**The Servant of the Lord**

Isaiah 40:1-11

Children are always asking two questions:

* Will you be involved with me?
* Can I get my own way?

Whether it’s a toddler tugging on your sleeve or a teenager playing a video game, kids are always looking for involvement and engagement from their parents. At the same time, kids are always ***exploring the boundaries*** to see if they can get their own way.

The task of Christian parents is to ***consistently say, “Yes,” and “No.”*** Yes, I will be involved with you. But No, you cannot get your own way. When our boys were small, we would often tell them, ***“Your job is to obey. Our job is to teach you to obey.”*** So early on we introduced them to the word **CONSEQUENCES**. It’s rewarding, and a little comical, when your 3- or 4-year-old realizes he has broken the rules and comes to you with his head down saying, “What is my consequence?” It’s not just good for vocabulary development, it’s good for training.

For example:

* ***If you don’t eat your dinner, you don’t get dessert.*** Clear, consistent consequence. We will save your leftover dinner and you are welcome to eat it later. But no dessert for those who don’t eat their dinner.
* ***Some things are NO TOUCH.*** It’s not a discussion. My parents have always had large birds - an African Gray, a Moluccan Cockatoo, a severe macaw and, for a time, an Amazon. The rule with those big bird cages was always “no touch.” When our boys were small and just learning to pull up on things and walk around, there were 3-4 cages we had to teach them were off limits. Touch the cage, SMACK. Better a swat from us than a nasty bite from a large bird. Consequence.
* One more. ***Obey right away.*** When we say brush your teeth and get ready for bed, delay will have consequences. We always read three books to the boys before bed - but if they didn’t obey right away, they risked losing one or more of those books. It became a powerful motivator and way to teach clear, consistent, immediate consequences.

***Some teenagers rebel because they were never taught consequences as children.*** So they come to believe they can do whatever they want without any negative results - and if parents don’t teach them about consequences it won’t be long before the world does.

* Drive over the speed limit - you’ll pay for it eventually.
* Roll through a red light - eventually you’ll get stuck by one of those red light cameras.
* Don’t turn in an assignment on time - fail that assignment, maybe the class.
* Speak disrespectfully to a teacher or school administrator - go to detention or worse.
* Shoplift from Walmart, it could go on your permanent record.

**Life has consequences**. The book of Isaiah is a lesson in consequences. Look back at Isaiah 1.

“Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me… Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel?” Isaiah 1:2,5

***Isaiah lived around 700 B.C.***, during the time when the northern kingdom of Israel was carried off into **exile in Assyria**. Ten of the twelve tribes experienced severe consequences for their idolatry and rebellion. The remaining two tribes of Judah and Benjamin were the ones Isaiah was appealing to - to learn from the mistakes of their brothers and sisters.

“Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land; it is desolate.” Isaiah 1:7

***The armies of Assyria were like the unstoppable waves of the sea***, crashing over the northern kingdom and coming all the way up to the walls of Jerusalem. Read Isaiah 36-38 for the details of where those proud waves were finally stopped, in answer to the desperate prayers of Isaiah and King Hezekiah. But listen to these warnings from Isaiah in chapter 1:

“When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes.” Isaiah 1:16

In other words: **SIN HAS CONSEQUENCES**. You can’t abuse the poor in the land, exacting crippling interest and enslaving their children and then turn around and pray at the temple with a burnt offering.

If one of our boys did something wrong - hit their brother, took something from a brother - and got caught, they would often say, ***“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”*** especially if the younger one was crying. They knew a consequence was coming and wanted to avoid any unpleasantness. But we had to teach them: “SORRY IS NOT ENOUGH.” It’s not a free pass. Yes, you need to apologize to your brother - and not just say sorry but be sorry - but there are still consequences. Eventually they learned the word “GRACE” and would say, “Can I have grace?” And you feel all mean and unChristian-like, but you have to say, “Yes, there is always grace available but ***that doesn’t take away the consequences***.”

The book of Isaiah is **God trying to reason with his rebellious children** - the nation of Israel. He is saying, “Yes, I will be involved with you. But no, you cannot get your own way. Since you have insisted on your own way, there must now be consequences, but even so, I will remain in involved with you no matter what!”

