

## SPEAK COMFORT

### ISAIAH 40:1-2. COMFORT, COMFORT MY PEOPLE

1“Comfort (Hebrew: *na·hamu*—from *na·ham*), *comfort my people,*” says your God (Hebrew: *elo·he·kem*). 2“Speak comfortably (Hebrew: *al·leb*—to the heart) to Jerusalem; and call out to her that (Hebrew: *ki*—that or because) her warfare is accomplished, that (*ki*) her iniquity is pardoned, that (*ki*) she has received of Yahweh’s (Hebrew: *yhwh*—Yahweh’s) hand double for all her sins.”

“**Comfort**” (*na·hamu*—from *na·ham*) (v. 1a). This word, *na·ham*, is found frequently in the Old Testament and has two basic meanings. The first is regret, as in the Lord regretting that he made humans (Genesis 6:6). The second is comfort or consolation for someone who is experiencing grief or distress, which is its meaning in this verse.

“**says your God**” (*elo·he·kem*) (v. 1c). In the last phrase (1b) God identified the recipients of comfort as “my people.” Now he identifies himself as “your God”—a phrase that drives home the bond that exists between Yahweh and the Jewish people.

It is Elohim who gives this order to comfort his people.

“**Speak comfortably**” (*al·leb*—to the heart) (v. 2a). A literal translation would be, “Speak to the heart.” The heart, in that culture as in ours, represents the core of the person—his or her innermost being. If we are trying to comfort a person by speaking to his or her heart, we will tread softly and speak tenderly.

This is the message to be spoken to Jerusalem—to these Jewish exiles. It is a single message expressed in three different ways, each introduced by the little word, *ki*. Jerusalem is to be comforted:

(1) Because (*ki*) “she has served her term.” She has served her sentence. The time for her release has come.

(2) Because (*ki*) “her warfare is accomplished.” Does this mean that the penalty has equaled the offense or that Yahweh has decided to count their penalty as sufficient? **Surely the latter**, but this verse is unconcerned with the debate concerning salvation by works versus salvation by grace. The point here is to assure these people that Yahweh will no longer treat them as debtors, but will count their debt as paid in full.

(3) Because (*ki*) “she has received of Yahweh’s hand double for all her sins.” We should not approach this word, “double,” as mathematicians. It is a poetic way of saying that Jerusalem has paid a great price for her sins, and Yahweh will not require further payment.

### ISAIAH 40:3-5. PREPARE THE WAY OF YAHWEH

3*The voice of one who calls out,*  
“*Prepare the way of Yahweh in the wilderness!*  
*Make a level highway in the desert for our God.*”

*4Every valley shall be exalted,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low.  
The uneven shall be made level,  
and the rough places a plain.*

*5The glory (Hebrew: *kebod*) of Yahweh shall be revealed,  
and all flesh (Hebrew: *basar*—flesh) shall see it together;  
for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken it.”*

**“Prepare the way of Yahweh in the wilderness! Make a level highway in the desert for our God”** (v. 3b). We have been expecting that Yahweh would prepare a highway through the desert for these exiles to return to Jerusalem. What we find, however, is the opposite—**Jerusalem is to prepare a highway for God**. Two questions come to mind. First, why would God need these people to prepare a highway for him? Second, how should they go about the task? We must not approach this poetic language literally. God does not need these people to wield shovel and pick-axe to create a highway through the desert for him. It is the **wilderness of their lives and the desert of their hearts that require preparation**. If they are to prepare for the Lord’s coming, their preparation must involve some sort of **spiritual discipline**, such as **prayer and the reading of scripture**—such as proper **worship** and pure lives. The voice does not specify the form that their preparation should take. It is enough for these exiles to know that they must prepare for the Lord’s coming. Their history and traditions will teach them how to do that.

**“Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low”** (v. 4a). It is the **obstacles of sin and lack of faith** that must be removed so that the Lord can return to take his place among them once again.

**“The uneven shall be made level, and the rough places a plain”** (v. 4b). This is another way of expressing the same thought—that the people must smooth out the uneven ground and the rough places in their lives in preparation for the Lord’s coming.

**“The glory (*kebod*) of Yahweh shall be revealed“** (v. 5a). The word glory (*kebod*) is used in the Bible to speak of various things, but is used especially to speak of God’s glory— We Are Making Room For The Glory

**“and all flesh (*basar*—flesh) shall see it together”** (v. 5b). This is a surprise. The vision of God’s glory that was denied to Moses shall be granted to “all people” or “all flesh.” If Moses had seen God’s glory, he would have died, but the implication here is that “all people” will see God’s glory and live. The vision won’t be limited to the Jewish people—or great Godly leaders like Moses—or great saints like Mother Teresa. We ordinary folk, too, will see God’s glory.

**“for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken it”** (v. 5c). This is our guarantee that this will happen. Yahweh has spoken, and Yahweh’s word has the power to accomplish that which it speaks. Yahweh’s word is trustworthy. Yahweh keeps his promises—a fact that is apparent in the fact that he is now working to redeem

these sinful people so that he might honor the covenant promises made so much earlier to Abram.

