

TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND JOY

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INTRODUCTION:

Last Lord's Day, the message was brought to us from the conclusion of Isaiah 40, and we learned from that message that there are two kinds of waiting. There is a waiting that causes our strength to dissipate, and there is a waiting that gathers our strength for us. There is a waiting that renews, an anticipation that is full of joy, and there is a waiting that is an emotional corrosive. This week we want to develop this idea further, and to do so from a few verses earlier in that same chapter.

THE TEXT:

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever" (Is. 40:1-8).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

The text begins with comfort (v. 1). Godly preparation does not begin with affliction, but such preparation actually ends the affliction. How so? The prophet speaks comfortably to Jerusalem, telling her that her sins are forgiven before the great deliverance arrives (v. 2). The next verse is a prophecy of the ministry of John the Baptist (v. 3; Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; John 1:23), who prepared the way for the coming Christ. Every valley is lifted up, and the high places are humbled—for just one example, Zebulun is humbled, and Galilee is exalted (Is. 9:1). Notice that this time of preparation is a time when things are made level, not uneven, when things are made smooth, not rough, when things are made straight, not crooked (v. 4). This time is aiming for a particular result, which is the revelation of the glory of the Lord, which all mankind will see (v. 5; Luke 3:4-6). The prophet is told to cry out—but what is he told to cry? Men are like the grass, and their glory is like the flowers of the field (v. 6)—and as the grass withers and the flowers fades, so men also fade (because of the breath of the Lord). This passage is quoted by the apostle Peter (I Pet. 1:24-25), to the effect that the Word preached to Christians is the Word that stands forever, and it is the Word by which Christians are born again (I Pet. 1:23). This means that men who are regenerate are no longer numbered with the withered grass and fading flowers. That Word is preached "by the Holy Spirit" (I Pet. 1:12), which is of course the same breath that makes the flowers fade.

TWO KINDS OF SORROW:

Just as there are two kinds of waiting, so also there are two kinds of sorrow—and they parallel the two kinds of waiting. One dissipates strength and the other restores it. One kind of sorrow rakes you over the coals, and the other is the word that speaks comfort. "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (2 Cor. 7:10). One sorrow leads to comfort and no regret, and the other leads to sorrow upon sorrow. You can be sorry today, sorry tomorrow, and you can die sorry. That is not what Christ came to do for you.

REPENTANT OR PENITENTIAL:

Our English words repentance and penitence are obviously related to one another (via the Latin *paenitere*), and we do have to be careful not to be superstitious about words. But there are different connotations to these words (in English) having to do with their history in our theological debates. Beginning with Tyndale, who translated *metanoieite* as repent, instead of do penance, we have had a long history of distinguishing what it means to receive the grace of God, and what it means to try to surreptitiously earn the grace of God. Luther's 95 Theses began with this whole issue of penitence understood in gospel terms: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying "Repent ye," etc., intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence."

THE REAL DEAL:

True repentance should take the time to confess and forsake real sin, and the time should not be wasted through indulgence in nebulous angst about possible sinfulness that is always carefully undefined. "Penitential" seasons can be put to a genuinely good use if they are a time when serious, once-for-all mortification of particular sins occurs—if real sins and real bad habits are uprooted from your life. Pray, practice and pursue Colossians 3:5 and 3:8. Who could possibly be against that? The real problems come in when sin is not really dealt with, and yet the times of squirrel-cage run penitence don't even slow down, and the penitent daily comes to resemble more closely the policemen in Penzance. "Yes, but you don't go!"

GLAD TIDINGS:

Jesus assumes that such times can be spiritually healthy, but He requires His followers to keep it a secret that they are observing such a time. "Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly" (Matt. 6:16-18). A fast is a time for reflection, personal discipline, and confession, and if you are doing this during a penitential season, Jesus requires that you take reasonable measures to hide what you are doing from others. Why? Because your life should embody the truth that this entire season is a time when we are bringing to the world tidings of comfort and joy.



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