



## Life Guide

applying God's Word to life

**Coming Soon: The God of His Word!  
December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

### Isaiah 40:1-11

But Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. <sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. <sup>5</sup> And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." <sup>6</sup> A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. <sup>7</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." <sup>9</sup> You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" <sup>10</sup> See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. <sup>11</sup> He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young

1. Think of people that you know whom you might describe as a "woman or man of their word." Explain why you find this admirable about the person you have in mind. Does the quality come with any pitfalls? **Answers will vary on this one. I'm guessing that most people will find this an admirable trait because it is a quality that makes the person in question faithful and reliable. I so appreciate the people in my life that I can depend on. Rarely do they disappoint. If there is a pitfall, it may be that I don't appreciate the fact that people of integrity may "call me out" for my own failure to follow through**

on a promise. I suspect I may be a disappointment at times when I fail to live up to this trait that I so appreciate in others.

2. Read Isaiah 39 and compare it to Isaiah 40:1-11. What sharp contrast do you notice? Why would God have Isaiah say these things years before they took place (the events of Isaiah 39 = 100 years after Isaiah/ the events of Isaiah 40 = 170 years after Isaiah)? **There is a stark contrast between the threats made in Isaiah 39 and the great comfort offered in Isaiah 39. There is no doubt that God wants to "wake his people up" to the harm their sin is causing. God's warnings are always issued with repentance in mind. At the same time, God speaks comfort in advance so that when his people do repent, they are not driven to despair. God has not "washed his hands" of these people. He loves them and has, through the promised Savior, redeemed them from their sin and its punishment. We have this same comfort when confronted with our own sin. God's promised forgiveness is always there no matter what we've done or been.**
3. How does God use the imagery of verses 3-4 to indicate the problems found in the human heart? **God uses the geography of the Arabian Desert to illustrate the roadblocks caused by the heart's sin and unbelief. The usual path between Jerusalem and Babylon would be to follow the water – on a northward, then eastward trajectory. God wanted to come to his people directly through a desert path filled with mountains and valleys. He calls on his people to build a highway for him. It's a call to repentance. He wants them to acknowledge the mountains of pride and the valleys of unbelief that are blocking him from dwelling with them and in them. Because God is the God of his Word, his message has the power to work the miracle it calls for!**
4. How are we sinners and our faithfulness like grass and flowers? In the same word picture, what is the "breath of the Lord"? **There's an interesting picture here. There are seasons when the desert produces grass and flowers, but then, in a 48 hour period the hot desert winds can "kill" them off. They are gone as quickly as they sprung up. The same is true of us. God made people to live forever, warning that sin would bring death (spiritual, physical, and eternal death). Because of sin, our days are short. Even our best efforts to be faithful fall short of the perfection God demands. Our faithfulness cannot save us. It only adds to our deserved punishment. God's breath in this picture is the curse he placed on sin – announcing that its wages is death**

(Romans 6:23). That curse, spoken in Eden, still blows hot to this day.

5. Agree or disagree and why? Only God's Word works repentance? Agree. Repentance in its widest sense is a turning from sin to God's promised forgiveness in Christ. The Spirit works repentance. While it's true that people can feel remorse apart from the Spirit's work, that remorse is not repentance. Think of Judas who came to recognize the wrong he did. But this was not Spirit worked. Judas did not turn to God's forgiveness in Christ. He despaired. At other times, rather than despair, people become self-righteous and think they can save themselves. Only God's Word works repentance.
6. Agree or disagree and why? The fact that "...the word of our God endures forever" is a great comfort. Agree. God gives his Word to save sinners. Of course, those who do not come to faith in Christ might "disagree" with this statement. They may see only the threats of God's Word. They would find no comfort in the thought that God's Word is eternal. But we need to realize that God did not give us his Word to terrorize sinners. Theologians say that it is the "strange" or "foreign" work of God to afflict sinners. His purpose in doing so is to bring them to see their sin and their need for the Savior. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23). The same theologians point out that God's "proper work" is to save sinners with the comforting promise of his enduring Word.
7. When will the events of verse 10 take place? What is the Lord's reward and recompense? The events of verse 10 will unfold on the Last Day or Judgment Day. The Lord will return as the Conqueror of sin, death, and hell. His mighty arm will have gotten him the victory. In his company is his reward and recompense. This is not a financial reward. These are the souls that Jesus won with his blood. In this verse we see all our loved ones who fell asleep in Jesus.
8. How do the words of verse 9 relate to 2 Peter 3:9? Agree or disagree and why? We have a role in speeding up the Lord's return. Verse 9 reminds us that we have work to do. We have good news to shout to our world – Jesus is the world's Savior from sin. This truth connects very nicely with the promise found in 2 Peter 3:9. The Lord Jesus isn't slow in keeping his promise to return. He's being patient with us and our world as we spread his message. With this in mind, we might agree that we play an important role in speeding up the Lord's

