

## ISAIAH 40:1-5 COMFORTING THE AFFLICTED

In his book “Tempting Faith,” author David Kuo writes of his path to God. He describes how God made little sense to him, until he met and knew a man named Jeff, who showed with his life and words, how God had changed him.

After pondering this and praying about this, Kuo says he discovered that God “had grown” in his mind. “The God of my early youth,” he recalled, was “more real than the Tooth Fairy, (but) not quite as concrete as Santa Claus. Now...God had a face. God was Jesus and Jesus was God...”

What did this mean for David Kuo? “I discovered that Jesus moved me. When I read his invitation, ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and weighed down, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light,’ it made me long, deeply long, for something I couldn’t identify, a kind of supreme peace infinitely more intense than anything I had found...”

Supreme peace. Real comfort. In a world of trouble, we long, even deeply long, for comfort and peace.

We may like adventure, excitement, and even danger. But in our hearts, we desire what David Kuo desired.

As we read through the Old Testament, we are spending two weeks in the book of Isaiah. Last week, we discovered how Isaiah afflicts the comfortable and urges professing believers to seek the mercy and righteousness of God.

At the end of Isaiah 39, the prophet delivers a troubling message. The nation of Judah will not fall at the hands of the nation of Assyria, as Israel did. But the nation of Babylon will come one day, and Judah will be crushed.

The comfortable have been afflicted, and now the afflicted need comfort. In chapter 40, words of comfort begin to replace words of affliction.

As David Kuo learned, and as we began to see last week, this comfort and peace can only be ours, through Jesus. Isaiah writes of him as the one who is “God with us”, the Prince of Peace, and the suffering servant of the Lord.

But how does this Savior, give comfort and peace? In the early verses of Isaiah 40, we discover three truths that provide comfort in affliction.

Here is the first: **HE IS YOUR GOD.**

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God.

He is your God **OF COMPASSION.**

The nation and her people have known grief, and the nation and her people will know grief, but now the Lord commands a word of compassion. He will have compassion on his people.

As we might say, he will “feel their pain.” He will be moved within himself, by their struggle. He will not coldly turn his back to them, but he will turn his loving heart toward them.

He is your God of compassion, and he is your God **OF COURAGE.**

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...” This is a call to speak to the heart of the people - to speak a word of encouragement to their hearts.

The nation and her people are tempted to give in to these nations around them. Maybe they can be rid of their affliction by following the gods of the nations. So God calls for his servants to speak words of courage to them.

Do not give up. The Lord will make you strong. Be of good courage.

He is your God of compassion, and he is your God of courage, for he is your God **OF COVENANT.**

“‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God.” This is covenant language. These are the words of a God who wants to personally relate to his people.

He does not say, “Comfort those people.” He says, “Comfort my people.”

The words are not from a god or some god. They are from your God.

Here is the difference. My wife likes to tell the story of living in St. Louis, and driving through one of the “inner-ring” suburbs, called “Clayton.”

But she says she was never sure if she was really welcome there, because as she entered the town, the signs said, “This is Clayton, Missouri.”

Most towns say, “Welcome to...” We are glad you are here. We want you to stay a while, maybe spend a lot of your money, and come back often.

But not Clayton. “This is Clayton, Missouri.”

God has not just said, “This is God.” He has said, “Welcome. I am your God. You are my people.”

God’s compassion and courage grow from his covenant commitment to his people. He has loved them. He does love them. He will love them.

He is your God. It is an amazing thing. This God is so great, and Isaiah describes this as well as anyone. But he still cares for us, who are so small.

Afflicted one, where is comfort? Where is peace? Do you understand that if you are united by faith with Jesus Christ, God is your God?

He has compassion for what you are suffering. Jesus has come and has suffered, and he knows what you suffer. And he cares. He truly cares.

He offers courage through your afflictions. You want to give up. You want to quit fighting. Maybe you want to quit living. But he wants to give courage to you, so that you may go on.

He is your covenant God, so you can trust him. He has chosen to embrace you and bring you into this relationship. He wants what is best for you. He is walking with you, every step of the way.

He is not just an Idea. He is not the Tooth Fairy or Santa Claus. He is a real, personal God. By the mercy of Jesus, he is your God.

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God.

Then a second truth to provide comfort in affliction: HE HAS PAID.

He has paid...FOR WHAT?

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for...”

What is sin? Here is an image.

At one time or another, we all have gone to the dump. Sometimes I have gone there with a van or truck full of junk, yard waste, or deadly chemicals.

I get out of the vehicle, and I toss it into one of the dumpsters, or one of the piles, or I place it carefully next to the other deadly chemicals, then leave really quickly.

I am contributing to the filling of that landfill. It’s a dirty, smelly, buggy mess, and I am contributing to it.

That is what sin is. Our world is messed up, and sin is my contribution to the mess. I may try to leave really quickly and act like I was not there, but I was. I helped make the mess.

In the book of Isaiah, God’s people have messed up everything. God had called them to serve him, but they have not. It’s a mess. Sin is a mess.

But he has paid. God has paid. HOW MUCH?

“...she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

What does that mean? Different “experts” have different ideas.

One idea is that the word here means to “fold over” or to “fold in half.” When you fold a piece of paper in half, you make two sides that are exactly the same. So God has paid exactly what is needed.

Another idea is that of abundance. If I say, “Give me double whipped cream on that sundae,” I am asking you to give me an abundance of whipped cream. So God has paid abundantly for our sin.

If the “experts” cannot be sure, then I won’t act like I am sure. But this is for sure: it’s enough. God has paid all that is necessary.

