

Comfort Ye

by Thomas Bradbury

God's command to comfort His people is a promise of assistance in necessity, help in extremity, and deliverance from distress, and is communicated through the Father's love and concern, and through the Christ of God, who is filled with the anointing to comfort His people.

Scripture: Psalm 119:50, Isaiah 40:1, Isaiah 49:13, Isaiah 51:12, Isaiah 57:15, Isaiah 66:13, John 14:16, Romans 15:4, 2 Corinthians 1:3

Topics: "Divine Comfort", "Trinitarian Love"

Description

Thomas Bradbury preaches on God's message of comfort to His people through the prophet Isaiah, emphasizing the rich covenant consolation available to believers amidst trials and tribulations. The command to comfort His people is not exclusive to ministers but extends to all living children of God, highlighting the heavenly birthright of mutual comfort among believers. God's promise of comfort is rooted in His unwavering love for His chosen people, despite their shortcomings and sins, leading to spiritual healing, forgiveness, and restoration. The sermon underscores the active role of the Trinity in providing comfort, with the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, conveying the consolations of the Gospel to the hearts of God's people.

Transcript

"Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God." (Isaiah 40:1)

God's message by the prophet Isaiah to His spiritual Israel abounds with gracious consolation and heavenly encouragement. This is seen continuously from the first word of our text to the last word of the prophecy, which we shall have occasion to notice as we progress with this very precious portion of the prophet's sublime utterances. The whole chapter is rich with covenant consolation for the people of God, who are the subjects of trial, temptation and tribulation all along the journey through a world of sin, suffering, and sorrow, to the saints' rest above. Yes, this is certainly true, as surely as God has separated you to Himself from a world of deceit and death, from the service of the devil, from the idolatry of self. Indeed, comforts and consolations abound to the wounded, way-worn, yet victorious warriors of Israel right on to the end of the prophecy.

The command issued in the words of the text is that of the Covenant God of Israel for His covenant people. Warfare, captivity, and oppression had long distressed them, and the cry of the oppressed, the sigh of the prisoner, and the groan of the wounded had entered the ears and moved the heart of the Lord

God of Hosts. A glorious future awaited them, which consisted in the appearance of their Gracious Deliverer, defending them from their foes and delivering them out of all their distresses. Babylon might triumph over, and crush to insignificance, Israel national, yet, in the midst of all these calamities, Israel spiritual must be cared for and comforted. This is settled in God's counsel and secured by His command. Though generations succeed each other and perish like grass, the purpose and promise of Jehovah fail not, simply because of His omniscience, omnipotence, and independence. His promise is replete with consolation, protection and peace, though its fulfilment may be still distant to the faith, hope and patience of those to whom it is made. Sometimes contingency seems to hang upon the promise, and failure in the execution of the command for its accomplishment. But all this exists in the short-sightedness of those to whom the promise is made, or the incompetency of those to whom the command is given. The failure of the messenger will only enhance the preciousness of the message, and all human disappointments will eventually result in the display of the stability of all God's appointments, and the perfection of His all-wisdom and prudence.

God's command to comfort His people is generally believed to be addressed to prophets, pastors, ministers, and preachers. To them it is certainly addressed, but not to them exclusively. Such a vain notion is fit food for the nourishment of priestly presumption and parsonic pride. The right and delight to comfort one another is the heavenly birthright of all the living children of God, all the living members of the body of Christ, all the fellow-worshippers at the throne of Jehovah. This we learn from the close of that sublime passage in 1 Thess. 4:13-18: "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." This was addressed to the whole church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. Unfaithfulness, incompetency and inability frequently characterise duly ordained ministers of ecclesiastical systems, and those who for their own ends receive the faithful minister's charge. See God's rebukes to the faithless and ravenous shepherds of Israel recorded in the first part of Ezek. 34. But God's purpose of love towards His Israel towards His Israel cannot be frustrated, His promise of life cannot be broken, His determinations in grace cannot be defeated, His commands may be slighted, but, "His counsel shall stand and He will do all His pleasure." Though all the world prove unbelieving, "He abideth faithful, He cannot deny Himself, (2 Tim. 2:13).

