

Comfort in the Wilderness

Isaiah 40:1-11

Halifax: October 20, 2002

Introduction:

Today, we have set aside for the baptism of Dave and Gina Alexander's second daughter—Sarah Jill Alexander.

- Do you realise that with the inclusion of Sarah, we now have the same number of children as adults in our membership?
- That's a lot of children!

But what hope do we have for these children?

- Just look at the condition of the church in North America!
 - What kind of world and church have we brought them into?
- Surely we are under God's hand of chastisement today!
 - There are so many divisions in the church—hundreds of different denominations!
 - All this points to our confusion today in trying to understand God's Word.
 - We can't agree about baptism, ordination, worship... or even about the work of Christ...
 - And look at what bondage the church is in to the world!
 - There are churches that are in bondage to the world's unbelief and deny that Jesus Christ is God...
 - or that the Bible is the very word of God
 - There are churches that are in bondage to the world's pluralism and deny that He is the only Saviour...
 - There are churches that are taken captive by the world's standards so as to tolerate sexual immorality, Sabbath breaking, role reversals of men and women, abortion, idolatry... we could go on and on!
 - God has commanded the church and sent us to call the world to repent and turn to Jesus,
 - but instead, it seems that we are turning away from Jesus and to the ways of the world!
 - If this trend continues, what hope do we have for the next generation?

Isaiah had been sent to a people that were a lot like the church in North America today.

- In the first 39 chapters, he urges them to repent of their sin and return to the Lord.
 - But even as the LORD told him before he started his ministry, only a remnant of the people would hear and believe...
- And indeed, during the days of his ministry,
 - all but the city of Jerusalem were brought into subjection to the Assyrian empire—
 - And though God promised that Assyria would proceed no farther...
 - at the end of chapter 39, Isaiah declares that it is only a matter of time until God will raise up another nation: the Babylonians, who will come and take Jerusalem itself—the very seat of the theocracy!
- The ominous words are found in vs 6-7.
 - Isaiah 39:6-7: “Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and what your fathers have accumulated until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,” says the LORD. And they shall take away some of your sons who will descend from you, whom you will beget; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”
- Do you see what this is saying?
 - The Covenant people would be brought under subjection to the world!
 - Rather than being ruled by Jehovah, they would be ruled by Babylon!
 - That is where the nation was headed!
 - The church in North America is moving in the same direction.
 - Little by little, we are giving way to the world...
 - the same world that we are supposed to be bringing under Christ!
 - What hope does this give you for the next generation?
 - Is this to be the end of God’s people?
 - Is the church to perish?
 - Christian parents,
 - What hope do you have for your sons and daughters when the church is headed for Babylon?
 - Are you just fighting a losing battle?

Well look at what God says in the midst of a situation just like ours:

- “Comfort, yes, comfort My People!” says your God.

I. In the midst of the very darkest hour, God wants His people comforted!

A. Isn't that great news!

1. God Himself commands His ministers to comfort His people!
 - a. This is what **God** commands...
 - This is not the comfort of a sentimental minister or friend who just wants to make you feel better and tries to soothe you with his words...
 - This is God Himself commanding His ministers to comfort His people in the very hour that His darkest judgements are threatened!
 - b. I don't mean to ridicule those who try to soothe you in times of trouble...
 - That is a kind and gracious thing to do...
 - But what I am saying is that **this** comfort (in Isa 40:1) is something far greater—far more substantial...
 - Because **this** comfort is authorised by God!
 - It is comfort that He wants you to have in the face of the darkest times as a Christian...
 - Even in the times when His hand of judgement is about to fall or has already fallen!
2. This comfort that Isaiah speaks—really from chapter 40 all the way to end of the book of Isaiah—is the comfort that God wants His people to have.
 - a. And because He wants His people to have it,
 - they do have it...
 - so that even though they are cast down,
 - they never fall into utter despair!
 - b. God had Isaiah speak these words over a hundred years before the promised judgement fell...
 - Without such words, the faithful would have surely been swallowed up in despair—
 - but God appointed these words to sustain them and they did!
 - How precious these words must have been to the faithful when their children were ripped away from them and taken to Babylon to be Eunuchs!
 - Think of Daniel's parents—
 - No longer did they have their son under their oversight,
 - but that did not mean that God was not looking after him and keeping him!
 - The faithful knew that the kingdom of God would not end!

