

Comfort my people

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[0 : 00] I'm going to pray and then we'll look at this passage together as we start this new series in Isaiah 48-55. Let me pray for us. Almighty God, we thank you so much for your word, the Bible.

And we thank you that you have decided, you've ordained, that this is the way that you want to communicate with your people. And so we ask now for our hearts that you'd help us to fixate our attention on the fact that you are speaking to us.

And that by the power of the Holy Spirit you can move our hearts, change us to be different people, to be more like Jesus. And so we ask that you do that and that where there is things that need correcting, where there's things that need to be taught, where we need to be rebuked and trained in righteousness, we pray that every single one of us would be built up and equipped for your work in the world.

We ask for this in the name of Christ. Amen. Amen. I think most of you by now will have known, I probably use it quite often in illustrations, that in a former life, before I was a minister I was a nurse. And I would often, when I did that, a few years ago now, amongst one of my many roles as a nurse, one of the things that you could say was continuous was nursing was about alleviating pain.

[1 : 26] Alleviating pain. Could be done in lots of ways. There's many ways to alleviate pain. Obvious one, painkillers. But also, that it was the only way to alleviate someone's pain.

Sometimes patients, perhaps they needed moving in bed to stop pressure and pain building up. On top of that, there was lots of research done to suggest that stress and anxiety actually make physical pain worse and harder to cope with.

And so, sometimes just supporting someone and helping them to be calm can actually relieve physical pain. Whatever the reason, the reason that was a big role is because alleviating pain brings comfort, doesn't it?

The opposite of comfort is being in pain. Whatever that might mean, physical pain, emotional pain, distress, anxiety, trauma.

It's the, comfort is the alleviating of that, whatever we're going through or that someone is going through in life. When, if you've ever been in that situation or maybe you have, if there's distress and anxiety and discomfort, or you have a friend that you think they need, you'd love to know how to comfort them.

[2 : 53] You think, the thing that you often think of is, what is the most important thing that I could say? What is the most important message they need?

Sometimes you, depending on what's causing the distress, you might often, we don't know what to say. That's right, isn't it? Sometimes just being there, we think, can be enough.

Being present is enough. And yet, in our passage this morning as we start this new series in Isaiah 40-55, what we have is God explaining what his people need to hear so that they are comforted.

That's what, and essentially that, in one aspect, the whole of this, these 16 chapters that we're going to look at over the next few months, is God explaining a message of comfort to his people.

He's comforting them in the pain so that he will alleviate their pain and the distress that they're in.

Just to give us a, need a bit of context to understand the time that God is writing, that he's speaking.

[4 : 08] The people Isaiah is writing to, and here's why. The background to this is that it happens during one of the big moments in Israel's history.

One of the big moments in Israel's history is when God kicks them out of Israel. He kicks them out of the land. The reason they're kicked out of the land is because for hundreds of years, they'd repeatedly done their own thing instead of following him.

They didn't listen to him. They don't live like his people from top to bottom. They've done what they've wanted. They've ignored his ways, how he's told them to live. And so he kicks them out.

He sends in another foreign nation, the Babylonians. They come in and they take over Jerusalem. They take over Israel.

And they're taken away in exile to live in Babylon. When you look at it, what you realise is that that whole period, what is called the exile, it's just a repetition of what actually happens to Adam and Eve.

[5 : 11] Adam and Eve, they're not listening to God. They're kicked out of the garden for not doing what he says. They actually leave in the same direction. They get kicked out to the east. And God's people get kicked out.

Babylon is east of Israel. It's just a repetition of what happens when God's people don't listen to him. People of God, the Israel nation, haven't learned. They've been kicked out of God's land for not doing what he said.

They're kicked out. They go to a land called Babylon. They live under Babylonian rule. Chapters 40 to 55 is written to the people who have been kicked out and their subsequent children.

They're now living in exile in a foreign country, ruled by a foreign king that worships false gods. And so in this living under this suppressive Babylonian rule, they're distressed.

