



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## The Invincible Voice of Comfort

Isaiah 40.1-11

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### *Introduction*

1. Having introduced the series in lesson one, we begin in this lesson to develop our study of the God of all comfort from Isaiah 40ff.
2. We first need to review the message of judgment on Judah from chapters 1-39.
  - a. Isaiah 39.5-7, the prophet's declaration to Hezekiah after he allowed the Babylonian envoys to see Judah's riches, summarizes the emphasis of the chapters 1-39. Verses 5-7 anticipate Judah's exile to Babylon.
  - b. Following that declaration, approximately 150 years pass before the events that prophet anticipates in chapters 40ff. occur.
3. Much would happen in Judah between Hezekiah's time and the events chapters 40ff. expect.
  - a. There would be a theologically disastrous reign by Manasseh followed by the reform led by Josiah (2 Kings 21.1-23.28).
  - b. Babylon would supplant Assyria as the primary power and threat to Judah.
  - c. Josiah would die in battle, effectively ending the reform he initiated (2 Kings 23.29-30).
  - d. Jerusalem would be destroyed and most of the people would be deported to Babylon (2 Kings 24.20-25.30).
4. As the events played out, the people of Judah, who counted on their status as the chosen people among whom the presence of God dwelt in their temple (cf. Jer 7.1-11), would wonder what had gone wrong and whether it would ever be right again.
  - a. They became a nation of exiles, left to voice their grief and dismay over the tragic turn of events and God's disfavor (cf. Psa 137).
  - b. These texts from Lamentations capture their mood of despair: 1.2, 9, 17, 21.
  - c. They cried "as if to an empty sky. There was 'none to comfort,' no protector, no one to intervene, no one powerful enough to make a positive difference. For too long Judah in dislocation experienced its life forlorn and bereft of possibility."<sup>1</sup>
  - d. In Isaiah 40, we come to a text written against the backdrop of lingering silence, dislocation, despair, and hopelessness.
5. We may not have hit rock bottom as Judah did, but we face stiff challenges. We need to know we can have the hope that sustained Judah. Our text declares that theme.

*Body*

## I. A Statement of Divine Policy (vv. 1-2).

- A. No word is more appropriate for creating hope than “comfort,” used in verse 1.
  - 1. Before looking at it more closely, we need to see something about its use that helps us make sense of this text and the book of Isaiah as a whole.
    - a) As the KJV / ASV shows (“comfort *ye*”), the word here is plural.
    - b) The addressees are most likely members of the “divine council,” Yahweh’s heavenly government that is comprised of angels and messengers.
      - (1) Other texts show such a gathering (see Job 1-2; 1 Kings 22.19-22).
      - (2) Isaiah 6 presents a similar picture; therefore, we are not surprised to see a the same group reconvene to authorize the deliverance seen in chapters 40-66.
  - 2. Notice also that “comfort, comfort” is an imperative verb.
    - a) Sovereignty over the events rests with God, not the council in his presence.
    - b) God decided and determined the policy. It remained only to be implemented.
- B. The people are to be comforted.
  - 1. The members of the council are to “speak” and “cry” (two more imperatives) to the people and extend to them the message of comfort. (Note that this is directed to Jerusalem, the capital city which had been singled out for destruction—see 1.21-27).
  - 2. Judah’s direction was changing; three statements in verse 2 show how.
    - a) “She has served her term” (NRSV), i.e., her sentence has been paid in full.
    - b) “Her penalty is paid.”
    - c) “She has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”
  - 3. These statements:
    - a) Are that Judah was punished for defying Yahweh; he will not be taken lightly.
    - b) Are also clear that forgiveness was extended; it was “not a cheap or soft or easy forgiveness” (Brueggemann, 18), but it *was* forgiveness.
- C. In vv. 1-2, the Lord showed that he identified with his people’s despair, wanted them to be comforted, and, most importantly, was intervening in to create new possibilities.

## II. A Guaranteed Decree (vv. 3-8).

- A. The divine council began by promising God would remove the obstacles (vv 3-5).
  - 1. The image was a highway (cf. 35.8-10), a construction project to make the return home easy and speedy.
  - 2. Highways in antiquity were mainly for processional events, when the ruler and gods could parade in victory. Here, the parade would be for Yahweh and Israel.
  - 3. The forgiveness of v 2 results in a homecoming, but not just any homecoming; this is for the exaltation of the Lord’s glory.
  - 4. And it is the glory that is the theme, for what the people of Judah would have immediately seen was that God was overriding Babylon’s intent to hold on to the exiles; despite their great power, they were powerless before the Lord Almighty.
- B. But, what if there were obstacles? Verses 6-8 announce the resolution of that issue.
  - 1. The second announcement of the voice gives instructions to “cry out.”
  - 2. The pronoun “I” likely refers to the prophet who points out that the people have not really changed: they are transitory, unreliable, fickle (vv 6-7).

- a) Might not the assurance of comfort tied to deliverance be wasted on such a people (these were the ones, after all, who saw but did not see, heard but did not hear, etc., to the point of their own destruction—see 6.9-12)?
- 3. The heavenly voice<sup>2</sup> does not dispute the point, but declares that the promise does not depend on the people, but instead “upon the resolve of God” (Brueggemann, 20).

### III. Glorious Good News (vv. 9-11).

- A. Verse 9 is designed to lay all doubts to rest.
  - 1. There is a sense of urgency, seen in yet another group of [five] imperatives – “get up,” “lift,” “lift,” “fear not,” “say.”
  - 2. There is also “good news” to be heralded, the first intentional use of the word in the sense of “gospel” in Isaiah.
  - 3. This “good news” is not found in the events or the blessings per se—those are by-products of the news—but in the phrase “Behold your God!”
    - a) This was a message that would have surprised the Babylonians, for “in their arrogance, [they had] construed a world without Yahweh” (Brueggemann, 20).
    - b) But, it also would have surprised the exiles, for “in their despair [they too had] construed a world without Yahweh” (Brueggemann, 20).
- B. The assurance they needed for trusting this message of good news is set out in vv 10-11.
  - 1. Yahweh is a mighty God, a warrior who is more than capable of realizing the conquest he has set out to undertake (v 10).
  - 2. But, he is also a tender God, a gentle shepherd who attends to wants and needs, as merciful as he is majestic.
- C. The good news was that God is changing the world, appearances notwithstanding.

### Conclusion

- 1. A story tells of a group of POWs who had a secret shortwave radio in camp and thus learned that the army that would liberate them had broken through enemy lines and was just a few miles away. Their captors couldn’t understand the prisoners’ jubilation. Nothing appeared to have changed. They were still prisoners, treated shabbily, undernourished, unshaven, and filthy. But the liberator was coming. That good news gave them hope.<sup>3</sup>
- 2. Judah derived hope from the invincible voice of their God who could not be defeated. Our hope is also found in him. Pain and death and sin and hell—all exist and continue to sting and threaten us. But we have good news: The King has come, and is coming again. The enemies are beaten, however much they resist their defeat. Eternal life awaits.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 16.

<sup>2</sup> “Although there is no signal that a new voice speaks in verse 8, it is most likely the case” (Brueggemann, 20). Assuming such a dialogue certainly fits the flow of the passage.

<sup>3</sup> John Piper uses and gives a prior source for this illustration in his book, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God’s Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2005), 20-21.