



Daily Devotionals – November 20 to November 26, 2021

By Dr. Charles Qualls and Rev. Steve Gibson -- Franklin Baptist Church

November 20 - Isaiah 40:1-11

by Rev. Steven R. Gibson

God's People Are Comforted

40 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Devotion:

The beginning of Chapter 40 marks a radical departure from the chapters that precede it. This section begins the section that will discuss God's majesty and God's coming that will rule the earth and all its people. God will reunite Israel and Judah and restore them to their former glory. Chapter 40 speaks to the restoration after the exile.

Judah has had turmoil and trouble for some time now. So God, in God's mercy instructs Isaiah to "speak tenderly to Jerusalem." This word was like a two edged sword that ushers in blessing and comfort, but also adversity. Because Israel had experienced turmoil for many years, God knew that they needed comfort. The opening verse spells out comfort, not once, but twice. We're told that this speech is tender in the fact that her

sins had been paid in full, that her hard service is now over. Because of how hardened the people must have been, the word comfort is repeated, as if Israel might have missed this good news the first time.

Then we hear the voice of one crying in the wilderness, reminiscent of John the Baptist in John 1:18. Do you comprehend all that is entailed in preparing a straight highway? At the very least it includes removing obstacles that would prevent us from encountering the Lord. This also speaks to the desert as having both trials and sufferings. We are reminded that we are not immune to trials and sufferings, but these need not hinder our faith. The prophet told the people to be prepared to see God at work. These words also serve as a reminder for each of us to “prepare the way of the Lord.”

The next verses (6-8) compares people to grass. Of course, we are much more important to God than grass, but it serves as a reminder that we are finite creatures and God is infinite. It is when we put our trust in God that we are able to navigate the changing tides of public opinion. We place our hope in God and trust in God’s unfailing plan for us.

Verses 9-11 are rich in imagery and importance. They remind us that the truly mighty are the ones that care for the defenseless and the vulnerable. The image of a mighty king coming is one that many people yearn for, but God has chosen not to work in that manner. While it is true that our Sovereign is all powerful, God also tends his flock like a shepherd.

It is telling that Isaiah moves from might in verse 10 to tenderness in verse 11. While it is true that God is all powerful, it is also true that God shows God’s strength in weakness. If God moves among and works among the most vulnerable, what does that teach us about ministry today? While every person is important to God, God cares deeply for those who are marginalized and are cut off from the mainstream. This describes the need for many ministries that support children and low income families. This also explains how the birth of Jesus was shared with shepherds before the ruling class.

This passage reminds me that:

- God’s comfort is always available.
- God is making level places out of mountains and valleys.
- God’s glory will be revealed to all people.
- God’s love of and care for us is like that of a shepherd, who feeds and cares for the sheep, who leads the sheep, and carries the sheep in his bosom.
- This God, although all powerful, is also capable of displaying his tender love for all!

Prayer:

God of comfort, allow us to trust you enough that we can understand your comfort. Amen.

November 21 - Psalm 100

by Dr. Charles Qualls

All Lands Summoned to Praise God

1 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. 2 Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

3 Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

5 For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Devotion:

We tend to call the psalter, or book of Psalms, the “hymnbook of the Bible.” That would be apt, for most of the entries herein were collected to be used along with musical accompaniment or to be read in worship much like we share in litany today. However within all that, we sense that not all Psalms are alike. Because folks think you can just Google everything these days, let me preview for you that if you do attempt to search on “Types of Psalms,” you’ll get as many different lists and opinions as you have time to read.

Hermann Gunkel’s classification of the Psalms carries as much weight with legitimate scholars as any. He finds 5 main categories and then a few other groups or subcategories. Here are the groupings as he sees it:

- Hymns -- these were primarily intended to capture “praise” songs (Psalms 8, 19, 29, 33 are a few examples).
- Laments of the Community -- these arose out of national calamities and pled for God’s intervention (Psalms 44, 74 and 79 would be a few examples).
- Royal Psalms -- concern life with a king who rules over the people (2, 18 and 20 would be a few examples).
- Individual Laments -- may be the largest category of the psalms; an individual’s cry to God for help (3, 5, 6, 7 and 13 would begin the examples).
- Songs of Thanksgiving -- these stem from individual worship and thanks (30, 32 and 34 are examples).
- Then there are the few subcategories I mentioned earlier that take in yet more styles of psalms.