They're tempted to look for comfort somewhere else. They doubt what God is doing. And their hope starts to wane. Their hope starts to wane.

[6 : 14] The whole section, the whole series is really a development of the message, as we've said, of what these people need to hear who are living in exile. As we look at what God's people needed to hear then, in distress, to be comforted, it's the message that we need to hear too.

It's the message we need to hear too. First thing that we're going to look at, first point, is God telling the messengers, and this is the first point, comfort my people with good news.

Comfort my people with good news. We have messengers who God is telling, he's telling the messengers to comfort God's people with good, brilliant news.

This is God giving Isaiah and other prophets, people who speak God's word, he's giving them instructions of what they need to say to God's people.

Look with me from verse 1, he's saying, he's telling them, this is what I want you to do. I want you to comfort. I want you to comfort my people. I want you to speak tenderly to them, to Jerusalem.

[7 : 26] I want you to proclaim to her. He's telling the messengers, you need to speak to the hearts of my people. Those who once lived in Jerusalem, to those who are distressed, to those who are tempted, to those who are doubting and losing hope, you must comfort them.

And this is what you must continue to tell them. Not just as a one-time thing, but you must repeatedly tell them a comforting message. Three things he says to them.

First thing, you see that in verse 2, top of the next page. First thing, proclaim to her, Jerusalem, my people, that her hard service has been completed.

In other words, the hard service, the exile, the affliction, the hard service of distress, the hard service of not knowing what's going, the doubting and fear, that hard service of my people, living in a foreign country, is coming to an end.

Tell them it will end. Tell them that it's going to be over. This is how you will comfort my people. The second thing, you can see that, next line down, that her sin has been paid for.

[8 : 41] All the things that God's people did, why they were kicked out in the first place, the sin, they're not listening to me, they're not listening to God, the disobedience, the rejection of him, doing their own thing.

All that sin has been paid for. The third thing, that she has received from the Lord's hand, double for all her sins.

God's people will not only be forgiven, not only is their misery about to end, but they will receive blessing and life in abundance. They'll be rewarded for every sin, they'll receive double back.

The comforting message to tell God's people, in their distress, in their temptation and doubt and losing hope, is the message of God's grace and kindness to them.

This is what my people need to hear. I want you to tell them the comfort that I love them. This is the message that God's people must hear while they're away from their true home, in Israel.

[9 : 42] Now, God's people today, it's not the nation of Israel, it's not a geographical land, or the people that, it's not that nation, is the church.

The church is kind of, you might say, the new Israel. The followers of Jesus are the church, that's God's people. And so what we have here, as we see them away from their true home, the land in

here, what we see actually, is a true spiritual reality.

Because our true home, is not actually, Great Britain. It's not actually, where the world, or wherever we were born, that is not our true home.

Our true home, is heaven. That is our true home. And just like the, God's people then living in exile in Babylon, there is a sense in which we, live right now, in exile.

Because we're not in our true home. They needed to hear this, repeated, comforting message. And it is exactly, what the church, God's people need today, and will continue to need, until we reach our true home.

[10:53] As we await, the return, of our true home. We have this shared experience, because just like God's people, in exile, don't we sometimes feel distressed, and overwhelmed.

We get anxious. We're tempted, just like the Israelite people were, to follow false gods. They were tempted to follow Babylonian gods.

They were tempted to lose hope. They were tempted to feel, where has God gone? We're tempted by the world around us, to worship ourselves, and look after number one. God's people doubted, would they make it home?

Has God abandoned them? We feel the same emotion. We lose hope. The comforting message, of the good news of the gospel, it needs to be heard repeatedly, proclaimed repeatedly, shared repeatedly, to comfort God's people, as we await our true home.

It reminds us, that the good news, that it's not just something, that people need to hear, to become a Christian, but it's what God's people, always need to hear.

