

# Waiting on God

Isaiah 40:1-11; Romans 5:1-5

**A sermon preached by Dr. Calvin Warpula  
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Seven hundred years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah looked at God's people, Israel. He saw that the land was full of greed, idolatry, neglect of God, and immorality (Isa. 1: 2-9).

Because God is a moral God, because God's very nature is opposed to evil and therefore must discipline and punish evil because it is totally opposed to him and all that is good and right, God had to act.

So after many years of their disobedience, God's patience finally had enough. Israel must be disciplined so that they would repent and turn to him. So God raised up the Babylonians from the east who came in great power against God's people. God himself would prompt Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians to defeat Israel and take them into captivity (39:7-9).

So Israel suffered. Their nation was destroyed, their temple ransacked and burned to the ground, their capital city, Jerusalem, was conquered, their wives and children forced into captivity and transported 750 miles back to the east to serve as slaves in Babylon. This is a dreadful condition and calamitous situation. Nothing like this had ever happened to them. Where is God in all this? He is loving and caring and yet he cares so much that he cannot allow his people to continue their sin.

So God is disciplining his people. For 70 years he disciplines them.

How did the people feel at this time? Psalm 137 shows us their joylessness and weeping because of this disaster (vs. 1-4).

Then God's prophet, Isaiah, by the spirit of prophesy, sees into the future that the end is coming to their hardships. After seventy years of oppression and captivity, God tells his prophets to cry out comfort for the people (Isa. 40:1). God will comfort his people.

It takes courage to say that God will comfort his people when no sign of comfort is in sight. But that's the nature of a promise---when something is not obvious, God declares it to be so, and God's people believe God's word.

Many years after Isaiah was dead and gone the comfort did come from God. The release came. The exiles returned home. The Jews returned home to rebuild their temple and to remember the covenants God made with them through Moses and David.

God calls them “my people.” He has chosen them and will not forsake them. They may forsake him and he may need to punish them, but he will not abandon them. God is called “your God.” These pronouns, “my people,” and “your God,” speak of a relationship bond between God and Israel. The relationship that God has with his people survives everything. God has allowed these disasters to come upon his people; in fact, God has sent them upon his people. But this does not mean that God is uncaring and indifferent. No, just like the father in the prodigal son story Jesus told still loved his son even though he was in the far country, so God still loves his people.

The prophets comfort Israel by speaking to them the words of God (v. 2). God’s word is comforting. The long period of bondage and misery brought on by the nation’s sins that culminated in their experience of God’s wrath and opposition in the exile was now over.

Their sins are pardoned; their time of suffering is coming to an end. Israel had been in exile for 50, 60, 70 years. The exile came in three stages from 605 BC to 587 BC. The people will be released and return to their own land. Isaiah foresees even the rise of the new king of the Medes and Persians who will conquer the Babylonians and release God’s people. This happened in 539 BC when Cyrus, king of the Persians, conquered the Babylonians, and released all the Jews to go back to their homeland. They had lived for 70 years in this foreign land; now they could go free.

This is what comfort really means:

“Comfort is not sin denied; it is sin forgiven. Comfort is not exile avoided; it is exile endured. Comfort is not getting our own act together; it is entering into the saving acts of God. Comfort is not a skin-deep course correction; it reaches through to the very core of the humbled heart. Comfort is not everything in place and under our control; it is a still calm with plenty of storm still around. Comfort means that there is a pathway through the dilemma, a call to go forward with God’s hand leading. Above all, comfort comes in the trust that God is at work, that God keeps his word, that his judgments are well deserved, that his overflowing mercy is not deserved. From this trust comes the peace that passes all understanding.” [F. Dean Lueking, “A Comfort, Deep and Lasting,” in The Library of Distinctive Sermons, VI, ed. Gary Klingspoon. Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1997, pp. 172-173].

Today, in Jesus Christ God comforts us with the knowledge that our sins are forgiven and that through the power of the resurrected Jesus that we are now God's people. God comforts us. The apostle Paul wrote, "God comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction" (2 Cor. 1:4). Truly, as the world's favorite psalm says, "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me" (Psalms 23:4).

We now have assurance and comfort from God but God has a great future for us. It may be many years in the future. It may not be in our lifetime. It may not be in our children or grandchildren's lifetimes, but eternal comfort from the Lord is coming.

If I had only one more sermon to preach it would be one on comfort. I think that my text would have to be one like the one we have today, "Comfort, comfort, my people says the Lord." Perhaps I would choose these comforting words: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." Maybe I would choose these words of Jesus, Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

All of this discipline, exile and return is for the glory of God. God will bring his people back. God is doing all of this. He gets all the glory (vs. 3-5).

The flowers that look so beautiful today will be wilted tomorrow. This reminds us that all of us humans are transient. The people that served at this church over the years have come and gone. We have lost many dear friends in our lives and we know that we ourselves are going, too. All great leaders must come to the end of their life on earth. For Israel, Moses was gone; David was gone; Elijah was gone. For us, Glenn McDoniel is gone; Jack Castles is gone; Burton Coffman is gone; W. C. Whiteside is gone. It will not be too long before we are gone, too. The brevity of life and the certainty of death stare us all in the face (Psa. 103:15-17).

