

Comfort for a Ruined People

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[0 : 0 0] So yeah, as I said, we'll just be looking at the first few verses of Isaiah 40. I'm just going to read something from Romans 7, and I wonder if it sounds familiar to any of you here.

For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good that I want to, but the evil I do not want to do, I keep on doing.

I wonder if that does sound familiar to any of you here. The battle against sin, and with it the desire to do what is right, the desire to do what God has called us to do.

But very often, finding that the good that we want to do, we end up unable to do it. Perhaps you have a difficult relationship with someone, and you reserve yourself wholeheartedly to patience.

Grace towards this person. Grace towards this person. They may not be the easiest person to deal with, but God has been patient with you, so you figure, well, I ought to be patient with others, even if they are difficult.

[1 : 1 1] One day you go around for a cuppa, and it's not long before they're pressing all the buttons again. And they go on and on and on, and eventually you blow up.

You storm out the house, you get in the car, you drive off, and it hits you. You've just done what you said you wouldn't do. You've not done what you said you would.

Or maybe you've been drifting away from God for a while, and your affections for him are waning. Your once keen and enthusiastic worship for him has turned into a bit of a drudgery.

And that drudge is turned back into going into old ways. And before long, you look around at your non-Christian friends, and you realize your life looks a little different for knowing Jesus.

The question I wish to address this evening is, who is God to you in your fight against sin?

[2 : 1 4] Who is God to you when your sin seems all-encompassing, like you can't escape it, like it's everywhere that you look? For all our grounding in the Bible knowledge we may have, the theology we may have, the great truths we sing in hymns and psalms, we wonder if we've blown it.

Have we pushed God too far this time? Are his long-suffering tendencies reaching the end of the line with us? We love God and we want to do right by him, but often find ourselves failing.

Is there hope for you and me tonight? Well, we come to a passage this evening of people just like you and me.

People who find themselves unable to match up with their belief systems 100% of the time. Whose greatest problem is consistency or lack of it.

The clashes song is, I fought the law and the law won. We're not even trying to fight God's law. We're trying to keep God's law. And yet the law wins. So how does God respond to lawbreakers like us?

- [3 : 32] With grace. With comfort. That undeserved kindness which words cannot grasp or comprehend. And as is this morning, we'll look at it with two headings.
- The first one is called by grace. And the second is living by grace. So the first one is called by grace. So a few years ago over the summer, I worked as a food delivery driver for a grocery store.
- And all was going pretty swell. It was a great job. I enjoyed it. But there was this one time where I was making a delivery. And as is the problem in Edinburgh.
- I don't know about Aberdeen. But certainly in Edinburgh, parking is a nightmare. So I'm looking for a place to pull up and can't find it. So I turn a corner. And just beyond the corner, I see there's a space here.
- So right, I'll pull into it. Well, before I know where I'm at, crash, what's happened? What have I hit? So I get out of the van quickly. And I see the passenger door is wrapped around the bollard.
- [4 : 36] I somehow managed to miss it. And I was totally mystified. I had no idea that I'd hit it. But it turns out I did. So I got back in the van, reparked it, and tried the door.
- Well, it was jammed shut. The window was down because it was the summer. It was really hot. So I thought, keep myself cool. I couldn't get the window back up. So this was thousands of pounds worth of damage that I caused due to my negligence.
- My thought was, how is my manager going to respond to me? After causing all that damage, I was expecting a rollicking, quite rightly. But he responded instead with grace.
- His first words were, Jeff, are you okay? He then, of course, explained the consequences that I would need to go back on and do driver training again.
- But I wouldn't be underdisciplinary. I wouldn't lose my job. I wouldn't even have to pay a penny for the damage I caused. Though I deserved my manager to absolutely flip his lid, he responded with words of comfort, words of grace.
- [5 : 47] Now, to set the scene of what's going on in the book of Isaiah, God's people have done a lot worse than accidentally crash a food delivery van. They have wandered from God.
- They have sought to find life in other things than him. The one to whom they owed everything. They flagrantly disobeyed him.
- They turned their back on him. They took God's kindness, which was meant to lead them to faithfulness, and instead used and abused it, and by extension, used and abused God.
- And for their persistent disobedience, they were rightly sent into exile, far away from home. Now, this is, in the Old Testament, a much bigger deal than just feeling a bit homesick.
- The land that they were in, that was the land that God had specifically promised to them as a place of blessing, a place of rest, a place of life and wholeness.
- [6 : 50] Furthermore, the king who reigned over his people, well, because there was no land, there was no king.
- And the king is the one, again, who God's rule and reign, God's goodness was meant to be seen by his people. There was no king. But the worst of all was that the temple was destroyed.
- Now, you know, it's not that I'm fond of religious buildings especially that I say that. In the Old Testament, the temple, that's where God's presence dwelt.
- And so the implications of that is that if the temple is not there, God is not there. God is absent. Now, we sometimes feel in our day-to-day like God is absent.
- We go about our day-to-day and wonder if he cares, if he's listening to our prayers, if he's interested in us. But what we have here is a people who, for whom God really is absent.