After 39 chapters of promises to remain involved but also warnings about consequences, Isaiah turns a corner in chapter 40:

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Isaiah 40:1

Yes, the northern kingdom was already in exile. And yes, the southern kingdom would also be taken into exile in about 100 years. But in the midst of this turmoil and uncertainty God speaks words of comfort to His people. ***How relevant for us today!*** Has our nation strayed from God’s will? Have we turned away from our founding Christian principles? Are we facing serious consequences now for our immorality and idolatry as a nation? You better believe it.

But ***there is hope***. There is comfort for the people of God - and, as we’ll see in verse 9, there is good news to announce to the whole world. What is this comfort? What is this good news? It centers on a single person Isaiah describes as **The Servant of the Lord**. Yes, like any good Sunday School student ***we know that means Jesus***. But we’ll see that it also means Isaiah sometimes and other times it clearly means Israel and it is meant to make the reader think, ***“Am I the servant of the Lord?”***

Here in the first part of Isaiah 40 we will see **three commitments of the Servant of the Lord** - three significant messages this servant will proclaim. First:

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Gently **Comfort** God’s People

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Isaiah 40:1

Right before this **God saved Jerusalem** from the massive and seemingly unstoppable army of Assyria - sending His angel to wipe out 185,000 soldiers right in front of the city walls. Hezekiah was saved! But then ***he got sick and was going to die*** - until Isaiah prayed for him and the king was given 15 more years. God is always working to protect and provide for His people. ***Sometimes His Fatherly love looks like discipline***, as with the northern kingdom. Sometimes it looks like merciful deliverance as with Jerusalem and Hezekiah’s health. But ***God is always speaking words of comfort*** to His children, even in the midst of discipline, hardship and suffering - like any good parent. You administer the consequences, but in a spirit of love and with many words of comfort before and after the discipline.

This is the first commitment of the Servant of the Lord - He speaks comfort to God’s people. He gently reminds us that ***we are the beloved children of God*** - even if we are rebels who don’t listen to our Father very well. Look at the specific comfort the Servant of the Lord would provide - it’s not just a general feeling of “it’s going to be ok,” it’s very specific:

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Gently **Comfort** God’s People

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned…” Isaiah 40:2

“That she has received from the Lord double for all her sins.” Sin must be paid for. There must be consequences. But the promise here - 700 years before Jesus was born - is that ***God would make a way to PARDON sin***. He would bring an end to the constant struggle, the never-ending battle.

***Oh, what words of comfort!*** What a promise to cling to! Jesus is the One who received double for all of our sins. But **because He paid the full price** for your sin and mine, God can speak these words of comfort to us. ***Because of Isaiah 53, Isaiah 40 is possible.*** Because “he was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our sins,” God can speak tenderly to us these wonderful words of comfort and assurance.

The promise of forgiveness is certainly ***not because Israel would suddenly deserve pardon***. If we learn anything from the Old Testament, it’s that God’s people never did well for long. Maybe there was a powerful Judge or a wise king and the people obeyed the Torah and were faithful for a generation or two - but then something would change and they would make a hard turn, abandoning the Lord and serving other gods.

No, ***God’s comfort can never depend on OUR FAITHFULNESS***. Israel proved that over and over - and so have you and I. There would be no lasting comfort or assurance in a forgiveness we had to earn for ourselves. **This is the problem with every other religion** - since they are based on human effort and worthiness. If your salvation depends on you - even a little bit - you can never be sure you’ve done enough. Have you prayed enough, given enough, served enough, been good enough, avoided sin enough? You can never be sure.

But the comfort God speaks to His children ***does not depend on our faithfulness, but instead on the faithfulness of Jesus***. Our eternal security does not rest on our righteousness but on that of the Servant of the Lord, King Jesus. Our right standing with God is not based on our efforts or our goodness, but on the perfect goodness of the Lord Jesus. HE is **the Good Shepherd**. Look at verse 11.