TRANS> God Himself comforted them and sustained them.

- And He does the same for you in your darkest hour!

- c. As He did with Peter, the Lord Jesus prays that your faith will not fail!
 - Indeed it may falter—
 - you may slip—
 - you may even deny the Lord like Peter did...

 - But your faith will not fail—
 - The seed of faith will not perish...
 - You will turn back to Lord again...

 - The Lord will maintain your faith and your comfort that comes from believing His promises.

d. The Heidelberg Catechism opens with these wonderful words:

Q. What is thy only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with His precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him.

- Dear child of God, it is His will that you have this comfort through all of life...
 - And that this comfort sustain you in the most trying times!
 - He commands it!

B. But note well that this comfort is not for everyone...

1. God says to Isaiah, "Comfort, yes comfort **my** people."

- Isaiah emphasises elsewhere that there is no comfort of any substance for the wicked...
 - Isa 48:22 "*There is no peace,*" says the LORD, "for the wicked."

 - Isa 57:20-21: But the wicked *are* like the troubled sea, When it cannot rest, Whose waters cast up mire and dirt. "*There is no peace,*" Says my God, "for the wicked."

2. You see, among the covenant people who make up the church, there are two very different kinds of people...
 - a. Those who are God's people in name only and those who truly God's people.
 - But kinds are baptised (or in the Old Testament, Circumcised)
 - and both kinds worship the true God outwardly,
 - but they are not at all the same.
 - The difference is quite significant!
 - The true people of God are looking to Jesus for eternal life...
 - They rely on God to save them through Christ...
 - The one's who are God's people in name only do not look to Jesus Christ alone for salvation.
 - Because of their unbelief, they are headed for destruction.
 - b. Sometimes, the bulk of the covenant people are unbelievers and God has to bring severe judgements on His church as a whole to correct her...
 - 1) It was that way when Isaiah spoke these words—
 - God had told Isaiah that only a remnant would be saved...
 - The majority of the covenant people were unbelievers.
 - 2) It was the same when Jesus came
 - There were a few who rejoiced when He came...
 - There was a remnant according to God's election...
 - But for the most part, He was rejected by those who were supposed to be His people—so that the Apostle John can say:
 - John 1:11-12: "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name."
 - 3) And so it is today—
 - There is little doubt that the majority of the baptised are not truly God's people—but only His people in name.
 - The comfort of God is not intended for them...
 - The comfort is for you who are resting upon Christ alone for salvation—it is not for anyone else but you.

C. Take heart then believer, because you are reconciled to God!

1. This is what verse 2 speaks of!
 - a. Isaiah is to speak comfortably to Jerusalem
 - “Jerusalem” refers to all the people of God...
 - In the same way that a news caster might speak of “Washington” deciding to go to war rather than saying “The United States decided to go to war.”
 - b. Isaiah is told to cry out or proclaim to her the good news:
 - that her warfare is accomplished,
 - that her iniquity is pardoned,
 - for she has received from the LORD’S hand double for all her sins.
 - c. In summary, this means that God has finished punishing her.
 - The days of the hard service of warfare are over...
 - The days of God’s displeasure with her are at an end because she has received full recompense for her sin...
 - “double” means that sufficient payment has been made.
 - Full punishment has been meted out.
2. But wait just a minute!
 - How could God say that when she was going into captivity?
 - The warfare (or hard service) was just beginning!
 - a. Well of course we may see here that Isaiah is looking to the future...
 - He is comforting God’s people with the fact that they will not be in captivity forever,
 - that the day will come when God will say “enough punishment” and bring His people back to their land again.
 - That’s true enough...
 - There was certainly comfort in that...
 - b. But throughout Isaiah’s prophecy, His words reach far beyond mere deliverance from Babylon!
 - 1) What he says here applies to the true people of God even as they were entering captivity!
 - You see, they knew themselves to have once been at war—not just with Babylon, but with God Almighty!
 - They know that they are members of the human race and that the human race declared war with God in the Garden of Eden!

