

Once there was a Baptist minister and humorist named Grady Nutt. Grady could tell some of the most hilarious stories. One of Grady's classic stories was of a seminary student who pastored a rural church on the weekends. Word came to this student preacher that a man in his church had died. Could he come and conduct the funeral? The young preacher had never done a funeral before, but after receiving counsel from one of his seminary professors about how to proceed, he drove out to the home of the man who had died to offer his widow some comfort and to plan the funeral service. The widow greeted him and they looked around for a quiet place where they could talk.

That was a problem since the house was filled with people who had come to offer their condolences. Since every other room was occupied, the widow suggested the only room that was available . . . the bathroom. So, they went in there. She closed the door and sat down on the edge of the tub, and as Grady put it, he took the, uh, "other seat."

Things went well. They shared stories about the deceased, chose appropriate passages of scripture, and then joined hands for a closing prayer. Then the young pastor stood up and instinctively reached back . . . and pushed down the handle. **8It was then that Grady reminded us: you just can't un-flush a toilet.**

I don't know how much comfort the young pastor gave the widow that day, but he sure gave her an experience she could laugh about for a long time.

Our lesson for today from Isaiah 40 begins like this: **"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for . . ."**

It's been said that the task of a prophet is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Prophets like Amos, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were quite skillful at afflicting the comfortable. **Amos, particularly, was harsh in chastising the children of Israel because of their treatment of the poor as well as their other sins.** Listen to his words.

"Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the Lord has spoken against you—against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: 'You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins against others . . .'"

That's interesting, don't you think? **It is because God chose Israel to be His people that it is necessary for God to punish Israel when they go astray.**

From time to time, I hear someone say that God has chosen America and that is the reason we are so blessed materially. Be careful when you say that. Remember what the Master said, ***"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked"*** (Luke 12:48b). It was because God had chosen Israel that He expected so much out of her. And it was because God chose Israel that He punished her for her sins. **That was the teaching of the prophets.**

Fortunately, you and I live on the other side of the cross. Therefore, God does not punish us for our sins. **Still, it would profit us to LISTEN TO THE WORDS OF THE PROPHETS.**

If we are in Christ, the punishment for our transgressions has been taken away from us. However, that does not mean we are home free. If you drive out of the parking lot of the church this morning at 90 miles an hour, run red lights, drive recklessly in every way possible—even if you escape the judgment of law enforcement—there is the judgment of the laws of physics that says that if you take a turn too fast in a car there is a price to pay. There is a certain amount of pain involved in crashing an automobile into an immovable object like a large oak tree or, for that matter, another car. God's not punishing you for this reckless act; the laws of nature are punishment enough.

God does not punish us for our sins. He only weeps when we bring punishment on ourselves by our wrong doings. The prophets of the Old Testament were simply warning the people where they were headed if they continually ignored God's law.

Someone has likened it to two young men canoeing down the river toward Niagara Falls. Although the water was relatively calm, they were approaching the area where the water began to pick up speed as it headed for the falls. A

man on the shore, sensing the danger, called out, “Young men, you’re getting too close to the rapids!” But the young men, who heard the warning, did not heed it. Instead they went on laughing and joking, paying no attention to the danger. On the shore, the man watching began to run and shouted in desperation, **“Turn around! You’re getting too close to the rapids!”** Still the young men did not heed his warning. Faster and faster ran the current until the canoe was trapped in the rapids. The young men began to panic. With all the power at their command they tried to turn the canoe around, but it was too late. **Over the falls they went—all because they refused to hear the warning.**

The prophets were not simply “spoil sports,” as many of us would like to imagine them, trying to keep people from having too much fun. Rather **THEY WERE VOICES OF WARNING...TELLING THE PEOPLE THAT DOING WRONG CAN BRING DIASTER TO THEIR LIVES AND GRIEF TO GOD.** Sometimes, if we are fortunate, a friend will serve as a VOICE OF WARNING.

Sometimes the prophets were quite strong with their warnings, but, once in a while, the prophets were quite gentle as well. **None more so than the prophet Isaiah.** LISTEN TO THESE GENTLE WORDS...

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for.”

Here is the setting for this passage: The Babylonian army had invaded the land. Many of the leading citizens have been taken away to exile in Babylon. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. The holy city lay in ruins. The people were in shock. Those carried away to exile had the extra burden of being displaced from their home, the Promised Land. As the psalmist cried out during this time of exile: **“By the waters of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.”** (Psalm 137:1)

That’s the situation that the prophet Isaiah is addressing. But rather than issuing any more words of warning, he becomes a **“HERALD OF HOPE.”** *“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem . . .”* The Lord has not forgotten His people. **Indeed, God Himself will soon be coming to them.**

This is one of the many messianic prophecies of Isaiah. Isaiah is telling the people that God will not leave them desolate—just as He will not leave us desolate. In fact, he says in chapter 7, **“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel”** which means **“God is with us.”** **GOD WITH US.** Are there any words in scripture more beautiful than these: **GOD WITH US?**

“Do you people remember the story about Robinson Crusoe?” “Robinson Crusoe was in a shipwreck. He was all alone, stranded on an island. He wandered around that island for days, weeks, months and he knew he was alone. But one day, he noticed a footprint in the sand and that footprint was not his own. Immediately, Robinson Crusoe knew instantly that **HE WAS NOT ALONE.** Someone else was on that island.” **Someone else was with him.**

That was the message of Isaiah to the people of Israel. IMMANUEL WAS COMING. God had not forgotten them. They were not alone.