return. We pray: "Your kingdom come." We are the answer to that prayer as we spread the gospel throughout the world. The end will come when the last person of God's elect comes to faith. As we get the Word out, it has the opportunity to reach that soul. Of course, God has set the time and the hour of Jesus' return. We can't speed that up. We have no idea if the last of God's elect has been born yet. The point is simply this: We have work to do while we wait. Let's be busy doing it!

9. What is so significant about the fact that our Good Shepherd "gathers the lambs in his arms...and gently leads those that have young"? I love this passage. This is God's way of telling us that not one of his people will be left behind. As the Lord Jesus shepherds us to heaven, he will make sure that even the youngest, weakest, most vulnerable among us makes it to our heavenly home.

### *The Sovereign Lord Will Rescue His People from Babylon*

#### *An Introduction*

#### **Isaiah 40:1–2**

**40 "Comfort, comfort my people,  
says your God.  
<sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and proclaim to her  
that her hard service has been completed,  
that her sin has been paid for,  
that she has received from the LORD's hand  
double for all her sins.**

Not just once, "Comfort", but twice, "Comfort, comfort." So the Lord begins with a single repeated command. The command flows from the mind of God, and God himself directed it toward his messengers, who will announce the good news of his love. God intends this comfort for his people. He claims them, "my people." After all their unfaithfulness, all their rebellion, all their sins, they are still his people. God remains their God, faithful and gracious, as he promised to be: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exodus 34:6, 7).

The prose of the previous chapter disappears, and the poetry begins again. Without an introductory comment, we are in the midst of God's thought, "Comfort, comfort my people." Who should comfort them? Isaiah? Of course, but not only Isaiah. The command extends to more than just one person. In the Old Testament, God's message of comfort came through the prophets; in the New Testament, through the apostles. All who share the gospel carry out God's command to comfort his people. This command applies to all who serve as public ministers of God and all believers who share the gospel. All believers share the important task of bringing God's comfort to those who need it.

The second verse introduces us to the method by which the comfort was to be shared, "Speak." Through the means of human language, God transfers his comfort to others. The process is simple. The comfort originates with God, who reveals it in human language so that it can be extended to others by the same vehicle or means. The gospel comes in words, the means through which God extends his grace and mercy. "Speak tenderly," God directs. Speak to the heart and proclaim, or call out. Use your voice.

What is the message? God tells us exactly the content of the words he wants spoken. Three clauses identify the content of the message. First, the hard service of God's people is completed. Second, their sins have been paid for, and third, God's people have received abundant blessing from the Lord. Each of these clauses begins with *that*. All of these clauses announce an action that has already taken place. It's done, even though all these things lie in the future. Babylon had not yet become a powerful nation; Judah had not yet been carried away captive; Cyrus had not yet been born, much less issued an edict that allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem; and certainly Jesus had not yet entered this world. The events God announced were so certain that God speaks as if they had already been completed. No doubt exists about this future.

The "hard service" of the first clause means military service and can also mean difficulty and trials. On the one hand, the promise means that the Babylonian captivity has come to end. The end of the Babylonian captivity brought comfort to God's people. On the other hand, sin and death forge chains of bondage for every sinner. Every sinner longs for the announcement that he or she is free from such bondage. Because Jesus has come, we are released from death. We are no longer slaves to sin. We are no longer locked in the dungeon because of God's wrath and anticipating an eternity of punishment in hell. Our hard service is completed, not because we have achieved release by our own effort or because we have done our time and satisfied the law. Our bondage is over because God has achieved our release through his Son, the Messiah.

