

Isaiah on the Divine Comforter

Isaiah 40:1: *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.*

Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary: *In this first address the prophet vindicates his call to be the preacher of the comfort of the approaching deliverance, and explains this comfort on the ground that Jehovah, who called him to this comforting proclamation, was the incomparably exalted Creator and Ruler of the world. The first part of this address (Isaiah 40:1-11) may be regarded as the prologue to the whole. The theme of the prophetic promise, and the irresistible certainty of its fulfilment, are here declared. Turning of the people of the captivity, whom Jehovah has neither forgotten nor rejected, the prophet commences thus in Isaiah 40:1: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." This is the divine command to the prophets.*

Note that the Prophet is an instrument of divine comfort to the people specifically because he is an instrument of "the exalted Creator and Ruler of the world." A God who does not judge is not going to be a means of comfort. For if He does not judge, then He is not really the "Ruler of the world." We see the importance of the fullness of the Holy Trinity to be in effect for there to be the possibility of comfort through the Prophetic Word.

Not only can God alone comfort through the instrumentality of His prophet, because God alone is "the exalted Creator and Ruler of the world," but Israel will find comfort only in submitting to and following God. Trying to find comfort, which is to say, relief from the political strife of their moment in history, in something or someone other than God will not work.

Compare with Matthew 11:28: *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

Implicit in Our Lord's message is that there is no rest for those who labor and are heavy laden apart from Him. Not only is He saying that He will give them rest. He is saying that He alone can give them rest. In echoing Isaiah's Divine Comforter verse, Christ Jesus is saying that He is the Divine Comforter that Isaiah is referencing.

Divine Comfort is more than temporary relief from strife. It is knowing that God alone is now, and always will be, the Comforter. It is the relationship with God that provides this comfort, so the command is for people under strife, which in some way is each of us, to focus not on that strife, nor even in the prospect of relief from that strife, but on his or her relationship with God.

The implications are radical. When we seek "comfort" only in God, we abandon our efforts to seek "comfort" in anything apart from God. Political machinations, popular acclamation, status, wealth, none of these will provide "comfort," and even a temporary respite from strife through one or more of these worldly attributes will prove to be illusory. What the devil may give in the form of short-term relief is more than outweighed by what he takes when we learn to rely upon him over God's Prophetic Word. It is like finding food that, when eaten, makes us even hungrier than before. So, divine comfort is in abandoning what we think we know about how to succeed in the world by embracing what the world views as the irrationality of total reliance upon God.

Compare with Matthew 5:39: *But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.*

Ellicott's Biblical Commentary: *We all quote and admire the words as painting an ideal meekness. But most men feel also that they cannot act on them literally; that to make the attempt, as has been done by some whom the world calls dreamers or fanatics, would throw society into confusion and make the meek the victims. The question meets us, therefore, Were they meant to be obeyed in the letter; and if not, what do they command? And the answer is found (I) in remembering that our Lord Himself, when smitten by the servant of the high priest, protested, though He did not resist (John 18:22-23), and that St. Paul, under like outrage, was*

vehement in his rebuke (Acts 23:3); and (2) in the fact that the whole context shows that the Sermon on the Mount is not a code of laws, but the assertion of principles. And the principle in this matter is clearly and simply this, that the disciple of Christ, when he has suffered wrong, is to eliminate altogether from his motives the natural desire to retaliate or accuse. As far as he himself is concerned, he must be prepared, in language which, because it is above our common human strain, has stamped itself on the hearts and memories of men, to turn the left cheek when the right has been smitten. But the man who has been wronged has other duties which he cannot rightly ignore. The law of the Eternal has to be asserted, society to be protected, the offender to be reclaimed, and these may well justify—though personal animosity does not—protest, prosecution, punishment.

