

The Comfort of God

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[0 : 00] Please turn back to Isaiah. We're going to look at the chapters that I read. Well, the chapter and the couple of verses that I read. Now, a big theme that runs throughout is comfort.

So that's a word I want you to keep in mind. I'm rereading The Lord of the Rings at the moment. It's my kind of just-before-bed, relax, chill out, let my brain unwind book.

And at the moment, I don't know if you know the story, but Frodo and Sam are wandering around on the edge of Mordor. It's very miserable. And that's a very bad place.

They're in a very dark place. And Sam, one of the characters, expresses his desire. Well, he's in the middle of this horrible, horrible place that it'll all be over, the adventure will be over, and that they're home, and he can relax, put off his feet, and look forward to getting up every day and just going and doing the gardening.

He wants to be back home where it's comfortable, and it's familiar, and he feels safe. He wants to be comfortable. And I think that's a very fair thing to want, particularly when you're in a very dark place.

[1 : 15] We know that experience. You know the feeling of being in a bad place and wishing it was over, being in a difficult situation and wishing for the end of it. We have this longing for comfort, and we think there's nothing wrong with that at a basic level.

What's wrong with wanting to be comfortable? I think the answer to that, and something that we're going to see as we go through this passage, a couple of things. A couple of things that can be a problem with comfort.

First of all, comfort can become like an idol. It can become an overriding obsession, because what we need to think about is what is the degree of comfort that we think we need in order to be comfortable.

But the second, and I think maybe the more serious thing, problem with comfort is that we can look for comfort in the wrong place. You know, what is it that you think, if you were to describe the comfortable life for yourself, well, what's the source of that comfort?

What gives you comfort? What do you hope for that will give you comfort? Of course, there are all kinds of different things in life, different variables, different situations.

[2 : 24] But what is the overriding thing that you trust in or hope for that will give you comfort? So this passage, particularly chapter 39, is about a man, King Hezekiah, who saw comfort and security in the wrong place.

The place that he went to as a source of his comfort is seen to be very wrong. We're going to bring that out just as we go through, but also this passage, as we move into chapter 40, speaks of another comfort altogether, and that is the comfort that is from God, and that is fundamentally different because it is to do with the comfort that we know when we have our sins forgiven.

So just that by way of introduction. So I'm going to look at three main points just now. First of all, just to look a little bit about the circumstances of Hezekiah, the king, King Hezekiah. So we see that just in the first few verses of chapter 39 here.

I don't want to suggest that Hezekiah, at this point, this late point in his life, is on a bit of a comfort quest. If you remember, if you know anything of the story, if you've ever read back in the chapters just preceding this, Hezekiah has a pretty remarkable experience leading up to this chapter.

If you think about the area in which these people involved in this chapter existed at the time, there's a lot of uncertainty politically, a lot of uncertainty.

[3 : 48] The Assyrians were in the ascendancy, they were the power at the time, and there was all kinds of alliances going on as countries, as kings and as people craved a sense of peace and security because of the threat of being dominated and the threat of being invaded.

And Judah has just faced great threat from Assyria, and Hezekiah has had to deal with that. And Hezekiah has known in this situation, if you were to read back into chapter 37, we see a really great example of the power of God to give security.

He rescues his people. He provides security and comfort. And so they know the power of God, and King Hezekiah knows the power of God as he trusts in God for deliverance.

Another example, if you were to have read in chapter 38, he knows personally the deliverance of God. Hezekiah gets very sick, so he's going to die.

And Hezekiah calls to God for release from the sickness, and he's granted an extra 15 years of life. If I go to chapter 38 verse 4, then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah, go and say to Hezekiah, this says to the Lord, the God of David, your Father, I have heard your prayer.

[5 : 14] So Hezekiah has this relationship with God. He's called out to God for relief. God hears his prayer. He says, I've seen your tears. Behold, I will add 15 years to your life.

What a great comfort that is. He's spared 15 years, but you know, he knows personally the God who says to him, I've seen, I've heard your tears.

I know you, and I know your fear, and I will deliver you for this time. And then he goes on to say in verse 6, I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.

What a great message to hear. You're a king in uncertain times, and God promises deliverance, and he heals you. So that's been Hezekiah's experience.

Yet, when we get to chapter 39, we read of a king who's been through this great deliverance and had this great personal experience of the power of God.

[6 : 21] Let's see what happens. This envoy comes from the king of Babylon. Now Babylon and another power, a rising power, and there's conflict between them and Assyria coming.

And of course we know that Babylon are going to become a greater power. And Hezekiah is aware of this. Again, think about the uncertainty and the different alliances that are going on at this time.

So this envoy from Babylon comes to Hezekiah. Now Hezekiah has just experienced the delivery of God from a foreign oppressor, if you like.

