

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^[a] ² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:^[a]

**See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;
he will prepare your way.**^{[a][d]}

³ **A voice of one crying out in the wilderness:**

**Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight!**^[a]

⁴ John came baptizing^[a] in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. ⁶ John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷ He proclaimed, "One who is more powerful than I am is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. ⁸ I baptize you with^[a] water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Comfort

What you think comfort what do you think of? When I think comfort I think of sweatpants. It doesn't really get any better than sweatpants. There is nothing quite like coming home having a hot shower and then slipping into a nice pair of sweats. They signify comfort, laziness, lounging. More than that they make a statement - I want to be comfortable but I also want to wear pants in case someone comes to the door. Somehow I don't think that is the comfort that Isaiah is speaking of. Rather than a superficial comfort he has a different message of Israel for Judah. This may leave you wondering, "What comfort is this?"

Imagine being surrounded on all sides. The kingdom split. North and South are divided. The Lion, the tribe of Judah, looks more like a kitten who has lost 80% of her people and 90% of her resources to the North. She is under attack by her brothers to the north who have joined forces against her. She is devastated 120,000 fall and 200,000 are taken captive. Only by the prophets prompting are the Northern tribes shamed into returning their brothers back south.

But the secret is out. Ahaz, Judah, can no longer defend their country. All they have are elastic bands. Not even sweatpants will provide you with comfort at that time. Isaiah stands before Ahaz who looks to securing his resources, and proclaims, "Don't worry about it. Do nothing. God has this under control. Put on these." What comfort is that? Maybe Isaiah didn't notice but they've been defeated once already. Ahaz refuses the comfort God offers. He chooses sweatpants and alliances with other nations instead. He turns to Assyria for help but now instead of two weak enemies a world power waits at his border licking its chops because that Lion, that tribe of Judah, looks like a mouse. Assyria dispenses with the two weaklings and turns on his host.

Assyria moves in and all the fortified cities of Judah are captured (36:1). The situation grows even more uncomfortable as 185,000 troops lay siege to Jerusalem, messengers are sent mocking their king, and the Lord. Isaiah 39 isn't full of the comfort one would expect. Instead of comfort we hear of exile. Instead of peace Jerusalem will be destroyed and their sons and daughters carted off. It's about to get even more uncomfortable for them. Circumstances will be terrible. Appearances will be hopeless. But now the prophet calls out, "*Comfort, comfort my people*"? What comfort is there in exile? What comfort is there in the destruction of the Temple and the rest of Jerusalem? How could they have comfort in such terrible times? Their exile in Babylon hadn't even begun and what Isaiah comforts them with is, "**All flesh is like grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the Spirit of the lord blows on it; surely the people are grass.**"

America doesn't really have a world power knocking on our door looking to expand their borders. We do feel the pressure of a world waging war on Christianity (as it's been determined non-essential by the state). Soon it may be seen as unhealthy for the state. Christians are in a number of uncomfortable situations. Nothing seems certain in our world. We are mocked in the classroom and the Lord is looked at as useless. Prayer is seen as ineffective. Sometimes it really feels like we are receiving from the hand of the Lord double for all our sins not double comfort. You think that the Lord would do something like he did for Judah.

Our expectations are comfort: Sweatpants, the removal of all that ails. We long for wonderful and amazingly respectful children. We imagine that this Christmas will be the best ever. Our expectations are only fed by the unreal expectations that commercials place before us. Then the "if only" begins. If only we had more money we could enjoy Christmas. If only we had more people more could be done. If only we had better messengers we would grow. If only other people would wear a mask properly. If only this virus would go away. **Usually what happens with those "if only" statements is we blame someone else for our failures.** Usually when we blame others we are only making life comfortable. Put on the sweatpants and sit waiting for someone to do something because this is not my fault.