That God has a people in the world is evident from His acknowledgment of them as His own possession, "My people." They are the people of His choice, and blessed according to His choice of them in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world, (Eph. 1:3,4). They are the Father's gift to Christ their Surety, to be saved, solaced and secured from wrath to all eternity. They are the Son's property as the purchase of His blood, the fruit of the travail of His soul, the bride of His heart, His body, His flesh, His bones. They are claimed and inhabited by the Holy Ghost as His temple, in whom He, with the Father and the Son, will be worshipped and glorified. The Psalmist styles them, "a people near unto Him," (Ps. 148:14). But, by the sin and fall of their first father and federal head, Adam, they were carried, not simply, "very far," but "altogether," from the enjoyment and appreciation of a God of Love, and a Father whose compassions fail not. In this state we found ourselves when quickened into spiritual life, and convinced of our natural state and position by the Blessed Spirit. Being thus taught we may well believe God when we hear Him say, "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me: the ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider," (Isa. 1:2,3). And being thus taught we are not slow to confess, and He defers not to acknowledge our confession, "For our transgressions are multiplied before Thee, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us; and as for our iniquities, we know them," (Isa. 59:12). Here we find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of a people scattered and peeled, trodden under Satan's foot, spoiled, far off from God.

In this condition we must have lingered until hell had been our portion but for divine interposition. The Lord's people are His people in spite of all their baseness, and from all their baseness He will thoroughly purge them. Yet, with all the promises God has given them in His Blessed Book, and all the grace He has secured to them in the Son of His love, whenever sin is felt in its vile working within, and the witness of the Spirit is lacking, the soul of the Israelite indeed will honestly refuse to be comforted, (Ps. 77:2). The corruptions of our vile nature, the fierce assaults of the devil, the ways of the wicked around us, the perplexities of God's mysterious providence, and grace withheld which we think we ought to have, all conspire to make our hearts disconsolate. Spiritual weakness felt, and the withdrawal of the cheering beams of our Father's reconciling countenance will cause the heart to sigh and cry, "For these things I weep: mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water, because the Comforter that should relieve my soul is far from me," (Lam. 1:16). The cry of the disconsolate child of God who knows something of the joy of the presence of the Father is, "O when wilt Thou come unto me," (Ps. 101:2). Though darkness thickens, doubts increase, desolations preveil, and comforts are all gone, yet the Covenant God of Israel will be true to His word, faithful to His promises, and firm in all His covenant engagements, so that not one consolation designed for His people shall be lacking in their seasons of temptation, trial and trouble.

God's determinations are proved by His doings. It is His will that not one of His disconsolate ones shall be left comfortless. Certainly He proves to us in His own way and time our own helplessness and the inability of all around us to perform anything that is spiritually good. Upon all creature productions and performances He blows with His withering wind, and drought and desolation are experienced at almost every step. Ministers and means all prove disappointing and disheartening, as set forth in God's own words, "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them," (Isa. 41:17). To seek comfort from priests or parsons is the very perfection of religious folly, yet the world is full of it. Look at them as described in Isa. 56:10,12; they are blind, ignorant, dumb, lazy, greedy, grasping, besotted. Painful descriptions are given of the incompetency of the prophets and pastors of Israel in Jer. 23, and Ezek. 34. The priest and the Levite had no cordial nor consolation for the Zionite who fell among thieves. But where His own ministers fail God's will is not frustrated nor His purpose of grace defeated, "His compassions fail not," for where men and means fail in comforting His people, He will comfort them Himself, and thus prove the stability of His appointments, the sovereignty of His will, the immutability of His counsel, the power of His hand, and the love of His heart.

All this is blessedly set forth in the succeeding chapters of this prophecy. From the many we will select a few sweet promises of comfort from the God of Israel to the Israel of God. Turn with me to Isa. 49:13,15: "Sing, O heavens; and be joyful O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains; for the Lord hath comforted His people, and will have mercy upon His afflicted." Here we are assured that spiritual comfort bestowed is the pledge of needful comfort for the future, or, as described by Paul, "everlasting consolation." Let us read on, "But Zion said, the Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me. Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee." The consolations of God are not small with His people, though their apprehension of them may be very small indeed. Now turn to chap. 51:12, where God appears as both Promiser and Performer, "I, even I, am He that comforteth you; who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man which shall be made as grass?" This is the Lord's confirmation of the prophet's words in verse three concerning Him, "For the Lord shall comfort Zion; He will comfort all her waste places, and He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving and the voice of melody."