The second clause announces the forgiveness of sins. The debt caused by every twisted and perverted deed committed by God's people and all humanity has been paid off. This does not mean that the 70 years of Judah's captivity have been enough to pay the debt that Judah's sins created. Judah could not atone for her own guilt or for the guilt of any other nation or people. But her sins have been paid for. If Judah could not pay the debt, how would her sins be paid for? The answer provides the reason why Isaiah's prophecy remains so important. Someone will come to pay for her sins. In chapter 53, Isaiah clearly describes how this will happen. The sins of Judah and all the world will be paid for by the vicarious suffering and death of the Servant of the Lord. "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (53:6).

The third clause is twice as long as the other two and underscores the grace of God. Isaiah tells us that God's people receive a double portion from the hand of the Lord. The God of the covenant, Jehovah, the Savior-God, holds these blessings. They belong to the Lord. The blessings originate in the heart of God; he possesses them, and he dispenses them to his people. The people only receive them from the Lord's hand, and from his hand alone. The people do not deserve these blessings. They cannot be earned either by sacrifice or by suffering. Instead, God distributes them by free grace.

He offers a double portion. This is not a quantity measured out in two portions. The word *double* simply means that God's blessings are ample, abundant, and beyond expectations. The sins of God's people have deserved punishment, but God has offered forgiveness and eternal life instead of punishment. The apostle Paul grasped the meaning of this clause when he wrote, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20).

These three clauses not only identify the content of the message of God's heralds; they also provide a road map to follow through the remaining chapters of Isaiah's prophecy. The 27 chapters of the last part of Isaiah can be divided into three nine-chapter sections. The first section (chapters 40–48) focuses on the release of God's people from their captivity in Babylon and develops the thought that "her hard service has been completed." The second section (chapters 49–57) announces the coming of the Great Servant of the Lord, who will be pierced and crushed for the sins of the people. How appropriate that the center of this section and the center of the entire last portion of the prophecy is the 53rd chapter. The sins of the people have "been paid for" completely by the Redeemer. Finally, the last section (chapters 58–66) takes us to the grand results of the Messiah's great work. God's people receive magnificent blessings—a

double portion—from God because of the suffering and death of the Savior.

The two verses provide an appropriate beginning to the study of the remaining chapters of Isaiah.

*Here is Your God!*

**Isaiah 40:3–5**

**<sup>3</sup>A voice of one calling:**

**“In the desert prepare  
the way for the LORD;  
make straight in the wilderness  
a highway for our God.**

**<sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
the rugged places a plain.**

**<sup>5</sup>And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
and all mankind together will see it.  
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”**

As dramatically as the first verse, Isaiah continues, “A voice of one calling.” A human voice had responded to the command of God to speak comfort to his people, Jerusalem. The word *voice* appears three times in the next nine verses. The verses can be divided by the appearance of the word. God communicated his message through human speech—the means through which God works on the hearts of his people. God does not work through telepathy or inner illumination. He communicates his thoughts to humans through human words expressed by a human voice. No human knows the gospel of God by intuition or meditation. Humans learn of the love of God when messengers give voice to the gospel; God hasn’t promised to work in any other way.

Seven hundred years after Isaiah wrote these words, John the Baptist appeared. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that he came preaching, and all three cite this passage, identifying John the Baptist as the voice who calls. But John the Baptist was not the only voice that fulfilled this prophecy. All preachers have a similar calling to announce the good news of God’s love for all the world. Finally, all believers respond to the Lord’s call when they give voice to the gospel and witness to others.

The message of John the Baptist and every messenger of God remains, a message of repentance. Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. The prophecy pictures the Lord coming to his people from the wilderness. In

preparation for his coming, the people are to prepare his way by removing all obstacles to his coming. The mountains, rough ground, and rugged places represent the natural condition of the hearts of the people; by nature all human hearts are hard as rock. The call of the gospel empowers human hearts to believe. Repentance is a turning away from sin and a trusting in the forgiveness God offers. That was John’s message in the wilderness and the message of every believer who gives voice to the hope within. Through the words of the gospel, God knocks on the door of an impenitent, unbelieving heart and creates faith. The obstacles disappear when the Holy Spirit creates faith.