He has done this through Jesus. On the cross, Jesus paid for the sins of every person who believes in him. Every sin. Every person. Through faith in Jesus, your sins are forgiven. The mess is cleaned up.

What does this mean for us?

David Kuo describes his father’s attempt to escape the communists by leaving China and coming to the United States for college. He went to the consulate with his papers. The American foreign service officer looked over the various papers, declared, “No freeloaders in America,” and stamped the word “rejected” on the application.

His father went a second time, and was rejected again. Then he went a third time, just before his boat was to leave. The same officer saw him and said, “Do you have anything new?” David’s father could only say “no.”

The officer pulled out the “rejected” stamp and raised it. Just then, a man came out from behind a door. He whispered something. The officer now pulled out another stamp, and pressed down the word, “accepted.”

In Jesus Christ, we are accepted, because our sins are paid for.

Do you believe it? Have you accepted that acceptance - not just as an interesting idea, but as something that has driven deep into your heart?

I have a theory. People have a lot more guilt than they will ever admit. We don’t even like that word in our culture. But it’s not because we think it doesn’t exist. It’s because we know it exists, and we don’t want to face it.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you know you are guilty. You know you have made a mess. But can you accept the astounding reality that Jesus has taken all of that guilt, and stamped you “approved” before God?

This is so freeing!

I don’t need to regret yesterday’s messes, over and over again, because I know Jesus has secured my approval before God.

I don’t need to sweat about how I am going to earn and secure God’s approval today, because I know Jesus has earned and secured it for me.

I don’t need to fret over how I might mess up tomorrow, because I know that even if I do, and I will, the blood of Jesus covers my sin.

As we learned last week, we seek righteousness. “He has paid” means I want to serve the Savior who has paid for me. But I find comfort and peace in this truth: Jesus has paid. I don’t have to pay. I cannot. He has paid.

He is your God. He has paid. Yet Isaiah also looks ahead. Comfort and peace arrive with this truth: **HE IS COMING.**

“A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.’”

What is happening? Isaiah is painting a word picture of a person who will come and prepare the way for the Lord.

And he will come. **NO ONE WILL STOP HIM.**

In the New Testament, these words are attached to the man we call John the “Baptizer”, who appears to proclaim the coming of this One.

But will he come? Will he truly come? Yes. No one will stop him. That is the point of all these words about valleys, mountains and ground. Just as road builders will clear away anything that will stop the road from going through, we can be sure that nothing will stop this Savior from coming. God’s plan is to give his people a Savior, and no one and nothing will stop him.

Isaiah looks forward to this. We look back on this. Yet we look forward, too, because while the prophets seem to reveal one coming, the rest of God’s Word reveals there are two comings. Jesus has come, and Jesus will come.

And when he comes again, **ALL EYES WILL SEE HIM.**

“And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

In his first coming, Jesus has secured the promise of this day, by paying for sin and rising from the dead. On this day, affliction will be gone. All will see who God is.

For some, this will be a terrible day. They have rejected the one true God, and they will be rejected by him, forever.

But for others, for those who have hoped in this One who comes, this will be a glorious day. Jesus will be revealed in all his glory. We will gain eternal joy, all because of his mercy.

That is the plan of God, revealed through Isaiah. It will happen. Nothing and no one in heaven or on earth will frustrate, distract or stop this plan.

Jesus has come. Jesus is coming. With this truth in our hearts, we have comfort and peace.

Do you believe this? Truly, do you believe this? How will God get you, or get me, to believe this?

David Kuo is a young man, but a few years ago, doctors found a tumor in his brain. They operated, and they were successful. But according to those doctors, this tumor is sure to return, sooner or later.

David Kuo writes, “From the moment I found Jesus - or Jesus found me - in high school, it was his peace that I longed for. I didn’t know what it meant or what it felt like. But wanting Jesus’ peace made me ache. I knew what I wanted it to do: take away the tumult, ache, barbs, and fear...I never knew I would find it in the helplessness of a brain tumor.

“It was different than I thought. Fighting cancer and thereby coming closer to God was like being a rock under one of those dropping streams that eat you away over centuries. You have to be still enough to feel God hovering, and open enough to receive love from everyone God puts in front of you.

“You have to love God enough to put him before anything he can give you.”

“‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God.” Where is comfort, and where is peace? It is in him who hovers over the helpless, who loves people through the love of other people, and who does all of this through his Son.

How our hearts seek peace and comfort in all the wrong places! Here is how I do it. How do you do it?

\* I seek peace and comfort in people. If I like you, I want you to like me. If you do, I am happy. If you do not, I am not.

But I must seek peace and comfort not in the personalities of people, but in the personal love of God. In Jesus, he is my God.

It is right to love people. It is best to love my personal God.

\* I seek peace and comfort in achievement. I want to do, so that I will feel good about myself, and what I have done.

But I must seek peace and comfort not in what I do, but in what God has done for me. He has found me. He has forgiven me. I can do nothing to get him to love me, because he has done all that is needed.

It is good to work. It is great to rest in my forgiving God.

\* I seek peace and comfort in order and control. I long for order, and I flee from chaos.

But I must seek peace and comfort not in any order around me, but in the orderly rule of the sovereign God

of the universe. He is in charge. He is still carrying out his plan. He will bring order out of this mess.

It is fine to seek order. But it is wise to trust in my sovereign God.

How do you do it? What do you chase after, in the hope that it will give you comfort and peace?

How might God be showing you your helplessness, so that you might find your comfort and peace, only in him?

“You have to love God enough to put him before anything he can give you.”

He is your personal God, forgiving, sovereign God.

In him, there is comfort and peace.