God is never at a loss to help and comfort His weak and weary, tried and tempted, oppressed and suffering people. Here He assures them when they are ready to perish and fearing destruction. It is remarkable to notice how God's promises of comfort are ever associated with their redemption, salvation and deliverance from evil. His comforts abound with assistance in necessity, help in extremity, defence in danger, deliverance from distress, and infinitely more, with all these He opens up His heart of love, and reveals to them His unwearied care and concern over them. All this He does Himself, not by deputy or by the assistance of priests, prophets, or pastors, but by His most precious Gospel, and the power of His Blessed Spirit. Mark well the way in which He excludes all others in this gracious work, "I even I, am He that comforteth you."

Then notice the gracious discovery He makes of Himself in chap. 57:15,18: "For thus saith the high and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, Whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones. For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth; for the spirit should fail before Me, and the souls which I have made. For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him: I hid me, and was wroth, and he went on frowardly in the way of his heart. I have seen his ways!" Ways of sin, ways of enmity, ways of folly, ways of rebelliousness, ways of shame. Here we may well expect to hear wrathful denunciation and righteous condemnation; but, no. "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust," (Ps. 103:13,14). Listen to Him! "I have seen his ways, and will heal him: I will lead him also, and restore comforts unto him, and to his mourners." O what marvellous grace! O what gracious healing! This healing is purely spiritual, and consists in the full and free forgiveness of all sin, and complete restoration to the Father's home and heart. Who can tell out the soothing and tranquilizing power of God's gospel when He, by His word and Spirit, leads His forgiven child out of the dark gloom of error into the glorious light of his truth? This is comfort indeed, aye, comfort unspeakable. Sinners in Zion graciously dealt with, have not all the mourning to themselves. Their waverings and wanderings bring many a pang, many a flood of sorrow, many a mournful groan, from the hearts of loving ones who travail in soul for their spiritual and eternal good. Blessed be God, these are not forgotten when He distributes His covenant consolations which are all in Christ. These are they who mourn because of sin as sin, their own sins and the sins of those around them, and who, in the time of love, can sing,

"Dear Lord, may I a mourner be

Over my sins and after Thee;

And when my mourning days are o'er,

Enjoy Thy comforts evermore."

Now I would again direct your attention to that precious Scripture in chap. 66:13: "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you; and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem." There is something exquisitely fine in this inspired word-picture. In it we have a delightful view of the maternal aspect of Deity. If I may be allowed the expression, the motherly heart of God. The beauty of the picture is marred by learned men, who, in their short-sightedness try to improve that which is perfect.

The words, as dropping from Isaiah's pen, run thus, "As a man whom his mother comforteth so will I comfort you." It may seem inappropriate to make a full grown man the subject of material solicitude and consolation; but it is not. It matters not how old a man may be, he is the object of his mother's solicitude

and the subject of her consolations as long as life lasts or consciousness lingers. A father may love but he can never enter into the depths of affection ever lingering in a mother's heart.

And in all this we have a faint setting forth of the lovingkindness, tender mercy, and covenant concern of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ toward His eternally loved children. His unchanging concern and care are beautifully illustrated in His love to Ephraim, expressed by Himself in Jer. 31:20, after Ephraim's base wanderings from, and rebelliousness against, the God and Father Who loved him so well. Mark you, God's word in this twentieth verse is not by way of question, but affirmation.

It is God's confident declaration, it is His conclusive assertion, it is His solemn averment, it is more, for when, "He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself," and here we have His word on oath, "Ephraim is My dear son, he is a pleasant child; for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still; therefore My bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord." All God's children are dear to Him, pleasant in His eyes, the delight of His heart.

He draws them to Him with the cords of love, and blesses them with the sweets of divine communion, kisses them with the kisses of His mouth, dandles them on His knees of eternal affection, presses them to His bosom of everlasting love, and holds every covenant blessing ready for whatever state or condition they may be in. How sweetly and tenderly this is all portrayed in the account of the prodigal son in Luke 15:20,24. All the gracious activities are on the Father's part. The son is a great way off, but the Father sees him.

