

**Victory of the Lamb // Pastor Ben Sadler // 12/20/20**  
**Series: Light in the Darkness // Theme: Preparing for the Light**

**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. (Isaiah 40:1-2)**

I grew up in a family the loves to sing. My grandfather was in a barber shop choir and so he taught all his kids and grandkids to sing. Even though my grandpa Goede is in heaven, we keep singing. When we go up north for our family vacation and we gather around the campfire, we sing songs like "Let me call you sweetheart." When we celebrate Thanksgiving, we sing "Now Thank we all our God!" And when we celebrate Christmas, 50 plus people gather in one room around a piano and we sing, "Joy to the World".

It's going to be hard to sing "Joy to the World" this year. And it's not just because we can't cram 50 people in one room, but because it's getting harder and harder to find reasons to be joyful.

How about you? Are you struggling to get into the Christmas spirit? Are you struggling to find a reason to sing songs of joy?

We are continuing our sermon series **Light in the Darkness**. In this series, we have been acknowledging the continual challenges that we are facing this year. We struggle to find joy as it seems like we are walking in the darkness.

This feeling is echoed in Psalm 137. This Psalm is a lament, a prayer of sorrow. The year is 605 BC and the Babylonians have just come into Jerusalem. They destroyed the Jew's homes, burned down their temple, and took them off to foreign land. They wonder if things will ever go back to the way it was and so they cry out to God with these words:

**By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.**

**<sup>2</sup>There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,  
<sup>3</sup>for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded **songs of joy**;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"**

**<sup>4</sup>How can we sing the songs of the Lord  
while in a foreign land? (Psalm 137)**

Like us, the Jews were struggling to find a reason to sing songs of joy. So they hung up their harps and stopped singing.

Now our reading from Isaiah is directed at these exiles who are walking in grief. The prophet is called to help God's people to find their voice again. The prophet is called to help them learn how to sing songs of joy again.

The Lord speaks to the prophet and commands:

**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...**

The Lord commands the prophet to preach a message of comfort. He repeats the word "comfort" twice, which is the Hebrew way of making an exclamation mark. The Lord tells the prophet to "speak tenderly", literally, "speak to her heart". God is commanding the prophet to speak kind words to the people.

Why? What were the reasons that God's people could be comforted in the darkness? The Lord gives 3 reasons and these three reasons are actually the outline of the rest of the book.

**<sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and proclaim to her  
a. that her hard service has been completed,  
b. that her sin has been paid for,  
c. that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.**

Let's look at the first phrase, **(Jerusalem's) hard service has been completed...** What does this mean? Well for the past 70 years, Israel had been laboring in hard service. They had been working under the control of the Babylonians. Why did that happen? Why did they experience their time in exile? The prophet tells us:

**<sup>24</sup>Who handed Jacob over to become loot,  
and Israel to the plunderers?  
Was it not the Lord,  
against whom we have sinned?  
For they would not follow his ways;  
they did not obey his law.  
<sup>25</sup>So he poured out on them his burning anger,  
the violence of war.  
It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand;  
it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart. (Isaiah 42:24-25)**

When it comes to Israel's exile, it is very clear. God sent them into exile to get their attention. They sinned and rebelled against the Lord for hundreds of years, so now he poured out on them his burning anger.

I don't know why God has allowed us all to suffer this year. I don't know all the different messages that he is trying to send each of us individually. But I do believe God is using this time to get our attention. Our lives are slowing down. We are limited where we can go and what we can do. So we have time to assess our priorities. We have time to acknowledge how our lives were not centered on God.

That is good. Like Israel, we need to be confronted with our sin. But the captivity was lasting more than 70 years. After such a long time, the Israel was really starting to beat themselves up. There is a whole book of the Bible called Lamentations, which is about Israel pouring out their hearts in lament, grieving over the consequences of their sin.

This pandemic is dragging on and we might be weary of repenting. Maybe we are just beating ourselves up for all that is going wrong in our lives. I don't know about you, but once my conscience is pricked, I can't let it go. The great Reformer, Martin Luther, used to physically whip himself when he would have a selfish thought or action. I have never whipped myself. But sometimes I feel like I take myself out to the woodshed and beat myself up for sins that I have repented up.

But that's why the prophet says, **"Her hard service has been completed."** In other words, You can stop beating yourself up. God has not left you. The prophet explains this verse later one when he wrote what the Lord said:

**"I, even I, am he who blots out  
your transgressions, for my own sake,  
and remembers your sins no more. (Isaiah 43:25)**

God had not left Israel. Yes, he put them in exile. Yes, he wanted to get their attention. Yes, he wanted them to repent. But now it was a time to move on. Their hard service was over because God would remember their sins no more. If God had forgotten their sins, then they could forget them too. If God has forgotten your sins. Then you can forget them too. You don't need to beat yourself up anymore. Your hard service is over.

That's great news, but how could an all-knowing God actually forget sins that we have committed? Why? Why don't we have to keep working off the sins of our past?

The prophet goes on, "Comfort, Comfort my people because **Her sin has been paid for...(Isaiah 40:2)**

The sins that Israel committed were real. For hundreds of years they had been sacrificing to false gods like Molek. And the way that you worship Molek was by sacrificing your children. They had been worshiping power and pleasure by worshiping the god Baal and Asherah. That would lead them into horrible sexual practices. These were real sins that led God to send in the Babylonians.

