

# The God Who Comforts

## *Isaiah 40*

April 8, 2026 — Wednesday Evening

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### **Archaeological Moment: The Great Isaiah Scroll**

In the winter of 1946–47, a Bedouin shepherd boy named Muhammad edh-Dhib was searching for a lost goat in the cliffs above the Dead Sea at a site called Khirbet Qumran. He threw a stone into a cave and heard pottery shatter. Inside, he discovered clay jars containing ancient scrolls wrapped in linen.

Among those scrolls was a document that scholars would designate 1QIsa — the Great Isaiah Scroll. It is the oldest complete manuscript of any biblical book ever discovered, dating to approximately 125 BC, more than a thousand years older than the previously known Hebrew manuscripts of Isaiah. The scroll is now housed in the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, under a dome designed to evoke the lids of the clay jars in which it was found.

Here is the archaeological detail that matters for our study tonight. The Great Isaiah Scroll shows absolutely no break, no division, and no scribal notation between what scholars call First Isaiah (chapters 1–39) and Second Isaiah (chapters 40–66). The scribe who copied this scroll treated Isaiah 40:1 as the seamless continuation of one unified book. Chapter 40 begins on the same column as the end of chapter 39, with only a small gap — the kind of gap a scribe would leave between any two sections. The ancient scribal tradition knew no “Deutero-Isaiah.”

The scroll also demonstrates the remarkable stability of the Hebrew text. After comparing it with the Masoretic Text — the traditional Hebrew text underlying most of our translations — scholars found that the text of Isaiah had been preserved with extraordinary fidelity across more than a millennium of copying.

Consider the moment in literary history: if you gathered every manuscript that physically survived — in ink, on any surface, from anywhere in the world — from approximately 125 BC, the list would contain essentially two entries of significance: the Mawangdui Silk Texts from China, and the Dead Sea Scrolls from Judea, with the Great Isaiah Scroll standing as the crown of that collection. Rome — gone. Greece — gone. Persia — gone. Egypt — fragments of business records. The ancient world produced enormous quantities of writing at 125 BC, and virtually all of it has perished.

One Jewish scribe, copying the words of Isaiah onto leather, placed his work in a clay jar in a desert cave. And it is still here. That is not merely an archaeological curiosity. For the Christian, it is a theological statement. The word that the scribe copied — *the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever* — proved itself by surviving, intact, while every other word from that moment in history crumbled to dust.

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## Introduction

Tonight we are looking at one of the great chapters of the Bible — Isaiah 40. The reason it is before us is its direct connection to the passage we will cover this Sunday, 2 Corinthians 1:1–11. Paul opens that letter with these words:

“*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.*” — 2 Corinthians 1:3

Over the next four verses, Paul uses the word *comfort* eight more times. When I saw that, the opening of Isaiah 40 came immediately to mind:

“*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.*” — Isaiah 40:1–2

Before we move into the passage itself, let me offer some background on the prophet and the book.

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## Background: Isaiah the Prophet and the Structure of His Book

Isaiah ben Amoz stands among the greatest of all the Hebrew prophets. He ministered in Jerusalem during the reigns of four kings of Judah — Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah — a span running roughly from 740 to 700 BC (Isaiah 1:1). He was, by all accounts, a man of culture, education, and direct access to the royal court. Tradition holds that he was of noble blood, perhaps even a cousin to King Uzziah.

His call came in a year of political crisis. Uzziah — the king under whom Judah had flourished — died. The throne was uncertain. Nations were shifting. And into the silence of that moment, Isaiah saw the LORD seated upon a throne, high and lifted up, His glory filling the temple (Isaiah 6:1). He was undone. He was cleansed. And he was sent.

He preached to a people who would not listen. He wept over a city that would not repent. He watched Assyria swallow the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. He counseled kings and confronted idolaters. He is sometimes called the “Evangelical Prophet” — the one whose words most richly anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ. No chapter illustrates that title more fully than Isaiah 53.

The book of Isaiah is often called a mini-Bible, and the comparison is more than superficial. The Bible contains 66 books; Isaiah contains 66 chapters. The Bible divides into two great collections — 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. Isaiah divides into two great movements in precisely the same proportion: chapters 1–39 and chapters 40–66.

