

Comfort My People  
Isaiah 40 and 41  
by Dellena Ludwig

When we are feeling low, or sad or ill, we tend to seek comfort. We want to just go to our favorite spot and cuddle into our warm cozy blanket. We want our favorite foods, even if they aren't healthy ones, like macaroni and cheese, that special recipe from our childhood, or chocolate.

Perhaps a coffee break brings you comfort from a frustrating day. For me, it is a warm cup of French Vanilla tea, in my recliner with my feet up! Comfort is a universal need. Even as a child we might run to our Mom's arms when we were upset and seek comfort with her low voice that tells us it will all be alright.

Hezekiah and the people of Israel were also in need of comfort. In chapter 39 Isaiah announced to Hezekiah that, "The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord." [Isaiah 39:6]

Jerusalem had survived the siege of Assyria. Hezekiah had reformed the nation of Judah from idols and even at that time was working hard to strengthen their fortifications. And now they must look forward to another enemy, the Babylonians. They needed comfort.

Our lesson today, from Isaiah 40 and 41 will offer just the comfort the people of Judah needed. We will see how God offered:

- A. Comforting voices (40:1-9)
- B. Comforting Presence (40:10-28)
- C. Comforting Strength (40:29-31)
- D. Comforting Help (41:1-19)
- E. Comforting Supremacy (41:20-31)

God's voice to the people of Israel up to this time had been the voice of judgment and doom. The first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah contained the record of God's judgment and warnings to His people for their sins.

But the people had ignored the warnings He had sent and fallen deeply into idol worship. God had sent the Assyrians as His instrument to attack and subjugate Israel and Judah. But to begin the surgery they needed to separate themselves from their false gods and idols. Their voices had been brutal.

However, as the second half of Isaiah begins, God would be giving the people a sign of hope through His prophet, and voices that promised His coming Messiah. This half of the book of Isaiah begins with God's voice to His prophet Isaiah:

"'Comfort, comfort my people' says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.'" [Isaiah 40:1,2]

Now, the sword of Babylon was still to come. The exile of Judah and the total destruction of Jerusalem was decades away. Yet God wanted Judah to understand that He already had their future in mind. Their captivity would be punishment for their sin of idolatry. The Lord God saw it as payment for that sin.

Ellicott explained the Hebrew word translated here: 'paid for' – "The word implies not exemption from punishment, but the fact that the punishment had been accepted, and had done its work." [Bible Hub; Ellicott; Isaiah 40:1]

However, we know from the fullness of Scripture that our consequences paid here on earth for our sins do not cleanse us from our sins. In the Old Testament, God gave the priestly instructions for animal sacrifices for sin. Even those sacrifices did not wipe away the stain of sin but had to be repeated over and over again.

The book of Hebrews instructed that "In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." As the temple was purified with the blood of sacrificed animals, so must humanity. "But he (Christ) has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself...so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many;" [Hebrews 9:22,26, 28]

God's comforting voice, full of promise, said that even though Israel had to pay the consequences of their sins in exile, God's future plan was that one perfect sacrifice would one day pay the full debt for sin. When Messiah would come, His sacrifice would mark all sin-debt "paid in full." That was the payment in double promised by our loving God.

To emphasize the age of redemption, another voice was heard. "A voice of one calling in the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." [Isaiah 40:3]

Now, this prediction had a twofold fulfillment. First, it was currently the way of honoring a king who planned to visit your village, to prepare the way. The people might fill in ruts in the road, move rocks out of the way to make the way straight.

The announcement of preparing the way in the wilderness, could have frightened the people of Judah. Because they knew a new power or conqueror could come to make demands on them as Assyria had done and Babylon was prophesied to do in the future.

But from our New Testament perspective, we recognize this voice as being from John the Baptist. In the gospel of John, chapter 2, John the Baptist was questioned by priests and Levites about who he was and why he was baptizing people. His reply was to quote this section of Isaiah: "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" [John 2:23]

John was appointed by God to prepare Israel for the coming Messiah. But John the Baptist didn't literally prepare highways, his ministry was to baptize people, preparing their hearts for repentance so they would be ready to receive their Messiah. "And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." [Isaiah 40:5]

What wonderful comfort God gave His people! God had set in motion the coming of Messiah who would save all people from their sins! However, the next voice explained that the current generation would not see this promise fulfilled.

"The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God endures forever." [Isaiah 40:7,8] Although the people of Judah would not live to see this day, they could live in the hope of this promise because "God's Word endures forever".

Someday the good news of Messiah would be spread all over Israel in joy. The final voice shouts out the message: “See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.” [Isaiah 40:10]

The voice of God made the firm promise that His anointed one, Messiah, would come to bring the forgiveness of sins through redemption; He would come for all people, and He would come as Sovereign Lord, to rule and reign.

