

## Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel...with Comfort

### Isaiah 40:1-11 (NIV)

<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." <sup>6</sup> A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. <sup>7</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." <sup>9</sup> 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!" <sup>10</sup> See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. <sup>11</sup> 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.

Is the Bible an instruction book for life? Some would hold this book before your eyes and declare that it absolutely is, almost like another book, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." But is that the Bible's primary function – to tell you what to do?

This section of Isaiah kind of reads like an instruction book. "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain." (verses 3-4) Straighten out your path so that you can get to God. Fill in all the valleys in your life, those areas that are pits of all the good things you haven't done. Make the mountains and hills low by demolishing your pride and shattering your ego to pieces so that you don't think of yourself more highly than you ought. Those days of imperfection, with slight, subtle mistakes we are supposed to smooth out and make level. With John the Baptist's voice still echoing in our ears we think, "Repent! Turn around! Fix yourself! This is what you gotta do! This is our instruction book for life."

This idea of straightening out, repenting, becoming a better person, this certainly sounds like something good to do, instructions to follow, but it's a whole lot easier said than done. I have a hard enough time drawing a straight line let alone making all my thoughts, words, and actions straight and right. It's not just about smoothing out the rough edges of my life. It's a total course correction and abandonment of sin – filling in valleys and making mountains low. I can't help but think of sins that I keep coming back to.

What sins do you continue to come back to? Is it losing your temper, spending money and buying things in excess, indulging in too much food or alcohol, viewing pornography, talking about others in a way that gives them a bad name or at the very least a tarnished reputation? You know these things are bad for you. You know that you need to straighten out and correct yourself from doing these things. And so you try. You pick up the self-help book. You take the anger management class. You get the counseling.

You try to straighten out, fill in the valleys, tear down the mountains, level out the rough stuff, and it works for a day, a week, maybe even a couple of months. But then you stick your toe out of the straight path and dip it back into the sin. You're ashamed. You vow to never do it again. You course correct, straighten back out. But then you stick your toe in again. Then your foot. In a quick downward spiral you're wading fully into sin. Then, hopefully before you do a cannon ball on the deep end, you stop yourself, wonder how you got here, and are ashamed all over again.

We keep making our path to God crooked, not straight. We keep building mountains of sin and leaving great valleys of the good deeds left undone. It feels like we will never get to God and just keep messing up. The temptations keep coming day after day and we wonder what the point is in fighting it. We ask for it to go away, but it doesn't. Then there are all sorts of other sins that need our attention, our fixing. Our resolve and our fight deteriorate. We wear out. And why wouldn't we? A voice cried the truth: "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field... Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall..." (verses 6b-8a) We just can't follow the instructions of the Bible. We fall. We fail. We can't fix our sinful selves with an instruction manual.

This is why God has Isaiah declare comfort to us. We expect the Bible to be an instruction manual, but really Isaiah gives us a completed project. That's what the Bible is. Yes, there are commands. There are instructions contained within it, but it's main message has always been to show us what God has done, what he is doing, and what he will do for us.

The LORD has Isaiah boldly declare: “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, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” (verses 1-2)

It’s not comforting to be told to do something that you can’t actually achieve. To be prepared for the coming of the Emmanuel, the God with us, we are supposed to make our lives straight to him, every valley raised up, every mountain made low, all the rough ground level. Fix yourself. But these first verses tell us that our hard service has been completed and that our sin has been paid for. We didn’t do it, but the LORD’s hand accomplished this.

God’s Word is not an instruction manual, but it is the proclamation that Emmanuel paid for all our sins – double, in fact. That means that there is no sin of ours left unpaid, no crooked path of sin that hasn’t been straightened out. Even with our depressing addictions to sin, our repeated and continued failures to correct our lives and fix ourselves, there is more than enough forgiveness for every single time that you or I lose our tempers or speak against someone and give them a bad name or spend money that we don’t have in an constant need to fill our lives with stuff or food or alcohol or pornography that we think will make us happy. The bill for all those sins is stamped “paid in full” by the life of the Emmanuel.

God’s message of comfort to you is that your service, your fixing, is already completed by him, Emmanuel. It was gifted to us in our baptisms, where our sins were washed away and we were clothed with white robes of Emmanuel’s perfection. It is gifted to us every time that we commune at the Lord’s table, that this is given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. God has straightened you out and continues to do so, fills in every valley of undone good works with Jesus’ good works, makes low every mountain of sin so that it is no more – paid in full, and levels the rough ground of our imperfection.

But isn’t there still an instruction to follow, that we have to walk this straight path God made for us? Isn’t that what John the Baptists was preaching? It’s just a walk on level ground. Anyone can do this, right? This is the comfort God is offering, isn’t it? Except even walks on level ground tire us out. We would have to walk this path every day for every hour for our whole lives. We are like grass. We wither. We fade. We fall. We die. If we are left on our own to walk the path by our power and our will, we will make it crooked all over again.

This is his comfort to us: “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... See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm... 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.” (verses 9ab,10a,11) God doesn’t just straighten out our lives, pat us on the backside, and tell us to get walking in order to make it to him. No, as the Emmanuel, he is actually walking with us, even when we can’t see him. When you sit back and wonder how you are going to get through the next day, how you are going to fight the next temptation, when you are weary and burdened and unable to go on, it is Emmanuel, our Good Shepherd, who gathers you into his arms, tucks you into the folds of his robe, and carries you close to his heart. God does not tire nor does he step a toe out of line on this straight path. He will take you past those addicting sins that you keep straying to. He carries you through that straight path that he made for you.

“Comfort, comfort, my people!” says our God. Yes, our hard service has been completed. Our sins have been paid for. God’s message to us is not an instruction manual, but the gifting of the completed project for us. It’s done. Emmanuel has come and is with us always to the very end of the age. He will carry us down that straight path of our lives and take us to be home forever with him. Amen.