[12:04] It's the message, that we always need to hear, as we live away, from our true heavenly home. Because as we hear it, it reestablishes our hope, as we live in a world, of distress and difficulty.

The question then, what we have is kind of, the benefits to them, of the gospel, you've seen that. Hard service completed, sin paid for, received double, from the Lord's hands.

It's all about the benefits. But there's more to be said. Because at its core, at its core, the good news of the Christian faith, is not first and foremost, actually about the benefits to us.

Of course, it's not less than that, it's more than that. At its core, the good news, is actually about God himself. It's about the Lord, revealing himself to us, making himself known, so that we can have, a relationship to him.

It's about God. The gospel is about, the living God. And so that's where, we're going to go next. The second point is, the glory of God revealed. The glory of God revealed.

[13:12] You think, what the people in Israel, must have thought, carted off to a new land. They must have thought, they'd blown it. You can imagine that, can't you? What have we done?

How has this happened? Out of the promised land, now in Babylon, under a foreign king. You can imagine the mindset. They must have reminisced about, oh, do you remember, it was so good. We had it so good. God, we had, you know, the way that all the rules, the nation's rules, were set up, to worship the living God. The Torah, the Bible, was at the centre, of the way that the whole, nation was set up, and now, they're here.

If only we'd listened. It seems like, hope had gone, God had, felt, must have felt like, God had washed his hands of them. It must have felt, hopeless. What we would give, to be back in our land, what we would give, to have God back on our side, as a group of people, they must have felt alone. And so, imagine how this hurt, this must have been heard, by them. Verse 3. A voice of one calling. In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.

[14:22] Make straight in the desert, a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low. The rough ground shall be made level, and rugged places are plain.

Verse 5. And the glory of the Lord, will be revealed, and all people will see it together. They might feel alone right now.

They might be in exile, in another country, but what we have here, is the Lord has not abandoned them. But they must be comforted, because he is coming.

He's coming. He's on his way. This is what is, this is what's going to happen. Not right now, but it's going to happen. The Lord is going to be made known, and everyone is going to be able to see it. To be made aware of his glory, his shining, radiant brilliance. And so, the prophet, the God is telling them, in preparation, in anticipation of that day, prepare yourself.

[15 : 25] Get ready, because the Lord is coming. When presidents, or world leaders, when they're visiting another country, these days, I'm guessing, they have a member of staff, will phone ahead, inform the people, of the exact day, when the dignitaries, whoever it is, is going to land.

You know, you'll get the day and time, probably the flight, well not the flight number, they just kind of, the special convoy, is it, what's the, what's the name of the plane, that the president flies in, it's called?

Air Force One. Thanks, I need to, slip from my mind. Air Force One, when's it going to land, what the, everything, how everything's going to be. And then they tell, what they want, when they get there.

What foods are like, what allergies, how many suitcases, how big the travelling party is, where they're going to stay. They phone ahead, so that the nation, can, can prepare, for their arrival. Now, they'll probably clean up the streets, polish the hotel floor, lay out the red carpet. What we have here, is God's sake, the living God, telling us, he will send someone, ahead of his arrival, so that the people, can get ready, for when he's coming.

[16 : 41] However, the way, to prepare, for the arrival of the Lord, it's not a, red carpet, or a glass of champagne, we see, how they must prepare.

We say, prepare, make straight, and then we have it in verse four, how to prepare. Obstacles, need to be removed. Look with me, there's valleys, in the way, valleys need to be raised up, mountains are in the way, they'll have to be flattened, rough ground must be levelled, what we see is, the Lord's path must be straight, and big obstacles, need to be eradicated.

Preparing for the Lord seems, I think as we read this, seems quite a bit harder, than preparing for, an important world leader. I mean, I don't know if you've ever tried, to raise a valley, or flatten a mountain.