- [8 : 00] And so the first 39 chapters of Isaiah are oracles of judgment, which were rightly belonging to God's people for their negligence, for their willful disobedience, for turning away from God.
- But chapter 40 marks a sort of a turning point in the book, by and large. And now comes the words of comfort. Verse 1, comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
- Now, notice before we get started here, something really amazing. This is God speaking here. What we don't have is God's people turning back to him first, asking for forgiveness, kind of committing themselves to faithfulness, and then living that out.
- And then only after that, God says, comfort, comfort. No, even in the midst of their mess, even in the midst of their sin, God is drawing near with words of comfort, of forgiveness.
- Now, I don't want to minimize the role of repentance and of faithfulness to God. We're going to get to that. But notice who the initiating party is. God is the one who was wronged.
- [9 : 23] He was the one who was trampled all over by his people. But it is him that initiates that reconciliation. It is him that initiates with these words of comfort.
- God doesn't stand with his arms crossed waiting for an apology. Because if he did, he'd still be waiting. No, he moves towards them, even in their sin.
- Now, we might object, God is holy. How can he abide with sin? Dane Ortlund writes in his book, *Gentle and Lowly*, The heart of God is inflamed with pity and compassion for his people.
- He simply cannot give up his people. Nothing could cause him to abandon them. They are his. And what Dane is trying to highlight here is, you know, if you imagine a parent who has told their child time and time again, do not run out into the road.
- Do not run out into the road. Do not run out into the road. Say the child chooses to just ignore that piece of advice and run out into the road anyway. Is the child, is the parent, sorry, going to stand back and say, well, I've told you a number of times and you didn't listen?
- [10 : 39] Of course not. The parent is going to jump out to the defense of their child. Because they love their child. They want their child well and safe. And similarly in God, because he is committed to our holiness, he's committed to our good, it is his very holiness that makes him draw towards us.
- Even when we sin, he must protect and keep his people. So God draws near with words of comfort, not of judgment.
- And notice in that, right, that there's not a hint of bitterness or disdain or God sort of tutting. He's not doing this out of some sort of obligation that he feels like he has to do it, and so he's kind of hesitant.
- There's not an eye roll in God as he forgives his people. He doesn't say, fine, and you come with a bit of the cold shoulder, but like a father trying to console his crying son, comfort, comfort.
- He doesn't stop there. He says, speak tenderly to Jerusalem. I wonder, do we have room in our doctrine of God for a God like this?
- [12 : 00] Do we have room in our doctrine of God for a God like this when we sin? That he comes to us, that we as his people, he comes to us, and he comes with words of comfort and grace.
- So often we view God as a head teacher that bursts in a rage because you've misbehaved again. Or like parents that say, I'm not angry, I'm just really, really disappointed.