- They know that when Adam ate the forbidden fruit, he declared war with God and entered into a desperate battle that he could never hope to win.
- 2) But they also know that when God called them to repent and return to Him as Lord;
 - They heard His call and obeyed it!
 - And how could they do anything else!
 - What a gracious call it was—
 - Not only was it a call to end the war...
 - It was a call to come back to Him and obtain from Him the full forgiveness of their sins!
 - 3) God promised to deal with them as a people who had not only paid the penalty of their sins, but also fulfilled His righteous requirement.
 - They had received double for all their sins from His hand!
 - By the ceremonies of the temple that God appointed for them,
 - He showed that He accepted the righteousness of Jesus Christ in their place...
 - Both the obedience of Christ fulfill the requirement of the law...
 - And the suffering of Christ to atone for their sins...
 - Even though Christ had not yet come into the world to die for them and to obey for them,
 - God accepted them on the basis of what Christ would do for His people when He came.
- c. O yes, there may be a war with Babylon, but what is that to them?
- 1) War with Babylon is nothing when you know yourself to be reconciled to God!
 - If God is for you, Babylon can by no means hurt you...
 - Everything becomes subservient to your salvation!
 - Even captivity in Babylon!
 - 2) And you Christian, you have an even greater assurance than the remnant had when you see troublesome times...
 - Now you know that the very Son of God is the One God sent to reconcile us to Himself!

- You know that the Son of God Himself died in your place to atone for all your sins and that he fulfilled all righteousness for His church...
 - You know that you are accepted by faith in Him!
3. There is no greater comfort than to know that your sins are forgiven you.
- a. As our Lord said to the paralytic,
 - "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you."
 - b. If you are forgiven, that means that God is reconciled to you—
 - He who was once your enemy because of your sin is now your friend—and what a friend He is!
 - He is the Almighty!
 - If He is for you, who can be against you?
 - Everyone! you say—
 - Indeed, but though all the world is against you, what will it amount to if God is for you?
 - No one can separate you from His love and blessing—
 - As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it—"all things must be subservient to my salvation."
 - The One who has all power in heaven and earth is reconciled to you now and He will surely bless you!

TRANS> So then, take heart!

- The wilderness is not the end!
- But what possible benefit can there be in the wilderness?

II. So, the thing to do when the church is heading into to wilderness is prepare for His coming.

- In v. 3-5 He tells you to prepare for His coming because He is surely coming to meet you there!
 - Verse 3 and 4 tell you to prepare...
 - Verse 5 assures you that He will come.
- A. See how He makes it certain that He will come to you there?
- READ v. 5!

1. The promise that He will reveal Himself to us there is underscored to make it certain with the words,
 - “For the mouth of he LORD has spoken.”

2. You need this promise because when we go into the wilderness,
 - it looks like God is bringing us there to destroy us.
 - a. Remember when God brought His people out of Egypt?
 - He told them to go to the wilderness and He would meet them there.
 - But they lost sight of the promise and said,
 - “He has brought us into the wilderness to destroy us!”
 - And many of them perished in God’s wrath because of their unbelief.
 - b. But God did reveal to His glory in the wilderness to those who believed!
 - He revealed His majesty in the giving of the law that was thundered from Mount Sinai
 - And He revealed His grace in the tabernacle and His service in which He showed that He dwelt in the midst of His people.
 - He also showed them His power in giving them grace to conquer their enemies, and His grace in feeding them and giving them water.

3. You can be sure that God will show you His glory in the wilderness if you belong to Him, because He has promised...
 - a. There may be a long stay in the wilderness before He does, but that is always what he will do.
 - Isaiah speaks of going to Babylon which was a seventy year event,
 - and actually, he looks far beyond that to the coming of Christ.
 - Though Israel had been brought out of Babylon and had returned to their land, they were still in the wilderness—
 - under the dominion of Rome and legalistic bondage.
 - Christ came to His people when they were in the wilderness—
 - He came to them when they were under the dominion of Rome, not when they were strong and healthy.
 - b. It doesn’t matter if it is a wilderness time in your own personal experience...
 - Or a wilderness time in the life of the local congregation...
 - Or a wilderness time for the church in the whole of Western Civilization!