God's word stands firm and true. It will never pass away. It is indestructible. Jesus referred to this thought when he said that heaven and earth would pass away but his word would never pass away (Mk. 13:31). Jesus says that God's word is more enduring than the universe.

Trust in the word of God is not like trust in a good luck charm. It is not trust in something impersonal. It is trust in God.

God stands behind his word. His word is as true and right and sure as he is. God cannot lie. He will not deceive us or mislead us. If his word says it, you can bet your life on it.

Life does not depend on man. We are so transient. Life depends on God, the word of God, and his promises. Nothing can stop Gods word from

being fulfilled. God is eternal, omnipotent and full of infinite wisdom. Isaiah goes on to say this in v. 28.

Isaiah goes on in vs. 9-11 to proclaim the awesomeness of God. God rules. He is “the sovereign Lord,” which is the NIV translation of the Heb. *Adonai Yahweh*, the Lord God eternal.

God loves and tenderly cares for his people (v. 11). Look at the terms: “tends his flock, gathers the little ones in his arms, carries them close to his heart, and gently leads those that have young.” God is patient. He is tender. He is kind. He is compassionate. He is good. He takes care of us. Jesus used this same imagery to describe himself in John chapter 10 when he said he is the good shepherd.

We look at others and we are distressed.

We look at ourselves and we are depressed.

We look at God and we are blessed.

This means that God is coming for his people. He who sent them out into exile now will bring them home to their own land once more.

The people’s hardship brought them back to God. Never again would they worship idols. Never again would they sin to the depth and degree that they did previously.

The people had to wait on God. They waited for 70 years till God acted. God acted in the right time. The people’s hearts now were turned toward God. Suffering and hardship have a way of pushing us to our knees and making us trust and turn to God for help and hope.

If Israel had not been punished, they would not have repented. They would have died and been totally destroyed in their sins. God’s discipline was actually a way of his love acting to bring them to repentance. If they had not been afflicted they would not have returned to the Lord.

Their suffering built character, character that turned to God for help, character that obeyed God, character that trusted God to do the right things, character that lived in submission to the will of the Lord.

A New Testament text that emphasizes this thought is Romans 5:1-5. Paul is writing to Christians in Rome and giving them the great doctrines of the Bible. He has spoken earlier here of sin and death, of faith and being put right with God. Now he says we have peace with God. We stand in the status or position of peace with God. We are friends with God again through Jesus Christ.

This is all because of Jesus and what he did for us at the cross. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, he says. We can now rejoice in our salvation and our status with God. But then Paul says something very strange. We not only rejoice in our salvation and our status

with God, but we rejoice in our sufferings. That's different. He says we rejoice in our sufferings. The word sufferings here does not mean things like sickness, pain, sorrow or bereavement. The Greek word *thlipsis* means the pressure of a godless and hostile world.

How can we rejoice in that which causes us pain? How can we rejoice in our sufferings?

Verses 3-5 explain the paradox. We don't rejoice in the sufferings but in that which the sufferings produce. We don't enjoy being hurt. We don't just grit our teeth and endure it. Our sufferings produce something—they produce endurance, character and hope.

The word "produce" here comes from a group of words that refers to refining metals by heating them in the fire. The fire must be hot to melt the silver or gold so that the dross will rise to the top and can be skimmed off. The heat of the fire produces purer and purer metals.

Paul says here that the fires and heat of sufferings "produce" a purer life for God.

Sufferings produce endurance. Just as the body produces antibodies when there enters so we produce endurance when suffering enters. Without suffering, there would be nothing to endure.

Endurance produces character. This character is the quality of something that has been put to the test and endured it.

Character produces hope. This produces hope of future glory. God is at work in and among us. We have confidence that God will not give up until the job is completed. If God is working within us now, then surely he will bring us safely to the end. Our suffering produces the hope of glory. God is sanctifying us now and he will someday glorify us forever.

We can rejoice in our sufferings because they develop us. They cause us to grow. They build us up. Sufferings transform our character.

We follow a suffering Jesus. All of God's people through the OT and NT have suffered. There is no such thing as serving God without suffering. The Bible says, "All who would live godly in this present evil world must suffer" (2 Tim. 3:11-12).

We don't learn anything from pleasure. We don't grow in comfort. We only grow when we suffer. We depend on God more when we are hurting than when we are comforted. When do you pray the most—when everything is going your way, no problems, no opposition, no pain, or when you are suffering, when you don't have the answers and don't know what to do, and when the way is dark and difficult? We all grow more in pain than in pleasure.

If God wants to bless us, he must first break us. The olive and the grape will never produce oil and wine unless they are first crushed. God will not bless a self-contented, independent person who has no sense of his dependency on God. The crucible of suffering produces righteous lives and obedient people. Think of Abraham, Moses, Joseph, David, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, Peter, and Antipas.