You can imagine, when our very own, Keir Starmer, next goes to visit, Donald John, news comes across, of what Keir, and his team need, and he says, you know, could you, what we really want is, could you just kind of, level out the Grand Canyon, can you just kind of, you know, like lift it up a bit, we're just, it just, that's what we need, you know Yosemite National Park, you know the mountains, can you just kind of, bring them down, that's kind of what we need, all the way down, if you could, that would be great, it would be brilliant, it's a picture isn't it, of something that is impossible to do, it's a picture of something, that only God can do, picture language, he's saying, the obstacles, before I get there, are as big as mountains, and valleys, it's a spiritual picture, it is the, the picture, is the hearts, of God, of the people, of God's people, he's saying, the sin, and the mess, the spiritual, sort of decline, the mess, that you've made, it is pictured, as mountains, and valleys, that need to be eradicated, in preparation, for the Lord, to arrive, it is something, that only God, can do, only God, can take away, the mountain of sin, that is inside, well it now, gets quite confusing, because, he's told them, to prepare, and make straight, for the path, so, how does it, how come he tells them, and then he says, you need to prepare, but it's something, that you can't do, prepare for me, but you can't do it, you can't prepare for me, how does that work, well notice, verse four, every action, is done, by God, the initiative, from him, there's no question, about here, if you notice, the type of language, that it's used, there's no question, about whether, it's going to happen, it's, the will go, it's the will of God, that is going to remove, the mountain of mess, before he arrives, verse four, every valley, shall, be raised up, further down the rough ground, shall become level,

God, will do it, God will work in the people, and prepare them, for himself, it's astonishing, we actually see, the fulfillment of this, didn't happen immediately, it happened, it actually happened, to those in exile, but hundreds of years later, God didn't phone through, to say he was on his way, but he sent a messenger, who did the same job, went through, right at the very beginning, of the gospel, his name is John the Baptist, and he came in the wilderness, he came preaching, and telling God's people, to turn back to God, God sent the messenger, it was from his initiative, and he, in the wilderness, told the people, to turn away from their sin, and receive the baptism, of repentance, he was baptizing them, he was, he was the voice, calling in the wilderness, and as the people, turned from their sin, the spiritual of mountains, were made low, to prepare for the coming, of the glory of the Lord, which means, the glory of the Lord, was revealed, in the person of Jesus Christ, this is the message, hundreds of years before, they need to hear, be excited, get ready, the Lord is coming, he's on his way, prepare for him, and I will clean you up, before I arrive,

[21 : 10] I will clean you up, if you turn to me, you'll be cleaned up, ready for me, living in this world today, we can be excited, because, whilst we might not, in another sense, we are waiting, for Jesus

to arrive, and so, we need to prepare, and make straight the path, for when he comes, again, and he calls you, by name, and when he calls to you, and you turn to him, away from your sin, it is the living God, who cleans you up, ready for his arrival, if you haven't already, turned to him, can I suggest, taking that on board, today, and turning to him, so that you are clean, for when he comes, because he's coming, this is the message, that will comfort, God's people, so we've had, the first, the first message really, is to, is that, the Lord is coming, the second thing, the comforting message, of the gospel, is that the Lord, is faithful to his promises, the Lord is faithful, to his promises, okay, we go back, where they're living, in a foreign nation, in exile, they think that God, has abandoned them, they've, and what would that lead to, they were in the world, they were in the exile, for 70 years, surrounded by foreign gods, living in the world,