The picture recalls the coming of the Lord to deliver his people from the bondage of Egypt. God called Moses in the wilderness at the burning bush and went with him when he appeared before Pharaoh. The Lord came from the wilderness with Moses and brought his people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai in the wilderness. Isaiah’s references here to the wilderness remind God’s people that he will come again as he did that first time. Isaiah added a further thought. Just as the glory of the Lord appeared to the people of the exodus in order to lead them and assure them of his presence, so “the glory of the LORD will be revealed” once again. The same God will work deliverance. Of course, this is a poetic and prophetic picture, not a literal one. We do not look for the Lord’s return in some remote wilderness, but we do wait for him, and by faith we have prepared our hearts for his coming. The picture here comes from an ancient custom of kings. An ancient king sent messengers ahead of his arrival, so that the road might be made level and smooth for the king’s journey.

**Isaiah 40:6–8**

**<sup>6</sup>A voice says, “Cry out.”**

**And I said, “What shall I cry?”**

**“All men are like grass,**

**and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.**

**<sup>7</sup>The grass withers and the flowers fall,**

**because the breath of the LORD blows on them.**

**Surely the people are grass.**

**<sup>8</sup>The grass withers and the flowers fall,**

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

The voice again. The word stands forcefully at the beginning of the verse with a command: “Cry out.” This time God directs his command to a single messenger, perhaps Isaiah as a representative of all messengers. But precisely who is to cry out is left indefinite and vague. Once again the Lord appears to cover all his messengers in these verses. Every messenger

of God is to be like Isaiah. The identity of the messenger disappears behind the news. The news becomes more important than the one who delivers it. Even the personality of Isaiah disappeared behind the glorious message he proclaimed. We know only a little about this prophet, but we know a great deal about his message.

The reappearance of the voice reminds us that the message of God comes to humans through a speaking voice. No one becomes a believer without the gospel. God the Holy Spirit works through the gospel as it is spoken or read. Without the Word, there is no faith; without the Word, sinners do not know of God's grace. No human mind could imagine what God has done out of undeserved love for sinners. No human could come to faith in the God of love without the gospel—the words that communicate God's love—just as no human mind could know sin except through the words of God's law (Romans 7:7). God has chosen to enter human hearts through the simple means of words. He commands his people, "Cry out"—preach, witness, communicate, proclaim—and he promises to work through the words of their witnessing.

The messenger asks an important question: "What shall I cry?" What follows defines a specific message—a message of law and gospel. The law comes first and destroys all human pride. Walt Whitman, the poet of *Leaves of Grass*, may have relished the idea that all men are grass, but these words are far from his belief in democratic equality. The prophet's message leaves no human glory standing before God's great majesty and power. Twice we see the word *all*. All humans and all human achievements are included. That message devastates the human mind with its pride. All of us want to consider ourselves important, and we desire to do something important. Our history books record the events of human achievement. The monuments of the ages stand as testimony to great people as surely as the arts perpetuate the thoughts and lives of significant people. But all humans are like grass, and every achievement—all their glory—is nothing more than the blossom of a flower, which blooms beautifully but soon drops its petals and dies.

The prophet repeats the thought in these verses so there is no mistake about God's message. In the face of the Lord's hot breath, both the people, who are grass, and their achievements, which are flowers, wither and fall. No matter what humans may accomplish, death still stalks every last one of us and will eventually pounce on us all and devour us. We are not to place our hopes and dreams on anything human, no matter how glorious it seems. The phrase "the breath of the LORD" perhaps recalled the hot dry winds that frequently blew across Palestine from the desert. In a short time such a hot, persistent wind could dry up everything and make life in Jerusalem miserable.

The passage sets all human thought and effort on one side and the Word of the Lord on the other. We cannot escape the idea of communication in these verses; it is the *Word* of our God that stands. *Word* corresponds very well with the word *voice* in this section. The Word of God communicates God's wrath against sin and his boundless love for all humans—law and gospel. The message is the Word of *our* God. Believers recognize their own sin and the grace of God. They confess that God has rescued them from their bondage of sin and death. All that is divine and belongs to God surpasses all that is human. Everything human fades and disappears; all that comes from God in his Word endures for all time. Finally, when the Lord returns, the earth and all that is within it will be destroyed (2 Peter 3:10). The Word of the Lord will survive even that catastrophe. It is permanent and enduring.