Our Psalm 100 seems to fit within Gunkel’s “hymn” category, encouraging people to sing and worship in light of their gratefulness to God. It is essentially a “Call to Worship” for us. The psalmist postures God as the central focus, and not we who are instead called there for the active, giving and humbling encounter that worship should be. It also declares a hope that for all the future, God’s goodness and care will preside over life “...for all generations.”

Okay. We ministers notice things. Over my career, I have observed varying stances in which my members show up. Some come in humbly each week, attentive and ready to worship. This is best. Others, though, come in as spectators. They just sit and watch pretty much. Bored and unengaged for the most part, they are there out of habit or because someone made them show up. Still others (and these are the scary ones) come in like uncaged consumers. They want their favorite hymns to be sung, and only their favorites. They want the minister to preach the way they like, and they criticize everything from the clothing some are wearing to the facial expressions the choir offers.

Do you come to worship expecting that God will be present? Do you show up in touch with the privilege of paying honor and respect to a loving, active God? Do you lift your voice, expressing that which is within you toward the One who is Creator, Sustainer and Salvation for us all? Are you relieved and grateful for the week that has been, and prayerful about the one that is to come?

Prayer:

Lord, may we learn that being in your presence is sufficiently humbling for all of us. Each one unfit, but grace-cleansed to serve and worship you. Amen.

November 22 - Matthew 25:31-46

by Dr. Charles Qualls

The Disciple's Life

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

44 Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' 45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Devotion:

The Disciple's Life. That was what Jesus was building the people toward as he taught. Today, we look at our responsibility to practice compassion. Let me say that another way. One indicator that we truly are a disciple may be that we practice compassion. Can you do the right thing for all the wrong reasons? I think most of us would agree quickly that we could.

Yet, there is a troubling aspect awaiting us in this study. In a Sunday School lesson based on this same text, the lesson writer will stake a bold claim here. I happen to have been challenged by it myself. Here it is -- we will be judged less by our actions and more by our character. Yes, we are down to the possibility of doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. Nevermind the possibility that we might just not do the right thing at all.

Practicing compassion is a central idea here. Doctors quickly tell you that they "practice" medicine because none of them ever truly master it. They will say that medicine is an "art" and not a science. Will I ever truly master compassion? Will compassion ever be so natural, so free-flowing, that it will become a given within me? Probably not. I will practice compassion. There is simply too much that can challenge me and hold me back when it comes to living as Christ would.

My biases, my blindspots and my ignorance show up at all the wrong times. So, I think I will always be "practicing" compassion because I'll never truly arrive. One minute I get things right. Then, I turn right around and miss the next chance to do as Christ would have done.

That study I mentioned a minute ago included some important thoughts. Here are a few highlights: "*Jesus had compassion for all sorts of people...concern for humanity characterized Jesus' ministry...Christians are to imitate Jesus, so if we fail to practice compassion, we fail to live as Jesus did.*" As we read the scripture text for today's devotion, I wonder if we might use those phrases to filter our hearing? We can't ever be Jesus. But we have to practice trying!

Prayer:

Lord, be patient with us. We need every bit of your grace as we try to learn your ways of empathy, love and compassion. Please keep on shaping us. Amen.

November 23 - 2 Timothy 2:8-13**by Dr. Charles Qualls*****He Cannot Deny Himself***

8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David -- that is my gospel, 9 for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. 10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

11 The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; 12 if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; 13 if we are faithless, he remains faithful -- for he cannot deny himself.

Devotion:

Other than that Jesus Christ lived, walked, taught among us and died for us -- this is some of the best news the Bible has to offer. Jesus Christ cannot deny himself. That is, Jesus couldn't stop being Jesus if he wanted to. His purposes will not be thwarted, no matter what we may do. Or not do.

The writer of the letter to Timothy says that even if he is placed in chains for his faithfulness to the cause of Christ -- God's word cannot be chained. God will go where God will go, and God will keep moving until the ultimate purposes are achieved. He views his own hardships as worthy to endure because the stakes are so high.

