



COMFORT WHEN THE DREAMS FADE

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Isaiah 40

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We have made it to the end of another year, and what a year it has been. I have been struck with the great contrast between last year and this year. Last year, the nation rode high on a wave of euphoria. One event after another in Eastern Europe led us to anticipate a New World Order of peace; we were excited about the economic benefits of the resultant "peace dividend"; and Saddam Hussein had been defeated in Operation Desert Storm. But where do we stand now just one year later? The New World Order has turned into a nightmare. In Serbia and Somalia, sheer moral breakdown and anarchy have paralyzed the West's technology and resolve. William Golding's book *The Lord of the Flies* seems not so very far-fetched after all.

The economic promise of the peace dividend has vanished in the despair of the recession, a recession that has hit close to home for many of us here. In September, sterling plummeted amid widespread chaos on the European currency markets. What caused this currency crisis? It was the very thing that so excited us just two years ago: the reunification of Germany. A still more sobering consequence of this reunification is the recent rise of right-wing racist attacks in Germany. Racial violence came dangerously close to home in April as the Los Angeles riots were carried live by television into our living rooms.

The sorry tale of woe continues with two devastating hurricanes. "Acts of God," say the insurers!

And then there was the election! As if the year hadn't been bad enough already, the election dragged on long after people were sick of it. Not being a United States citizen, I was not allowed to vote. Initially, I was glad not to have the vote as it meant I didn't have to make a decision from an unappealing pack of candidates. By the time election day rolled around, though, I found myself so worked up that I was upset not to be able to throw in my two-bits worth. The day after the election was a gloomy day for many. It seemed as if God had lost the election.

With the election behind us, what lies ahead? It is not a pretty prospect. Despite the fact that the recession seemed to miraculously end the day after the election, major problems loom ahead. Health care is rapidly headed for a crisis. A banking crisis may follow on the heels of the S&L crisis. AIDS continues to loom larger and larger. The national debt continues to escalate, and there are alarming projections about its status in ten years time.

Are our dreams fading?

Is the American Dream dying? For the first time in the history of this nation, today's younger generation faces the prospect of being worse off financially than its parents.

Is the Californian Dream dying? As people and companies flee to other states, this is no longer the Golden State at the end of the rainbow.

Is the Christian Dream dying? The incoming administration is dedicated to heading further and further away, at an alarming pace, from our Judeo-Christian roots.

What is your attitude as you look toward 1993? Anger? Despair? Many showed their anger in last month's election. Never have so many votes been cast against rather than for the candidates. The many term-limitation initiatives reflected the public's outrage over

business-as-usual in Washington.

How are we as Christians to face a New Year that seems bleak? What are we to do when the dreams fade? This morning I want to share with you a passage of Scripture that, although written 2700 years ago, is of great relevance today, because it, too, was written at a time when the dreams were fading.

Isaiah's prophetic ministry lasted from 740 B.C. to perhaps 690 B.C. Chapters 1-39 are a collection of oracles and narratives for the contemporary situation. Chapters 40-66 are markedly different as the Lord gave Isaiah prophetic insight into what was coming down the road 150 years hence. Like us facing 1993, the view ahead was not a pretty sight, but God graciously put on record a message that would help his people cope with a most awful event in their own history, an event in which a great many dreams died.

This awful event was the exile into captivity of the nation of Judah. In 587 B.C., the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, and led many of the people away to Babylon. All of the things in which the inhabitants of Judah had put their identity perished at that time. The temple, the palace, the city were all destroyed. They lost their king, their priesthood, their land. Everything! Everything that made Israel Israel was gone. It was the destruction of Judah's dream.

For all save a few bold prophets the unthinkable had happened. Jeremiah tells us that the inhabitants of Jerusalem had a formula for life: "*This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord*" (Jer 7:4). They believed they were safe because God would never allow his temple to be destroyed. What they did not see, but Ezekiel did see, was that God had vacated the temple, disowning it as his dwelling place (Ezekiel 10). Being no more than an empty shell its continued existence had lost all meaning. Many Christian teachers today offer formulas: the health, wealth and prosperity formula; the faith formula (if you have enough faith you'll never be sick). But the time may come in your life when the formula does not fit.