However, He would also come as a shepherd, with tenderness. “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” [Isaiah 40:11]

The people of Israel had had many kings, ruling with many varied approaches. But their most loved king had been David. His beginning as a shepherd was well known and remembered through his songs, recorded in the book of Psalms.

God blessed David as the second king of Israel and the Lord made a covenant with David, that the scepter would never leave his lineage. The promised Messiah would come from David’s ancestry and would reign over all the nations forever.

How comforting were the promises from these voices! God promised that His Holy One would gather his people like a shepherd gathers his lambs. This promise of Messiah was still in effect, even during Israel’s exile. The people of Israel would once again be gathered back to their land, governed by the Son of David, Who would reign over all the earth in power and might.

They could face the hard times, knowing that in the end, they would come back to their land, in security and peace. But at this time, their loyalties were divided. On one hand, they lived in wonderful anticipation for Messiah to come, but on the other hand they turned to their idols to ask for blessings and help.

Remember, Hezekiah had sealed his policy of “no idols” by breaking down all of the high places, all of the statues of idols set up around the kingdom and the Asherah poles and even the serpent on the pole made by Moses. But we will see that when his son, Manasseh, became king after Hezekiah, he quickly re-instituted the idol worship of his wicked ancestors like Ahaz.

Anticipating that future, Isaiah included a proclamation of Jehovah’s comforting presence in the second half of chapter 40. He challenged this undercurrent of idol worship with a series of questions:

“Who has measured the waters in the hallow of his hand?” (v.12)

“Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket?” (v.12)

“Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord?” (v.13)

“Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him?": (v14)

“Who was it that taught him knowledge?” (v.14)

Could any of the idols that the Israelites secretly hid in their homes actually have the power to challenge the One True God? The answer, of course was, that only Jehovah existed from the beginning to the end of our earth. He alone made all things and laid out our universe in perfect measure.

To hold up an idol as their deity was foolish. “Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.” [Isaiah 40:15]

The God who can weigh the mountains on scales would merely blow off the nations as meaningless dust, much less the false gods they worshiped.

The foolishness of worshiping a carved idol was often described by God's prophets. Isaiah does so by asking another rhetorical question in verse 18: "With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him?" [Isaiah 40:18] The rich want images out of gold and silver. The poor make images carved out of wood.

But their inferiority is emphasized by the fact that each must be secured to keep it from falling! "A person too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot; they look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple." [Isaiah 40:20] and again in Isaiah 41:7: "One says of the welding, 'It is good.' The other nails down the idol so it will not topple." [Isaiah 41:7]

Isaiah was flabbergasted! How could these people even think that carved images, fashioned by people, could be compared to the Maker of all the Universe Who had devoted His presence to Israel as His chosen people? "'To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?' says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens; Who created all these? He brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing." [Isaiah 40:25,26]

But the people of Israel wanted something they could see. They wanted something tangible that they could consult. They wanted the comfort of these idols so they might feel like they have some control over their lives.

In verse 28 Isaiah states: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom." [Isaiah 40:28]

Think of the strongest person you know. Perhaps it was your Dad? My oldest granddaughter, 27-year-old Isarai, is very strong. She has gotten into weightlifting and cleared 220 pounds! She works as a fire fighter and has a side job of trimming trees.

But Isarai, a couple weeks ago, collapsed at work with trouble breathing. She had to go to the hospital for a week. She has a genetic disorder called Peutz-Jegher syndrome, that creates polyps so big that they block her intestines. Even my beautiful, strong granddaughter has to take time out to heal and get help.

Isaiah put it this way, "Even youths grow tired and weary. And young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not be weary, they will walk and not be faint." [Isaiah 40:30, 31]

That verse brings me a lot of comfort. Even though my children and grandchildren might faint and stumble in their lives; even though we might blow it and seek help from the wrong sources; even though I might falter in my faith, God does not. The Lord God never grows weary. Our God made all creation, so we might see His strength as He keeps it all working.

Our God doesn't even grow tired of Israel's complaining or tired of our own complaining! Our God "gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak." [Isaiah 40:29] He can help us when we are helpless. We can always count on His strength.

And Judah could count on God's strength to face their future. They faced exile in Babylon, in their future, just as the other tribes of Israel had faced under Assyria. But even as they watched the political storm clouds hover in the north, God promised that His strength would get them through this.

