

# BELPRES CHURCH

## Sermon Title: Comforted and Comforter

Dr. Scott Dudley

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**Scripture:** Isaiah 40:1-5

<sup>1</sup> Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare

the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low;

the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

<sup>5</sup> And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

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### Transcript:

Welcome. It's so great to have you with us. My name is Scott Dudley. I'm the senior pastor here. Thank you for joining us for worship this first Sunday in Advent. So great to have you with us. Lord, as we turn to Your word, ask that You would use this time to help us know You better and be strengthened by You. We pray this in Your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, one of the reasons I wanted to marry my wife was because of her unique way of comforting me when I'm stressed out or worried. As I've shared with you before, if I'm worried about something, or say, I felt like a sermon didn't go very well. She'll sometimes say to me, "Relax, Scott. Remember, nobody thinks about you as much as you think about you. They've forgotten all about you and that bad sermon by now." So comforting.

I remember one time when we were engaged, we were out at dinner and I was just freaking out. I said, "I don't know. I think maybe I'm not ready to be married yet. Maybe we should wait. I don't know if it's right," just kind of spiraling into this frenzy of fear. She just kept eating. Didn't say a word. Finally, I paused and she said, "Are you done? Because I was thinking blue for the bridesmaids' dresses. What do you think?" She just will not get on my rollercoaster, which is often what I need. Now, if it's really serious, she will show me compassion, but somehow for me, her style of comforting me is super helpful. It gets me out of myself, it makes me take myself less seriously and helps me buck up.

Who or what comforts you? Because we all need comfort from time to time, and I think especially this year, we have needed comfort because there's so much loss and so much grief for so many things. We can't see loved ones that we normally see, do things that we normally do. Thanksgiving and Christmas are very, very different for us. For me, Sundays are a bittersweet day. I am glad that we can worship together online and actually do feel somewhat connected to you even through the camera, but also, it's a very hard day for me because the empty building, when it should be filled with people and energy and buzz, especially this time of year. It's just really hard. I miss you guys a ton. If I see one of you in the store, it's like, "Oh. Oh, it's so good to see you. You exist still. It's awesome to see you."

So much loss, so folks are looking for comfort and some of them are looking for comfort in good and healthy places and sometimes looking for comfort in unhealthy ways, alcohol or drugs or other addictions, shopping too much, on and on and on. Where do you find comfort and what does God's comfort look like? Because it's a little different than what we might think of as comfort because when we hear that word, we may think of a warm blanket or comfort food or a person saying, "There, there, it'll be okay," but biblically, there's a difference between being comforted and comfortable.

The English word for "comfort" comes from the Latin "com" and "fortis," which means "strength," as in the English word "fort", so it literally means to put strength into someone, to fortify someone. That's what "comfort" originally means in English. It's a mix of the kind of comfort I might give, which is heavy on sympathy and the kind of comfort my wife tends to give, which is often, "Buck up you little buckaroo, time to get going," because we need both sides of that and we can receive both, not just someday when this pandemic is over, but here and now we can have that kind of comfort, strength put into us.

We're starting a new sermon series on Isaiah 40, one of the great passages in the Bible. Isaiah lived at a time of a lot of prosperity, a lot of luxury, but the Israelites were doing two things that God was angry about. First, they were worshipping false gods, idolatry. Second, they were not

seeking justice for the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the immigrant in their midst. God warned them for centuries until finally, Isaiah comes along and God says through Isaiah that since they won't listen to get their attention, to turn them around, God was going to let the Assyrian Empire wipe out the northern portion of Israel, which happened in Isaiah's lifetime. Then Isaiah starts to predict the future because even after folks in Jerusalem see what happened up north, they still don't change their ways, so Isaiah starts to predict events 150 years into the future when the Babylonians will wipe out Jerusalem and take the Israelites into exile in Babylon for 70 years and chapters one through 39 predict all this destruction and devastation. There's there's even a section called the six woes. Doesn't that sound fun? For 39 chapters, Isaiah predicts destruction, bad, bad people doing bad, bad things with bad, bad results. It's woe to this, woe to that, here a woe, there a woe, everywhere a woe, woe.

Then you turn the page and suddenly everything is different in chapter 40 with the very first words, "Comfort, comfort my people." Isaiah here is predicting the end of the Babylonian exile when the Israelites were about to return home to Jerusalem, but it's not going to be the home they remember because it's been wiped out and they've been in exile. What Isaiah's going to tell them is that their home now is in God, not in a place.

We call this series Finding Home, which may strike some of you as odd since mostly we've been at home for the last nine months, right? Some of you are like, "I don't need any help finding home. I'm stuck at home. I want to get away from home. This is carrying 'I'll be home for Christmas' a little too far, thank you very much," but what Isaiah says to the exiles is that even though your earthly home may be a place of tension or disaster or whatever it is, our ultimate home is in God, and in Him, we find hope and comfort. Not someday, but here and now in five ways, all beginning with the letter "P."

