



MATT SEARLES

COMFORT  
&  
JOY

*Advent Devotions from Isaiah 40–55*

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## INTRODUCTION – ‘COMFORT MY PEOPLE’

*Comfort, comfort my people,  
says your God.*

(Isa. 40:1)

Under dark skies in Jerusalem, an old man called Simeon is waiting. He lives in a land of shadow, but he still hopes for light to dawn. He longs for Isaiah’s age-old prophecies to be fulfilled: promises of hope, of good news of salvation, of a suffering servant, and ultimately of God himself coming to dwell with his people. He longs for the ‘consolation’ of Israel (Luke 2:25), or as this same word is translated in Isaiah 40–55, the ‘comfort’ that God will bring. Then, one day, he holds a baby in his arms, and knows he may depart in peace. In Jesus, all these promises are being fulfilled.

The Christmas story is familiar to many of us, but perhaps it has become over-familiar. As we spend this Advent in the book of Isaiah, my prayer is that, like Simeon, we may have our eyes opened again to the beauty of our Saviour. I pray we might see afresh the astonishing blessings he brings, and our hearts would be warmed by the God who is so utterly *for* us.

Isaiah 40–55 is known as Isaiah’s ‘book of comfort’. After 39 chapters speaking of the people’s sin and the judgment of exile that they would face as a result, Isaiah 40–55 present promises of hope, of return from exile and of comfort from God – promises all fulfilled ultimately in Jesus.

Nowhere in the Old Testament paints a richer picture of Christ than Isaiah 40–55. These chapters are the primary Old Testament background for all the

hopes of the 'gospel'. The 'comfort' that God offers his people (40:1) is nothing less than his own presence with us, which we celebrate each Christmas. In short, to understand Jesus better and to delight more in the riches of his salvation, you could not find a better place to turn.

This Advent, join with Simeon in meditating on Isaiah's 'book of comfort', and experience with him the same comfort and joy as you behold our King in his beauty.



HERE IS YOUR GOD!  
(ISA. 40:1 – 11)

Mark's gospel has no account of the birth of Jesus. There are no angels, no shepherds on the hillside, no wise men, no star. Instead, Mark opens with John the Baptist – 'a voice of one calling in the wilderness' – preparing the way for Jesus, just as Isaiah 40 prophesied. To understand the ministry of Jesus, Mark doesn't point us back to his birth in the stable; he points us back to the promises of comfort from Isaiah 40, chief among which was God coming to dwell with his people. We might say that Isaiah 40:1–11 is Mark's Christmas story.

*Read Isaiah 40:1–11*

*In the wilderness prepare the way.* When the Lord came, it would not be in a marble palace or in a centre of worldly power. It would be in an unlikely and unpromising place, the wilderness. But in this desert place, God's glory would be made known (v. 5). Indeed, the wilderness itself would be gloriously transformed to become a place of abundance. It has always been God's way to work in the unpromising and hopeless places. Perhaps our lives seem like desert places – places where God's glory could never be seen, nor his presence known. Think of the newborn Christ lying in an animal feeding trough. It has always been God's way to shine light where it is least expected.

*Here is your God!* When the New Testament writers use the word 'gospel' or 'good news', they have in mind this section of Isaiah which repeatedly uses this word. The great promise of comfort in Isaiah, the good news of hope, is

that God would come to rescue and then dwell with his people. God coming to dwell with his people is good news not just because of what he *gives*, but because of who he *is*, what he is like. This will be the primary subject of Isaiah 40–55: the character and majesty of God. When Mark opens his gospel with a quote from Isaiah 40, it is to signify that these promises of comfort are being fulfilled in Jesus. God – the mighty God of Isaiah 40 – was coming to his people.

*See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.* Isaiah depicts a God whose power is without limit and who is uncontainable and unstoppable. But what does he do with this power? How does he use these mighty arms? Look at verse 11:

*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.*

When Jesus walked on this earth and stilled storms with a word, but then gently ministered to the sick, he was simply expressing what God has always been like: utterly powerful, but also gloriously tender and compassionate. This is the comfort we all need. This is the good news that we scarcely dare believe. Not only is there a God who wants relationship with us, but the *character* of this God is that of our tender and mighty Saviour, Jesus Christ.

If you are a Christian believer, no matter how small and frail you may feel, know that you are held in these mighty and powerful arms, and no-one can snatch you away. No matter how weak and sinful you may be, God uses these arms not to hold you at a distance, but to bring you close and embrace you. You are now, and ever will be, held close to his heart.