When I think of this spiritual truth, I am reminded of that small town in southern Alabama named Enterprise. Before 1916, Enterprise was right in the center of some of the most fertile cotton growing land in the south. Everything in the community depended on cotton. But then tragedy struck. The boll weevil invaded and wiped out the cotton entirely. Everything the people had worked for all their lives was facing total ruin. The farmers were forced to switch to peanuts and other crops that brought them far greater returns than they would have made with cotton. That which seemed a disaster became the basis for undreamed prosperity. The town and the area flourished once more. On December 11, 1919, to show their appreciation for their new found fortune the people of Enterprise erected a monument in the center of town---a monument to the boll weevil. This is the only monument in the world to an agricultural pest. Today, when you drive through Enterprise, AL you can see that monument right in the middle of the main street.

We all have had and do have boll weevil experiences: financial reverses, professional failure, relational disappointments, psychological or physical hurts. These trials, however, can bump us out of our old ways and force us to find new ways to live. Through the Lord, tragedies can turn into triumphs.

Marvin McNickle of Cleveland, Ohio, tells this story about his tulips:

On the Sunday after Thanksgiving 2009, I exercised an act of faith by planting tulip bulbs in Cleveland, Ohio. I wondered if I had waited too late to do this, and I worried even more when the first snow of the winter fell on the next day and covered my flower bed. That was followed by one of the worst winters on record so far as snow fall was concerned. My flower bed and tulip bulbs were covered by three feet of snow for more than three months. Each day as I saw that snow piled up in my yard, sitting on top of my tulip bulbs I wondered if those small and delicate flowers could survive of their surroundings.

Things got so bad as far as snow was concerned that I actually talked to my tulip bulbs, telling them how sorry I was that I placed them in such a terrible situation. I told those tulip bulbs, "If I had known how much snow was coming I never would have placed you in the ground." How could they survive a winter like that with all that ice and snow covering the ground for so long? I truly felt sorry for my tulip bulbs, and I was sure I never would see a tulip in the flower bed in spring.

However, it seemed as if my tulip bulbs started talking back to me, telling me not to worry. “Take it easy, Marvin; we’ll be alright. Don’t worry about a thing, just wait and see what happens. There may be some snow on top of us, but there are some roots underneath us, and we are going to persevere until the snow melts. Just wait a little while and see what happens.” Sure enough, when the snow melted, I went outside to see what was happening in my flower bed, and I saw the tips of tulips breaking through the frozen ground after a harsh winter. There was snow on top of them, but they persevered. The heavy ice sat on top of them for months and caused me to doubt if they could survive, but they persevered. The weather threw everything it had at those tender and delicate plants, but they persevered.

(Marvin McNickle, “God Is Worth Waiting For,” Preaching, Nov.-Dec, 2010).

We can learn a lesson from the tulips. We can persevere in the face of hardship. We can rejoice in what’s happening in our lives if we are thereby becoming more Christ like. Paul said in Romans 5 that “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance produces character, and character produces hope.”

Press on like the tulips pressed on though buried deep in the cold snow. The Bible says that “weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning” (Psalms 30:5).

We need to press on. God is bigger than any problem we may be facing.

We need to press on. We may have sinned badly, and God may have punished us deeply; but we can still be used greatly.

The song we will sing in just a minute should be our theme song:

“I’m pressing on the upward way,  
New heights I’m gaining every day,  
Still praying as I’m onward bound,  
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”

I encourage you to wait patiently as God works. God is worth waiting for. Israel had to wait 430 years for God to deliver them from Egypt. Israel had to wait for 40 days while Moses was on Mt. Sinai. They had to wait another forty years before entering the Promised Land. During Isaiah’s time, they had to wait 70 years to be delivered from Babylonian exile. Isaiah spoke of the coming comfort that would be theirs. It was finally realized. But Isaiah also looked down the stream of time and saw a far greater fulfillment in the future kingdom of God. He spoke in chapter 53 of a suffering savior who would die for the sins of the people and be buried and

then raised to life. Israel had to wait 700 years for this promised Messiah to appear.

We are now waiting the fulfillment of the eschatological kingdom, the final glory of God's great universal kingdom. At that time, suffering, pain, frustration, disappointment, loneliness and sorrow will forever pass away.

I hear Peter say, "We. . . . look for a new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwells righteousness." (2 Pet. 3:13). I hear John respond, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold I make all things news" (Revelation 21:2-5a).

Until that day we say with John the apostle in Rev. 21:20, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

God is worth waiting for. But God is also waiting on us. He is waiting for us to turn to him with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength. He is waiting for us to get fully ready for the coming of his son.

Are you ready for that day? This is an ideal day and time for you to turn back to God with your life. We want to help you. We are ready to pray with you, study with you, counsel with you, love and encourage you, and/or assist you in being baptized into Christ. We want you to come to the Lord now. "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come,' and whosoever will, let him come," while we stand and sing.

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