Babylonian, religion, was, sort of a multi, God religion, they had many gods, for different things, gods for everything, under the sun, that they would go to, and offer worship, in hoping, that they would receive, a blessing, from that God, you think, you think God has left you, the temptation, would always be, to try something else, if they thought, it would work, give up on God, be unfaithful to him, to doubt his promises, and turn to what, Babylon had to offer, the comforting message, of the gospel, is that God is always, faithful to his promises, even when we're not, he's always faithful, to his people, even when we're not, and in verses 68, verses 6 to 8, we see a contrast, between people, and God, the faithfulness of people, and the faithfulness, of God, first we see, the inconsistency, the faithlessness, you might say, in God's people, verse 6, look with me, all people, are like grass, and all their faithfulness, is like the flowers, of the field, the grass withers, the flowers fall, because the breath, of the Lord blows on them, surely the people, are grass, the grass withers, and the flowers fall, our commitment, to God, is like, grass, and flowers, flowers, as we mentioned, this morning, with the kids, they, they have, an even shorter life, than grass, don't they, in spring, and summer, we see the flowers, but then they fade, grass is a bit better, lasts a little bit long, but you get bad frost, or a hot day, no water, they fade and perish, the best of gardeners, or even the best farmers, can lose their crop, depending on the weather, and just like grass, and flowers, are affected by weather, our faithfulness, our commitment to God, to loving him, is easily affected, by our circumstances, we're not consistent, are we, if it was plotted, on a graph, you'd have, over your life, your faithfulness, it'd be, like all over the place, you'd have growth, withering, growth, withering, growth, withering, generally, it'd be going uphill, but it'd be, all over the place, our faithfulness, is just like that, the contrast, with God, just one line, you see, end of verse 8, but, the word of our God, endures, forever, forever, his faithfulness, endures, forever, the Lord God, his faithfulness, to his promises, is not like grass, not all like a flower, that fades, when he makes a promise, he never fails, his word, which is where you find, his promises, where you learn, of his character, and his plan, to stay faithful to us, his word endures, it lasts, it remains forever, there will never be a day, when God will fail, on what he's promised, never a day, he'll always come through, he said, his glory will be revealed, and that is going to come, it came in the person of Jesus, he said, he's going to return, he's definitely on his way, to us, at some point, he's saying to them, you're in exile, but I haven't forgotten you, you may be tempted, to turn away from me, maybe you have, you've withered like grass, but I will never wither, from you,

I will never wither, from my promises, that I've made to you, that faithfulness, we see it fulfilled, in Jesus life, don't we, faithfulness, in sending his son, faithfulness in Jesus, the way he lived, faithfulness in Jesus, going all the way, to the cross, making the agreement, the contract, the covenant, that is written, in his blood, that he will always, forgive us, the proclamation, our misery, and affliction, will be no more, that we will receive, double, for all our sins, we can't even, keep promises, to one another, never mind God, but God is faithful, his lasting, enduring, love, for his people, will never diminish, so we've got, the Lord reveals his glory, the Lord is faithful, to his promises, and then the final section, verses 9 to 11, we, what we see, is more about, what these promises mean, for God's people, we see the Lord's arm, rules, the Lord's arm rules, we see, God's people, are not in charge, at this moment, they're in Babylon, it doesn't feel like, they're in charge, it's the Babylon, they're under a, under a different, a foreign nation, and perhaps, for them, right now, as they kicked out, perhaps, it feels to them, like God isn't in charge, either, it feels, like they've been left, to the wolves, left to fend, for themselves, in the world, this is the comforting, message of the good news, of what it means, that the, what the coming, of the Lord means, what it will be like, when he is arrived, what it is, like now, here is your God, let me tell you, about him, here he is, let me proclaim him, to you, he, verse 10, he is sovereign, he has power, he rules, verse 11,

he tends his flock, his people, like a shepherd, he gathers them, in his arms, he carries them, close to his heart, he gently leads, those that are young, the Babylonian empire, is not in charge, the empires, the institutions, the people, that we look to, and lead, in a sense, they, well they do lead, are the nations, over the world, now,