He deserves most righteous indignation, but he feels the Father's compassion. He creeps, the Father runs. The Father falls upon the neck of a son who might well fear His frown. The son delights in a kiss where he deserves a curse. How comforting! How precious! to see in all this more than an earthly father's love and care. God in the expression of His interest in His loved children condescends to the level of the soft heart of a poor weak mother. All the revenues of grace He puts under contribution for the comfort and consolation of a wayward, wandering and restored child.

But the communication of covenant comfort is not that of the Father exclusively. Blessed be His name, He is the Fount and Source of all the real comfort we enjoy. He has devised the way in which the consolations of the Gospel shall be conveyed to the hearts of His people. This we see in Isa. 61:1-3: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me; because He hath anointed Me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent Me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified." Here we see the Christ of God filled with the anointing which secures comfort to every indigent, poor and needy child committed to His care and attention. In their poverty and misery these find substantial comfort in the unsearchable riches of Christ abounding in the Gospel. To hearts broken with a sense of sin, and rent with a dread of God's wrath, Christ appears to bind up and soothe with the balm of His blood and the discovery of the Love of God in the removal of all guilt, and the forgiveness of all sin. Comforts and joys abound as He reveals Himself as the Liberator of souls from spiritual captivity. These are by nature prisoners, shut up under Satan, sin, and law; but when He comes He brings liberty from the damning power and plague of sin, freedom from the law of sin and death, and deliverance from Satan's vile slavery. The liberated ones are called to endure many a hard fight of affliction with Satan, sin, and self, and to experience seasons of

torment from the miserable comforters who hug their chains of legal bondage; but He Who graciously sets them free from their bondage, will see to it that His comfort shall not be lacking in the set time of His Father's appointing. Pardon is comfort to a condemned criminal. Forgiveness is comfort to a repentant son. Justification is comfort to a convinced sinner. Acceptance is comfort to an outcast of Israel. These the Consolation of Israel comforts by His word and Spirit.

Christ actively engaged in comforting His people is seen, to the heart's delight of every soul in love with Him, all through that precious fifty-fourth chapter. Here we see the church and people of God in a comfortless, forsaken, destitute condition, grieving over their spiritual widowhood. See verse 11: "O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. And I will make thy windows of agates, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children." This is a true description of God's living people when feelingly destitute of the witness and seal of the Blessed Spirit, and left longing for the gracious attention and comforting communications of the Loving Head and Husband. But in this state she is not, cannot be left. Does she mourn her barrenness? He will fill her with fruits of righteousness. Is she straitened? He will enlarge her coast. Does she fear shame and confusion? He will sweetly persuade her that He has borne the same for her. Is she grieved in spirit? He will abundantly comfort her. Does she feel herself forsaken? With great mercies will He gather her to Himself. Does she dread His wrath? She shall be lost in His love. Does she bewail her ignorance? She shall be taught of the Lord, allured to His sacred feet by the persuasive power of the Holy Ghost, brought by Himself to the enjoyment of obedience to His own covenant command, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light," (Matt. 11:28,30).

It is blessed to see the Whole Three Persons in the co-equal and undivided Trinity engaged in the comforting of Zion's mourners. At the time of their deepest sorrow, when He was taking leave of His disciples, our Blessed Lord, Who was ever alive to their comfort, now encourages and cheers them with the special promise of Another Comforter. This term another signifies His personal distinction from the Father and the Son. He says, "And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you Another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; Whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him: but ye know Him; for He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you," (John 14:16,17). The title here given to the Spirit signifies all His comforting operations in the hearts of His people. The same word referring to Christ is rendered Advocate in 1 John 2:1. No doubt the term Comforter is given here because He is promised to the disciples whose hearts were then filled with sorrow at the thought of their Master's departure from them. His ways of comforting are various, and He is never at a loss in any one of them. We know this to the joy of our hearts. Are we mistaken? Our Advocate comforts us in convincing and discovering to us our error, (John 16:8). Are we weak and weary? He comforts by strengthening us with might in our inner man, (Eph. 3:16). Are we dull and listless in the things of God? Very often. Well, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth," (John 6:63). Are we ignorant? The Master's promise holds good that, "the Holy Ghost shall teach us all things." Are we forgetful? The Covenant Comforter brings all things to our remembrance that our blessed lord has said to us, (John 14:26). Are we filled with infirmities? The Blessed Spirit is our Helper. Do we fail and falter in our prayers? "The Spirit maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered," (Rom. 8:26). Every covenant blessing and every consolation in Christ, is ours in experimental possession only by the indwelling witness and seal of the Holy Ghost.

