compares himself or belittles, really, the size of the forces of nature.

In verse 23, he says that he's the one who brings princes to nothing and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Sometimes we think of someone like Xi Jinping, who's a dictator of a vast nation with a growing economy, a growing military.

And we think they seem terrifying to us, perhaps. We think of someone like Vladimir Putin, who, again, is dictator of a country with a very large army, a very large nuclear force, someone very aggressive.

And we think, this seems so overwhelming and so frightening. Sometimes we might think of the culture around us. As Christians, you perhaps, I hope you would have a worldview that's quite different at points from some of the people around you.

[16 : 39] And sometimes, perhaps, when you're surrounded by people who think that what you believe is crazy, and they're the ones who agree with everybody in our society, with musicians, with celebrities, actors, movie producers.

I heard recently that Taylor Swift apparently can determine the outcome of elections by whom she endorses. Seems kind of absurd, doesn't it? But apparently, that's true.

We see the culture around us, and we can feel so overwhelmed. We need to read verse 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 of these things around us are like nothing in comparison to the greatness and the majesty of God. So first of all, you can take comfort because of the majesty, the greatness of God.

Secondly, as we look at this passage, you can see that you can take comfort because this God is coming. Again, because we don't see God, we perhaps ignore the fact that God is at work always in this world, and that at a point in time, he is going to work decisively in history.

[18 : 06] Look at verses 9 and 10. Go 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. God is coming. As we think about this situation for the original audience, for the Israelites who heard this, it's important for us to appreciate that this was something that they had already experienced and that they were going to experience.

Because if we were to go back earlier in the Bible, their God had already come. Israel existed as a nation at that point because they had been brought out of Egypt.

If you were to go back to the book of Exodus when they were in Egypt, when they were slaves in Egypt, you don't need to turn to it, but it's the very end of Exodus chapter 2. God heard their groaning and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

[19 : 25] God saw the people of Israel and God knew. And then a little later on in the next chapter in verse 7, the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters.

I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians. God had come.

That's why Israel, the people in Isaiah chapter 40, that's why they existed at all. And now, God is saying to them that he is going to come again. And interestingly, in Isaiah, when he promises to come again, he uses all of the language of the Exodus, all of the language of that time when he first came.

If you were to look over at chapter 43, Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, for your sake I send to Babylon.

Now, bear in mind, the people aren't in Babylon yet, but Isaiah is warning them that's going to happen. It's too late. Now, you are going to end up in Babylon, but when you are there, God will come.

[20 : 40] He will bring the Babylonians down his fugitives, even the Chaldeans, in the ships in which they rejoice. I, the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior, they lie down, they cannot rise.

God is speaking about what he's going to do, but if you're familiar with the Exodus story, you'll realize that he's describing it in the language of what he had already done.

And I mention this, that that fact that they had experienced it and he was promising to do something similar again, I mention that because that's your situation. You live in a time when God has come and when he's going to come.

If you look at Isaiah chapter 40, A voice cries, In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for your God.

[21 : 46] Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain will be made low. The glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Even if you didn't know Isaiah, you might be familiar with that passage because that's quoted in Matthew's gospel, isn't it? It's quoted in the New Testament. That's John the Baptist who does those things before the coming of Jesus.

You see, Jesus has come. And Jesus also promises that he will come again. In Revelation, we read, 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, Jesus will return. All the seemingly powerful forces of this world will be utterly humbled.

He will come to deliver his people and to defeat all of his enemies. Jesus has come and Jesus is going to come again. And you might be wondering, as you think of that promise that Jesus will return, you might be wondering, well, why should I believe that?

[23 : 05] Why should I think that that's actually going to happen? Well, why should you think that there's going to be some decisive, apocalyptic event that will fundamentally alter human history?

Why believe that? Well, you can believe that he will come because he has come. That's a fact of history.

This is a very big topic and it goes beyond the scope of one sermon. But as Christians, we have a faith which is based in history.

Jesus' birth and his life and his death and surprisingly, even his resurrection, these aren't vague notions that we have.

These are facts of history. You can examine history and you can come to the conclusion that there is compelling evidence that Jesus has done these things. And if there's compelling evidence that he has done these things, then it means that there's compelling evidence to believe that he will do these things.

[24 : 12] You can have comfort because God will come. He is faithful. He has kept his word repeatedly in the past. He has come.

And we can know that he will once again finally and decisively come. So you can take comfort because God is great. You can take comfort because your God will come.

Now, at this point, I hope you're thinking, this is a terrible sermon. Now, they say, you should be careful what you hope for. And there are many reasons you might be thinking that that I'm not wanting.

But the reason I say that, the thing that I'm thinking about is what I told you at the very beginning. Remember, I suggested to you the kind of comfort that these people needed. Well, why did they need to be comforted?

Well, we could read Jeremiah 44 again. We won't. The reason they needed to be comforted is because they had repeatedly provoked God by their sin.

[25 : 10] And the reason that we need to be comforted is because of our sin and because our sin alienates us from our Creator. And if that's the case, I hope you're sitting there thinking that the notion that this God whom we have provoked with our sin is a God of overwhelming greatness, that's not comforting.

The notion that this God whom we have repeatedly provoked by our sin, the idea that He is coming, that might not obviously seem like good news. That might seem like bad news.