Turn with me to Isaiah 40 where we'll find the word of comfort that the Lord left on record over a hundred years earlier to give his people hope when all the dreams faded, the formula failed, and their world came apart.

I. A word of comfort (40:1-11)

"Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.

We are all familiar with these verses at this time of year because they are the opening words of Handel's *Messiah*. Into an environment of hopelessness and despair the Lord sent a message of comfort. Behind this concept of comfort we are to understand more than just sympathetic platitudes. God's comfort implies his active intervention to alleviate the suffering. For example, David was comforted in the valley of the shadow of death because he knew that God actively walked through it with him (Psa 23:4).

In verses 1-11, the Lord gives four words of comfort to his hurting people.

1. The Lord says, "enough" (40:2)

"Speak kindly to Jerusalem

*And call out to her,
That her warfare has ended,
That her iniquity has been removed,
That she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her
sins."*

As the Jews languished in exile it seemed that God didn't care. Indeed, contemporary theology decreed that Yahweh, God of Judah, was dead. Since he had been unable to preserve his city, his temple, his land, his people, he had obviously lost his power, overwhelmed by the greater power of Marduk and the other Babylonian deities.

When our dreams fade, it is easy to think that God has forgotten us, that he doesn't care, that we are laboring away on our own, unseen, from behind the closed gates of heaven. So it seemed to the exiles in Babylon. But God instructs Isaiah to speak kindly to Jerusalem, that is, to his people. Isaiah is literally told to speak to the heart, to speak to where it's hurting, with words of tenderness and compassion. One of the things that lost George Bush the election was the perception that he didn't understand how much the people were hurting, that when he spoke he did not speak to the heart, that for all his talk of a kinder, gentler nation he was too out of touch with real life to know what that meant. That is not a problem with God. He understands and, like a master psychiatrist, addresses the heart with a three-fold message of comfort: the hardship is over, the root problem dealt with, and complete restitution made.

(a) The end of suffering

In telling Judah that her warfare is ended and her iniquity removed we are reminded that the hardships that God permits to fall our way are never without purpose. The word "warfare" means also servitude. The captives were suffering under grinding servitude because of their sin. It was a return to Egypt. But, just as the day came when God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, so here he pronounces deliverance from slavery in Babylon.

(b) Atonement is accepted

A mere lifting of suffering, however, would leave the root cause uncured. The exiles labored under servitude for two sins in particular: idolatry, and neglect of the sabbath. God used the captivity to deal with these two sins. He sent his people to the most idolatrous city on earth to cure her of idolatry. It worked, for after the return from exile idolatry was never again a problem. The lack of sabbath observance was atoned for as the land of Judah enjoyed the sabbatical years of rest of which she had been deprived all these centuries. Furthermore, with the birth of Judaism in Babylon, the Jews became increasingly meticulous in their sabbath observance.

A better translation of the second line is that "the punishment for her iniquity is accepted as sufficient atonement" (cf. Lev. 1:4). The reason the Lord could remove Israel's suffering was that a sufficient price had been paid.

(c) Restitution has been made

The final statement is that God's people have received a double portion of punishment for their sins. The law of restitution required that a thief not only restore the animal he had stolen, but give up one of his own (Exod 22:4, 7, 9). So the Lord here declares that complete restitution had been made and peace restored.

The immediate context of these verses is the promised return from captivity, but it becomes increasingly clear through subsequent chapters of Isaiah that the purview of these verses extends far beyond that. Seventy years of slavery could not make sufficient atonement or restitution. Ultimately, it was only the death of the Suffering Servant that could fulfill these verses. It is through him that hardship has ended, atonement been accepted and restitution made.