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Gently **Comfort** God’s People

“He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom.” Isaiah 40:11

When you were lost, the Good Shepherd ***left the 99 and went searching for you***. When he found you, stuck in your sin, struggling with the consequences of your sin, he picked you up, pulled out the thorns, cleaned your wounds and carried you back to His fold. There he fed you and nursed you back to health. And, in the end, the only way to save you and to save all of us was **for the Good Shepherd to become the Lamb of God** - He had to lay down His perfect, spotless life in exchange for our sinful, broken lives.

But because of that sacrifice, because of the blood of the Lamb, God can speak words of comfort to us - His Sheep - because we are safe in His arms forever. I hope you feel that comfort today. I hope you speak these words of comfort to your children and grandchildren. Because of the Servant of the Lord - King Jesus - our warfare is over, our sins have been paid for, we are loved and accepted, safe and protected forever!

That’s the first commitment of the Servant of the Lord: gently comfort God’s people. Second:

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Urgently **Warn** All People

“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” Isaiah 40:3

If these words sound familiar, they should - the gospel accounts open by quoting this verse and applying it to **John the Baptist**. He was the voice crying out; he was the one who prepared the way of the Lord. But his voice was not filled with comfort and grace - his words were stern, urgent, ***serious warnings*** about the power, glory and judgment of the coming King.

Don’t miss the important theology in this verse: prepare the way of **the LORD** - all capital letters - referring to the covenant name of God in the Old Testament, Yahweh. John was announcing ***the impending arrival of God Himself!*** And listen to verse 4 - what will happen when God arrives?

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Urgently **Warn** All People

“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill brought low.” Isaiah 40:4

In other words: the end of the world. Keep reading to the end of Isaiah and you’ll see more and more descriptions of ***the cataclysmic way history will end***. And it will end with the arrival of Yahweh, the LORD.

C.S. Lewis compared it to the old days when they would put on a play and at the end the curtain would close and the author of the play would come out to take his bows. ***When the author appears, the show is over.*** People sometimes think - like Job - that they want an audience with God; that they want to have it out with their Creator. Read the book of Job and see how that went for him, who was the most righteous man alive in his day. The reality is - ***you don’t want that interview right now***. Oh, you’ll have that encounter one day - and pray you’ll be ready for it - but if you stood before God right now, guess what? You’re dead. That’s how you get that full audience with the Lord.

Now, was there an ***“already, not yet” fulfillment*** in the days of Jesus and still today? Yes. for sure. “The last will be first and the first will be last…. Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” This verse is already true SPIRITUALLY, but when Jesus comes back it will be true PHYSICALLY. Game over. The sun will stop shining, the moon will turn to blood, the stars will fall from the sky. End of the World. Look at verse 5:

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Urgently **Warn** All People

“And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.” Isaiah 40:5

The Jews knew that to ***see God would kill you***. No one could see God and live. The glory of the Lord shook Mount Sinai in thunder and lightning, billows of smoke - and that was His glory at a distance. That was localized to just that part of the Sinai peninsula. ***What would happen if God’s glory appeared to the entire world all at once?*** Game over. End of the World.

When the glory of the Lord filled Solomon’s temple the priests had to run for it. They couldn’t be near the Holy Place because the glory of God was blinding and overwhelming.

Again, we know that there was an “already, not yet” fulfillment to this as well. In the first coming of Jesus **the glory of the Lord was revealed in Christ**. “If you have seen me,” Jesus said, “You have seen the Father, for I and the Father are one.” “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us - we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

But we cannot yet say that “all flesh has seen it together.” That will take place ***when Jesus returns on the clouds***, Revelation 1 tells us that: “Every eye will see him… and all the tribes of the earth will wail” (Rev. 1:7).

What did Jesus do? Remember **when he read Isaiah 61** in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth? “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind… to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” That is where he stopped the reading, which is significant because it’s a comma in the Hebrew (yes, I know there aren’t commas in the Hebrew). That verse continues on in Isaiah, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor AND THE DAY OF VENGEANCE OF OUR GOD.”