First, we find comfort, that His strength is put into us in the presence of God. Isaiah 40 starts: "Comfort, comfort my people." My people. God is saying no matter what happens, no matter what you do, even right in the middle of a pandemic, you are not this people, not that people, you are my people. Our comfort is that no matter what we face, our God is present with us. You are not abandoned. You are not lost. You are not forgotten. You are home with God and He is here.

The text says "In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway," important word, "for our God." See, back then, kings didn't travel on ordinary roads, they traveled on highways. Isaiah says "A King is coming, but this King is God Himself. Prepare a highway for our God." Here, Isaiah is predicting Jesus' arrival at Christmas 600 years before it happened, which he's actually been doing all along throughout the whole book, like he did in chapter seven, where he says "A virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and you shall call Him 'Emmanuel,'" which means "God with us."

When we experience God's presence with us, it brings a supernatural sense of comfort. It puts strength into us. There's lots of ways we experience God's presence. We talk about them almost every week: prayer, worship, Scripture, community. But I want you to know this: Even if you do

not feel God's presence right now, He is still with you. His being with you is not dependent, the reality of His being with you is not dependent on you feeling He is there. God is with you, even in a pandemic. That puts strength into us.

Second way that we receive comfort is the pardon of God. The text says, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard services over," that is the exile, "and that her sin has been paid for." Well, how has it been paid for? Well, go forward a few chapters to where Isaiah talks about a mysterious figure called "the suffering servant" and this is what he says: "He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds, we are healed. The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." You don't need a PhD in literature to know that that is foreshadowing Jesus' death on the cross to pay the price for our sins long before, centuries before it actually happened.

That's comforting because, you see, the Israelites at this point, they're wondering, "Does our sin mean that we are separated from God forever? Does our sin mean that God will never bless us again?" The emphatic answer is no, because as the Bible says, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. There are no terms or conditions to God's forgiveness of you. Now, there are natural consequences of our sin and God uses those consequences to change us and teach us what is good for us, what is bad for us, as any parent would do, but we are fully pardoned and fully loved because of Jesus' death on the cross.

For some of us, this is so familiar. We've heard it a million times and we don't even hear it anymore: "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for my sins. Yeah, yeah. I get it." We don't live as though it's true. We walk around with his sense of karma, that God is out to get us because of something we did in the past or something we're doing now and keep doing or something we should have done and didn't do. We think, "God's going to blast me for this at some point, or at bare minimum, God is not going to bless me because of this."

But again, there are no terms or conditions to God's forgiveness, to God's pardon. If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior and your Leader, there is nothing you can do that will ever stop God from working for your good. When you get that, you don't walk around sort of cowering, waiting for God to blast. You are fearful that He's not going to bless you. Strength is put into you. You are comforted by the pardon of God when you really understand it.

Third thing that brings comfort is the plenty of God. Text says, "Tell Jerusalem that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins," and you hear that and you go, "Whoa. God punished them double punishment, like extra punishment." That would contradict everything else in the Book of Isaiah as well as the whole Bible. This verse does not mean God punished them double. It's God's saying to them, "I haven't just given you the bare minimum of forgiveness. I've given you double forgiveness. It doesn't just wipe out your sins, it also welcomes you into my arms." Because, see, so many Christians have this bleak view of the world because they don't understand the double salvation of Jesus. They think, "Jesus paid

the price for my sins just enough so that I don't go to hell and I'm kind of grumpy and miserable and guilt-ridden because of it." No, no.

Pastor Tim Keller uses the analogy of a death row inmate who is pardoned by the governor, and so he's free, but he still has this cloud over him because he was a death row inmate, right? Nobody's going to say, "Here, would you like to marry my daughter?" Or, "Here, would you like to join my company?" He's been pardoned, but not accepted. He's not liable for his bad record, but he also doesn't have a good record, either. But the Bible says this: "God made Him, Jesus, who had no sin, to be sin for us so that in Him, we might become the righteousness of God." What that means is Jesus didn't just die the death you should have died, He lived the life you should have lived. Your bad record isn't just imputed to Him so He is treated as you deserve, His good record is imputed to you so you are treated as He deserves. It is a superabundance of grace.

When my wife and I got married, we mostly paid for it ourselves and we didn't have a ton of money, so we did everything very cheaply. Now, everyone had a good time. It was really fun, everyone. It was great fun, but it was minimalist. We hired this fly-by-night caterer down by the airport, right, because they were the cheapest, and when we met with him the second time, he had erased our names from his calendar and put someone else's name in the date for our wedding, and we corrected him and he said, "Oh, don't worry. We've never missed anything except for piddly little luncheons, we've missed those, but we've never missed a wedding." Not comforting.