Consider for a moment that a servant of Christ might feel that way about you. It explains every pastor who has served and has not left the ministry even though rationally they might should. It explains every missionary who has served overseas or in the most challenging neighborhoods of our country. Every servant of Christ who has ever wondered if their efforts were getting anything done is tied to this writing. Serving Christ is not easy. Still...you and your fellow humans are worth it.

Did you know that when the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship emerged in 1991, the stated mission strategy was to go into the hardest and most difficult places on earth and focus on "*unreached people groups*." That means that the Rock People, the Roma (or gypsies as you may know them) and the like became the objects of our Cooperative Baptist mission. Why? Because so difficult was it to reach these few groups that no other mission efforts for them existed.

I am somehow reminded by this brief section in 2 Timothy 2 of the epic poem by Francis Thompson called, "The Hound of Heaven." The writer speaks of fleeing God through the days, through the years and through his own ways. Still, the unhurried and determined pursuit by God never stops. Majestically, for 182 lines the poet explores what it is to try to escape the persistent love of God. Yet, he finds that the Divine cannot let up and cannot stop. By the end, the voice of God asks him "Who will love you if not me?" Do you hear grace? All this day, we give thanks that Jesus the Christ cannot deny himself. You and I will find relief in that, no doubt!

Prayer:

Dear God, your love for us is unfathomable. Especially in its ultimate expression, a crucified and risen Christ. Thank you that even when we may try to dodge you, your love can never be taken away. Amen.

November 24 - Revelation 19:1-9

by Dr. Charles Qualls

The Rejoicing in Heaven

19 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, 2 for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants."

3 Once more they said, "Hallelujah! The smoke goes up from her forever and ever."

4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!"

5 And from the throne came a voice saying, "Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great."

6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.

7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; 8 to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure" -- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God."

Devotion:

Although Revelation can be tricky to decipher, and although I did embed a secret message in the last paragraph of yesterday's devotion (yes I did!) -- you don't have to be a sophisticated code cracker to get the gist of today's scripture reading. Take a look at it again.

God in Christ is working toward a resolution of all Creation. There is coming a new Heaven and a new Earth. Everyone who has chosen to enter into God's fellowship through the grace of Christ will have the opportunity to gather around the throne.

Christ's bride...that institution that we Americans take so for granted these days...she is the one spoken of here. The Church is the Bride of Christ. The faithful will be gathered up, our robes (righteous deeds and cleansed hearts) will be white as we worship God on that wonderful day.

The sufferings of those who have paid the ultimate price for the cause of Christ will be resolved and rewarded. The gathering will be worshipful, and all will give thanks in the presence of Almighty God. Friends, the invitation is set. Blessed will be those who choose to show up. Put on your robe and get ready!

Prayer:

God of our days, and Lord of all eternity, we thank you for your transforming grace. Be with us even now, that we might be found faithful! Amen.

November 25 - John 5:19-40

by Rev. Steven R. Gibson

The Authority of the Son

¹⁹ Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. ²⁰ The Father loves the Son and shows him

all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished.

²¹ Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. ²² The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, ²³ so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

²⁵ “Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; ²⁷ and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and will come out -- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

Witnesses to Jesus

³⁰ “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

³¹ “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. ³² There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. ³³ You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. ³⁴ Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵ He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. ³⁶ But I have a testimony greater than John’s. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. ³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, ³⁸ and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.

³⁹ “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. ⁴⁰ Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

Devotion:

This passage has two distinct sections: The authority of Jesus and witnesses to Jesus. Jesus begins by reasserting his reliance upon God the Father for his words and his actions. If the reader needs additional information, Jesus invokes the testimony of witnesses including John the Baptist. This was a preamble to our passage for today, trying to determine whether Jesus was merely a man, or was Jesus God?

If Jesus was only a man, then his opponents had every reason to oppose him, his teachings and his actions. He had riled up the people and turned them against the religious authorities. Why are we surprised when Jesus is met with opposition? His actions were a direct threat to the reigning religious leaders. Of course his main offense was to heal people *on the Sabbath!* This was expressly prohibited because healing was considered work, and all work was to cease on the Sabbath.