Donald John, is not in charge, he is not sovereign, Putin, is not in charge, he is not sovereign, even your, bosses at work, they are not, in charge, they are not sovereign, our God is sovereign, he is in power, he is in charge, of all things, he has ultimate power, over every human nation, over every human institution, over every human leader, and he is all powerful, and he rules, and he governs, with might, with his arm, and yet, this is quite astonishing, he, he is all powerful, and full of might, and power, and ruling, and yet, he doesn't use, that might, and power, to be, he's like, some sort of, tyrannical maniac, he does, he's not a power hungry God, who's abusive, or corrupt, but he, he uses his power, as we see, he uses his, his power, to show mercy, and love, to his people, to serve them, mention to the kids, as we're talking about, this time of year, one of the things, they've not got it on TV, this year, but I normally love, watching lambing live, have you ever seen lambing live, it's amazing, it's on for a whole week, and they do like a, they do like a roundup show, like for about, an hour 45 minutes, normally, in the evening, of where they show, like live, all the births, that have happened, with the lambs, in a particular farm, and you see that, the guys, the farmers, they're up all night, there's someone, they're doing shifts, assisting the ewe, in a difficult delivery, and they're nurturing, and helping, and then a few days later, or maybe, they show how the little lamb, that's only just made it, is getting on, and what you see, is that there's this, deep connection, between the farmer, and all his sheep, and he's looking after them, he's delivering them, they make sure, that someone's on shift, like somebody always, has to be there, to make sure, when the labour starts, that there's someone there, nursing and caring, for the ewes, and their lambs, it's not on this year, but I love lambing live, the language we get here, is of intimate, care, between a shepherd, and his sheep, living God, has a deep affection, for you, for his people, he uses his might, and his power, as I said, not as a tyrannical maniac, but he uses his might, and his power, to carry you, through your life, to lead you, when you don't know, which way to go, and to hold you, in his arms, to tend to your needs, there's a beautiful thing, right here, and in verse 10, look with me, see what it says, it says, see his reward, is with him, and his recompense, accompanies him, the flock, is his reward, his compensation, what the living God receives, what Jesus receives, is a flock, that he loves, that is with him, it means, the church, the people of God, that is his prize, that is his prize, that is his treasure, that's his reward, when he comes in might, he comes, with his prize, and his reward, to rule, this is the comforting message, of the gospel, we're awaiting, our true home, we live with distress, anxiety, we get overwhelmed, we doubt God, and his promises, sometimes it feels like, he's left us, and we wonder, will he ever, when will he ever, come back,

[32 : 55] and fix everything, the comfort, that God's people needed here, and the comfort, that we need to hear today, is that he will, that he will come back, that he, will prepare you, to meet him, if you turn to him, he'll prepare you, he will do the work, in your heart, cleaning you up, so that when he arrives, you're ready to meet him, he's faithful, to his promises, he'll never leave you, in fact, he carries you close, to his heart, you are the apple, of his eye, he will shepherd you, and lead you through life, giving hope, in the darkness, he treasures you, you are his treasure, and his reward, and he loves you, this is the message, that needs to be heard, this is the message, that comforts, in any situation, anything, that you're going through, it is the message, when we're in distress, and pain, it is the thing, that we need to hear, that will alleviate, the pain, that we're, any pain, that we're going through, whether that's huge, or whether that's small, this is the comforting message, of the good news, of Jesus Christ, let me pray,

Almighty God, we thank you, for the good news, we thank you, for your son, and we thank you, that you've revealed, yourself to us, in the face, of your son, we know, that we are, our faithfulness, with us, we know, that it falls, but we thank you, that you endure, and your faithfulness, to us, endures forever, we see that, in you sending your son, and Lord, we thank you, that you rule, with a mighty arm, we thank you, that you treasure us, we thank you, that you shepherd us, that you gather us, that you carry us, and lead us, and that you tend to us, we thank you, that you speak tenderly, to us, not harsh, or with words, not with harsh words, Lord, you don't rule, with corruption, or, you don't abuse, your power, but you use your power, to be merciful, and gracious, and so I thank you, that whatever we've got, going on in our lives, whenever we need comfort, that the message, of the gospel, would comfort our hearts, as we live, away from our true home, in heaven, would you

prepare us, through the rest of our lives, to wait for the coming, of the Lord, we ask for this, in the name of Jesus,
Amen.