But God decided to carry out his plan. He told the prophet to preach words of comfort, namely, that "her sin had been paid for." What does that mean? It certainly doesn't mean that 70 years in Babylon was not enough to pay for over 800 years of wickedness.

No, Israel couldn't pay for their sins. But God had a plan to enter into this world to rescue us. Isaiah tells the story of Jesus in his famous chapter, Isaiah 53:

**He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.  
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
<sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by mankind,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.**

**Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.**

These verses tell us something about the Christmas story. The Messiah, Jesus, would grow out of the dynasty of David, that was all dried up. As he grew up as a boy there was nothing in him that would attract us to him. According to the prophet he had no beauty or majesty.

But what made him so special is the work that he would do. The prophet goes on to explain:

**<sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.  
<sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
<sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.**

The prophet is telling us that the Christmas story leads to the cross. Like Israel our sins are real. And nothing we do can pay them all off. So Jesus went to the cross. The prophet here explains what happened when Jesus died. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. He was punished. We have peace. He was wounded. We are healed.

Isaiah spoke words of comfort because the Christmas story led to the cross.

This is good news. We don't have to beat ourselves up anymore. We don't have to pay for our sins because they have been paid for. But if you are like me, there is still lingering regret. Sin ruins our lives and changes the trajectory of our lives. So our sin is paid for, but what do we do about all the regret we feel right now?

It makes me think about something I recently read by Viktor Frankl. He was that Jewish psychologist who survived the holocaust. He used his experience to help people find meaning and purpose even in the most hopeless situations. The book I read was called *Yes to Life in spite of everything*. The book is made up of a series of lectures that were given in 1946 right after he was released from the camp. They were never before translated. And they were just released.

In these lectures he explained that people often feel hopeless and consider ending their life when they look at their life like a balance sheet. All their good experiences are in the credit column. And all that they think life owes them is in the debit column. They consider the time that they have left on this earth. And if they can't balance out life's balance sheet they want to give up.

That's definitely how the Israelites felt. Their sin had destroyed everything. They had lost their Temple and their homeland. Now they were living in a foreign land. And many of them had no hope of returning.

But the Lord told the prophet to preach words of comfort to these exiles because **(Israel) has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins**. Yes, their sins did create a deficit in their lives. And they would not be able to make it up on their own. But God promised to restore them with double their blessing as before.

What does this mean? How could this be? We turn to Isaiah 65 to see this verse explained:

<sup>17</sup> **"See, I will create  
new heavens and a new earth.  
The former things will not be remembered,  
nor will they come to mind.**

<sup>18</sup> **But be glad and rejoice forever  
in what I will create,  
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight  
and its people a joy.**

<sup>19</sup> **I will rejoice over Jerusalem  
and take delight in my people;  
the sound of weeping and of crying  
will be heard in it no more.**

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And now the prophet is saying that he is going to do it again. He is going to create this world again. He will make it new. Again there will be rejoicing and joy in Jerusalem. Why? He goes on to explain:

<sup>20</sup> **"Never again will there be in it  
an infant who lives but a few days,  
or an old man who does not live out his years;  
the one who dies at a hundred  
will be thought a mere child;  
the one who fails to reach a hundred  
will be considered accursed.**

<sup>21</sup> **They will build houses and dwell in them;  
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.**

<sup>22</sup> **No longer will they build houses and others live in them,  
or plant and others eat.  
For as the days of a tree,  
so will be the days of my people;  
my chosen ones will long enjoy  
the work of their hands.**

You see God was promising to give back to his people double in the life to come everything they had lost. They lost their houses. Those houses would be rebuilt. They had lost vineyards. They would grow vineyards. The Lord commanded Isaiah to preach words of comfort because the Christmas story led to the cross that ends with a crown.

And that is good news because so much has been lost. We have lost things because of our own sin. And we have lost much this year just because we live in a sinful world.

Do you know that famous Christmas song, “Joy to the World”? Did you know that was not actually a Christmas song? The writer, Isaac Watts, actually was writing not about Jesus’ first coming, but about his second coming. This song explains that when Jesus returns we are going to welcome our king and he is going to pay us double for all our sins. Listen to the lyrics and think about Isaiah’s promise:

**No more let sins and sorrows grow  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found  
Far as the curse is found  
Far as, far as the curse is found.**

This is what Isaiah is promising. God is going to give double blessing wherever the curse has destroyed. Wherever the curse of sin has destroyed your life, when Jesus comes he will replace it with blessing because Christmas led to a cross that will end in a crown.

We heard that when the Israelites went into exile, they hung up their harps on the poplars and stopped singing songs of joy. But the prophet preached a message of comfort so that they could find their voice again.

Now it’s our turn. Yes, we are still in the middle of the darkness. And much of our darkness is our own doing. But there was such a thing as Christmas that led to a cross that will end in a crown and so we can sing songs of comfort and joy.

So would you join me in singing? I don’t care if we all sing out of tune. We need to find our voice again. We need to be filled with joy again. So let’s sing the first verse of Joy to the World acapella. Let’s stand and sing:

**Joy to the world, the Lord is come!  
Let earth receive her king;  
Let every heart prepare him room  
And heav’n and nature sing  
And heav’n and nature sing  
And heav’n, and heav’n and nature sing.**

Let’s pray.