Jesus continued to provoke the religious system with their strict rules and regulations. He was teaching that his way, God’s new way superseded the laws of the Old Testament. Jesus’ teachings were somewhat controversial because they compromised a new facet of understanding. In essence, Jesus was teaching that while the law is important, the law of love is greater. By healing people on the Sabbath, Jesus was teaching all who would observe, that the greatest action known to humankind is love. And this love originated with God, and God, in God’s mercy, provided concrete examples of how love functions.

The religious leaders were understandably upset because Jesus was a threat to their livelihoods. Because they were the ones who interpreted the Law, they were the ones to benefit. The natural clash between the establishment and Jesus was not unexpected. It was a natural outgrowth of the differences of the two mindsets.

Once we go beyond the cultural clash, we learn that Jesus was the most powerful name that ever spoke, because he spoke with the authority of the only begotten Son of God. His voice continues to direct us to a future time when the objective of peace and justice for all will be accomplished. But where is God in the here and now? Beloved, God is present with us every day. God continues to work each and every day, if we only take a moment to “see.” When our focus is on others instead of ourselves, then we can begin to see God at work in our world. God continues to call us -- can you hear the Shepherd’s voice? Can you discern the voice of God inspiring you to service? One of the many ways that we can exhibit our faith is to continue to do that which you are called to do. By continuing to do so, we are able to express our faith in a God that continues to renew, recreate and redeem.

Our passage ends with additional words that are challenging to us. All of our best practices are able to be revitalized by the living presence of Jesus among us. The Gospels are like a two-way mirror -- as we look into them we see a greater reality that is focused on God, and as we look back at ourselves, they will illuminate our very lives, the good, the bad and the ugly. Perhaps the goal of our lifetime is simply to become more like Jesus every day. We yearn for that day when we shall see him face-to-face and become like him. Thanks be to God!

Prayer:

Holy God, thank you for teaching us how to love, how to live, and how to relate to each other. Amen.

November 26 - Psalm 80:1-7
by Rev. Steven R. Gibson
Prayer for Israel’s Restoration

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth ² before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

³ Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

⁴ O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?

⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

⁶ You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Devotion:

As I write for Thanksgiving Day, this Psalm promises to speak to us in today’s world of pandemic and a divided country. It opens with a directive compelling God to listen to the Psalmist’s concerns. The way that it is worded implies that God is not aware of the Psalmist’s plight and certainly not attentive to the needs of the Psalmist. This Psalm cries out for Israel’s fortunes to be restored.

In today’s divided country, this Psalm speaks volumes to us. The Psalmist remembers what life was like before the current issues and desires to return to that scenario. The writer pulls out all the stops in addressing God: Shepherd of Israel, leader of Joseph, and provider. What is extremely interesting is that the people apparently believe that God is absent and inattentive to their needs. Yet, the writer invokes the same God who has been deemed inattentive, inactive and absent from them. The writer is focused on returning to Israel’s former glory -- to return from exile. From the Psalmist’s perspective, it is critical that God act.

Verses 4-6 repeat the same appeal except with more urgency. This call to God has the added effect of including “*how long*”, sort of like an impatient child continuing to address their parents because of their inactivity. The litany of God’s perceived slights continues with the final indictment indicating that their scorn had been God’s doing and not theirs.

The simple fact is that the people had strayed far from God and wanted to claim God's blessings as they remembered them.

But, they got one thing correct -- they knew that their salvation depended solely upon God, and not anything that they had done.

We as a nation have drifted far from our early days. We have moved far from an attitude of gratefulness to an attitude of what's in it for me? We have strayed away from a thankful people to a people that have difficulty being thankful for anything. Remember, dear friends that all that we have is a gift from God. Remember that our gifts are intended to bless others, not for us to hoard. So, on this Thanksgiving Day 2020, pause, reflect and give thanks to God for all your blessings. Give thanks to God for your church family, your health, your family and your friends. But, most of all, give thanks to God for your faith which allows you to trust God.

Advent, which begins on is a season of preparation and repentance. Psalm 80 proclaims that our lives ultimately depend upon God's gracious willingness to accept our repentance. The birth, death and resurrection of Jesus also depends on God's willingness to repent. Our repentance involves our turning to accept the loving embrace of God who gave us life.

Prayer:

Forgiving God, thank you for your gracious and extravagant love for us. Empower us to live grateful lives that honor you. Amen.