We cannot dismiss this all-important subject without noticing Paul's expression of delight, and all-absorbing interest in it, as recorded in 2 Cor. 1:3-7: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope of you is steadfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation." This is a long quotation but it is too good to curtail, showing, as it does, the mutual interest ever existing between God and His people in the consolation of those who mourn as members of the mystical body of His dear Son. What a precious and endearing title: "THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT." All the comfort worth enjoying, or whatever relief, ease, or pleasure we may spiritually experience under any temptation, trial, or trouble, is from Himself, the Source and Fount of covenant comfort, and the Sole Efficient Cause thereof. All the comfort we enjoy flows from the Father's fullness, abounds by Jesus Christ, and is efficient by the Covenant Comforter.

"Each bitter grief, each anxious care,
O Lord! Thy goodness knows;
My wounded spirit only there,
Mid conflict, finds repose."

Now He Who has given the command, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, My people," will see to it that His people shall be comforted without fail. He has the means in His own hands, and the messengers at His own disposal. He is never at a loss for the comfort of His own when they are in distress and sorrow. The appearance of a friend has frequently proved the cessation of anxiety and mourning. Paul experienced this on many occasions. He longed to see his brethren in Christ at Rome, and gives as his reason, "That I may be comforted with you by the mutual faith both of you and me," (Rom. 1:11,12). Listen to his proof of this in Macedonia, "Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my glorying of you: I am filled with comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation. For, when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus," (2 Cor. 7:4-6). "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend," (Prov. 27:17). This is blessedly true when a man brings Jesus along with him. I have proved the truth of this again and again. But the chief instrument employed by God in the comforting of His mourners is His Holy Word. Listen to the confession of the Psalmist, "This is my comfort in my affliction; for Thy word hath quickened me," (Ps. 119:50). The same continuing conflict is experienced by all the people of God, and to them the consolations of the Spirit with the comforts of the word ever abide, and are ever the same. That term, "Thy word," embraces God's decree, determination, promise, and performance. To quicken is to save alive from death felt and feared, and this to all the seed royal of heaven is comfortably sure, (Rom. 4:16). We see it set forth in Rom. 15:4: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope."

This is blessedly true to us because they testify to our hearts of the Consolation of Israel, of what His Father, "the God of all comfort," has made Him to us. The abiding Comforter sweetly reveals this in the

second verse of our chapter, "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem," that is, to the heart, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished," Christ has done all the fighting with Satan, sin and death, and, "we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us," "that her iniquity is pardoned." All Zion's iniquity in the lump was removed in one day when Jesus put it away by the sacrifice of Himself. How comfortable the privilege to say with the Psalmist, "Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and forget not all His benefits, Who forgiveth all thine iniquities," (Ps. 103:2,3). How many? "All thine iniquities." How clearly Paul states this in Col. 2:13: "having forgiven you all trespasses." Well might dear John Kent sing with all his heart, and so may I,

"Here's pardon full for sin that's past,

It matters not how black the cast;

And, O my soul, with wonder view,

For sins to come here's pardon too."

Where are the sins of God's people? Hezekiah says, "Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back," (Isa. 38:17). The soul says, "Sought for, they shall not be found," (Jer. 50:20). Micah says, "Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea," (Micah 7:19). Not in the shallows, but where they can never be seen or re-appear. The soul that once enjoys the comfort of that, is very uncomfortable without the enjoyment of it. And what a blessing to know that we are now receiving double favours, favours more abundant, in spite of all our sins.

"Thine, O Lord, is THE GLORY." AMEN

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