Now, of course, we want to be clear that there is room in God for disciplining his children. That's true of the people of God in the Old Testament.

It's true of us as the people of God today. But even the goal of God disciplining us is not to push us further away, but it's to draw us closer to himself.

That is God's heart for us. That even in our sin, he is not interested in saying, well, fine, you've burnt your bridges. You've made your bed, now lie in it.

[13 : 17] No, he comes and draws near to us. He wants to draw near to us. We look to the second part of verse 2.

Proclaim to her, her hard service has been completed. Her sin has been paid for. She has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. And we ask, how can these words of comfort be issued?

Well, here we have in our passage why God can issue those words of comfort. Because God, as a just God, he isn't just saying, don't worry about it.

It's fine. You're okay. No, payment had to be made for the sin, for the wrongdoing. There were consequences. And that is what happened in exile for God's people.

Their hard years of service has been completed. Their sin paid for. And we might be affronted in today's day and age to think of God like that.

[14 : 24] But there's a very good reason that God is like this. Because if God just lets it slide, if God says, don't worry about it, he is unjust. Letting sin and evil and wrongdoing just slide like it doesn't matter.

Because it does matter. He would be unjust for letting all the sin go. And so the people of God in the Old Testament underwent temporarily God's displeasure and judgment, not finally or fully, but as discipline.

And this was as he was faithful to do. You go back to the book of Deuteronomy where God has given his people the law and at the end of all that he sort of stipulates the blessings that would follow, the temporary blessings that would follow if they obeyed and temporary curses that would follow if they disobeyed.

And so after generation and generation and generation of God's people turning away, he was holding up his end of the bargain so to speak.

He was faithful in doing what he did. So how do we move forward with that today?

[15 : 40] I think it's wholly insufficient to just say, well, we've got Jesus, it's fine. I think this verse really highlights that God takes sin seriously.

And that's what makes the cross such a big deal. because Jesus on the cross isn't just doing a nice deed. He isn't just being a kind, benevolent individual or a noble person taking the blame.

He's taking the punishment for our sin. See, on the cross, you're meant to be there. I'm meant to be there. But instead on the cross, Jesus is there.

All the divine curses that were meant to fall on us fell on him. So when we hear these words of comfort this evening, God isn't just being a cuddly grandfather in the sky.

His words of comfort are made possible because our sin was paid for by Jesus on the cross. The justice which called for punishment was still upheld.

[16 : 47] Yes, it didn't fall on us, but it fell on Jesus. And so that's how in the midst of our battle with sin as God's people, we can have confidence that these words of comfort are for us tonight.

Those of us who follow Jesus do so imperfectly, but those of us who follow Jesus, we can be assured these words are for us. That is why a perfectly holy God can say to you and to me tonight, comfort, comfort.

Because payment has been made, justice has been satisfied, and now God delights to draw near to you and to me tonight with these words of comfort and grace.

Just before moving on any further, if you're joining this evening and you're not a Christian and you're trying to figure out what Christianity is all about, what does it mean to be a Christian, this is basically it.

We recognize that we are imperfect fallen people who get it wrong a lot of the time, who turn our backs on God to follow our own way. Now that's not because we are especially bad people in the church that we believe that, but that's everyone's problem, whether we're in here, whether we're not in the church.

[18 : 07] But we recognize that on the cross this actually means something. Jesus is actually bearing our sin, not just as a nice act, but so that God can draw towards you with words of comfort instead of judgment.

And I would just ask if you're not a Christian, where do you go with your wrong? What do you do with it? You can't go to community and to society around you because we see so often nowadays, don't we, that this society that claims tolerance can actually be quite intolerant if you end up on the wrong side of them.

So maybe you go inwards. Do you fester away in guilt or do you try to outweigh your bad with some good? But I want to say gently tonight, the problem of the bad is always going to be there.

So now, where will you go? I just want to plead with you tonight in the words of a modern hymn, come to Jesus.

