

COMFORT FOR CAPTIVES

By David H. Roper

I have been told that the purpose of scripture is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Last week we looked at the story of Micaiah, certainly a discomfoting passage of scripture. I thought it would be appropriate this morning to comfort you with a passage from Isaiah.

The book of Isaiah is a remarkable prophecy. The first section of the book, chapters 1 through 35, is set against the background of the Assyrian empire, when the Assyrian emperors, time and again, scourged both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It was during the lifetime of Isaiah the prophet that the Northern Kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity. This first section of Isaiah covers the period of about 740-700 B.C.

The last section of Isaiah, from chapters 40 through 66, is set against the Babylonian captivity and is addressed to a group of people who lived about 120 to 140 years after Isaiah ministered. So Isaiah is a unique prophet. He not only prophesied to his contemporaries, but he also prophesied to a generation some 120 years later. Chapters 40 through 66 of Isaiah are set against the exile. In this section Isaiah prophesies to the captives in Babylon.

The middle section of Isaiah, chapters 36 through 39, are a prose history, in contrast to the poetic sections on both sides. In this historical sketch, we are told that Hezekiah, the king of the Kingdom of Judah, contracted a terminal illness. Isaiah said that Hezekiah would die, but the king pleaded for extra years of life, and was granted 15 more years.

Frankly, Hezekiah lived too long. During those 15 years he sired Manasseh, who was the most wicked king in the history of either the Southern or Northern Kingdoms. Hezekiah also received into his court the king of Babylon. Babylon at this time was a minor principality. The king was Merodach-baladan, a virtual unknown. He was received into Hezekiah's court and shown the royal archives and the treasury. Hezekiah was a bit boastful and wanted Merodach-baladan to see his wealth, so it was displayed for him. The king went back to his kingdom and put a reminder in his tickler file, "When we go west and conquer the world, we are going to sack Jerusalem." Nebuchadnezzar, some time after this, read that reminder and sacked the city of Jerusalem three times, eventually destroying it.

This historical section of Isaiah is sandwiched between the two poetic sections: the first dealing with the Assyrian captivity, and the last dealing with the Babylonian captivity. Isaiah 40 is the introductory message addressed to the exiles under Babylon. Isaiah did not live during this period, but prophesied prior to the event. So when the exiles went into Babylon, this prophecy was awaiting them. It was a word of comfort addressed to them.

Let me tell you what it was like being an exile in Babylon. We know a great deal about the exile. There were three deportations from Judah. When Nebuchadnezzar first sacked the temple, he took a number of the rulers and leading people back to Babylon. There was a second deportation in 597 B.C. In 586 B.C. he leveled the city and the temple went up in flames. All of the leading people, all of the artisans, were deported and resettled in Babylon along the river Chebar, close enough so that the Babylonians could keep an eye on them.

These Judeans were disconcerting to the Babylonians, to say the least. The Babylonians wanted to keep the captives under their thumb, and so they placed them as close to the city of Babylon as they could. The exiles served as household servants and slaves to the Babylonians. These were the Judean princes, the leaders, the rulers, the professionals, now doing manual labor and menial tasks as servants under the Babylonians. It was a terribly

oppressive period.

Babylon was located on a great plain that was arranged in a square. 15 miles to a side. We are fortunate in that we know a great deal about Babylon from the writings of a man named Herodotus, who wrote about 50 years after the fall of Babylon. He actually went to the site and wrote an eyewitness report of the condition of the city and the buildings. Babylon was not destroyed; it was taken virtually without a fight, so the cities were still there.

Herodotus tells us what Babylon was like. It was approximately the size of San Francisco, surrounded by a great wall 85 feet high and 65 feet wide, and outside of the wall was a moat. There was a smaller wall on the inside, a second line of defense. Around the wall there were about a hundred gates, eight of them named for the Babylonian gods. If you were a Jew approaching from the north, you would go through the great Ishtar gate, dedicated to the god Ishtar. If you came from the east, you would come in through the gate of Marduk, another god they worshiped. The southern gate was dedicated to Shamash, the sun god. The eastern gate was named after Adad.