The key point here is that when a Christian seeks retribution, he is putting his time and energy in work that is not efficacious to the Father's will. He has "other duties which he cannot rightly ignore," but that is exactly what he is doing when he seeks to balance the scales for his private loss rather than to rely on God in his own time to right the wrong. Relying upon God, who alone provides us "comfort," means not only trusting in God to right the wrong but also doing God's work and not being sidetracked. There are Eastern Orthodox monks who talk about what to do when attacked by a demon during Christian prayer. A demonic attack is akin to a strike on one's cheek. Our inclination is to confront the demon with prayerful retribution, but that is what we should not do. The demon wants our attention, even if we are successfully rebuking him, since the more we focus on him, the less we focus on God. The correct response, according to what the monks teach, is to ask God for deliverance from the demonic attack without referencing at all the identity of the demon. God knows and does not need for us to name the offender. Give the demon no retribution but instead render joy unto God. This is "turning the other cheek" in a way that the world regards as irrational, but which allows for us to be comforted.

When Isaiah counsels against any political alliances, even when an attack is imminent, what he is saying is "turn the other cheek." He is not saying, "let the enemy win." Rather, he is saying if we rely upon God alone, God will deliver us from the enemy. He will be our Divine Comforter in

this precarious situation. The meek shall inherit the earth not because there is some nobility in being a doormat for one's enemies, but rather because God is stronger than anything else, and when we rely upon Him alone, we are shielded and avenged by Him without the interference of our own sinful prevarications.

Isaiah on Idolatry

Isaiah 40:18-21: To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him? The workman melteth a graven image, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold, and casteth silver chains. He that is so impoverished that he hath no oblation chooseth a tree that will not rot; he seeketh unto him a cunning workman to prepare a graven image, that shall not be moved. Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth?

Compare with Acts 17:29: Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

Cambridge Bible Commentary: This question introduces the distinct theme of the argument on the folly of idolatry. Although the prophet has in his mind the difficulties of Jews impressed by the fascinations of idolatry, his words are addressed not to them directly, but to men in general. The error he exposes is not the worshipping of Jehovah by images, but the universal error of thinking that the Deity can be represented by the works of human hands. His point of view is that of Paul's speech to the Athenians in Acts 17:29. In order to see how absurd this is, one has but to observe how the images are manufactured; and the various processes are described with an unmistakable irony.

Isaiah is presenting an absolute dichotomy between reliance on God and foolhardiness. There is no middle ground position. If we rely on our Divine Comforter, we shall eschew idols as much as the cunning machinations of man. We shall go into battle with God alone as our fighter and our

defender. Absent that, we are fools, and being fools, we shall devolve in time into presuming to worship idols fashioned by men. Isaiah is not denying the sacramental nature of proper worship of God, for idolatry is not worshipping God in and through the sacraments, but rather forgetting about God and instead worshipping the idols themselves. For men to worship what they create is a form of narcissism that degenerates into madness. Isaiah and Paul both show how mad this is by contrasting the Godhead with “gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device.”

Barnes’ Notes on the Bible: *He that is so impoverished - So poor. So it is generally supposed that the word used here is to be understood, though interpreters have not been entirely agreed in regard to its signification. The Septuagint renders the phrase, 'The carpenter chooseth a sound piece of wood.' The Chaldee. 'He cuts down an ash, a tree which will not rot.' Vulgate, 'Perhaps he chooses a tree which is incorruptible.' Jarchi renders it, 'He who is accustomed to examine, and to judge between the wood which is durable, and other wood.' But the signification of the word (meaning "to dwell, to be familiar with anyone") given to it by our translators, is probably the correct one, that of being too poor to make a costly oblation.*

That he hath no oblation - No offering; no sacrifice; no rich gift. He is too poor to make such an offering to his god as would be implied in an idol of brass or other metal, richly overlaid with plates of gold, and decorated with silver chains. In Isaiah 40:19, the design seems to have been to describe the more rich and costly idols that were made; in this, to describe those that were made by the poor who were unable to offer such as were made of brass and gold. The word 'oblation,' therefore, that is, offering, in this place, does not denote an offering made to the true God, but an offering made to an idol, such as an image was regarded to be. He could not afford a rich offering and was constrained to make one of wood.