The first 39 chapters sound like the Old Testament in concentrated form. They begin with accusation — God calling heaven and earth as witnesses against His people (1:2), echoing Moses calling heaven and earth as witnesses in Deuteronomy (30:19; 31:28). The language is covenantal. The indictment is covenant unfaithfulness. From there, chapters 1–39 move through the full range of Old Testament themes: judgment and prophetic warning, oracles against the nations, wisdom and apocalypse, and finally historical narrative — chapters 36–39 running almost verbatim parallel to 2 Kings 18–20, where the historian’s pen meets the prophet’s in the court of Hezekiah with Sennacherib at the gates.

And then — like turning the last page of Malachi — everything changes.

Chapter 40 opens with the word *comfort*. After 39 chapters of warning, accusation, and judgment, a new voice breaks through. Not a voice of wrath. A voice of consolation. The tone shift at Isaiah 40 is as dramatic as turning from the last verse of Malachi to the first verse of Matthew.

The parallels to the New Testament are remarkable. Isaiah 40:3 introduces the voice crying in the wilderness — “Prepare the way of the LORD” — and all four Gospel writers identify John the Baptist as the fulfillment of that text. The four Servant Songs of chapters 42, 49, 50, and 52–53 are quoted, referenced, or alluded to in the New Testament more than any other single passage in the Hebrew Bible. Isaiah 61:1–2 describes the anointed one who brings good news to the poor and liberty to the captives — the very passage Jesus reads in the Nazareth synagogue before declaring, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). And chapters 65–66 bring the vision to its climax with language Revelation 21–22 takes up directly: “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (65:17).

The first great movement of Isaiah establishes the problem: a holy God, a covenant people, a catastrophic failure of faithfulness, a judgment that cannot be avoided. The second great movement announces the solution: God has not abandoned His people. Comfort is coming. The servant will bear what the people could not bear. The exile will end. The highway will be prepared. The glory of the LORD will be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together.

Every time you open Isaiah, you are holding the Bible in miniature. Tonight we are looking at its hinge — chapter 40, where, after 39 chapters of warning, God speaks a word that no one expected.

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## The Hebrew and Greek of Comfort

Before reading through the chapter, it is worth pausing over the language of comfort itself.

The opening of Isaiah 40 in Hebrew reads:

— *Nachamû nachamû* — ~~comfort~~ “comfort, comfort my people.”

Notice the repetition. This is a Hebrew rhetorical device — the doubling of a word to intensify its force. It is not redundancy; it is urgency. God is not merely suggesting comfort. He is commanding it. It is a royal decree.

The Hebrew word *nacham* is an unusual word. At its root, it means to breathe deeply in response to strong emotion. When the emotion is grief or regret, it means to sorrow, to be deeply troubled, even to relent. When the emotion turns toward another person in their pain, it means to comfort, to console, to draw near to someone in their suffering and speak peace into it. The word carries both sorrow and consolation within itself, which is exactly why it is so rich. The God who uses this word to comfort His people is not a God who is distant from their pain. He is a God who has felt it.

This same word appears in Genesis 6:6–7, where God is grieved over human sin — the anguish of a Creator whose beloved creatures have turned away. And it appears here in Isaiah 40:1, where that anguish resolves into the determination to comfort. The God who was grieved over sin now moves to comfort the sinner.

When the Septuagint — the Greek Old Testament, translated around 250 BC — rendered this verse, the word *nacham* became *paraklēsis*. In Greek it reads:

*Παρακαλε τε παρακαλε τε τ ν λαόν μου* — *Parakaleite parakaleite ton laon mou*.

This is the exact word Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 1:3–7 — the noun *παράκλησις* and the verb *παρακαλέω* — no fewer than twelve times combined, giving that passage the highest concentration of this word group anywhere in the New Testament. And it is the root of the word *paraclete* — the title Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit in John 14:16:

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever.”

When Jesus promises the Paraclete — the Comforter, the Holy Spirit — He is reaching back to the comfort of Isaiah 40. The line from *nacham* to *paraklēsis* to Paraclete is a single, unbroken thread running from the exile to the Upper Room to us.

With that in mind, let us read through this extraordinary chapter.

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## 1. The Declaration of Comfort — Isaiah 40:1–2

“*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.*” — Isaiah 40:1–2

It begins with a command. God does not whisper it. He does not suggest it. The imperative is doubled: *nachamû nachamû*. Comfort. Comfort. It is the sound of heaven breaking into the silence of exile.

Notice who God addresses first — not the people directly, but the messengers: the prophets, the heralds. He is commissioning a proclamation. Before the comfort reaches the people, it must be carried by voices. Someone must speak it. Someone must cry it out. The comfort of God requires ambassadors.