Entering Babylon through any of these gates, you would be struck by the large number of temples dedicated to pagan gods. There were 53 temples in Babylon. They were dedicated to Ninurta, Ishtar, Bel, Marduk, Adad, and all the other gods of the Babylonians. The great ziggurat, which was probably located on the foundation of the tower of Babel, was in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar's palace complex was located there. On every brick of his palace he had his name inscribed, so that people would read the name Nebuchadnezzar thousands of times.

On the main route from the Ishtar gate to the temple of Marduk, there were great limestone slabs with beveled edges, and every beveled edge read, "To the honor of Marduk" "To the honor of Marduk". Everywhere you looked you would see temples dedicated to idols. There was prosperity, security, ease, and peace in Babylon.

Off to the west, Jerusalem lay in ruins. The temple was a smoking, blackened hulk, the king was in chains, life was in ruins. The Judeans would ask, "Where is the God of Israel? Where are the promises made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob? Where is the land that God promised us? Where is the Seed? We were told that we would be a blessing to the nations. Where is the God of Israel?" All around people were living to the honor of the gods of the other nations.

It is against this background that Isaiah 40 is written. It is a word of comfort for people in exile. That time is no different from our time. Look around you and see the flood of violence, immorality, injustice, and greed. You may ask the same question, "Where is the God of Israel? Where is the Lord in all of this? We see gods dedicated to commerce, technology, greed, violence, and sex. Where is the God of Israel?" This prophecy is addressed to us, to the people of God. Now let's look at verses 1 and 2 of Isaiah 40.

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

"Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,

[Though she was still in servitude to the Babylonian empire.]

That her iniquity has been removed,

That she has received of the Lord's hand Double for all her sins.

This is the first word of comfort that Isaiah addresses to his people. You have been forgiven of all your sins. It was the sins of Judah that drove her into exile, and Isaiah says those sins have been forgiven. They were forgiven on the basis of an event that was yet to happen, the cross. Though the cross is an event in history, it transcends history; it is an eternal event. The Judeans were forgiven just as we are forgiven, on the basis of the death of Jesus Christ.

You, like these poor captive Judeans, have been forgiven the debt of your sins. You have been released. Your bondage to sin has been lifted, on the basis of Christ's death. He died for you and for me, and he set us free. And this is true not only if you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, but also if you do not know him yet. You have been forgiven all of your sins.

The only sin God ever holds against any of us is the sin of unbelief. John 3:17 says that Jesus "came not to judge

the world, but that the world should be saved through him." You have been forgiven. The only sin, past, present, or future, that God ever holds against anybody, is the sin of rejecting the remedy--the salvation that Jesus Christ offers.

Perhaps, like me, you are here this morning with a sense of guilt. Perhaps yesterday or some time this past week you did something you regret, and you are here with a deep and burdensome sense of guilt. Last night I said something to one of my children that I deeply regret and I wish I had never said it. But I did, and I woke up this morning feeling like Joe Blplstx, the fellow in Li'l Abner who is always being followed by a black cloud, a dark sense of depression and guilt. It always rains on him.

God says to us what he says to his people: Your guilt has been lifted, forgiven. Isaiah gives a graphic description of this in verse 2: "...she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." That gives the impression that God's people, by suffering twice as much as they deserved, had somehow atoned for their sins. Unfortunately, this is a bad translation. What the passage actually says is, "You have received a doubling for your sins." The symbol is that of something being folded over.

I believe this symbol refers to an ancient custom. In those days, when you owed a great deal of money, and perhaps fell behind on your Bank Assyricard payments, a representative from the bank would come and try to collect. If you didn't have the money to pay, the bank would tack a due bill on your front door, for the whole community to see: "XX dollars owed to Bank Assyricard" It would be embarrassing to have your bills proclaimed to the world. But if you, or someone else, paid the debt, a representative from the bank would come out and, with great ceremony, he would fold the card over and nail it to the wall. Your guilt would be doubled.