In one of his books, evangelist Billy Graham told about a time in his life when he was going through a dark period. He said he prayed long and earnestly, but there was no answer. He said he felt as though God was indifferent and that he was all alone with his problem. It was what some would call “a dark night of the soul.”

Billy Graham wrote his mother about the experience. He said he would never forget her reply: “Son,” she said, “There are many times when God withdraws to test your faith. He wants you to trust Him in the darkness. Now, Son, reach up by faith in the fog and you will find that His hand will be there.” **“Relieved,” Graham said, “I knelt by my bed and experienced an overwhelming sense of God’s presence.” YES, GRAHAM discovered he was “Not Alone.” By reaching out, he FOUND COMFORT IN GOD!**

In 1995, there was a young man in Britain who excelled in taking examinations. His name was Francis Thomason. Francis gave credit to his warm slippers when explaining how he had managed to pass so many examinations and gain a university degree. “It is important to have comfortable feet,” he said.

Lots of things bring US COMFORT. Linus, in the *Peanuts* cartoon, had his blanket for comfort. Remember that? He took it with him everywhere he went.

Nowadays people carry their pet with them for comfort. You see them in department stores, on buses and airplanes. And it seems to work. A psychologist at the University of Buffalo, Karen Allen, did a study on people who were giving speeches. Some subjects performed their speech for Dr. Allen alone, others performed in front of their spouse, and others spoke for only Dr. Allen and their dog. Here's what Dr. Allen found. The performers' stress levels were lowest when their dog was underfoot—four times lower, in fact, than when their spouse was present.

So the next time you give a speech take your pet with you! For some people, pets can be a real source of COMFORT!

FACE IT....WE ALL NEED COMFORT SOMETIME IN OUR LIVES!!

Later in this chapter Isaiah tells us the real source of comfort. Yes, our real source of comfort is GOD: *“You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”* Then he adds these tender words, *“He 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.”* NOW THAT IS COMFORT—COMFORT ONLY GOD CAN GIVE.

Jess Moody, a well-known pastor told of meeting Rose Kennedy, mother of President John F. Kennedy at a Bible study Moody was conducting. In that study Moody challenged his hearers to make their hearts ready to meet the Lord because life is short, and no one knows what the future may hold.

Later, during the study, Rose Kennedy spoke to Jess Moody privately and said she had done what Moody was talking about. She confessed that, as a young bride, she had been enamored with money. “She became selfish,” she told Moody, “living only for her own desires. Then she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. Soon it became apparent that something was wrong with her daughter. Medical tests revealed that her daughter had been born with severe [intellectual disabilities] and would have to be institutionalized for her entire life.”

Rose Kennedy said that she and her husband were devastated. Then the devastation turned to enormous anger toward God. “How could you have done this to us?” she asked the Lord. The anger eventually turned to a corrosive kind of bitterness that drained every bit of joy from her life. She hesitated attending social engagements, fearful that her anger about her daughter's condition would spill out. “And that's when it happened. A maid who worked for the family spoke to her. “Mrs. Kennedy,” said the maid, “I've been watching you for the last few weeks and I've seen how angry you are. If you don't do something, it's going to ruin you.” Then the maid made a suggestion: “I think you should pray this prayer: *‘O Lord, make my heart a manger where the Christ child can be born.’*”

“Rose Kennedy told Jess Moody that she was so angry that she fired the maid on the spot. But that night when she went to bed, she couldn't sleep. Tossing and turning, she couldn't get that simple prayer out of her mind. Finally, she knelt by her bed, and in an act of deep surrender she prayed, *“O Lord, make my heart a manger where the Christ child can be born.”* In that moment, in the depth of the night, when she cried out in anguish, God heard and answered her prayer. “I've always been religious, you know. I'm a Christian of the Catholic faith,” she said, “and I've always believed in Jesus. But this was different.” *On this night, she opened her heart to Christ in a new way, and her heart did indeed become a manger where Christ could be born in her.* Love replaced the anger that had gripped her soul. And the end of the story is this: She rehired the maid who stayed with the family until she died many years later.” Let me ask you a question: is this the prayer that you ought to pray as we celebrate the coming of the Christ child? *“O Lord, make my heart a manger where the Christ child can be born.”* Are you, like many carrying around a lot of ANGER in your heart due to Covid and how it has changed your life, imprisoned you in the way you live, hurt those you love? Like Rose Kennedy is it time to Pray, *“O Lord, make my heart a manger where the Christ child can be born.”* If you need help softening your heart so you can pray that prayer, remember the words of the Prophet Isaiah, *“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for . . .”*

There's only one place where lasting comfort can be found—in the arms of the one who as a babe laid his head... in the manger of Bethlehem. I PRAY YOU WILL FIND COMFORT THERE!! Amen.