## WITH WHOM WILL YOU COMPARE ME? (ISA. 40:12–26)

The people in Isaiah's day were weary, facing hard times. They were small and vulnerable, and hope felt in short supply. Perhaps you can identify with these feelings. I certainly can. In such situations, how wonderful it is when someone says, 'I'm with you, I'm on your side.' This is what God is saying to us when Jesus is born as Immanuel – 'God with us'. But, of course, how much of a comfort it is to hear someone say 'I am with you' depends on who is speaking and whether they have the power to help. As you read today's passage, remember that it is *this* God who declares, 'I am with you', and whose coming to be with us we celebrate at Christmas.

*Read Isaiah 40:12–26*

*Who has measured the waters or weighed the mountains?* How much water could you hold in the palm of your hand? How far can you stretch with a hand breadth? How much weight could you carry in a basket? Verse 12 speaks of the immense power of God, but does so in visual ways, to fire our hearts and imaginations.

Picture the immensity of the oceans. It's hard to think about something that big, so to get a sense of scale, consider Point Nemo in the South Pacific Ocean, the furthest place from any land (1670 miles to be precise). If you were cast adrift there, with nothing but inky-dark sea in every direction, you'd be so remote that often the closest other human beings to you would be the crew of the International Space Station when it passed overhead. I imagine you'd feel



pretty small compared to this vast terrifying ocean. Yet God holds this ocean in the palm of his hand.

Now think of the great mountain ranges of the world, with their craggy ridges and plunging ravines. Picture their snow-capped peaks and misty summits. Their majesty and glory are nothing compared to the God who weighs these mountains on the scales. And this is the God who promises to carry you.

*Who can instruct the Lord?* This is a poetic description of the Lord's wisdom. He needs no counsellors, rather he is the one who knows and understands all things. Often, I look at the world around me and can't understand what's going on. There are times I think, 'I can't see how God can be working for good in this situation' or 'I don't understand why God let it happen.' Maybe you have similar experiences. These verses remind us that our confidence as Christians is not that we know and understand all things – we rarely do. Our confidence is that we rest in the care and embrace of the one who does.

The key question of this passage (and indeed of Isaiah as a whole) comes in verse 18: 'With whom, then, will you compare God?' What the people of Isaiah's day needed more than anything was not a change in circumstances, but a bigger view of God. Our God sits enthroned above the circle of the earth and stretches out the heavens like a tent; he brings princes to naught and the rulers of the earth to nothing. No trial that we face is greater than this God. The more we see him clearly, the better we can cope with everything else.

This passage from Isaiah – along with all of chapters 40–55 – will help us to 'Behold your God' (Isa. 40:9, *esv*). We could never spend too long pondering his glory and majesty. We could sooner swallow the contents of the ocean than fully fathom God's glorious being. So spend some more time with the images from this passage – maybe pick one to meditate on further. Soak in the immensity of our majestic God, who holds all things in the palm of his hands. And rest in the comfort that *this* God, the God of Isaiah 40, carries you close to his heart.

### 3



## ON EAGLES' WINGS (ISA. 40:27–31)

As this glorious chapter comes to a close, the Lord shows us why he has presented such a rich picture of his majestic character. The chapter has been deeply theological – telling us about God – but the purpose is wonderfully pastoral – providing us with great comfort. These verses are addressed to weary saints, to people who wondered, ‘Does God know what I’m going through?’ and ‘Does he care?’ The glorious answer God gives is to lift our eyes afresh to who he is.

*Read Isaiah 40:27–31*

*My way is hidden.* The longer I’ve lived, the more I’ve come to realise how all people have struggles and griefs of many kinds. Even those who seem outwardly self-sufficient and at ease can wrestle with deep struggles. At times, our society makes it hard to share such things, and so we can labour on without others knowing what we’re going through. Maybe we wonder if God knows. Is God too great and distant to know my struggles? Perhaps I am too small and insignificant? Perhaps I am unseen?

Even more painfully, we might wonder whether God *cares*. Perhaps we feel that our cause is disregarded by God. We look at our lives and, at times, the evidence seems to point this way. Evil and chaos appear to have the upper hand. For Isaiah’s original audience, this was the pain of exile – being slaves in a foreign land. Maybe there is one particular personal circumstance that you