Isaiah is saying that God paid the price for your sins. Israel did not atone for her sins by suffering; the Son of God atoned for her sins. Therefore God has folded over the due bill. We are forgiven. Of how many sins? Isaiah says all of them. That is the first word of comfort: We are free from guilt. The servitude, the heavy bondage demanded by sin, has been lifted. That is a great word of comfort.

Isaiah hears another voice in verse 3,

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 be 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."

This passage also is rooted in an ancient custom. In those days when an oriental monarch moved from place to place, he sent ahead a great army of workmen to level the rough places, to fill in the valleys, and to cut through the mountains so the chariots could travel in comfort. Herodotus tells a story about Cyrus, who was on his way to Babylon. At the river Gyndes, one of his horses fell in and was swept away and drowned. Cyrus was so enraged that he spent the entire summer camped by the side of that river and committed his entire army to dividing the large river into 360 channels so he could break its power. Then he waded across the channels. This was sort of overkill employed to make the monarch's path smooth so he could gain access to a particular region of the country.

Isaiah says to the people, "Make way for the Messiah. Let him gain access to your life. Make the way clear, make room in your life for him. When the access to your life is free and clear, then he will come, and he will display his glory there, in the midst of captivity."

So often this passage is interpreted as referring to the return of the exiles with the Messiah at their head. But Isaiah is saying that God wants to manifest his glory in the midst of these terrible circumstances in the exile in Babylon. The glory of God will be seen in Babylon. The Jews were thinking of a time when they would go back to the land and rebuild the temple, and the Shekinah, the cloud, would cover the temple and the glory would be manifested

there. But Isaiah says, "No, God's glory will be manifested in Babylon."

This is the same passage that the Jews used to refer to John the Baptist in the New Testament. John went from Jericho into the wilderness, along the shores of the Jordan River. He spoke this same word of repentance, "Make way for the Lord. Let him have access to your heart." When the Israelites were in the land, they were as much in a wilderness as they were when they were in exile. Even when the Israelites were in the land, their hearts were wrong. Spiritually they were in a wilderness; they needed to make room in their life for the Lord.

Isaiah says to these exiles, "If, in simplicity, in humility, you will let the Lord be Lord in your life, if you will give him access to your heart, if you will let him be king there, then the glory of God will be seen in your life. Though you walk through Babylon and on every side you see, 'To the honor of Marduk', 'To the honor of Ninurta', there will be thousands of temples to Yahweh--lives lived out 'To the glory of God', 'To the glory of God', 'To the glory of God.' "In your tragic, distressing circumstances, let the glory of God be seen. Make room in your life here and now.

In verses 6-8 another voice calls out,

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.

What word? The word in verse 5: If you give the Lord access to your heart, his glory will be seen in your life. That fact stands forever, in all circumstances. In contrast to God and his word, the people are like grass or like a flower. The Babylonians, with all their power--they were rulers of the world at that point--are like grass. They will fade.

They tell me that when it rains in the spring, Palestine turns into a paradise. The mountains are covered with flowers as a result of the latter rain in April or May. But about mid-May the hot winds begin to blow from the west, and almost overnight the flowers fade and the grass withers and the hills turn brown (just as they do here in California).

God says the Babylonians are like grass. The hot wind of God will blow over them, and they will be gone. Anyone hearing those words then would have thought them absolutely absurd! Babylon is impregnable! But in less than fifty years, Cyrus marched against Babylon. The great Persian king encountered the Babylonian army outside the gates of Babylon; the Babylonians were defeated, withdrew into the city, and buttoned up the gates. They had provisions enough to last them for years under siege. The Euphrates river ran right through the city so the Babylonians had plenty of water and enough food to withstand a siege longer than any conqueror could maintain supply lines.

Cyrus made several futile attempts to breach the walls, but he could not break through. So, in a stroke of genius, he sent half of his army to the south end of the city where the Euphrates River flowed out under the wall, put the rest of his army on the north side of the city where the river flowed under the wall, and took all of his nonmilitary people north. Years before, a queen of Babylon had diverted the Euphrates temporarily. Cyrus broke through the dam she had made, and the Euphrates flowed into a marsh. Cyrus' army walked up the Euphrates riverbed, under the wall, and into the city.