And therefore, it's very, very important that we pay attention to how this passage opens. Because it is God who says, it is this God whom we've offended by our sin, He's the one who issues this command, comfort, comfort.

And notice, it's just two small words, but look at verse 1. And notice how He addresses His people. Comfort, comfort, my people.

At this point, those are precisely the last words that you would expect Him to use because they have so offended Him by their sin that they're going to be exiled. Symbolically, they're going to be cast out of His presence.

[26 : 40] The last thing that you would expect Him to do is to own them as His people. And notice how He refers to Himself. Comfort, comfort, my people, says, your God.

And if you carry on in verse 2, cry to her that her warfare, you'll notice there's a footnote that says, hardship, the NIV translates it as hard service, that's probably a better translation.

Your hardship is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she is received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. sins. The third reason that you can take comfort is that not only is God great, not only is He coming, but also, this God is profoundly merciful.

And fundamentally, the reason why these people can take comfort is because it is God who is telling them, your sin is finished. It's dealt with.

And in chapter 40, He doesn't explicitly say how that will happen. That comes out more explicitly, for example, in chapter 53. Chapter 53 is perhaps the most famous passage in Isaiah, one of the most famous passages in the whole of the Old Testament.

[28 : 04] Isaiah 53 in verse 4, for example, we read, Surely He has borne our griefs, this is speaking about Jesus, He has carried our sorrows. We esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted, but He was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. Isaiah 40 indicates that Jesus is coming.

Isaiah 53 explains to us how the coming of Jesus and what He did enables Him to be the one who can forgive our sins. But the key thing for you to know is that Jesus is the one who can deal with your sin.

Jesus is the one who is able to offer you comfort because He's able to say to you, it's finished. It's dealt with all of your sin. And maybe you're here this morning and you are a Christian.

I suspect most of you here this morning, you are Christians, and yet maybe at times you think, I've really done it this time. you feel that your sin somehow inseparably has alienated God from you and there's no way back.

[29 : 26] It's tremendously important for you to know that it is this God who says to you, it is finished.

It is this God who offers you comfort. And in verse 11, it says that 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. Again, this is fulfilled in Jesus, isn't it? It's Jesus who says, I am the good shepherd.

I know my own and my own know me. Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep. and I have other sheep that are not of this fold.

I must bring them also. That's what Jesus says to you. He knows you and He's laid down His life for you. That doesn't in any way give us an excuse to sin.

[30 : 29] But it does mean that when we have sinned, there is a way back. We can acknowledge our sin and repent of it and turn to Him and know that He will receive us. because it is God who says that you are His people and who offers you comfort.

And maybe you're here this morning and you aren't yet a Christian. This passage is a tremendous revelation of the greatness of God. It reveals the greatness and the majesty of God, something intuitively that we have a sense of but it drives it home to us in a very vivid way.

it also impresses upon you a sense that this God is incomparable. Nothing in this world can match Him. We see in this passage that this God is coming.

And in one sense this is terrifying. If you didn't tremble at the sense of this God then there's something wrong within us.

But also this reveals to you a God who is great in mercy. That's perhaps the thing that's most remarkable because we can't assume that. It's not for us to presume upon God's mercy but it is God Himself who says to you that He is merciful and that if you humble yourself and that if you seek His mercy in Jesus you will find it.

[31 : 54] And there's a beautiful contrast isn't there between verses 11 and 12. Did you notice that as Annie was reading through it? notice in verse 11 He will lead 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 gather us up with His hands in His arms and then in verse 12 who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand and marked off the heavens with a span?

The God of such overwhelming majesty that His hands could hold the seas in the palm of His hand. It's those same hands as it were that gathers those who humbly come to Him.

There's a beautiful contrast there. God is overwhelming in so many ways but especially in mercy. Do you know this God?

Because this is the God that you meet in His word and this is the God who calls you to come to Him. To acknowledge Jesus as your shepherd to acknowledge Jesus as your Savior.

There's one last point and we're out of time and so I'll just mention it very briefly. You can take comfort because the words of this God are certain.

[33 : 20] As I say we don't have time to look at this but I would just draw your attention to it. If you look at verse five, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

And then notice in the very next verse a voice says cry and I say what shall I cry? All flesh is as grass and its beauty like the flowers of the field the grass withers the flower fades and the breath of the Lord blows on it.

Surely the people are grass the grass withers the flower fades but the word of our God will stand forever. God's word his promise of his mercy for example this testimony to what he has done for us in Jesus it is so certain that you can trust him it is so certain that it determines history notice verse five the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together because the mouth of the Lord has spoken you can take God at his word so as we come to Isaiah 40 God's people faced a tremendous difficulty difficulty what made it worse perhaps was the fact that it was a self-made difficulty something they had inflicted upon themselves and we are in the same predicament because we like they face that problem with our sin we have offended

God by our sin but the good news the astonishing news is that this God offers you comfort and you can take comfort in him because he is all powerful he is overwhelming in power he is a God who is coming Jesus will return in fulfillment of all of his promises you can take comfort because he is profoundly merciful he has promised to forgive all of your sins and finally you can take comfort because you can know that this message is reliable it is trustworthy will you bow your heads with me as we conclude in prayer men more than by T