He's realized in the past that making alliances with other nations is no good. He needs to rely on the Lord as God. But when we go through chapter 9, what does He do?

He says, come on in. Come and see my riches and my storehouses and all the treasures and everything that is here. Look at all these wonderful things that we have at our disposal.

[7 : 23] Aren't you impressed? Isn't this great? And He's just lulled into this friendship with the Babylonian envoy and the powers.

And it seems so naive, and it seems so wise, and we think, how could He have done that? Why would He have done that? Until we realize that actually when we look at characters like Hezekiah, biblical, historical characters, we need also to remember that it often reflects the way that we can behave in our own hearts.

We don't look at historical biblical characters like this just to judge them and to say, ah, Hezekiah was stupid. I would never behave like that. But we see often reflected in our own hearts similar tendencies.

His tendency here is to forget what God had just done and to be impressed and distracted and lured into alliance with this Babylonian power.

So he takes them in and he shows them verse 2 in chapter 39, and Hezekiah welcomed them gladly, showed them his treasure house, etc.

[8 : 28] And he seems quite happy with himself. You know, when Isaiah sends the message and says, what have you done? Who are these people? And what have you shown them? He says, they're from far away. They're important people from Babylon.

And yeah, he showed them everything. Great. What was he thinking? So he makes this big mistake.

Here's this big mistake that Hezekiah makes. Remembering what he's just been through. He fears for security. And so he seeks alliance with these Babylonians.

He's impressed by them. He seems to see no problem with them. And so he enters into this alliance when he's just experienced God's covenant promise and saving.

He thinks, he seems to think that in this alliance will be security and comfort for him and for his people.

[9 : 29] So this is a great mistake that Hezekiah makes. Now again, like so many biblical characters, Hezekiah does so much that is good. And yet we see at this latter stage in his life this great folly, this great mistake that he makes.

Second thing, just to further this, just to take this point on, we've seen that Hezekiah has this quest for comfort, for security really is what's going on here.

But really what we have to emphasize in thinking about this is that this quest for comfort is sinful. Now maybe you think that sounds quite a harsh thing to say, but it's sinful.

And that's quite an important word for us to pull out and emphasize just at this point. It's sinful. How so? Well, we see that this result of what he does, the message that comes from Isaiah to him afterwards, is one of judgment.

So he's acted in this way towards the Babylonians and immediately Isaiah, the messenger of God, the one who speaks for God, comes to him and he gives him these words of judgment. So if you turn down to verse 5, Isaiah said to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord of hosts, Behold the days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day shall be carried to Babylon.

[10 : 56] All those treasures that you showed off so gleefully to the Babylonian envoys, they're going to be taken away to Babylon because Babylon are going to be the ones who come and conquer.

And then he goes on with words that are almost worse. Nothing shall be left to the Lord and some of your own sons who have come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.

His own children, and his own children will go to be people who are not able to have their own children. Now of course that's so significant, isn't it? Because of the promise of who will come through the kingly line of Judah, the Savior who was to come.

So this is a disastrous prophecy. This is bad news. And yet the last thing that Hezekiah says in verse 8 seems to be again so complacent. There will be peace and security in my days.

So there's no problem with the way that Hezekiah thinks at this time, but he receives judgment which shows that the actions that he has in trusting in alliances rather than going back again to God was sinful.

[12 : 04] It was actually sinful. Let me just read a couple of references. I'm going to turn back to Isaiah chapter 30. Because this was such a familiar problem, trusting in other things than God, the covenant God of Israel, covenant God of the Jews.

This is such a familiar problem. Now this is something that they had been warned about. So if I go back to chapter 30, I'm just going to read the first two verses. God says, Ah, stubborn children, declares the Lord, who carry out a plan but not mine, and who make an alliance but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin, who set out to go down to Egypt without asking for my direction to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt.

There's another alliance being spoken of there. You would get the same if you turn to the next chapter, chapter 31. The first two verses there speak also of the temptation of trusting in alliances, again, the promise of help and strength from Egypt.

And so there is this warning and this condemnation of the action of trusting in other things than the covenant God, who has said to his people, I will protect you, salvation is found in me.

Come to me when you face trouble, and I will protect you. And so often the story is that they go elsewhere, to that place, to that idol, to that king, for protection, for meaning, for assurance, for salvation.

[13 : 48] So the actions are sinful and they bring judgment. And so the promise here, of course, is the one that leads to that great exile when God's people are so broken up and they're carried away to Babylon.

And it seems like such disaster has come upon his people. Such a great disaster. God's covenant people are to be judged and taken away because of their unfaithfulness.

Let's just think about ourselves for a minute, though. Remember I said that we don't look at these historical situations and we don't point the finger. I think it's very possible for us to make alliances in all kinds of ways.