- Or even the wilderness that we will in a sense be in until Jesus Christ returns in all His glory to take us to heaven!
- The thing that is certain is that God brought us there in order that He might better show us His glory!

B. But how does it help to be in the wilderness?

- How can God better you show you His glory in the wilderness?
- You are told in v. 6-8...
 - READ v. 6-8

1. Do you see what the voice in the wilderness is saying?

a. It is showing you what you are!

- In the wilderness, God's people (those who really know Him) are humbled!
- We love to flatter ourselves, but our loveliness is like a flower—
 - It is only there as long as God sustains us...
 - All he has to do is blow upon it and it evaporates!
- And this is not only talking about our bodies—
 - It is talking about all the things that we might glory in...
 - Our skills, our morals, our wisdom and knowledge, our popularity, our physical appearance, our personality...
 - It's all grass....
 - It dries up and is blown away!

b. You need to be humbled before you can see the glory of God.

1) Look at the Jews when Jesus came!

- Though they were in the wilderness, many of them were not sufficiently humbled because of their unbelief.
- So when the glory of God was revealed in Christ, they couldn't see it.

2) Their problem was, they thought they were okay!

- The problem was not their sin, but the wilderness!
- The desert did not make them thirsty for Jesus Christ and the salvation that He brought—
 - but it made them hungry for earthly power and dominion!

- The cross was a stumbling block because they thought they had already suffered enough for their sins...
 - They were not humble, but proud.
2. The voice in the wilderness not only humbles us, but it also points us to what we need if we have faith!
- a. v. 8 “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”
 - b. We are nothing but grass and flowers—weak and transitory...
 - But God’s Word of promise is eternal!
 - c. The only way we can live forever in glory is if we are joined to the word of promise by faith.
 - 1) Peter talks about this in 1 Peter 1:23-25
 - READ 1 Peter 1:23-25
 - 2) Do you see how that works?
 - You without the word perish—
 - But as soon as you are joined to the word of promise, you live forever!
 - The word is the gospel that tells us how Jesus Christ shed His blood to atone for our sins, and gives us the Holy Spirit to give us life...
 - It is by looking to Him to save you according to God’s promise that you are made to life forever...
 - But you can’t see His glory until you are humbled!
- C. So now lets back up for a minute and see what the voice tells us to do when we are brought into the wilderness.
1. Since God has brought you there to show you His glory, you need to prepare for His coming!
 2. And how do we prepare for Him?
 - a. The picture given us by Isaiah is of a road crew building a highway...
READ v. 3-4
 - If you have been down the 101 lately, you can see this being done.
 - They are flattening the hills and filling up all the valleys to make a level road.

- b. This is exactly how we prepare for the coming of the LORD.
- 1) The valley of despondency has to be filled in...
 - God's people are paralysed when they lose confidence in God's promise to build His church.
 - Rather than moving forward in faith, they shrink back and give up.
 - There are many Covenant people who have abandoned God's way of salvation altogether because they have lost hope in the gospel as the power to save.

 - 2) The hills and mountains of pride have to be knocked down...
 - I showed you before how the Jews were not prepared for Jesus, for the most part, because they were proud and self-sufficient...
 - A Messiah on a cross for their sins was not what they had in mind;
 - in their pride, they thought they could please God without the blood of the cross.
 - There are many like this today—
 - they do not rely on Christ because in their pride, they think they can please God without Him!

 - 3) And then there are all the crooked places that have to be made straight and the rough places that have to be smoothed...
 - Perhaps these refer to our wrong living and our wrong beliefs.
 - You prepare the way of the LORD by repenting of your sin and embracing the truth of the Bible.
 - Disobedience and false doctrine are obstacles that keep us from receiving God's blessings.