In fact, the morning of our wedding, I got up and I thought, "I wonder if the caterer is going to show up?" Every table at our reception got only one bottle of very cheap wine for a table of eight, they were just lucky it wasn't in a box, and so all night, you'd see people at the end of the table turning the bottle over to try to get some wine and there was none because it was out and people were like, "Is there more wine?" "No, that's it. One per table."

That's not God. God is not like that. God is not cheap. He is lavish with His grace, more than enough with plenty left over. When we get that, we don't live like me wondering if the caterer is going to show up, "I wonder if God's going to show up?" When you understand the plenty of God, you are comforted. Strength is put into you because you know that God is going to show up.

Presence, pardon, plenty. Next, we find comfort in the purposes of God because when you understand that God is always with you and that you are fully pardoned and you understand the plenty of God, then you know that all of that means that God's purposes in your life can not be stopped by anything and God is always working to bring good out of whatever circumstances we are in. God used the exile for good in the life of Israel in a couple of ways. First, it purged them over their idolatry. After the exile, they never worshiped false gods again.

Second, they discovered that God wasn't just a local deity confined to Jerusalem. That's kind of how they thought about Him. They got to Babylon and God was there, too, still doing miracles

for people like Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, still bringing good things out of bad things. Then God showed His power by bringing them back to Jerusalem after 70 years in Babylon, which, by the way, never happens in history, right? That's a thing in history. Large masses of exiles don't return. But God's power is such that even in exile, God was working for the Israelites' good. His purposes cannot be stopped in your life or mine, no matter what. That is comforting.

Now, that doesn't mean we're always going to like the way God works His purposes out. Exile is no fun, but we do discover that His purposes are good, even if they weren't what we expected. The text says "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low," it's a kind of reversal. God sometimes gives us a strange comfort by reversing our priorities. What we want to raise up, like maybe ourselves or our career or our reputation, God, sometimes for our own good, puts down. What we put down, God sometimes raises up. The Israelites lifted themselves up above God and His commandments, so God put them down through the exile, but in exile they found God's power, which brought them up by having been brought down. See how that works?

Presence, pardon, plenty, purposes, and finally, we are comforted by the power of God working through us. In the original Hebrew of this text, the word that's used here for "comfort" can also mean "encourage," which means literally to put courage into someone, encourage. What that's getting at is that the Bible's comfort isn't a "There, there, it's going to be okay," the Bible's kind of comfort is "Let's go. Get going." It's a power that God puts into us. Maybe an encouraging word from someone or through Scripture or a supernatural infilling of the Holy Spirit because, see, this is important: Biblically, God's comfort isn't fluffy pillows and sheets and kittens and bunnies, it's a sword and a shield. It's not about easing our pain, it's about stiffening our resolve. Comfort isn't comfortable. It's strengthening. One of the best ways to find comfort is to comfort someone else.

The text says, "Comfort, comfort my people." It's an imperative. It's a command, not a statement, because when we comfort others, we experienced comfort. Apostle Paul puts it this way: "Praise be to God who comforts us in all of our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble. With the comfort we ourselves receive from God." We are comforted not to be comfortable, we are comforted to be comforters to others, which ultimately brings us comfort because when we feel God using us to make someone else's life better, it gets us out of our own problems and it's something positive and we get a bigger world and a bigger view. We can do that by encouraging other people, by volunteering, doing things that are practical to help other people, and we do it by giving money.

Bell Pres, y'all do this so well. You all do this so well. We are so grateful. Thank you. As we've said to you, because of you, we've been able to send out \$1.8 million to help people who are struggling from this pandemic here in our church and in our region and in places all around the world where we have partners all around the world. We've helped over 66 families in this church alone and helped them with support for food and rent and utilities and that sort of thing.

The Bible talks about tithing, which is giving 10% of our money to God's purposes through the faith community that we're a part of. Now, for some of us, 10% is not enough because at our income level, like me at our income level, we can give more, so the way my wife and I do it is we give 10% to this church because that's what the Bible says and then over and above that to other Christian organizations and the plenty of God means that he will supply our need and/or show us that we can be happy with less than we thought we needed.

It's comforting. It puts strength into me when I give, not just money, but time and talent, because I get to be part of fixing what is wrong in the world, which makes me feel like the world isn't hopeless. When I hear stories of kids getting off drugs or feeling loved and included in our church family here and loved by Jesus, and when I hear about refugees around the world finding Jesus because of the ministries of our church, it gives me hope. Rather than being mad or sad or scared about what's going on in the world, we find comfort by comforting others because we see God's power healing what's wrong in the world, which shows us that it isn't hopeless. God is on the move through us. There's a twist here, right? We need to become uncomfortable by giving more than we feel comfortable giving so that we can comfort others and thereby experience the comfort of God ourselves. It's upside down. It's every valley raised up, every hill made low.