We're human beings. We experience need. We fear. We want security in life, in different ways. A couple of ways that we're tempted to make maybe very obvious alliances, we can easily make financial or material alliances, where we think that a degree of security will come in a pension or in an investment or something.

Something. If I had this place to go to, this bank account, whatever it is, I would feel secure and then my life would be better.

[15 : 06] Now, there are many things that will make our lives better and there are many good things that will make our lives good in a good way. But again, as I was mentioning earlier, if that becomes an ideal or an obsession, that becomes our salvation and we're going down a very dangerous track.

Second thing is we can make social alliances. What person do you think will provide you with a degree of maybe status or identity in which you can trust?

And we put it another way. What person would you not mention your alliance with God to? Because we think that if we admit to being a Christian, if we admit to going to church, if we admit to being a believer to this person, then they'll think we're ridiculous and they'll maybe ostracize us from this community.

We'll have problems at work. Our security and our sense of well-being is under threat and so we can keep it to ourselves. We make alliances that aren't helpful.

In fact, when we get to the root of things, are sinful because what we're doing is we're investing ourselves in the person rather than trusting in the Lord and being faithful to Him.

[16:17] So there's different ways in which we can make different alliances at different levels in the way that we live out our lives. It's very easy for us to slip back into thinking like that. We've seen the quest of Hezekiah for comfort and we've seen that it's sinful and that there's a problem with the human heart always.

There's always been this problem to seek security and comfort elsewhere. Third final point. And that is that as we finish this chapter and move into chapter 40, into a new phase, if you like, of the Book of Isaiah, we see another comfort and it's a comfort that is from God.

It's a divine comfort but it's a very different comfort and that's what I just want to bring out just now. As we move into chapter 40, we move forward in time.

So we've read about Hezekiah and this experience that he's had in this judgment that is prophesied that the people will be taken away to Babylon. They'll be exiled. And the voice that speaks in chapter 40 is the voice speaking to those who are in exile, those who have experienced this great judgment and they are in the middle of this horror whereas God's people, they've been taken away into a far off place and they experience so few of the benefits of being God's people.

And this voice from God called out to them, to those who experienced this very real sense of discomfort and a sense of alienation and loss of identity and loss of blessing.

[17:53] And what does this verse say, this voice say, comfort? Comfort, comfort my people says you're God.

These people who have been sent into exile receive this news of comfort. And this is in many ways a pivotal point in the book. If you read through a book like Isaiah, it seems like it kind of repeats.

You get messages about judgment and all the problems of the people and all that they've done wrong. And you get interspersed occasionally if you like snippets of or flashes of promise and blessing and that God's speaking to them still as the covenant God.

But from verse 40 on we get this wonderful introduction into what God will do for his people and get promises of grace, promises of the one who will be the deliverer. And this voice that promises comfort in this chapter here speaks of the voice who will cry out in verse 3 of chapter 40.

Of verse 6, you get the voice there again in verse 9, the one who is to be a herald of good news. Good news is being spoken to these people who have experienced such horror because of their unfaithfulness.

[19:06] Comfort, my people, says your God, the God who's not forgotten his people. Look at verse 2, speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Not a lovely phrase, speak tenderly.

In that phrase is contained the idea almost of trying to convince them, trying to get alongside them and say, though you experience such horror, I want you to know my presence again.

I want you to know that I speak words of comfort. I want you to be convinced of this, that I am still your God and that I am still the one who will bring you peace and who will bring you salvation.

I am the one in whom true comfort is found. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended. Wonderful words of comfort, convincing them, seeking to convince them.

Call them into that understanding again that he is the God of all comfort, the covenant God who will protect them and who will watch over them. Let me just highlight again the recipients. Who are the people who are hearing this?

[20 : 13] They are the people who had been so unfaithful. They are the people who trusted in alliances. They are the people who'd worshiped other gods who hadn't worshiped the true God and yet they are the ones who receive this news of grace.

Right at the heart of the Old Testament, God's grace to them. But here's the thing, crucially, what type of comfort is this and what is the source of this comfort?

See, this isn't God just saying to them, life in Babylon is very bad, I know, but I will make it easier for you. So he's not talking about improving their chances of living a peaceful life.

He's not even saying, I'll just take you back to your home. Because look at, when we read through these first two verses, look at the type of comfort that is spoken of here.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned. And that's why this is a different comfort.

[21 : 24] And that's why this is such good news. And this is the Gospel in the Old Testament, that the sins of the people, their unfaithfulness, the mess they had made of things so many times that God knows all about and for which he has judged them, he will pardon, he will forgive them, he will take away their sin.

And so they will know true comfort, the comfort of being God's people, forgiven and at peace with him. And so their alliance will be with God. Not because they've made an alliance with him, because they've become good again and they're kind of up their game, you know, they can't just decide, oh, well actually, let's get back with God.