Chooseth a tree that will not rot - Wood that will be durable and permanent. Perhaps the idea is, that as he could not afford one of metal, he would choose that which would be the most valuable which he could make - a piece of wood that was durable, and that would thus show his regard for the god that he worshipped. Or possibly the sense may be, that he designed it should

not be moved; that he expressed a fixed and settled determination to adhere to the worship of the idol; and that as he had no idea of changing his religion, the permanency and durability of the wood would be regarded as a somewhat more acceptable expression of his worship.

A cunning workman - Hebrew, 'A wise artificer;' a man skilled in the art of carving, and of making images.

A graven image - An image engraved or cut from wood, in contradistinction from one that is molten or made from metals.

That shall not be moved - That shall stand long, as the expression of his devotion to the service of the idol. The wood that was commonly employed for this purpose as being most durable, as we learn from Isaiah 44:14, was the cedar, the cypress, or the oak (see the note in that place). The phrase, 'shall not be moved,' does not refer so much to its being fixed in one place, as to its durability and permanency.

The man who gives himself over to idolatry is “impoverished,” for he is like the poor man who believes that he can offer what is as good as gold by finding an idol crafted from a tree that will not rot. He thinks he is like the rich if he can find wood that is durable enough to be a facsimile of gold. That is ridiculous on its face, so is it not as ridiculous to presume that the worship of an idol is the same as the worship of God? In essence, idolatry is cast as the same farce as when a poor man presumes his wooden idol is like a golden idol. The farcical nature of this madness is God’s wakeup call for us to abandon the allure of idolatry for the true worship of God.

Isaiah: The New Exodus – The King’s Highway

Isaiah 35:8-10: And a highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called then The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it

shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there: And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Compare with Ezra 8:31: *Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way.*

Compare with Mark 1:3: *The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*

Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary: *Not only unclean persons from among the heathen, but even unclean persons belonging to Israel itself, will never pass along that holy road; none but the church purified and sanctified through sufferings, and those connected with it. To them, and to them alone, does this road belong, which Jehovah has made and secured, and which so readily strikes the eye, that even an idiot could not miss it; whilst it lies so high, that no beast of prey, however powerful, could possibly leap up to it: not one is ever encountered by the pilgrim there. The pilgrims are those whom Jehovah has redeemed and delivered or set free from captivity and affliction. Everlasting joy soars above their head; they lay fast hold of delight and joy, so that it never departs from them. On the other hand, sorrow and sighing flee away. A prelude of the fulfilment is seen in what Ezra speaks of with gratitude to God.*

The imagery in Isaiah's prophecy seems otherworldly at first glance what with the references to the lions and ravenous beasts being excluded and the persons returning to God "with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads." Nevertheless, Ezra 8:31 refers back to Isaiah 35:8-10 in giving praise for God's deliverance during a trip in this world ("we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month"). Isaiah's apocalyptic imagery (meaning imagery that reveals God through His deliverance of His people) is manifest *in this world*. The fact of a world to come does not diminish the fullness of God's action, nor the extent to which He reveals Himself in this

action, *in this world*. If the way of holiness is going to be carved out *in this world*, God Himself is going to be the One who carves out that way of holiness. So, we are seeing here the Incarnation of God foreshadowed. When John the Baptist also refers back to Isaiah 35:8-10 to urge us to do our part in preparing the way of the Lord, this is because God Himself is the Lord about to come to us. We can do this work because God Himself empowers us to do this work. He comes to us, and He empowers us to receive Him. Notice how this is similar to the Trinitarian action of God in every Christian prayer: We pray to the Father, through the Son, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. So, the Divine Comforter “comforts” us by giving us the means to walk in holiness toward Him, through Him, and with Him. This takes place *in this world*, and yet this way of holiness also transfigures this world into one very different in certain respects from the world as we know it. Indeed, the very definition of Israel is transfigured into including all people who are made holy, not just of the Jewish bloodline, who have been “ransomed of the Lord.”