The Babylonians were so certain that no one could break through their defenses that they did not even have a guard on the wall! Two-thirds of the city was destroyed before the Babylonians even knew what was going on. They were partying in another part of town! The city fell fifteen years after the exiles read these words of Isaiah. God said the people are like grass, and when the hot wind of God blows across them, they will wither. Why are you afraid of men? Why are you afraid of the Babylonians?

History has repeated itself many, many times since then. The Persians were like grass, and they faded. The Greeks

were like grass, and they faded. The United States is like grass, IBM is like grass, the IRS is like grass, and when the hot wind of God blows across them they will be gone. But God's word remains. God has promised that he will glorify himself in any life that will open itself to him. Then the glory of God will be seen. This is a promise you can count on; it is a fact. By contrast, every other nation, every other promise, is like grass.

In verses 9 through 11, Isaiah symbolizes the arm of God as that of both a judge and a shepherd. The monuments of this period portray all the kings as having very muscular, sinewy arms with 21-inch biceps--a picture of power. Isaiah depicts God coming as a judge, with his arm flexed in judgment. But the same arm that is bent in judgment is the arm that gathers his sheep into his bosom. He does not overdrive the pregnant ewes or those that are overburdened. The arm that has so much strength and power in judgment is the arm that encircles and protects us.

So why should we fear when the Babylonian empire is just upstream, or when some other enemy threatens? The arm that batters every nation into submission is the arm that surrounds us.

In verses 12 through 15, Isaiah tells us who is coming and describes the strength of that arm.

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, [Two-thirds of the surface of our globe is covered with water, and Isaiah says he just measures it in the palm of his hand.] **And marked off the heavens by the span,** [A span is the distance between the end of your little finger and the end of your thumb, so he is not only powerful and immense, but he is precise.] **And calculated the dust of the earth by measure, And weighed the mountains in a balance, And the hills in a pair of scales? Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, Or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge, And informed Him of the way of understanding?**

In short, Isaiah says that God has everything we need. He has power and wisdom. Do we extol men who are powerful, wise, intelligent, and influential? God says he is all of those things. This was a period of history when there were some truly oppressive men. This was the period when Buddha, Confucius, and Zoroaster taught. This was shortly before the very classical age of Greece, the time of men like Euripides and Sophocles and Pericles, men we look to today as being truly wise. God says they have not taught him a thing. He has all wisdom and all power.

Verses 15 through 17,

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust, Even Lebanon is not enough to burn, Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering. [If you took all the cedars of Lebanon, and used that lumber to sacrifice all the animals found in the hills, it would not be an adequate sacrifice.] **All the nations are as nothing before Him, They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless.**

This is God's estimate of the great powers on earth today--Russia and Red China and the United States. They are nothing, just a drop in the bucket. They are of no consequence. Notice that verses 18 and 25 both contain the statement,

To whom then will you liken God?

This entire section is bracketed with that question. What analogy can we set up to describe what God is like? We can use an idol, but the Bible repeatedly pokes fun at the idea of idolatry. Chapter 41 tells us what Isaiah has to say about idols. But the point he makes in this chapter, with gentle irony, is that a man will take an idol, embellish it with gold, and worship it--but he has to prop it up because it will fall over! Are you going to compare God with an idol? We know that in Babylon there were hundreds of idols, impressive things made of gold. God says, 'Certainly you are not going to liken me to an idol, that falls over unless it is adequately buttressed. Shall you compare me then with men?'

He then gives an estimate of the world's great men in verses 23 through 24.

He it is who reduces rulers to nothing, Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless. Scarcely have they been planted, Scarcely have they been sown, Scarcely have their stock taken root in the earth, But he merely blows on them, and they wither, And the storm carries them away like stubble.

