

JJ¹

I'm sure you've all experienced those times when you couldn't wait to get home. I'm not talking about just a long day at work. I'm talking about those times when you've been away from home. You couldn't wait to get home after a long vacation. You couldn't wait to get home after being on a long business trip. College students are wrapping up a long semester with major tests and can't wait to get home for Christmas...and probably just go right to bed. Maybe you've been there lying in a hospital bed, longing to get better and go home.

Consider an extreme example: Senator John McCain. Talk about someone who at one point certainly knew what it was to long to go home. McCain was a pilot in the Navy during the Vietnam War. During one of his missions he was shot down and captured. He was held prisoner for over 5 years and beaten on a regular basis. Imagine the intensity of McCain's longing to go home!

Now take that times 14, and that's how long God's Old Testament people spent in captivity in Babylon. For 70 years the Israelites sat in captivity. Imagine how they longed to go home! In chapter 40, Isaiah looks ahead from the time in which he was living and sees the nation of Israel at its lowest point. They're

enslaved in Babylon. Their villages and towns were destroyed. Worse, Jerusalem and even the temple lay in ruins, burned to the ground! The special presence of the LORD in the Most Holy Place had departed and it didn't follow Israel to Babylon. There was no temple and therefore no temple worship. God's people couldn't worship the LORD as he had commanded them. No offerings were being made for the sins of the people.

It's a sad and pitiful situation. One you and I can't even begin to comprehend. Yet, it's to these people the LORD speaks these words through the prophet Isaiah years before their captivity even began: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." God commands his people to be comforted. Sounds strange because when we tell someone who's feeling down, "Come on! Let's go! Pick yourself up!" it never works. But with God it's different. When God says it, it actually happens. And Isaiah tells us why. "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call out to her. Her warfare really is over. Her guilt is fully paid for. Yes, she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins."

God has completely forgiven the guilt that brought them into captivity in the first place. And what's more, God gives double the gifts of his love in place of his people's sin! But greater comfort yet was

¹ JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for "Jesus Help". It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

coming. God tells his people to get ready as though a victorious king were coming home from war. "A voice is calling out: In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD. In the wasteland make a level highway for our God. Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be made low. The rugged ground will become level, and the rough places will become a plain."

As we heard in our Gospel today (Mark 1:1-8), we're not talking about doing this physically. This is a spiritual matter. This was John's message to prepare the way for the coming Savior. It is a message of repentance. The LORD calls on us to demolish the mountains of sin we build. The LORD calls on us to fill in the valleys of the depths of our depravity. But this is something that you and I cannot accomplish ourselves. Isaiah writes:

"All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like a wildflower in the countryside. Grass withers, flowers fade, when the breath of the LORD blows on them. Yes, the people are grass."

God leaves no room for human glory to stand next to his majesty and power. All people and all the things they accomplish which the world considers beautiful wither up like freshly cut grass on a hot

summer's day when confronted with God's splendor and glory. This dries up all human pride and all human achievements. Sure, the pyramids are still standing, but all they are is a monument to a power and culture long dead. Sure, they've endured for thousands of years, but in God's sight, all they are are the world's largest tombs of people whose hearts remained hardened against him. And even those mighty monuments and all others in the world will pass away.



No matter what anyone accomplishes in this life, death still stalks that person and not one person has ever evaded death. We dare not place our hopes and dreams on anything human, no matter how wonderful or glorious it seems. It will all wither up. That's what happened to Israel. That's why the LORD in love had to let them be carried off into captivity.

They found their security in their prosperity and in a city called Jerusalem and its temple.

In our daily lives, we show ourselves to be so similar to those Israelites of Isaiah's time. Like God's Old Testament people, we make idols out of our possessions, wealth or even those that we love. We lust for or even chase after the desires of this world. We suffer the pain we inflict on ourselves through our sin. We see the

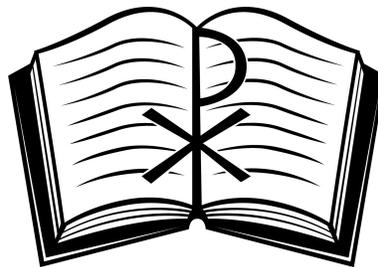
pain we inflict on others because of our sin. And the pain builds up in our hearts. Sometimes we might feel like there is no escaping. Sometimes we may feel as though God is going to pass us by because our sin is so great. And at the end of it all, we realize that we too are captive to face death one day! Our bodies wear out, wither up and die and we turn back into the dust that we are, just like grass that shrivels up in a hot sun.

This is the human race, our human race! And yet the glory of the LORD has been revealed and we have seen him. No, not with our physical eyes but through the eyes of faith. The LORD's glory came into this world in the form of a little baby born in Bethlehem to a virgin named Mary. That little baby grew up and ascended terrible Mt. Calvary where he gave his holy life so he could say to us, "Comfort, comfort my people..."

And he can say this because the battle is over. Jesus fought all our fights for us. He conquered the devil and brings us into his peace. And what makes that peace is the fact that Jesus has fully paid for our guilt. Jesus took our guilt and gave us double what we gave him with our sin. He not only washes away all our sins, but promises us a place by his side forever in heaven!

Until that day comes, he acts as our Good Shepherd in this life. Isaiah writes, "Like a shepherd he will care for his flock. With his arm he will gather the lambs. He will lift them up on his lap. He will gently lead the nursing mothers."

Our Lord Jesus is a shepherd who scoops up his little lambs in his arms, sets them on his lap, telling them that everything is going to be okay. And when he says this to you, it's not the empty sentiments of those who don't know what else to say when you need comfort. It's not the empty words of those who don't know what the future holds. These words are spoken to you by the One who not only knows your future, but wrote it down in his Book of Life before time began. And it is that future which he sealed by shedding his blood for you.



Sometimes it's a long journey to get home. Sometimes we get stuck in places we'd rather not be which keep us from getting home when we'd like. We long for our home, our bed, our pillow. John McCain knew what it was to wait to go home. If you don't know, he's been quite sick lately. His body and brain are withering away because of illness and cancer. I don't know his spiritual condition, so I don't know if the peace and comfort of God rests on his heart.

Friends, while we might be uncertain about McCain, you can be certain about yourselves. You know and believe God's amazing promises. Long for your heavenly homecoming with peace and comfort in your hearts. Wait with the Old Testament Church, knowing that God himself has prepared the way for you. He has leveled your mountains of sin with his forgiveness. He has filled in the valleys of your depravity and weakness with his love and strength. Yes, this flesh will wither, fade and decay. Yet, your heavenly Father did not let his Holy One, his Son, see decay as his body rested in the tomb those three days. What's more, he is alive forever and his body is perfect, strong and now can never be hurt, let alone die. Friends, this is what God promises for you too by his side for all eternity. Waiting for this, friends, is to wait with comfort. Amen.

SDG²

² SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for "To God Alone Be The Glory". This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn't about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.

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