

Comfort and Joy

A Southridge Christmas Special

20.12.23 | Jeff Lockyer

What do you do in your life to experience comfort? Do you have a favourite comfort food? (I know in my house, chips or anything from Dairy Queen can serve that purpose!) Do you have a space that represents comfort to you? (For me, it would be on one of the couches near our fireplace.) In my world, one of the first things I do when I get home is to change into what my kids refer to as my 'comfy cozies'—do you have clothing like that, comfy socks or a comfy sweater? What do you do to experience comfort? Do you have a pet or pastime or is it represented by a routine or vacation?

Take it to the next level now: what do you do in your life to experience inner comfort? How do cope with the stress life throws your way? Do you avoid life's anxieties through binging on TV or social media? Do you compensate for life's struggles with vices like eating or other indulgences? Do you douse your heartaches with shopping or spending? Do you medicate your conflicts with substances? It's one thing to get comfy and cozy; it's another thing to experience true comfort on the inside.

The thing is, Christmas is one of those seasons we lean into in order to experience a greater degree of comfort—whether through the decorations, the nostalgia, the traditions or the family connections. But all those comfy, cozy Christmas routines on the outside don't address our

need for comfort on the inside, do they? That's why we need to look deeper into what Christmas is really all about—at a spiritual level—because Christmas, at its core, is about God making a source for comfort available for all humanity. But it's important for us to understand how you and I can access that source in order for us to all experience the true inner comfort of Christmas.

In the Old Testament of the Bible, there's a prophet named Isaiah who has 39 chapters of recorded warnings to the nation of Israel. But at the point where they found themselves conquered, captured, and feeling abandoned by God, the tone shifts. And beginning in chapter 40, Isaiah provides a different kind of prophecy. Verse 1 begins:

***“Comfort, oh comfort my people,” says
your God.***

The message of this prophecy is that, even at our rock-bottom, God is there. And when He's there, if He brings any impact into our lives it's the impact of comfort. To our uncertain, waiting, struggling and desperate hearts, there's a God of comfort for us.

But the prophecy Isaiah provides Israel continues this way in verse 3:

***“Prepare for God's arrival! Make the road
straight and smooth, a highway fit for our God.
Fill in the valleys, level off the hills, smooth out
the ruts, clear out the rocks. Then God's bright***

***glory will shine and everyone will see it. Yes.
Just as God has said.”***

Isaiah re-affirms God’s desire to shine in the lives of people who would turn to Him, and seals that promise with a guarantee. In between those bookends, He encourages His hearers to prepare the way for God’s arrival. Something is required to experience Him.

Here, Isaiah uses the metaphor of road construction—a series of work designed to make a straight path. Whether digging down to gain solid footing, leveling undulation to create a flatter surface or removing debris, there’s work required to create smooth travel. Comfortable travel doesn’t happen automatically; it requires work to prepare that smooth way. Similarly, Isaiah is describing on behalf of God the reality that the loving comfort God is eager to pour out to people—the brilliant glory of His life shining in people—doesn’t happen automatically. It requires preparatory work to experience it.

Here’s the counterintuitive but unavoidable truth about God: experiencing His comfort requires some discomfort. That’s the point Isaiah is making here, shifting gears from 39 chapters of doom and gloom to now launching into providing Israel hope through what are known as a series of ‘Messianic prophecies’. Isaiah is predicting a comfort that will one day be able to be experienced through the birth of Jesus Christ.

And when you stop to reflect on it, the birth of Jesus itself only serves to illustrate this reality. In a nativity scene, everything looks so peaceful.

But imagine scrambling back to your hometown on a donkey while you're full-term pregnant. Imagine giving birth in a barnyard—never mind, without the modern medical advancements of painkillers. Nothing about the reality of Jesus' birth was comfortable—right down to the barnyard stench! But it's through this discomfort that Mary delivers a Saviour to the world to bring all of humanity inner comfort. God's comfort required some discomfort.

Then consider the life of Jesus Himself. When He started His public teaching ministry, he was essentially homeless. He drew crowds but was hardly an adored celebrity, consistently hassled by the religious leaders of His day. And in order to fulfill His divine destiny it required offering His life to a tortuous death on the cross. To experience God's comfort in Jesus required discomfort. To extend God's comfort through Jesus required discomfort. Like Isaiah predicted, there's no way around it.

For those of us desperate to experience a greater degree of comfort in our lives, God is eager to enter in and allow our lives to be filled with His comfort through the promised life of Jesus that Christmas celebrates. But to experience it—and then to extend it to others—demands a certain degree of discomfort. It's why the message and work of Jesus was known as, "Comfort to the afflicted but affliction to the comfortable."

This Christmas, our church family wants to invite you to join in with us on the journey of increasingly experiencing the deep, inner comfort that God provides through Jesus. We invite you to gather with us on Sundays—online this winter—as we learn how to practice His presence. We invite you to connect in what we call a Life Group, to process what

you're learning and share how God's growing you. And we invite you into a 'learning by doing' experience in what we call our Anchor Causes, creating friendships with people our world otherwise ignores. We understand that those steps can take you out of your comfort zone—that's the point; it's through discomfort that God comforts us.

We all long for comfort. And especially in a global pandemic, our hearts ache for inner comfort. Will you face your fear of confronting the past? Will you allow yourself to engage in the awkwardness of trying something new? Will you get out of your comfort zone enough to try some different things in order to get different results? Do you have the courage to allow your mind to be changed on some things? Can you find the humility to open yourself up to God's transforming work? Will you bring the grit to stick with the process? Can you risk enough to allow yourself to be truly, deeply loved?

Will you allow yourself to experience some discomfort in order to experience God's inner comfort? If you're wondering what kind of inner discomfort you might have to face, consider what lives in the pit of your stomach that hesitates you to fully invest yourself in the journey of following Jesus. Addressing that is probably your first step!

This is exactly what the classic Christmas carol means when it says, "Let every heart prepare Him room." As we enjoy this service from the comfort of our homes this Christmas, will we allow ourselves to go out of our comfort zones to enjoy the fullness of the deep, lasting inner comfort Jesus came to earth that first Christmas to bring?