Then come three great announcements of what has changed. Her warfare is ended. The Hebrew word is *tsaba* — military service, hard campaign, forced labor. The exile was a tour of duty in the school of suffering. God says: the tour is over. The campaign is complete. You can lay down your weapons.

Her iniquity is pardoned. The verb is *ratsah* — to be accepted, to be approved. Her debt has been satisfied. The accounting is complete. This is not amnesia; God has not forgotten the sin. He has settled it. The ledger is closed.

She has received double for all her sins. The “double” is not a statement that God was unjust and punished her too severely. It is a legal metaphor — a receipt of full payment. In ancient Near Eastern commerce, when a debt was paid in full, a document was folded and sealed with the notation that double had been received, meaning satisfaction was complete. God is showing her the receipt.

All the wonderful promises that follow in Isaiah 40 are grounded in this: iniquity pardoned, relationship restored. Is this not the gospel?

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## 2. The Voice in the Wilderness — Isaiah 40:3–5

“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’” — Isaiah 40:3–5

In the ancient world, a royal herald would precede the king on his journey, crying out to clear the road. Mountains were cut. Valleys were filled. Rivers were bridged. The king must pass unhindered. Isaiah draws on that image, but the King coming here is the LORD Himself — and the road is not through Judea or Persia. It is through the human heart. Every valley — every depression, every place of defeat, every low and broken place — shall be lifted up. Every mountain — every pride, every self-sufficiency, every obstacle — shall be brought low. The terrain of the human soul must be prepared for the arrival of God.

All four Gospel writers identify John the Baptist as the fulfillment of this voice (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4–6; John 1:23). John is the herald. Jesus is the King. The new exodus has begun. The comfort of God is arriving in human flesh.

And notice the promise of verse 5: *And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.* Not just Israel. All flesh. The comfort of God that begins in Jerusalem is destined for the world.

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## 3. The Enduring Word — Isaiah 40:6–8

“A voice says, ‘Cry!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” — Isaiah 40:6–8

This is the contrast at the heart of the chapter. All flesh is grass. The word translated “beauty” in verse 6 is the Hebrew *hesed* — lovingkindness, covenant loyalty. Even the *hesed* of human beings is like a wildflower: beautiful this morning, gone by evening. The Assyrian empire — grass. The Babylonian empire — grass. Every human institution, every political alliance, every civilization built on human strength — grass.

But the word of our God stands forever.

The Great Isaiah Scroll lying in its cave for two thousand years while empires rose and fell is itself a testimony to this verse. Rome came and went. Persia came and went. Babylon came and went. The scroll outlasted them all. The word of God endured.

Peter quotes this passage directly in 1 Peter 1:24–25 and applies it to the gospel:

“*All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*” — 1 Peter 1:24–25

The word that stood forever was planted into human history in Bethlehem. It walked through Galilee. It died on a cross. It rose on the third day. And it endures. It endures in you, because you have been born again — not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God (1 Peter 1:23).

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#### **4. The Herald and the Shepherd — Isaiah 40:9–11**

“*Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.*” — Isaiah 40:9–11

*Behold your God.* This is the proclamation. Zion herself becomes the herald. She climbs the mountain. She lifts her voice. She announces what she has received: your God is coming.

And how does He come? He comes with might. His arm rules. He is not weak, not defeated, not a God diminished by the catastrophe of exile. He comes as conqueror.

But then the image shifts — and the shift is breathtaking.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom. He will gently lead those that are with young.

This is the same God. The mighty arm that conquers is the same arm that carries the lambs. The God of sovereign power is the God of tender pastoral care. He does not drive the nursing ewes at the pace of the strong. He leads them gently.

John 10 is the New Testament home of this image. Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” He is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s shepherd-king — the mighty arm that conquered sin and death at the cross, and the gentle hand that carries the lambs of His flock. When Paul calls God “the Father of mercies” in 2 Corinthians 1:3, he is describing the same God Isaiah portrays here: the shepherd who carries the weak and wounded. This is the God who comforts.

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## 5. The Incomparable God — Isaiah 40:12–26

*“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power, not one is missing.” — Isaiah 40:12–26*

This section is a doxology of divine incomparability. Isaiah fires question after question. Who measured the oceans in the cup of His hand? Who calibrated the heavens with the span of His fingers? Who weighed the mountains on a scale? Who counseled the Spirit of the LORD? Who taught Him wisdom? The answer, of course, is no one. No one measured. No one counseled.