### Isaiah 40:9–11

**<sup>9</sup>You who bring good tidings to Zion,  
go up on a high mountain.**

**You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem,  
lift up your voice with a shout,  
lift it up, do not be afraid;  
say to the towns of Judah,  
"Here is your God!"**

**<sup>10</sup>See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,  
and his arm rules for him.**

**See, his reward is with him,  
and his recompense accompanies him.**

**<sup>11</sup>He tends his flock like a shepherd:  
He gathers the lambs in his arms  
and carries them close to his heart;  
he gently leads those that have young.**

The word *voice* appears for the third time but this time not as the first word of the verse. Two ideas receive emphasis before we read the word *voice*. First, the Word of God rises far above anything human. It deserves to be proclaimed from the highest mountain. God directs the messengers who possess the "word of our God" (verse 8) to go up to a high place where their message can be broadcast to the widest audience. Second, the message they were to proclaim is "good tidings." This is the gospel—the good news of God's tender love for his people. In the verses to follow, we will learn more about that good news.

God intends the "good tidings" for his people—for Zion and Jerusalem. The messengers of God are to use their voices to proclaim the

gospel to these people. The messengers are encouraged not to be fearful; the news is too wonderful and important. They are not to whisper it but to shout it from the high mountains. The people must hear the message; God works in human hearts through it.

If the breath of the Lord caused the grass and flowers of humanity to wither, why would anyone want to hear that the Lord is coming? The message is clear, “Here is your God!” But if he comes with fierce, hot judgment, humans will want to hide from him. People will call for the hills to cover them rather than face the Lord. Why would anyone want to rejoice and revel at his coming? We find the answer in the law and the gospel. Those who reject God will fear his coming, but those who believe will anticipate his coming and prepare for it, will actually look forward to it joyfully. The Lord’s good news works this change, for the good news reveals not God’s anger against sin and the sinner—that’s the message of the law—but his compassionate and gracious heart. Both law and gospel reveal the same God. The law reveals him as fierce in judgment. The gospel reveals him as gracious and loving.

Our eyes are to look to God and see his coming. What do we see? The Sovereign Lord, that is, the powerful, gracious, and faithful God of the covenant. He controls all things and comes in power. He comes leading the exiles back home from their captivity. He leads them in triumphant procession. And he has something with him—a reward. What he has is further described as a “recompense.” Both words indicate something that has been earned by the performance of some work. This reward is not what humans have stored up in God’s mind or heart because of their many good deeds. Luther suggests, “Though we should all our life go about attempting to please God, we should be nothing but worms in view of his majesty” (*Luther’s Works* [LW], American Edition, Volume 17, page 18). The entire Scripture announces that human works do not earn God’s reward. The previous section, which identified human glory as nothing but a temporary flower, will not allow us to say that the Sovereign Lord appears with the rewards earned by any humans. No, he comes with rich blessings, which he will freely give to his people. They will no longer have the misfortune, desolation, shame, pain, and tears they deserve because of their rebellion and sin.

God clearly brings this reward with him. The reward is the result of the work that God himself performed. God has obtained the reward by the suffering, death, and resurrection of his own Son. Through that work God has achieved forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and deliverance from

everything that would separate his people from him. Blood bought this reward, and God achieved it by his own work. Such blessings no human could achieve. God appears in this portrait ready to dispense these blessings to his people.

Because of his work, God has claimed us as his own, and by grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we surround this glorious and powerful Lord as sheep surround a shepherd. As God’s people, we are familiar with the picture of the shepherd tenderly caring for his flock. Jesus made use of the image (John 10), so did others like David (Psalm 23) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 34). The powerful Lord cares for his people. He places the lambs, weak and newly born, in the folds of his garment close to his heart. Those who have young need his special care to lead them. It is no wonder that this message, these good tidings, should be proclaimed from the mountains for all to hear.

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<sup>1</sup> Braun, J. A. (2001). [\*Isaiah 40-66\*](#) (pp. 12–23). Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Pub. House.