I must give a word of caution here lest you jump to a wrong conclusion. It is a mistake to assume that all hardship is directly attributable to sin. That is to reduce life to a formula again, a formula offered today, and the same formula offered Job by his three "friends." But

Job knew that the formula did not fit. In his case, the Lord had another purpose in mind: to teach Job about himself. Actually, that was the same purpose for the exiles: God's punishment for sin was redemptive—to teach his people anew about himself.

If you are enduring suffering, the first word of comfort is that the time will come when the Lord declares, "Enough. My purpose has been served." Ultimately, that purpose is to teach you about God.

2. The King is Coming (40:3-5)

*A voice is calling,
"Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.
Let every valley be lifted up;
And every mountain and hill made low;
And let the rough ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;
Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
And all flesh will see it together;
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

The second word of comfort is put into the mouth of an unknown messenger announcing the coming of the King. What was Judah's problem? The fear that God had forgotten her or was powerless to act against the might of Babylon. Not so, proclaims the messenger. The King is not dead. Indeed, he is on his way, so roll out the red carpet.

(a) Get Ready

In the Ancient Near East, when a king traveled a work crew went ahead, straightening and leveling the road, clearing away all obstacles. The messenger called on the Jews to prepare the way for the King, to remove the obstacles. What were the obstacles in the way? Israel must repent of her idolatry and return to the Lord. Note that this highway is to be prepared in the desert. A physical desert lay between Babylon and Jerusalem, but a spiritual desert lay between the exiles and God.

Maybe your dream marriage has fallen apart. Whatever it is, if you are not willing to examine your own life and remove any obstacles, I have no comfort. But if you are willing to humble yourself before God, then the comfort I hold out is a visit from the King of Glory himself.

(b) Watch God at work

Having prepared their hearts, were the exiles to do something? No, they were to watch expectantly for God to work. He would work in such a way that all flesh would see his glory—the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Persians. What would they see? They would see that Yahweh, this God whom their theologies decreed dead, was very much alive; that he was faithful to his impossible promise to restore his people; and that he was actively at work to bring back these defeated captives.

Perhaps you look back with longing to the golden years that have passed. Certainly many of the Christian activists at work in the political arena are looking in that direction, longing to restore this nation to its "godly" state in the fifties or whenever. The problem is, if you're looking backwards, you can't see the arrival of the King! But if you turn around and prepare your heart, you will see the King arrive and work miracles amidst the darkest gloom. God is not crippled by the moral decline of this nation. He will continue to arrive in the lives of people who have lost their dreams. If your dreams have died this year, don't look back and long for the past. Instead, look ahead, roll out the carpet and ask the King to come visit you.

3. Understand the True Nature of Things (40:6-8)

*A voice says, "Call out."
Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"
All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the
field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,*

*When the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.*

A messenger is instructed to call out with a word of comfort, but the messenger replies that he has no word. Verses 6b-8 are usually understood to be the word given to the messenger, but I prefer to take verses 6b-7 as a continuation of the messenger's lament. All around him he sees reminders of man's frailty, so he despairs of finding any word of comfort. Perhaps you feel like that: as you look around you see nothing to give comfort.

The third word of comfort is then given in verse 8. It is a call to understand the true nature of things.

(a) Understand Man

The messenger is told, "You're right. As you look around you there is no word of comfort. Man is no better than grass." This is the complete antithesis to most comfort that is given today. Bookstores, both secular and Christian, are full of self-help books. New Age gurus offer expensive seminars on self-actualization so we can achieve our status as gods. Psychologists and educationalists strive to boost the self-image of their clients or students. It is not politically correct to fail people morally or academically. One of the issues at Stanford University last month has been whether or not to bring back the F grade. Proponents of the F argue for academic integrity; opponents argue against the stigma a F-grade brings to a transcript.

What is God's view on this? He gives all mankind an F-grade. David prayed that God would "let the nations know they are but men." The Lord did just that to Nebuchadnezzar, making him eat grass until he acknowledged he was just grass (Dan. 4:33-35).

If you are putting stock in your own abilities to see you through life, or are taking pride in your own accomplishments, then I must warn you that you are like the grass on the hillsides around here that we see turn brown every summer. God can blow everything away in a moment.

