

Three Voices of Comfort

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 1

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The people of God need comfort. Isaiah 40 makes this very clear. Old Testament Israel needed comfort in the Babylonian captivity where Isaiah sees her prophetically. And the New Testament church, too, needs this comfort just as much in the Babylon of this world, surrounded by sin, sorrow, and suffering. And then there are all our own sins, as well as the power of the devil and our own death. These three foes—sin, Satan, and death—combine to oppress us, but the gospel declares that they are conquered in Christ.

Isaiah 40:1-11 can be neatly and easily divided. The first two verses command God's ministers to preach comfort to His people. Then in verses 3 through 11, we have three different voices that explain further this message of comfort. The first voice is in the wilderness, and it tells us that God the King is coming. The second voice is in the field, and it tells us that all flesh is grass. The third voice is on the mountain, telling us that God the Shepherd is coming. All three bring comfort to God's people, in keeping with the command of the very first verse: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God." The passage brims with the anticipation of divine intervention, of the majesty and nearness of God, and it brings consolation for trembling hearts.

The Voice in the Wilderness

In the ancient world, it was a tremendous honour to have the king visit your little town. No pains could be spared; everything needed to be just right. And from the perspective of Isaiah 40, this even applied to the roads. The voice in verses 3 through 5 proclaims that one far greater than any earthly king is coming. *God* is coming. *Jehovah*: "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of *the LORD*, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa. 40:3).

This highway must be straight, flat, and smooth. "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain" (v. 4). God commands the people to prepare, but then promises that He will accomplish the necessary preparation by His grace. "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (v. 5). It is not merely the

promise of preparation but of revelation – the unveiling of the glory of God in a form that men may behold and rejoice in.

Luke 3 interprets this passage as repentance and faith. This is John the Baptist's preaching: "bring forth fruits worthy of repentance" (v. 8). God commands the way to be prepared, and God gives what He commands. Augustine's prayer applies: "Lord, give what thou commandest, and command what thou wilt." The grace of God moves us to obedience, and then blesses what it commands. Thus, we see that the Lord not only demands holiness and faith but gives both through the power of His Spirit.

John the Baptist identified himself as this voice in the wilderness (Matt. 3, Mark 1, Luke 3, John 1). His ministry prepared the way for Jesus Christ. This teaches not only about John's role, but about Jesus' deity. Jesus is *Jehovah, our God*. As Isaiah 40:5 declares, "The glory of the LORD shall be revealed." Christ is that glory, as Hebrews 1:3 calls him "the brightness of his glory." II Corinthians 4:6 speaks of "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." John 1 confirms it: "Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." To see Jesus rightly is to see the heart of God. His mercy, His justice, His faithfulness, and His compassion – all are visible in the incarnate Son.

This passage, then, is one of *comfort*. The Hebrew word for comfort suggests breathing out in relief. That is what God's people experience when they behold the glory of God in Christ. Lord's Day 1 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* asks: "What is thy only comfort in life and death?" and answers: "That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who with His precious blood hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil." To know this is to rest in the sufficiency of Christ.

The Voice in the Field

Verses 6–8 shift to the second voice, which cries in the field: "The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry?" (v. 6). The preacher seeks the message, and God gives it: "All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field." The grass withers, the flower fades, "because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass" (v. 7).

This teaches human frailty and depravity. It begins with man's physical mortality – he is flesh, like grass. Then it moves to man's ethical condition – his goodness is as the flower of the field. But flowers, especially in the heat of Palestine and the scorching east wind, wither quickly. So too does the goodness

of man. Verse 8 concludes: “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever.” The contrast is emphatic: human glory fades, divine truth abides. What comfort for the soul that feels its weakness—God’s promises are unshakeable.

John the Baptist exemplified this preaching. True ministers always proclaim this: man is flesh. Isaiah 40:6-8 is not mere poetry about nature but a devastating truth about human inability. Martin Luther, in *The Bondage of the Will*, after addressing Erasmus's defence of free will, appeals to this passage. “All flesh is grass” —this destroys the dream of human merit. There is no free will, no goodness that can stand before God. The Spirit of the Lord blows, and man’s supposed virtue evaporates.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* asks: “How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, enjoying this comfort, mayest live and die happily?” The answer begins: “First, how great my sins and miseries are...” That’s where Isaiah 40 takes us in this voice from the field. Until we know our sin, we will not know our Saviour. And that’s the point of preaching the fading grass and flower—so that people look to Christ. There is a beauty in this truth, for it empties us of ourselves and drives us to the fountain of grace.

This is also the message of I Peter 1:24-25, which quotes Isaiah 40: “For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.” The gospel proclaims *the enduring Word and the fading glory of man*. Here is our comfort: we have no strength in ourselves, but we have the gospel. No self-help religion. No humanist delusion. Just *gospel*.

The Voice on the Mountain

Verses 9-11 contain the third voice. This time, the voice calls from a mountain: “O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!” (v. 9).

This is now the whole church speaking through her ministers, declaring that God is coming—not only as Jehovah and King, not only as the revelation of glory, but as the *Good Shepherd*. Isaiah 40:10-11: “Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him... He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.” This is a tender image,

full of intimacy and care. Christ's shepherding includes feeding, protecting, carrying, and guiding.

This voice speaks with strength from the mountain – not to deafen, but to be heard. It must not whisper. It must not fear. "Be not afraid." The preacher must proclaim the coming of the Shepherd-King with boldness. Jerusalem, the gospel city with temple, altar, priesthood, throne, is called to evangelize the other cities of Judah. This city is the picture of the church, chosen and graced. Her name means *possession of peace*. She bears good tidings, for in her midst dwells the hope of Israel.

Christ explains this passage in John 10: "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." And again in John 21, "Feed my lambs." Christ is the Shepherd who comes, who feeds, who gathers, who carries, who gently leads. And the church is summoned to preach this Shepherd in every generation.

This is comfort. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God" (Isa. 40:1). Speak comfortably to Jerusalem. Tell her, "her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned" (v. 2). Preach *Christ*. And that is our only comfort in life and death – that we are not our own, but belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. This message is the beating heart of all true ministry, and the sweet balm for every believing soul.

So here are three images. The *wilderness*: rough, winding, impassable; God must level it to bring the King. The *field*: withering grass and fading flower; man's glory is nothing. And the *mountain*: a high pulpit for gospel proclamation; our Shepherd comes.

Embrace this. It may seem hard, but it leads to joy. When the believer sees his sin and his need and beholds the glory of God in Jesus Christ, then he breathes in relief – comforted, contented, at peace. His iniquity is pardoned. His warfare is over. His only comfort in life and in death is *Christ*.

Our Father in heaven, have mercy upon us miserable, weak sinners, and grant to us this everlasting comfort of the gospel. Quicken our faith and give us certainty and comfort through it. For Jesus' sake. Amen.