Some of you have been involved in the grocery project through Jubilee Reach, which we support, and every week we hear stories of families lives completely transformed because they've been provided their basic needs, like one mother who has three kids and her husband lost his job when his company shut down because of COVID, then she lost her job for the same reason. They have a daughter with medical issues, which means she's in a high-risk category, so they're afraid that she's going to get sick. The meager savings they had is long gone and she said it has been so stressful trying to pay bills and get food and all of that stuff. She said, "We are so deeply thankful to Jubilee Reach, that they're helping us with food, so our kids don't have to go hungry and we know where the food's coming from." Imagine the stress and fear of being in that situation and the comfort it is when some of your basic needs are taken care of. Because you give, families' lives are transformed. Thank you, BelPres.

Just so you know, there's a waitlist of families still waiting to be helped by this project, and so we do need more volunteers and we do need more food, and if you're interested in helping, you can go to [bellpres.org/christmas](https://bellpres.org/christmas) and learn more about it. One of the best ways to feel comforted is to comfort others by giving. Just a reminder, like all nonprofits, December is our make-or-break month around here. We need to bring in about \$2.6 million in the next month in order to make the budget for the rest of the year work, so just please remember us in your year-end giving, as you always do. You've been so generous and we're grateful. But also remember you in your year-end giving because one of the best ways to feel comforted is to give and to see God's power flow through you and heal some of what's wrong in the world.

A while back, we got an email from a woman who grew up in our church and is now going to college at Whitworth in Spokane, great university. I'm on the board there, as you know. She sent this email to some of us in leadership, but really, Bell Pres, this email's to you. This is what

she wrote. She said, "I grew up at Bell Pres and I've grown in my faith and leadership through the culture of this church, and I've been in a season of gratitude for everything that Bell Pres has taught me. I've recently been looking for a new church here in Spokane and have been missing things, like our 22-minute sermons." Yes. Actually, 25, but who's counting? "And the reminder to bring Jesus' healing wherever I live, work, play, or learn, and their strategic coffee placement on Sunday mornings. Most of all, though, I miss the community, and the church that empowers people to find their home in Jesus rather than in a church." Their home in Jesus. Kind of our sermon series.

"While I've always felt at home at Bell Pres, more than that, I felt encouraged to find my home in God. As I step into a new community, I find myself remembering all that I've learned about what it means to pursue God's healing in the city that He calls us to. Bell Pres, it is your willingness to go to hard places and dive into difficult conversations that helps bring healing out of the darkest places for the people in your congregation. My life and faith have been changed for the better because I've been part of Bell Pres. Thank you."

Bell Pres, you did that. You did that. You did that by volunteering to teach in her Sunday school classes or help with the youth choirs that she sang in. You did that by giving money so there could be a staff to pour into her and there could be choirs and youth groups and Sunday school and mission trips for her to be a part of. You comforted her, put strength into her through your gifts of time, talent, and treasure, helped her to experience the presence, the pardon, the plenty, the purposes, and the power of God flowing through her now in Spokane to pay it forward and bring God's healing there. In a world where so much seems so wrong, that is good news. You did that and so much more here and all around the world, so thank you.

Where do you need to be comforted? Find your home in God through prayer, worship, Scripture, and experience His presence, His pardon, His plenty, and His unstoppable purposes in your life. Then let His power work through you to comfort others and you will be comforted yourself. The church is not an audience to be entertained, it is an army to be empowered, to heal the world so that it is on Earth as it is in heaven, and Bell Pres, you do it so well. You do it so very, very well. Comfort, comfort God's people and you will experience the comfort of God yourself and the glory of the Lord will be revealed in your life and in mine and in our world.

Jesus, thank You so much that You are the great comforter. You are the one who puts strength into us, so Lord, we come to You in this season of in this pandemic, in the season of giving, in this season of gratitude, Lord, in spite of everything that is going wrong, we still are thankful. We still come to You and we ask put Your strength into us so that we can give it away. You are good all the time, God, all the time You are good. Help us to know that every single waking minute of our days and show Your goodness to the world. We pray this in Your name, Jesus. Amen.



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**Discussion Questions:**

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1. Jerusalem has been destroyed and the Israelites taken into exile in Babylon, what do you think Isaiah's emphatic "comfort" mean to Israel?
2. What words of comfort do the three voices bring (v. 3, 6, 9)?
3. What do verses 1-5 say that could bring comfort to the people of Israel?
4. What does it mean to prepare the way for the Lord?
5. When you are in a difficult time, how does God comfort you? How can you be a comforter to others?