(b) Understand God

But the word of comfort does not end with man. Get your eyes up off this earthly plane where we see man's frailty. Look into heaven and see God's character. Unlike man, God is faithful and trustworthy. What he says he will do. Eight hundred years earlier he promised restoration from captivity (Deut 30:1-10). That promise still stood. God restored his people while Babylon vanished into the dust.

God's verdict remains the only true verdict on mankind and the state of the world. So when your dreams have faded, don't look to the experts or the commentators to get your dream back on track, to tell you when the recession is going to end. Look to the enduring promises of the God who repeatedly defies all the experts, the God who constantly works unexpected wonders.

4. Vindication is the Lord's (40:9-11)

*Get yourself up on a high mountain,
O Zion, bearer of good news,
Lift up your voice mightily,
O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;
Lift it up, do not fear.
Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"*

The fourth word of comfort is put into the mouth of Zion, the city that had been devastated. She is to get up onto the Mount of Olives, look east into the wilderness, and tell the other cities of Judah what she sees. What will she see? You would expect the text to read that she would see the captives returning from Babylon. But no, she would see the Lord himself. Though he brings his people behind him, the emphasis is on God.

Two brief descriptions are given of God.

(a) God is the Judge

*Behold, the Lord God will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him.
And His recompense before Him.*

The Lord returns to Jerusalem having defeated Babylon and vindicated his people. The psalmists frequently struggled over how God could allow the wicked to be so prosperous. This was oppressive to Asaph until he understood that God was the Judge who would punish the wicked and vindicate the godly (Psa 73).

(b) God is the Shepherd

*Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs,
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes.*

As the Lord comes across the desert from Babylon, he is not only a victorious warrior but a comforting shepherd. He knows those who are weak and hurting, carrying them himself.

It is the Lord's responsibility, not ours, to vindicate, and it is himself that he will vindicate. In the meantime, for all his people who are as perplexed and grieved as Asaph, he will carry you gently as a shepherd. But if you defy this King, he will eventually take the part of judge and his vindication will be more terrifying than it was to Pharaoh.

II. Implications of Comfort (40:27-31)

In verses 12-26, God confronts the captives with himself. Their basic problem was that they had lost sight of God. It was their idolatry that put them into exile, and it was their myopia that caused them such grief in Babylon. The same is true for all of us. Our problems are usually attributable to losing sight of God. When you lose that vision, it is so easy to sink into self-pity, anger or despair.

After renewing the vision, God gives three comforting implications in verses 27-31.

1. God sees our suffering (40:27)

*Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert O, Israel,
"My way is hidden from the Lord,
And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God"?*

In their grief, the captives felt that God had lost sight of them, or even worse, had forgotten all about them. A few years ago, I was going through a dark period when it seemed as though my way was hidden from the Lord. At that time I came across these words by Philip Doddridge,

Can you, even when your natural spirits are weak and low, and you are not in any frame of mind for the ardors and ecstasies of devotion, nevertheless find a pleasing rest, a calm repose of heart, in the thought that God is near you? That He sees the secret feelings of your soul while you are, as it were, laboring up the hill, and casting a longing eye toward Him, though you cannot say you enjoy any tangible communications from Him?

When all physical evidence seems to the contrary, take heart that God does see you just as he saw the affliction of his people in Egypt and in Babylon.

2. God is equal to the most impossible trial (40:28)

*Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth
Does not become weary or tired.
His understanding is inscrutable.*

Even if we take comfort that God sees us, we frequently believe our situation is too difficult or too complicated for the Lord to solve.

We find ourselves faced with an insurmountable situation with no way out. That's how it was for the Jews in Babylon, an invincible city. But the Lord reminded them of his power and his understanding. He is equal to the most intractable circumstances.