### **ISAIAH 40:6-8. THE WORD OF OUR GOD STANDS FOREVER**

*6The voice of one saying, "Cry!"*

*One said, "What shall I cry?"*

*"All flesh is (Hebrew: basar—flesh is) like grass,  
and all its glory is like the flower of the field.*

*7The grass withers,*

*the flower fades,*

*because (Hebrew: ki—because) Yahweh's breath (Hebrew: ruah—breath or spirit) blows on it.*

*Surely the people (Hebrew: ha·am) are like grass.*

*8The grass withers,*

*the flower fades;*

*but the word of our God stands forever."*

**"The voice of one saying, 'Cry!' One said, 'What shall I cry?'"** (v. 6a).

Neither the speaker nor the person addressed is identified. The order is "Cry!"

The question is "What shall I cry?" Before the prophet or preacher can proclaim the word faithfully, the Lord must reveal the word to him or her.

**"All flesh is (basar—flesh is) like grass, and all its glory is like the flower of the field"** (v. 6b).

Like grass, flowers are fragile. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of this fragility: "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today exists, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, won't he much more clothe you, you of little faith?" (Matthew 6:30).

**"The grass withers, the flower fades, because (ki—when or because) Yahweh's breath (ruah—breath or spirit) blows on it"** (v. 7a).

Shepherds would be familiar with sirocco winds—hot, dry, dust-laden winds originating in the desert and blowing across their grazing lands.

**"Surely the people (ha·am) are like grass"** (v. 7b). Now the metaphor is made more explicit. We can learn from grass and flowers, which fade in the sirocco winds. They remind us of our **own impermanency—our own fragility**. Just as the grass and flowers prosper for awhile and then wither and die in the sirocco winds, so we also prosper for **awhile and then wither and die**.

**"The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God stands forever"** (v. 8). This is the point. Like grass and flowers, humans wither and fade, but the word of God will stand forever. The word of God is the **constant on which we can depend day in and day out**. God gave his word to Abram and David and others in the form of a covenant that promised blessings to their descendants. We, too, fail God, but God will not fail us.

### **ISAIAH 40:9-11. BEHOLD, YOUR GOD**

*9You who tell good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain.*

*You who tell good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with strength.*

*Lift it up. Don't be afraid.*

*Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold, your God!"*

*10Behold (Hebrew: hin·neh—Look!), the Lord Yahweh will come as a mighty one, and his arm will rule for him.*

*Behold (Hebrew: hin·neh—Look!), his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.*

*11He will feed his flock like a shepherd.*

*He will gather the lambs in his arm, and carry them in his bosom.*

*He will gently lead those who have their young.*

**"You who tell good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who tell good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with strength"** (v. 9a).

(1) There is an urgency to the proclamation. The herald needs to move smartly to carry out the mission of proclamation. (2) The herald is to proclaim the message with strength—to shout the message loudly—to make sure that everyone hears. (3) The message to be proclaimed is good news—glad tidings. **"Lift it up. Don't be afraid"** (v. 9b). There is no reason to fear opposition. The Lord is in charge. There is no reason to fear embarrassment. The Lord will do what he has said he will do.

**"Say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold, your God!'"** (v. 9c). God is with them—that their punishment is finished and their servitude is ended. The message is that God will make it possible for them to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their city and God's temple.

**"Behold"** (*hin·neh—Look!*) God Is In This!!!

**"the Lord Yahweh will come as a mighty one, and his arm will rule for him"** (v. 10b). (1) the Lord comes (2) that he comes with might and (3) that he will rule in power.

If that is true—and we can be sure that it is—then the work of God's opponents will amount to nothing.

(*hin·neh—Look!*) **"his reward is with him, and his recompense before him"** (v. 10c).

If the exiles are to receive the reward, their reward will be release from servitude and freedom to return to Jerusalem. If God is to receive the reward, his reward will be the exiles—his people—his children. Once they were lost, but now they are found. That is a great reward.

**"He will feed his flock like a shepherd"** (v. 11a). Each of the three parts of this verse emphasizes the nurturing care of God for his people. He will feed them like a shepherd. He will make them to "lie down in green pastures. He (will lead them) beside still waters" (Psalm 23:2).

**"He will gather the lambs in his arm, and carry them in his bosom"** (v. 11b). Note the contrasting use of the word "arm" in verse 10b, where "his arm rules," and verse 11b, where "he will gather the lambs in his arm." The strong arm capable of wielding a sword is also capable of gentleness and compassion.

Lambs, like little children, cannot walk fast or far. When the flock moves, their little legs wear out quickly. If nobody helps them, they will be lost to the flock—but the shepherd will not allow that to happen. He alone has the ability to pick up the lambs and carry them, and that is what he does. Just imagine how comforting it must be for a tired lamb to be picked up and carried in the strong arms of the shepherd—next to the shepherd’s bosom—next to his heart.

**“He will gently lead those who have their young”** (v. 11c). The mother sheep will be concerned for her lamb and will want to have her lamb nearby. If the shepherd picks up her lamb and carries it in his arms, the mother sheep will follow close by. She will not be afraid for her lamb, because she knows the shepherd—but she will follow close by nevertheless. It is the gentlest possible leadership that the shepherd performs here—leading the mother sheep by carrying her lamb in his arms.

**26**Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these *things*, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that *he is* strong in power; not one faileth.

**27**Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God?

**“My way is hidden from Yahweh”** (v. 27b). This is what Jacob/Israel has been saying. “My way is hidden from Yahweh, and the justice due me is disregarded by my God.”

But this has to be false. How would Yahweh, who keeps track of each and every heavenly body, lose track of his own people—the people with whom he has covenanted? How would Yahweh, who knows the way of each star and asteroid, not know the way of his people? Ridiculous!