

Title: “Comfort. Comfort my People.”

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Mark 1:4-5; Isaiah 40:1-2

12/06/2020

Lesson:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

*² 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.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Not a famous person....

It wasn't supposed to be like this; she wasn't supposed to ever be in this situation, especially at her age. She had come too far, struggled too long, fought too hard to have it all slip away like it did; to lose it all at once, so quickly. That moment when she realized it was happening is burned in her memory and is replayed constantly in her mind like a never-ending movie. And she studies it, looking for a clue, looking for something that would help explain how it all came to this. But there's nothing. At least nothing that she can point to. It just simply happened. Well, that's not entirely true. Something *must* have happened, but she just doesn't know what *it* is. But what she *does* know is that it isn't her fault. She's sure of that. She reflects back on all of her years and what she sees is determination, and hard work, and dedication; what she sees is success. She was successful. She *is* successful. Well, she *was*, anyway.

<pause>

He stood on the top of the hill and looked out over the seemingly endless land. As far as the eye could see was death. Bodies, more than could be counted: men, women, children. Every age. Every nationality. Every walk of life. All lying lifeless across the land. It wasn't supposed to be this way; it wasn't supposed to be like this. There was never supposed to be a battle, a war. There was never supposed to be an enemy. But here he stood looking out over the battlefield, across this sea of death. And his heart ached. It ached for every one of these people that lay motionless, separated from life, *for all eternity*. They didn't have to die. They didn't have to rebel. He had come to wage war on only one, to defeat a single enemy, but that enemy knew how to recruit. How terrible was the scene that lay before him.

<pause>

Where did she go wrong? Seven days. Every week. 15 hours. Every day. No vacations. No distractions. Just focus. Total focus. That's what it took to build her company. The millions of dollars in yearly profit affirmed it. Her husband understood her commitment, at least she *thought* he did. Her children, for sure did. They were on board! They had every *thing* that they every wanted. They longed for nothing. No toy was ever denied when they were little. No electronic gadget or car or trip was ever held from them as they grew. They had everything. The kids were happy. Her husband was happy. She was happy. Life was great! And then it all fell apart. Not so much fell apart; it was all taken from her. What had she done to deserve it? The past days were a blur, but she remembers with clarity the details of the charges that the government pressed against her. Tax evasion, antitrust, racketeering, bribery, even money laundering. But what hurt the most, what she just couldn't erase was the look on her husband's face when she was arrested. He had known nothing about how she built her company, and even though she disagreed with the categorization of these charges, she could see that he didn't. And she could see how hurt she had made him. But she still couldn't understand how this could be her fault. Why was this happening to her? Why was she being punished for being successful? Why was God so angry with her? That last question barely left her lips when she caught herself. She hadn't thought about *Him* since childhood. Her parents were very.... Religious and so she went to church every Sunday, but she had long since outgrown that. So why was she thinking about it now?

<pause>

As he looked upon the land, he still could see movement. His enemy had been defeated but his followers were alive. Bruised and battered from the battle, but all alive. No one had made it through unscathed; especially him. And as he stood on top of that hill, he glanced back from where he had come. Behind him was the heavy cross, stained with blood - his blood. He remembers the torture of the whip and the pain from the nails. He remembers the struggle for every breath. But he also remembers the isolation, the separation from God that he experienced in those final moments. It was terrible, indescribable. But it was necessary. It was the price that had to be paid to win the war. It was the price that had to be paid to win back humanity. And it was the price that only *he* could pay. And these bodies? These people created by God? They didn't have to die. They didn't have to rebel. He came to fight for them. He came to win for them. His act covered their sins. But they rejected his love and now lay dead. Forever separated from their creator.

<pause>

The weight of the world had come crashing down around her, but in the days that followed it was the weight of her soul that proved unbearable. She couldn't push God out of her mind. She tried. Oh, how she tried. But nothing worked. And so, she finally relented and purchased a Bible. She told herself that in those pages she would find reaffirmation that God was an outdated belief; she would finally be able to get him out of her mind. But that's not what happened. She read her way through the Gospel of Matthew and as she began in the first chapter of Mark she read:

⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea and all

Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

The wilderness. That was exactly where she was right now. She was in her own wilderness. Was there really forgiveness out there... for her? Was she wandering alone, forgotten or was someone searching for her? Was it even *possible* that Jesus would even *want* to find her? She couldn't believe that. She had nothing left. She had nothing to offer. Her business was gone. Her husband had divorced her. Her children no longer spoke to her. She was a failure. She had nothing to give. She had fought and she had lost. The battle was over, and she was completely alone. Completely abandoned.

<pause>

The world was dark that day when he was laid in the tomb. The world didn't understand what had happened. They saw a man who claimed to be God and, in his death, they claimed victory. But that was three days ago. He rose from the grave. He is alive. And as he looks across the land, he sees his followers. These are the ones he has chosen, the ones who have received him. These are the ones he calls his brothers and his sisters. These are the ones he calls his own. And off in the distance he sees the silhouette of a broken woman. Crushed by the weight of her sins, completely defeated, she is calling out to him. He has been looking for her and she has finally been found. The world has deceived her, the enemy has bound her, but for no longer. He runs to her, wasting no time. And as he places his hands upon her shoulders he whispers softly:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her

that her warfare² is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the LORD's hand

double for all her sins.

<pause>

She had been reading the Bible day and night, partly because it kept her mind from wandering but mostly because she feels like something tugging at her heart. She is currently in the book of Isaiah and has just read a couple verses. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." She looks up because it seems like these were read *to* her. She can't explain it, not even to herself but all of the sudden it all begins to make sense. These words are not just captured on the page, these are words that God seems to be speaking *to her*. It's as though he is right there, whispering into her ear. She gets it. It's like a veil is being lifted from her eyes and she can see who God is! He is not some abstract idea but a person who cares for her; a person who is calling to her.

No longer is she lost. No longer is she abandoned and alone. She is his. Her war has ended, her iniquity, pardoned. She has been made perfect in him. She is *why* he suffered and died. He went to

the ends of the earth to find her and he will not let her go. She is his and he is hers and nothing will change that.

The war is ended.

The iniquity is pardoned.

We have received from the Lord's hand, double for all our sins.

Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me. (from Psalm 94)

Who rises up for me against the wicked?

Who stands up for me against evildoers?

¹⁷ If the LORD had not been my help,
my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.

¹⁸ When I thought, "My foot slips,"
your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up.

¹⁹ When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations cheer my soul.

²⁰ Can wicked rulers be allied with you,
those who frame injustice by statute?

²¹ They band together against the life of the righteous
and condemn the innocent to death.

²² But the LORD has become my stronghold,
and my God the rock of my refuge.

²³ He will bring back on them their iniquity
and wipe them out for their wickedness;
the LORD our God will wipe them out.