3. God gives strength (40:29-31)

*He gives strength to the weary
And to him who lacks might He increases power.
Though youths grow weary and tired,
And vigorous young men stumble badly,
Yet those who wait for the Lord
Will gain new strength;
They will mount up with wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary.*

When you hear these verses, perhaps you think of *Chariots of Fire* which depicts Eric Liddle preaching on these verses in the Scottish church in Paris (an apocryphal event) days before winning the Olympic 400-meter race and the world record. The danger with that depiction is that we can come to believe that God will honor our heroic endeavors for him. (I am not saying this was true of Eric Liddle, who was quite content to serve the Lord "non-heroically" in the backwoods of China.)

When I was in university, I interpreted these verses as meaning I could burn the candle at both ends, laboring away "in the Lord's service," and he would keep me going. I call this the heroic interpretation because we expect God to give us success and energy in our heroic labors for him, failing to see that so much of our activity is actually pursuit of our own programs in our own strength. A few years ago, I came to see that this is not what the passage is about. It is when I am at my wit's end, overwhelmed by my circumstances, aware of my own great weakness and inability to see any way out, when it seems as if the Lord does not care, it is then that if I wait upon the Lord, he will give me strength to endure.

Waiting is one of the hardest things to do in today's age. We live in an "instant society" in which we want to have and know everything now. On election day last month, the TV networks graciously waited until 12 minutes before the polls closed here on the West Coast before calling the result. We all needed to know the result before we went to bed. But God does not work according to any of our timetables. He frequently keeps us on hold and defies our plans. Two months ago, the interns spent an evening with Bob Roe. Reflecting on over 40 years of Peninsula Bible Church, he observed that all the major mistakes made by the elders had one root cause: not waiting long enough for the Lord to reveal his will. Taking seriously their responsibility for hundreds if not thousands of people, they often felt pressured into making a decision when the Lord wanted them to wait.

We live in a technique-oriented society in which we want plans, methods, programs. God's call to wait on him does not fit into any program.

We live in a fast-paced society in which we are urged to maximize our use of time. But in a Daytimer, "waiting on God" figures as an unproductive use of time. Hudson Taylor wrote "it is not waste time to wait on the Lord." But it is so hard to believe that.

Waiting is one of the toughest tests of faith. It is not a glamorous test and it can test our faith to the utmost. In the past few years there have been frequent times when I have had to wait on the Lord, but two times stand out as major trials. The first occasion was nearly five years ago when I was in the process of changing churches to come to PBC. Although I viewed this move as necessary for my own spiritual health, it was traumatic. One of the more traumatic aspects was leaving a church where I knew everyone and was actively involved in many activities, to come to a church where I knew no one and was not involved in anything. Such is our emphasis on doing that to go from doing a lot to doing little leaves us disorientated. I finally came to understand that I can never say I don't know what to do, because I can always be pursuing the Lord, walking with him, learning about him. Waiting on God is not unproductive time.

The second trial was last year before my wife Sue and I returned from Indonesia. For months, Sue had been telling me she needed time to be settled in the US before contemplating going overseas again. It wasn't until about seven weeks before we left Indonesia, that I finally accepted this. I was excited about the possibilities of staying in Indonesia, and the last thing I wanted to do was return to Silicon Valley. There was nothing I could do but pray and wait, taking comfort that God saw me and was equal to the situation. It wasn't until just a few days before leaving that the Lord gave an answer: become an intern under Brian Morgan at Peninsula Bible Church.

As you stand at the threshold of 1993, how do you view the year ahead? January is named after the Roman god Janus, who is frequently depicted with two heads, one looking back into the old year, the other looking ahead into the new year. Maybe you are looking back, longing for the good days before the dreams faded, and pessimistic about what lies ahead. If you are living your life merely upon the stage of secular history, then it is pessimistic and I have no comfort to offer. My reading of history sobers me as I see civilization after civilization vanish into the dust.

The Bible gives us another view, showing us there is more to life than mere secular history. In the pages of sacred history God is moving steadily onwards to his great goal of restoring all things. If you live your life on the stage of sacred history, of redemptive history, then you will understand that the best is yet to come, and you will be able to face a new year with unquenchable optimism.

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