

Contents

Introduction — page 9

1. Comfort amid the Sand, Sweat, and Blood of Our Lives15
2. The Comfort of God’s Presence (Isaiah 40:3–5)25
3. The Comfort of God’s Promise (Isaiah 40:6–8).....35
4. The Comfort of God’s Person (Isaiah 40:9–11).....47
5. The Comfort of God’s Protection (Isaiah 40:12–26).....61
6. The Comfort of God’s Power (Isaiah 40:27–31)81

Notes — page 98

Acknowledgments — page 99



Chapter One



*Comfort amid the Sand, Sweat,
and Blood of Our Lives*

I sat near the back of the church, waiting for the wake to begin. I was there to honor a friend whose wife had suddenly and unexpectedly died. But what could I say — or do — to comfort a grieving husband?

The answer came when the pastor asked the congregation to rise as he led the family up the aisle . . . quoting Scripture after Scripture that focused on God's sustaining comfort.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . thou art with me."

"In my Father's house are many mansions. . . . I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

“I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.”¹

The Bible offers eternal answers to life’s troubling questions. But are those answers relevant to us today? The images in the Bible make clear this is not a sterile Book immaculately conceived in some sort of mystical, holy vacuum. Though God *is* the ultimate Author, He used human writers as His instruments. And both they and the Lord speak through varied images of the day: the caring shepherd (Psalm 23; John 10:1–15), a shield and horn (Psalm 18:2; 112:9), and a mother hen (Matthew 23:37), to name a few. To interpret His Word properly we must enter their world. The bleating of sheep on barren hills, the mournful wail of a ram’s-horn trumpet on the temple steps, or the harsh clang of sword hitting sword in epic battle hang like tapestries in the background of nearly every page.

To understand Israel’s struggle in the wilderness, we must smell the dust kicked up by the murmuring multitude’s sandals and feel the sweat falling from their sun-scorched foreheads as they desperately search for water in a parched desert. Or to understand the fear of Jesus’ disciples, we must hear the waves crashing over the bow of the boat and feel the sting of the wind-whipped spray on their faces as they strain against the oars, struggling to survive a late-night storm on the Sea of Galilee.

The harsh conditions of that time may seem remote—few of us ply the lake or ocean for a living; even fewer live in the desert. Yet at times we face hardships just as fierce and challenging as people living in the days of Moses, Isaiah, or Jesus. And the Scriptures of that day speak to our hardships

as loudly as they did to Israel's challenges more than two millennia ago. So to understand our day, and Isaiah's writing, let's first review the historical background, which provides texture, color, and depth to the biblical account. The words will take on greater force and impact when we see with increased clarity their connection to the real world in which we live.

Assyria's Invasion of Judah

The background to Isaiah 40 includes the sounds of several thousand snorting horses pushing wildly against their yokes, their hooves pounding into the dry Judean ground, nostrils flaring, ears attuned to the crack of the chariot drivers' whips. As these panting steeds race by, their sound subsides, only to be replaced by the deep, rhythmic thump of 200,000 soldiers' leather sandals marching along the hard-packed road.

The smoke of burning cities and towns mixes with the dust kicked up by the thousands of refugees fleeing from the invading Assyrian army, seeking safety and security in Jerusalem. The scene is one of confusion, fear, and, at times, even panic.

Inside Jerusalem, the streets are filling with refugees from every corner of the land. Crying babies reach out to mothers who are so distracted by dark thoughts of impending destruction that they scarcely notice. Food and water are already in short supply, and the situation deteriorates daily as frightened civilians continue to pour through the city's gates. Rumors spread as the people quiz each new arrival. Where have they come from? What have they seen? What have they heard from others?

Tension mounts as each new report brings the Assyrian army ever closer. The rising plume of dust from the village of

Nob, on the northern edge of the Mount of Olives, confirms their worst fears. The Assyrians have reached the outskirts of Jerusalem! Then a shout is heard from the watchman on the city's southern wall. A column of Assyrian soldiers is also making its way up the road from Bethlehem! The city is surrounded; all avenues of escape have been cut off. Acting on instinct, a large crowd rushes toward the temple to cry out to God for deliverance.

Words of Deliverance

Pushing his way through the people, the prophet Isaiah forces his way to the front of the panic-stricken crowd. The people grow quiet as Isaiah begins to speak. Boldly he announces God's protection and deliverance for those hiding behind Jerusalem's walls: The Assyrian king "will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it" (Isaiah 37:33). The words sound almost too good to be true, but the prophet assures the people that God's deliverance will come soon.

Isaiah's words barely have enough time to reach the ears of everyone in Jerusalem before God brings them to pass. In a single night God strikes down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. "So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew" (verses 36–37).

Jerusalem was spared! God answered prayer! King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem experienced a genuine miracle. They had the biblical equivalent of a mountaintop experience. Unfortunately, when you walk off a mountaintop, you are usually heading toward a valley.