TRANS> So you see then that the wilderness is a time to prepare to see the glory of God.

I. And now I want to show you what that glory is that He reveals to you in the wilderness:

- **In short, it is the saving glory of Jesus Christ revealed in the gospel!**

A. We are to proclaim the glorious gospel to God's people with confidence, even though we may be in the wilderness!

- READ v. 9

1. There is a boldness and confidence about this message!

- Even though we are in the wilderness and looks like we are being destroyed...
 - God will still accomplish His saving purpose...
 - And we can proclaim His salvation with confidence in the wilderness.
2. The message is that God Himself has promised to save us!
- All religions but true Christianity deny this glorious truth!
 - They do not humble themselves to see that God must save them from their sin if they are to be saved...
 - They think He needs to save them from other things and even give them direction—
 - but they do not see that nothing but divine, transforming, power...
 - and the death of the very Son of God in their place can save them from their sin.
 - But we told to behold our God who comes to save us!

B. And what are we to behold in Him?

- His power and His grace
1. His power is revealed because He comes in strength to save us...
- a. Jesus Christ destroys everything that keeps His people from God.
 - b. He destroys the corruption that is in us...
 - regeneration
 - sanctification
 - glorification
 - c. He destroys all our enemies that try to take us captive
 - the Devil,
 - the world,
 - death and the curse—the penalty of sin
2. Verse 11 shows how He comes to graciously shepherd us.
- He graciously supplies us with everything we need to serve Him.
 - 1) When it says, “He will feed us like a shepherd,” it means that He will do everything that a shepherd does for His sheep!
 - He feeds us with His word and waters us with His Spirit so that we are able to walk in His ways and live by His promise.

- He chastens us to correct us when we go astray...
- He guides us into His ways...
- He protects us and defends us from wolves that come to deceive us and lead us astray...
- He causes us to bear fruit for eternal life

TRANS> What security there is for us under His divine care and provision!

2) But notice also the special care He has for children!

a) His special attention is given to the lambs and those parents who are caring for them!

- What an encouragement this is in troublesome times!
- Was the remnant of God's people concerned for their children when the threat of captivity was heard?
 - Let them behold their God!
 - He promises to care for them!
 - There will always be a succession in the church!

b) The Bible teaches that He takes the children of believers to be His own.

1) First, in that He calls them His own—

- In Ezekiel 16:20 God says: "Moreover you took your sons and your daughters, whom you bore to Me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. *Were* your *acts* of harlotry a small matter, that you have slain My children and offered them up to them by causing them to pass through *the fire*?"

2) Secondly, in that He blesses them—

- When the mothers brought their infants to Jesus, He took them in His arms and blessed them, but He does not bless those who are not His people.

3) Thirdly, He declares that the children who have at least one believing parent are holy—and that otherwise they would be unclean—

4) Fourthly, because He gives them the sign of His covenant—

- In Gen 17, He commanded Abraham's descendants be circumcised on the eighth day.
- This was the sign of the covenant to mark them out as His people and to declare that He was their God.

- 5) Fifthly, He says that the promises belong to them—
 - When Peter preached in Acts 2, he said, “The promise is to you and your children.”
 - Therefore, our children are included in the covenant promise

- 6) He promises to parents who keep His covenant a succession—
 - In Psalm 103:17-18, He says:
 - But the mercy of the LORD *is* from everlasting to everlasting On those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children’s children, To such as keep His covenant, And to those who remember His commandments to do them.

- c) So parents, be comforted for these little ones!
 - When you have faith in God’s promises to them,
 - you will feed them the promises of God with eagerness and confidence...

 - When you have faith in God’s promises to them,
 - you will chastise them—not in vengeance, but in hope....

 - When you have faith in God’s promises to them,
 - You will pass that comfort along to them so that your rest will become their rest...
 - You will say to them, “Behold your God!”

So as you face the wilderness and captivity—do not despair!

- Be comforted—God is reconciled—your sins are forgiven...
- Therefore, prepare to see His glory in the wilderness!
- He will show you His glorious saving power and grace in Jesus Christ.