In the battles Israel heard about, in the far corners of Assyria's conquests, God would raise up one leader who would understand Judah's plight. "Who has stirred up on from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow." [Isaiah 41:2]

This chosen general's name is revealed in Isaiah 44:28, to be Cyrus. As though this event was already in progress, God revealed to Isaiah that this one leader would conquer nations easily because God would help him. "He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow. He pursues them and moves on unscathed, by a path his feet have not traveled before." [Isaiah 41:2,3]

This revelation of the future movements of the nations was a challenge for Judah to recognize that the Holy One of Israel was their help and hope even during turmoil.

While the islands, or nations of the earth called upon their idols, God reminded Israel that they didn't need to be afraid of the future. God had chosen them as descendants of Abraham. "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." [Isaiah 41:10]

There were certainly a lot of powerful armies hovering in Israel's future. War was surely coming again. But if God was on their side, if the Almighty was upholding them, if the Holy One of Israel would keep them in His righteous right hand, they would be assured they could survive, come what may.

God promised them, "All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced; those who oppose you will be as nothing and perish." [Isaiah 41:11] God was not saying that there would not be any more wars. But that those who opposed Israel would be "as nothing."

Some believe that if you are a Christian, you will not have any more problems in your life. But they are quickly disillusioned when life continues to happen. Just as Israel continues to have enemies to this day, our life will continue to have trouble; war with our selfish desires; war with the evil in this world; war with our own frail health. But our Lord God never abandons us in our time of need.

"For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, 'Do not fear; I will help you.'" [Isaiah 41:13] Notice He takes hold of our right hand. Most often, the right hand would be the hand in which we hold a weapon. But if He holds our right hand, He is our weapon. He fights for us and there is no weapon forged that can beat Him.

He can vanquish every foe, no matter how big they seem. Judah seemed like a tiny, scrawny worm compared to these huge nation-devouring armies. But the Lord encourages even tiny Judah. "Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob, little Israel, do not fear, for I myself will help you," declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them and reduce the hills to chaff." [Isaiah 41:14,15]

Now, Israel has never yet mowed down the great empires around them. Yet God has enabled them again and again to have amazing victories over their enemies that no one thought possible. But where did such a victory as described here take place?

Perhaps this is referring to the final, future battle of Armageddon, described in scriptures such as Revelation 19:11-21. In this battle all the nations of the earth will gather to attack Jerusalem. But the Lord Jesus Christ will ride in to destroy these enemies with His word, just before He begins His reign on the earth for a thousand years.

During His reign, the Lord will cause the desert to bloom. He will make the Promised Land once again to be covered with trees in areas thought to be “wastelands”. His promise that the land will one day flourish was to prove a point, “so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it.” [Isaiah 41:20]

God’s final word to the false gods His people wanted to worship, was stated as a challenge. “‘Present your case’, says the Lord. ‘Set forth your arguments’, says Jacob’s King. ‘Tell us, you idols, what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome.’” [Isaiah 41:21,22] Only the Lord God could prophesy with one hundred per cent accuracy!

Isaiah went on to proclaim God’s supremacy over idols. Jehovah pronounced “But you are less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless; whoever chooses you is detestable.” [Isaiah 41:24]

In fact, the Lord God made a further prophecy about the future King of the Medes and Persians, Cyrus. “I have stirred up one from the north, and he comes – one from the rising sun who calls on my name. He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay.” [Isaiah 41:25]

Cyrus was ½ Mede and ½ Persian and so came from both the East and from the North. How precise God’s prophecies were! Not only could no false prophet or idol tell the people about the man Cyrus, but they also certainly wouldn’t know how he could reverse the exile of Israel. But the Lord God knew all about his future.

The Lord God prepared the circumstances that would bring about the revolution that would bring in the rise of the Medes and Persians to overtake Babylon and set up the final change of heart of Cyrus to actually obey the Holy One of Israel to allow the remnant to return.

The Lord God is the Supreme One. He alone knows the future and He alone moves the heart of the nations to accomplish His will in the world. He declared: “I look but there is no one – no one among the gods to give council, no one to give answer when I ask them. See, they are all false! Their deeds amount to nothing; their images are but wind and confusion.” [Isaiah 41:28,29]

What a comfort that announcement is! There is no confusion or debate. There is no one like our God. There are none who can stand up beside Him to even be compared to Him. And this all-powerful, perfect, Holy One gives us comfort in our worst times.

His voice comforts us about the future.

His presence comforts us in the turmoil of the nations.

His strength give us comfort because He lifts us up when our strength is gone.

His help comforts us when we cry in frustration because we can’t fix our messes.

His supremacy comforts us because He cuts through the noise of false promises, to deliver each and every promise He ever made to His people.

He cares enough to want to give comfort to His people. What a blessing He is to Comfort His people in their time of need.