Where are the great men of history? They are gone. God blows on them and they are gone. So don't compare me with great men. Verses 25 and 26,

"To whom then will you liken Me That I should be his equal?" says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high And see who has created these stars, The One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power Not one of them is missing.

The stars are like a flock of sheep that God leads out every night. In fact, the word translated "missing" here is akin to the word for "flock". Every evening God leads out the stars, and not one of them is ever left behind. There is never a time that an ancient could look off to the east and say, "Ah, God forgot one!" The ancients identified their gods with the heavens. The stars were gods. But Isaiah says, "No, God transcends the stars." He controls the stars. They never run amok; there is never one missing. He orders the universe. You can expect to see the same stars every night. If there is one missing tomorrow night, then you can suspect something is wrong with our God. But if they keep turning up, he is in control.

Consider, then, the significance of verse 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"?

Here is the cure for self-pity. If God knows the stars by name, he has not forgotten you. You may live in a household where no one ever appreciates you. All you do is wash dishes and clean house, and no one ever says thank you. The kids don't appreciate you, your husband doesn't appreciate you. But God knows. He knows your name. You are not lost. There is no place you can hide that God can't find you. When then should you say, "My way is hidden from the Lord?" Verse 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.

He has all wisdom, he has all power. He is never going to lose you. Nothing is ever out of his control. He never becomes too weary or too tired or too preoccupied to pay attention to you. The God who orders the stars is the God who has his arm around you. Therefore, when the enemy comes in like a flood; when you feel oppressed; when you feel guilty, inhibited, and frustrated by circumstances; when you feel that nobody knows, cares, or understands your needs, the God of creation will encircle you with his arms. He says in verse 29,

He gives strength to the weary, And to him who lacks might He increases power.

The word "power" here is related to the Hebrew word for bone. It means firmness, structure. When you feel like a bowlful of jelly, God gives you substance. He puts starch in your backbone. He gives strength and increases power.

Though youths grow weary and tired, And vigorous young men stumble badly...

This was happening in Babylon. Strong young men who had been influential in Judea were stripped of their power. Though they had been strong and able, they were weary, tired, hopeless, beaten down.

Yet those who wait for the Lord Will gain new strength...

Those who hope and trust in the Lord will, literally, exchange strength. We will trade our weakness for the strength of the God of the universe. Have you traded a car in recently? You take that tired old junker down to the car lot--the head cylinder is blown, the pistons are swapping holes, the tires are all bald. You say, "Here, take it!" And you get into a 1976 model and drive away. Of course, in that case, you have to lay down a lot of dough first. But God is saying, take your tired old body and exchange your weariness and your frustrations for his strength. It does not cost you a thing; it is all paid for. His son paid for it, and therefore he can give you the model that is adequate for any demand. When we trade in our weakness, we receive his strength.

The results are pictured in three wonderful figures.

They will mount up with wings like eagles,...

This is a great picture of majesty and strength. When I was a kid we used to go down to the Big Bend country in southern Texas and lie on the banks of the Rio Grande and watch the eagles soar. They would rise on those great thermal currents that generate there. I never saw one fall out of the air. They would soar. God says we will soar. When the pressure is really on, he says, we will run and not be tired, and walk and not be weary.

They will run and not get tired.

Here is the word for all those monotonous humdrum days when the sink is full of dirty dishes and you have to crank out all those routine chores. God says, "You will endure." You will be able to walk right through that day and display the glory of God. I talked to a man yesterday who was filling out some forms. He had filled out the same form 31 times that day. How excruciating! Yet some of you have other vocations like that. To you, Isaiah says,

They will walk and not become weary.

David has a comparable word in the 84th Psalm:

How blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee; In whose heart are the highways to Zion!
[The same picture--that of making room in your life.] **Passing through the valley of Baca** [The Hebrew word 'baca' means weeping.] **they make it a spring, The early rain also covers it with blessings. They go from strength to strength..."**

This is Isaiah's word to captives. Yahweh is the God of the universe. His strength is adequate for any need, and we can exchange our weakness for his strength. That brings comfort.

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