Jesus intentionally stopped reading after “the year of the Lord’s favor,” because that was what his first coming was for. ***“Now is the time of God’s favor; NOW is the day of salvation,”*** as the book of Hebrews reminds us. The day of vengeance is still coming - it’s still in the future. When Jesus returns that will be the great and terrible DAY OF THE LORD.

So even as Jesus spoke gentle words of comfort and hope in Nazareth that day, he also proclaimed a subtle warning - ***that the day of judgment was still coming - it was just temporarily delayed.***

Listen to John the Baptist:

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Urgently **Warn** All People

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” Matthew 3:7-8

Not the gentlest words of comfort. No, these are ***words of urgent warning and exhortation***. And he wasn’t done. His job was to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus, so He spoke of the one to come - whose sandals he wasn’t worthy to untie:

1. Urgently **Warn** All People

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Matthew 3:11-12

***Stalks of wheat had to be beaten out*** on a hard, flat threshing floor in order to separate the heavier wheat - that would fall to the ground - from the lighter chaff that you couldn’t cook and eat. The useless chaff would either be blown away in the wind or gathered and burned up.

The point is that there are **only two kinds of people**: good and bad; useful and useless; those destined to be preserved and those destined to be burned with a fire that is never satisfied.

This is **a warning that EVERYONE needs to hear**. John the Baptist preached a serious and passionate warning to all who came out to him. Jesus had a more balanced ministry - with both comfort on one hand and confrontation on the other. But ***anyone who says that Jesus didn’t believe in hell*** or that Jesus didn’t teach about hell simply has not read their Bible.

TGC article - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-uncomfortable-subject-jesus-addressed-more-than-anyone-else/?amp>

***Jesus talked about hell more than any other leader in the Bible.*** He talked about hell more than he did about heaven. I was leading a Bible study one time through the gospel of Mark and reached chapter nine where Jesus says, ***“If your right hand causes you to sin cut it off.***” Three times in that section alone Jesus warns about hell saying it’s better to lose your hand or your foot or your eye than to be thrown into hell where the fire never goes out. A woman was in that Bible study who had not only been attending a nearby church for many years but who had been in high level leadership in that church. But she had never realized that Jesus spoke clearly and directly about hell.

But it is an inescapable fact if you read the gospel accounts. Jesus spoke wonderful words of comfort to His followers. But he also spoke urgent, ***powerful words of warning*** to those who were not His followers.

That is the task of the Servant of the Lord. Isaiah shows us in chapter 40. John the Baptist showed us, and so did Jesus. Look back in Isaiah 40.

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Urgently **Warn** All People

“All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.” Isaiah 40:6

The prophet was told to cry out. He asked, “What shall I cry?” This is the message: all people are like grass; like a flower. Here today, gone tomorrow.

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Urgently **Warn** All People

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” Isaiah 40:8

Think of the last time you **sat down with a really old person**. Not old like me, in their late 40s, but like super old - late 80s, 90s. You look at their pictures - not on a phone or tablet but in a photo album or in these wooden things with glass called frames. You listen to their stories. And do you know what every older person will tell you? ***“It went by so fast. It was the blink of an eye.”***

One of the most precious tasks of a pastor is to **plan funerals**. You sit down with a family and talk about the life of the one they lost and discuss how best to honor that person’s memory in a service. It’s a sad process but also a beautiful one. Stories come out that some people have never heard or only vaguely remember. There can be a lot of laughter and also a lot of tears. But the universal reality at every planning meeting is the feeling that it came so FAST. “We thought we would have more time.”

Oh, how people need to hear this warning. Life is so short. There really is no time. ***Don’t put off a decision about Jesus.*** You may not get another chance. “Now is the time of God’s favor; NOW is the day of salvation.” **We are all like grass**. Like flowers in a vase. Young people, you may be all fit and beautiful now - but I have news for you - it will not last. You’ll turn 30 and rupture your achilles. Then you’ll turn 32 and rupture the other one. Then you’ll try to play soccer again at age 47 and tear your hamstring. You’ll try to play basketball with the youth group, get bumped and have a sore back for 2 weeks. Ok, your ailments will be different from my very self-inflicted bumps and bruises - but they are coming for you one way or another.