He will never cast you out. Come, you thirsty. Lay aside your fear, your doubt. With great gentleness, see how he calls you to himself.

[19 : 29] We'll look in the second part now to living by grace. And for many of us, our lives will be defined by past experiences.

So, for example, probably an unrealistic one for many of us, but say someone wins the lottery, that is a life-altering experience. Or you meet someone that you are madly in love with.

Or you have a near-death experience. These things are life-changing. They drastically alter the course of life for the rest of the days we have here on earth.

And that's what is intended with God drawing near with words of comfort. That it is life-changing for us. In view of God drawing near to us, of forgiving our sin, of issuing words of comfort and peace, the joy that that brings, that's meant to have an impact in our life, in the way we live.

And we see that in a number of times in the Gospels where Jesus draws near to someone, whether he heals them, whether he forgives their sin, he says, now go and leave your life of sin.

[20 : 46] And that is Jesus' call to each one of us for whom he is drawn near to and offered grace. To live in that rhythm of grace.

Yes, knowing that we will follow him imperfectly. But knowing that we are to go to him with that. And we are to walk in his ways.

And it's that call then that fuels the rest of our life. That call that then fuels repentance of living for God.

I'm just going to read then from verse 3. A voice of one calling, in the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be raised up and mountain and the hill made low. The rough ground shall become level. The rugged places a plain. So what we're talking about here is like when a town or a city or a village is getting ready for a visit from the royal family.

[21 : 55] They pull out all the stops. They clean up the streets. They put up the bunting. Every effort is made to make this place ready for when the queen visits. And it's this kind of all-out preparation that is being talked of here.

Now, we remember when the New Testament reading was made of John the Baptist coming, he was asked, who are you? Why are you here?

He describes his ministry in these words as a voice of one calling out in the wilderness preparing the way for God to come. In other gospels, he says his ministry is one of baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

And this was his role of preparing God's people for the coming of God himself. Repentance. Leading them in repentance and preparation for his coming.

And so, as we await the coming of Jesus here today, we do so differently, of course. Jesus' first coming is markedly different to the second coming.

[23 : 06] In the second coming, he will come with salvation and rescue for those who are his. He will come with judgment for those who are not.

And so, we're called to prepare for his coming by living in light of his second coming. As you go about your day to day, are you living in preparation for the coming of Jesus?

Are you turning from the way of self to the way of Christ? As you go to work, are you treating your colleagues poorly? Or do you treat them as if Jesus really is coming back?

As you make financial choices, are you living as if your treasure is here on earth? Or as if your treasure is the coming Christ?

Friends, we have received such an amazing call of grace. Such a call that we didn't deserve to receive. Where God draws near to us, where God calls us to himself.

[24 : 18] And so the call is then to live life in gratitude to him for that call. Following him in every circumstance.

Lives of repentance, turning from our ways to God's ways. Because God has accepted us, so are we called to respond with repentance and faith?

And verse 5 is what awaits us. The glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people will see it together, for the mouth of the Lord is spoken.

That is what we look forward to, where every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

That is what we look to, that is what we long for as we enjoy that grace that we have received, which is called us, as we live in light of that grace that we have received.

[25 : 27] So we look forward to the coming of the glorious one, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Father, thank you so much for your incredible kindness to us, a kindness which we don't deserve, a kindness that we so often flounder and ignore, but yet you pursue us in kindness.

You pursue us with words of comfort, comfort. Lord, help us to take these words of comfort as a means of drawing closer to yourself.

Lord, help us to respond with faith, trusting these words of comfort are for us. Help us to live in light of that comfort we have received and in light of that ultimate comfort that is to come, that day where every tear shall be white from our eyes, where suffering will be no more, where this battle with sin, this constant tension that we experience as God's people will be no more, where all will be made right, where the glory of the Lord will be revealed, where all people will see it together.

In Jesus' name, Amen.