This is the covenant of God to his people, that he will be their rescuer and he will be their saviour. It's the good news of the grace of God to a wayward people.

And you know this points us forward to the Old Testament, it's why I read in John, it reminds us of the voice of John the Baptist, pointing us, pointing all people to Jesus, because this voice, see verse 3 there, I didn't read verse 3, but if we just note it just now, a voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

Of course, each of the synoptic Gospels, each of Matthew, Mark and Luke, use that verse to apply to John the Baptist, as he prophesied of Jesus who was about to come.

[22 : 51] John the Baptist is preparing the way for Jesus, because Jesus was the one who would fulfil this promise, Jesus is the one who would effect this promise. You know, how were the sins to be forgiven?

How was God able to deal with this and say, your sins will be removed, because God would send his saviour, who was his son, who would be the sacrifice so that sin could be dealt with.

He was the one who cried. And what does John cry? He cries out, behold, look at him, the Lamb of God, the one who would be the sacrifice, who takes away the sin of the world.

He takes it away, and there is good news in that cry. There is good news in that Gospel proclamation. There is good news for us, because of what we know Jesus has done.

And so we get this wonderful sense that the comfort that Isaiah is speaking about here isn't just a better grade of life. God doesn't promise to improve your chances and make you feel more comfortable.

[24 : 02] He promises to give you a different experience altogether, to know that at a heart level, these people were to hear this message, and you are to hear this message also this morning, that the greatest problem that you have, and if you don't realise that this morning, then you need to ask the Lord to show you, to see your own heart.

The greatest problem that you have is that, as Derek loves to say, the dis-peace that you have between yourself and God, because of your sin that separates you from God, can be forgiven.

You need to have your sins forgiven, so that you have relationship with God, so that you know that you are a child of God, and then you know comfort.

Come what may, in all the different circumstances you will face, you know the comfort of being forgiven. God has chosen to forgive you in Christ, and to bless you, and to call you to be his son and daughter, and to give you new life.

So this is the comfort, the divine comfort that God promises, and it's the blessing that we always need to hear. It's the blessing that we always need to know.

[25 : 17] And it will always be attention there, because as I said, there is always the temptation in the human heart to think we don't need that, that we can make it by ourselves, or really to forget how big a deal that is.

We're not used to the idea of having sins forgiven, or we don't really like to talk about sin in the first place. Let me just finish with two examples, two illustrations.

If you have a deeply infected wound, if you've cut your arm and it's badly infected, it's not going to help you if you put sunscreen on it.

To put sunscreen on a deeply infected wound in your arm is like putting on the wrong balm, the wrong cream. It's just going to make it worse, I think. Don't imagine sunscreen is going to do much good.

You know, sometimes we allow ourselves to look for comfort, security, even at a very deep level in our hearts, in completely the wrong place.

[26 : 23] And the things that we are trusting in and making alliances with, we think will help us, but they're not. They're distracting us, and they're giving us a false sense of security, and they will leave us lost.

So the balm that we need to know that we need is the healing, forgiving power of Christ. And the second illustration is water.

In Scotland, if you live in Scotland for any length of time, it's unlikely that you'll remember a true feeling of thirst. We don't really feel thirsty because we have lots of water, because it rains a lot.

So we take water for granted sometimes. It's one of the essential things of life, but it's just all around us, and we sort of take it for granted. I want to say, if you're a Christian this morning, ask the question, do you take for granted the healing power of Christ and the fact that your sins are forgiven?

They're taken away, and you have new life, and you have relationship and fellowship with God. And so your life is completely transformed. We can get so used to that. Isn't that strange?

[27 : 39] So let's make that a prayer this morning. If we don't know our need of the healing power of God and the true comfort of God, that we will ask God to show us.

We need to ask that His Holy Spirit would open our hearts. And if we've grown too used to things, and if things have become a bit routine for us, then let's go back to God again and say, Lord, show me the wonder of what you have done for me and the comfort that you have brought into my life.

Help me not to be distracted by all the kind of material and everyday comforts that can actually do me damage by taking me away from you. Help me to see the comfort of knowing the radical change that you have affected in my life.

Let me just pray. Father, Lord, we read when we go back into your word of your grace, we read of your appropriate judgment and of your anger towards sin, and of your warnings to your people so many times that they stay close to you and that they remember the truths that you speak to them.

We see often their complacency, and we recognize that in our own hearts this morning. We have to be honest and confess our own tendency to complacency, and we pray for your forgiveness for that.

[29 : 01] We pray this morning that you would open our hearts if we don't realize that we need our to be saved and that you are the one who can save us.

And we pray also that we would be overjoyed as believers because of what you have done for us. Amen.