Are we the Servant of the Lord? Do we gently comfort God’s people? Do we urgently warn all people around us? One more message the Servant proclaims:

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Clearly **Proclaim** the Good News

“Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news.” Isaiah 40:9

This was to be **Israel’s assignment in the world**: to be heralds for the Lord - ambassadors for God. We’ll see in the coming chapters how God commissions Israel saying, “You are my WITNESSES that I alone am God, and there is no other.” Was Israel the faithful Servant of the Lord? Did they preach comfort to one another and warning to the world? Did they run up the mountains and throughout the cities proclaiming the good news of the power and glory of their God?

Not so much.

Ok, and ***how are WE doing?*** Are we standing up in the marketplace and shouting out on the street corners? Are we bold witnesses for Jesus or are we like timid little mice, hiding in our corners?

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Clearly **Proclaim** the Good News

“Lift it up; fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’” Isaiah 40:9

***What is the most frequent command in the Bible?*** “Do not be afraid.” “Fear not.” Here we see it. Lift up your voice - don’t be afraid. Proclaim this message from the top of the mountains, from the rooftops and in the streets - wherever and whenever you can.

And what is the good news? What are we proclaiming? “Behold your God!” This is what John the Baptist was saying - “Guys, I’m here to prepare the way of the LORD. God Himself has come to dwell among us - and here He is - Jesus.”

This is the message the apostles proclaimed as their gospel: ***“Jesus is Lord.”*** That may not sound shocking to your modern ears but that was a shocking, impossible, full on blasphemous message 2,000 years ago. ***To say, “Jesus is Lord,” was to say He is God*** - He is the covenant God of Israel, the personal King of Kings Yahweh. The apostles were announcing this MAN - Jesus of Nazareth - as GOD, the One supreme, monotheistic God of Israel.

The message Isaiah proclaimed ***remains our message today***. Look at Jesus and you will see God. And verse 10:

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Clearly **Proclaim** the Good News

“Behold, the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him.” Isaiah 40:10

That’s it - that’s the gospel, announced 700 years before Jesus was born. The Servant of the Lord is coming who will be GOD among His people; He will rule with power and glory and He will reward all who trust in Him.

So this is our introduction to the Servant of the Lord. Three messages He will proclaim:

**The Servant of the Lord will:**

1. Gently **Comfort** God’s people
2. Urgently **Warn** all people and
3. Clearly **Proclaim** the good news

The first application is to see - very clearly - that **JESUS is the Servant of the Lord**. He is the clear and ultimate fulfillment of all of these promises in Isaiah - both in His first coming and in His imminent second coming.

But Jesus is not the only servant of the Lord. ***Isaiah was a faithful servant*** in preaching these words and writing them down. John the Baptist was faithful to fulfill this prophecy and preach warnings to all who would list. ***The apostles were faithful servants*** of the Lord to both comfort and warn, and to proclaim the good news the Lord Jesus entrusted to them.

So this presents the question for each of us - **are WE the Servant of the Lord**? Are we committed to proclaiming these three important messages? Do we regularly comfort God’s people? Do we warmly and gently reassure them of the Good Shepherd’s presence with them and love for them?

With those who don’t know and follow Jesus, ***do we warn them?*** Do we urgently plead with them to come to Jesus and be forgiven? Do we help them see how short and fragile life is and that one day very soon they will stand before God in judgment?

And do we follow these warnings with ***winsome presentations of the good news*** - that salvation and eternal life are available in Jesus Christ and Him alone?

Watch this video of the famous magician **Penn Gillette**. It’s from a while ago now but his words remain so relevant for us today. And keep in mind, this is from a vocal and (as far as I know) still committed atheist.

PENN GILLETTE VIDEO - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6md638smQd8>

As we study Isaiah let’s ***keep these applications in front of us***. Let’s see Jesus exalted in glory as THE Servant of the Lord. But let’s also feel the exhortation to walk in the steps of Jesus and live, ourselves, as the Servant of the Lord. Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom with gentle words of comfort and grace and with flaming warnings of hell and judgment. May we persevere as faithful servants!

Let’s pray.