But there are draw backs to sweatpants. They aren't socially unacceptable at any store classier than Target. **If you are striving for a life of comfort then you miss the point. We miss the point when we spend our lives looking for God's glory in our lives rather than looking for God's glory at the cross.** We miss the point if we think that we can be comfortable with sin. Paul writes to those who think they can continue in sin because it makes God look gracious, ***"Their judgment is just or their condemnation is deserved"*** (Romans 3:8). God's chosen people were carted off into captivity because of their comfortable situation with sin. We too fall short of God's expectations and we will face the consequences of our actions.

The reality of our lives and the world around us is that we receive what we deserve: like grass. The very best we can do like a flower and that too will dry up and die. But there is comfort... the Word of God will stand forever. That's a promise.

God wanted Israel to know that their suffering would not last forever. It will come to an end. They will die like the grass of the field. Their yoke of service, their time of service - hard labor or warfare is ended. The Angel of the Lord single handedly took out 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, **but Babylon starts knocking on the door eager to devour the treasure trove that Hezekiah foolishly showed them.** Their warfare is over because their sin is forgiven and she has received from the Lord's hand double for her sins. But what about Babylon? Babylon doesn't matter but God does. You do not want to go to war with God. Judah is forgiven. They receive double comfort even as they are led off into exile.

This is comfort, real comfort. Your God has not given up and He's coming back. Get ready. The glory of the Lord will be revealed. Cry out. ***You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem,^[c] lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"*** They can find comfort no matter what may happen to them. Isaiah can 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.*** Their sin can harm them anymore. Don't sweat it. Babylon isn't the end. When God wants his people to listen he takes them away. Immediately Isaiah begins by depicting God as a husband pleading with his wife, "I still love you." They deserved to be ditched. They deserve to die. But instead of receiving what they deserve God gave them comfort in his promise of love.

That voice called out in the wilderness preparing their hearts for God's grace. John cried out. He pointed out sin. He spoke the word of the Lord which cut down and condemns. A word which they hated to hear but he

also pointed out the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John was comforted in prison. God is not unaware of what an ugly world we live in. He knows all about it. He bears his holy arm and gives us a glimpse of his glory. He says, "Take your best shot!" The world brought out every weapon to bring him down, Assyria mocked them, Babylon defied them, even Rome tried their hardest but the nails, thorns, spears, and guards couldn't keep him down. ***"The Lord looked down from heaven and laughs. I've installed my king on Zion, my holy hill."***

And the glory of the Lord is revealed for all to see. The Lord has spoken. It is finished. Your hard labor is over. Your sins have been paid. You have received double comfort for all your sin. Take your eyes off your circumstances and see the Lord. See him lay bare his holy arm. See his glory. He rules with a mighty arm. Not only is he powerful but he is also gentle. **He tends sheep and he gathers the lambs.** The Lord is strong enough to take on any enemy. He is able to defeat all his enemies and gentle enough to carry us home. That is the best comfort ever.

Our hard service has been completed, that is, the perfection we owe to God has been paid and met in full by our Lord Jesus. No more striving to find out if I've done enough. No more worrying about what still is lacking. Just comfort. That's what we need. That is the greatest gift we receive at every Christmas. Find comfort in him. You will not find it anywhere else. You can sleep at night knowing that he is watching over you. You can rest secure knowing that no matter what happens in this world you have peace with God. So in a sense the comfort God gives is lot like sweatpants. When you put them on you don't have a worry in the world.

God has taken care of everything. Dictators, extremists, politicians, the angry, the elite, even the so called religious who blame others. God will judge. Be ready. Be prepared. Repent knowing you are forgiven. Repent knowing that the mighty arm of the Lord comes with power, and he rules, he raises up, and he tears down. This is the same God **who 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.** That's the comfort we have.

Comfort Comfort my people says your God! – You can comfort people this Christmas. Not with Merry Christmas but with the reason you have comfort, the reason why we continue to come every year and that's the gift that God has given us. His glory, his son, our Savior is revealed in Christ.