Babylon's Destruction of Jerusalem

Some time after the Assyrian army retreated from Jerusalem, an envoy arrived from the king of Babylon bringing gifts for Hezekiah. Word of Hezekiah's miraculous recovery from physical illness—and, no doubt, his victory over the Assyrians—had reached Babylon's king, who was also struggling against the Assyrians. Perhaps Hezekiah would share the secret of his great victory. But instead of pointing the visitors toward the great God of Israel, King Hezekiah basked in their praise and “showed them what was in his storehouses—the silver, the gold, the spices, the fine oil, his entire armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that Hezekiah did not show them” (39:2). Hezekiah foolishly took credit for a victory he had not won.

Hezekiah had feared the Assyrians, but it was the Babylonians who would become Judah's ultimate enemy. God sent Isaiah to announce the grim news. “The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left” (verse 6). The predicted invasion didn't take place for another century, but it *did* come. Long after Isaiah had died, God sent King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon against Jerusalem to fulfill this prophecy.

In 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar's army entered Jerusalem. The soldiers sacked and burned God's temple that had been built by Solomon. They captured Judah's king as he tried to escape. Blinded and bound in chains, he was carried into captivity in Babylon where he eventually died. Most of the other inhabitants of Jerusalem who survived the brutal siege were also carried off into captivity.

Defeated. Disheartened. Depressed. Distressed in spirit. Deported from their homeland to a foreign country. These were the people who had looked for the light at the end of a dark tunnel—only to discover that it was the lamp of the onrushing train of God’s judgment bearing down on them. And the impact was horrific.

God’s Program of Comfort

God’s judgment through the Babylonian army may have taken the people of Judah by surprise in 586 B.C., but the prophet Isaiah had clearly seen it coming. He not only announced the event long before it took place, he also wrote a message of comfort and hope to those who would endure this time of national tragedy. Isaiah 39 predicted Jerusalem’s fall; Isaiah 40 offers comfort to those affected by that fall.

Indeed, more than a century before the event even happened, God boldly announced His plan to provide comfort for those who would experience the approaching pain and sorrow. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem” (40:1–2a). The remainder of Isaiah 40 contains God’s prescription for healing Jerusalem’s pain and discouragement—for providing comfort in times of sorrow.

But what does the message of Isaiah 40 have to do with you? Can words that were written 2,700 years ago make a difference in your life today? They can, even though your circumstances will not match those of ancient Israel. The people of Israel experienced the loss of national identity and personal liberty. They saw their God-ordained religious and civil institutions crumble. They watched helplessly as

loved ones died of starvation and disease. They saw friends and family members raped, tortured, and murdered by brutal soldiers. They felt their throats tighten from thirst as they endured a forced march into a strange land where they became slaves.

Our individual circumstances are not the same, but we have all experienced personal heartache and trauma. Perhaps you are struggling with the loss of a loved one—the sorrow and intense loneliness pulling you down into a black pit of despair. Or perhaps you have been seared by the hot iron of rejection—the hurt and anger burning your soul, leaving a wound that refuses to heal. Maybe you are facing physical or emotional pain that has turned your life upside down and left you feeling violated, vulnerable, and valueless.

It is even possible that you do not even know exactly why you feel so lonely and discouraged. Others might think you are happy and content, but your smile is nothing more than a mask that hides your deep personal sadness.

The causes for sorrow and discouragement vary, but the results are the same.

Are you discouraged? If you are, then walk with me through the majestic landscape of Isaiah 40 to discover God's sustaining comfort.

As you do, along the way through the desert experiences, you will encounter oases that refresh, even as the nine men and women who have written their "Postcards from the Wilderness." The first postcard comes from a seasoned Pennsylvania pastor, who found comfort during his own "dark hour."



"Your daughter has achondroplasia—she's a dwarf."

Those were the words of the head of the genetics department, who, with other doctors, had been examining our infant daughter, Anna, who had developed a high fever within eleven days of birth. My wife, Barb, had the presence of mind to ask the doctor pertinent questions. I just stood there silent—and numb.

Barb spent the night in the hospital with little Anna—as she had been doing each night—while I drove home in the darkness. The phone rang soon after I walked through the front door. I picked up the receiver and heard the familiar voice of Dr. Harry Fletcher, president of the college where I was teaching. Harry was the man who had led me to the Lord.

Harry tenderly asked about Anna. I told him of her condition. He expressed his concern, and then we hung up. Minutes later the doorbell rang. I opened the door and there stood Harry! He hugged me and quoted Exodus 4:11 (NASB): "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?"

Harry reminded me that God formed Anna the way He desired and that He could be trusted to do what was best. He then prayed briefly and left. "Indeed, Lord," I prayed, "You don't make mistakes."

Later that evening I wrote Anna in the margin of my Bible at Exodus 4:11. Soon peace and comfort replaced the gloom and despair. A few days later my son Joel and I brought Barb and Anna home. Today Anna is a vibrant teenager who loves God and walks closely to Him.

I thank God for sending a close, personal friend to encourage me in my darkest hour. God is faithful and unchanging.

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Postcards from the Wilderness