No one taught. Because God is the measure. God is the counsel. God is the wisdom. He is not one being among others of the same kind. He is in a category entirely alone.

Then Isaiah turns the lens to the nations. All of them — a drop in a bucket. Dust on the scales. Less than nothing. Lebanon's cedar forests would not provide enough wood for one adequate offering. Lebanon's animals would not provide enough for one adequate sacrifice.

Then comes the sharpest point of the argument: the idols. Carved from a tree. Overlaid with gold. Requiring a craftsman's skill to keep them from wobbling. These are what Babylon offers as gods?

The theological point here is foundational: the comfort of God is grounded in the greatness of God. Isaiah 40's theology of comfort does not work if God is small. You cannot be comforted by a deity who might fail. You cannot rest in the arms of a god who might be defeated. But this God — the God who measured the oceans, who weighs the mountains, who sits enthroned above the circle of the earth — this God speaks comfort. And His comfort holds.

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## 6. Those Who Wait on the LORD — Isaiah 40:27–31

*“Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God’? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” — Isaiah 40:27–31*

After all the cosmic grandeur — after the incomparable God, the withered grass, the herald's proclamation, the shepherd's arms — it comes down to this. A single person in the dark. Exhausted. Saying: my way is hidden. God does not see me. God does not care about my case.

Isaiah knows this person. He has pastored this person. This is the one in exile who has stopped praying because the prayers seem to hit the ceiling. This is the one who has watched the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer and concluded that the moral order has collapsed. This is the one who has simply run out of strength.

And the prophet turns on them — not in anger, but in astonishment: *Have you not known? Have you not heard?*

All the theology of the chapter comes crashing down upon this exhausted believer. He does not faint. He does not grow weary. His understanding of your case, your situation, your hidden way — is unsearchable. He knows. He sees. He does not sleep.

And into your exhaustion He pours strength. Not your strength renewed — His strength transferred. The Hebrew word for “renew” (*chalaph*) can mean to exchange — to trade in the old for the new. You bring your weakness. You exchange it at the counter. And He gives you something that was never yours to begin with: the power of the Everlasting God.

*They who wait for the LORD.* The Hebrew word for wait is *qavah* — to hope in, to bind yourself to, to entwine with. It is not passive waiting. It is active attachment. It is the posture of a person who has stopped running on their own strength and has bound themselves to God’s. This is the life of faith. And from this place — from the place of holy waiting, holy attachment — they shall mount up with wings like eagles.

Three images conclude the chapter, and they move in a surprising direction. Wings like eagles: the great soaring, the high vision, the supernatural lift. Many of us want to live here all the time. But notice — this is the first gift, not the steady state. Run and not be weary: active ministry, the daily work of the gospel, long but sustained effort. This is the middle register of the Christian life. And then: walk and not faint. Simply walk. Put one foot in front of the other. Do not collapse. Through grief. Through illness. Through uncertainty. Through ordinary Tuesdays.

The progression is not a disappointment. It is a revelation. God gives strength not only for the mountain peaks of spiritual experience but for the long flat roads of faithful, patient, unremarkable obedience. The God who comforts is the God who keeps you walking when you have no wings and no energy to run. He sustains what He begins.

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## Closing: The God of All Comfort

Now return to 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 with fresh eyes:

“*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*” — 2 Corinthians 1:3–4

Paul was writing from affliction. He had been pressed beyond measure in Asia. He had despaired of life. He had faced death. He had known the darkness of the exile experience — not geographically, but spiritually. And he had been comforted.

The God who comforted him was the God of Isaiah 40. The God who measures the oceans. The God who carries the lambs. The God who keeps His word when empires fall. The God who gives strength to the faint. The God whose comfort runs down through *nacham* and *parakalēō* and finds you in your particular affliction, in your particular darkness, on your particular ordinary Tuesday.

His comfort is not a feeling. It is a verdict.

Your warfare is ended. Your iniquity is pardoned. The debt is paid.

Behold your God.

He comes with might. He comes with tenderness. He gathers the lambs. He leads the nursing ewes gently. He does not faint. He does not grow weary.

And you who wait for Him — you who bind yourselves to Him in holy trust, who exchange your weakness for His strength — you shall not faint.

The same Spirit who moved Isaiah to write these words is the Paraclete — the Comforter — promised by Jesus and poured out at Pentecost. He is the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah 40's *nacham*. God has come near. The exile is over. The wilderness is blooming. The voice has cried. The King has come. And His comfort — His *paraklēsis* — is available to you tonight.