MacLaren’s Expositions: *The prophet here is not only speaking of the literal return of his brethren from captivity. The place which this prophecy holds at the very close of the book, the noble loftiness of the language, the entire absence of any details or specific allusions which compel reference to the Captivity, would be sufficient of themselves to make us suspect that there was very much more here. The structure of prophecy is misunderstood unless it be recognized that all the history of Israel was itself a prediction, a great supernatural system of types and shadows, and that all the interventions of the divine hand are one in principle, and all foretell the great intervention of redeeming love, in the person of Jesus Christ. Nor need that be unlikely in the eyes of any who believe that Christ’s coming is the center of the world’s history, and that there is in prophecy a supernatural element. We are not reading our own fancies into Scripture; we are not using, in allowable freedom, words which had another meaning altogether, to adorn our own theology, but we are apprehending the innermost meaning of prophecy, when we see in it Christ and His salvation (see 1 Peter 1:10: Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you).*

Who are the travellers?

'Redeemed,' 'ransomed of the Lord.' Israel had in its past history one great act, under the imagery of which all future deliverances were prophesied. The events of the Exodus were the great storehouse from which prophets drew the clothing of their brightest hopes; and that is a lesson for us of how to use the history of God's past deliverances. They believed that each transitory act was a revelation of an unchanging purpose and an unexhausted power, and that it would be repeated over and over again. Experience supplied the material out of which Hope wove its fairest webs, but Faith drove the shuttle. Here the names which describe the pilgrims come from the old story. They are slaves, purchased or otherwise set free from captivity by a divine act. The epithets are transferred to the New Testament, and become the standing designation for those who have been delivered by Christ.

That designation, 'ransomed of the Lord,' opens out into the great evangelical thoughts which are the very life-blood of vital Christianity.

Emancipation from bondage is the first thing that we all need. 'He that committeth sin is the slave of sin.' An iron yoke presses on every neck.

The needed emancipation can only be obtained by a ransom price. The question of to whom the ransom is paid is not in the horizon of prophet or apostle or of Jesus Himself, in using this metaphor. What is strongly in their minds is that a great surrender must be greatly made by the Emancipator.

Jesus conceived of Himself as giving 'His life a ransom for the many.'

The emancipation must be a divine act. It surpasses any created power.

There can be no happy pilgrims unless they are first set free.

The end of the journey.

'They shall come to Zion.' It is one great distinctive characteristic and blessedness of the Christian conception of the future that it takes away from it all the chilling sense of strangeness, arising from ignorance and lack of experience, and invests it with the attraction of being the mother-city of us all. So the pilgrims are not travelling a dreary road into the common darkness, but are like colonists who visit England for the first time, and are full of happy anticipations of 'going home,' though they have never seen its shores.

That conception of the future perfect state as a 'city' includes the ideas of happy social life, of a settled polity, of stability and security. The travelers who were often solitary on the march will all be together there. The nomads, who had to leave their camping-place each morning and let the fire that cheered them in the night die down into a little ring of grey ashes, will 'go no more out,' but yet make endless progress within the gates. The defenseless travelers, who were fain to make the best 'laager' they could, and keep vigilant watch for human and bestial enemies crouching beyond the ring of light from the camp-fires, are safe at last, and they that swallowed them up shall be far away.

Contrast the future outlook of the noblest minds in heathenism with the calm certainty which the gospel has put within the reach of the simplest! 'Blessed are your eyes, for they see.'

MacLaren's beatified vision of the people of God, Gentiles, and Jews, walking together on this way of holiness seems too perfect to be a reality in the world as we know it, but that is only if we insist on seeing our world through our own sin and faithlessness. In Christ Jesus, this godly world is also our world: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Isaiah's vision of the way of holiness is a vision of Christ Jesus.