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He was ten years old and absolutely loved baseball. He had signed up for Little League as soon as he could and really looked forward to the games. Well, at least he used to. For the last 4 games he had failed to get a hit and had dropped a few fly balls. He worked hard with his dad in the back yard, trying to get out of his slump, but it just wasn't happening.

His dad sat down with him after the latest game to have a chat. What do you think his dad told him? “Well, son, you're just not good enough to play this game. You might as well stop wasting your time and quit.” Some pessimistic, cynical dads might have said that, but not his dad. His dad said “Everyone goes through slumps like yours. You just have to keep on battling. I know you're talented. I know you can do it. I'll do everything I can to help you. And remember, no matter what happens in the game, I love you and I'll take you home!” He encouraged his son when life was rough.

Today our heavenly Father through the prophet Isaiah encourages us as well. He reminds us of His presence, His grace and His power. He encourages us during the tough times in our lives, and He wants us to **“ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER!”** Encourage one another when anxiety threatens to overwhelm. Encourage one another with God's gift of paradise.

Part One: When anxiety threatens to overwhelm us

Isaiah's listeners needed God's encouragement desperately. They were living in uncertain times, to put it nicely. War and conflict had been a big part of their lives for years. If it wasn't battling the ten tribes of Israel to the north, it was battling the clans and nations around them. They had seen the nation of Assyria roll over the nation of Israel to their north and deport many of them. Now, that same nation was threatening them. For years they had been dealing with the threat of war, with uncertainty, with fear and anxiety. On top of that, many of their fellow countrymen had deserted the Lord. They no longer wanted to fear, love and trust in Him above all things and were pushing others to do the same.

As you can imagine, all of this fear and anxiety had worn some of them down. Some began to question whether the Lord still cared about them. Some began to question whether the Lord would keep His promises to them. They began to wonder if serving the Lord was worth it. Wouldn't it be better just to give in and go along with these unbelieving pagans? After all, many thought, then we'd have peace. Why keep struggling to serve the Lord if all you got was pain and trouble?

We can relate, can't we? There are times in our lives that we struggle and are anxious. Maybe it's about our health. Maybe it's when we looked at our finances. Perhaps it's when we watched the evening news and saw the injustice and cruelty of others. Or, perhaps you had a contentious discussion (some might call it an argument) with another person. All these things raise our anxiety level and tempt us to withdraw into ourselves. We are tempted to withdraw from others, from God Himself and just focus on our own wants and desires. There are times that anxiety threatens to overwhelm us and cause us to give up on following the Lord.

Or maybe you're doing ok but you have friends that are suffering from anxiety. You notice their unease when talking about the economy, or the impact of the virus on our nation. Maybe you've noticed their anxiety when talking about relationship difficulties or planning for the future. Their hearts are troubled. They don't know which way to turn or what to do. And your heart aches for them. We don't want to see them suffer. So, what do you do?

Today, God encourages us to reach out to those suffering from anxiety. But how do we comfort our friends? How do we calm their hearts about all the things that are happening in the world today? Do we buy them ice cream and say “let's watch a movie tonight”? Do we just give them a hug and say “It's going to be ok”?

God's got something better, something that soothes the anxious thoughts that threaten to overwhelm us. ***“Say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.’*** Does this mean that the Lord will come and make everything ok tomorrow? Do these words refer to a time on earth when all your enemies will be punished and the United States are totally at peace? Is this a reference to an earthly paradise, as some might want to believe? Some might think that this is what Isaiah is talking

about, but God has an even better future for us than some earthly paradise. He wants us to comfort one another with a picture of God's gift of an eternal paradise - heaven.

Part Two: With a picture of God's gift of paradise

God's message to the Israelites uses some imagery that was immediately understood by them. ***"⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. ⁷ The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs."*** When the Lord comes, life will be grand. No physical problems. No nature problems.

We see a reflection of these words in the life of Jesus here on earth. He healed the blind, the lame and the mute. He solved some of the physical problems of sin in some people. But He solved the eternal problem of sin by living a perfect life and dying a perfect death to pay for all sin of all time. That was His mission. He was focused on saving us, not from earthly problems, but eternal ones.

These verses in Isaiah are describing paradise, what life is going to be like after Jesus returns on Judgment Day. This is made very clear in verse 10 when it says ***"They will enter Zion with singing, everlasting joy will crown their head. Gladness and joy will overtake them and sorrow and sighing will flee away."***

Why would God do this for you? Why would He do it for anyone? After all, we are all sinful and don't deserve any gift from our Lord. But He gives it all to us anyways. This is grace, getting what we don't deserve. Understand, then, that nothing can stand in the way of His grace. He is the all-powerful Ruler of this universe. Nothing can stand in the way of His will. And His will for us is to shower us with His grace, His love every minute of every day. The only time we don't see God's grace is when we're not looking for it. Nothing can prevent it from coming through His Word. Not sorrow. Not weakness, not fear or even the devil himself can stand before the steamroller of God's grace. Not even death! It will come!

Most of the time we don't notice our Lord's power in our lives. We get up in the morning and take it for granted that our hearts are still beating and that we will arrive safely at work. We make dinner and take for granted that our food will keep our bodies going. So often we take the Lord's power for granted. But sometimes, we recognize His hand in our lives. Maybe there was that car accident that you walked away from with just a few scratches. Should have been much worse. Maybe it was that disease that you recovered from with no lasting effects. Or maybe it was the fact that you survived your time in the army. You could have been killed or injured, but the Lord kept you safe.

Encourage one another with God's gift of paradise. Time and time again He has proven to us that He has the power to make it happen. He created this world. He brought the Israelites out of Egypt with amazing signs and wonders. Jesus proves He has the power over death by rising from the grave. Time and time again He has shown us His power as He cares for us in this world, keeping us safe to this very moment. His power is always at work in our lives.

I need this encouragement. You need this encouragement. Someone in your life needs God's encouragement as well. Reach out to them with compassion. You know they are hurting, or anxious, or depressed. Let them know you care. Let them know God cares. Reassure them with God's message of forgiveness and the gift of heaven. Maybe share a story of how God helped you through a difficult time, or comforted you with a particular Bible passage. In reality, every Christian has a story to tell, a story of God's encouragement. What's yours, and who will you share it with?

Your encouragement will make a difference in someone's life. That young boy went on to bat .406 his senior year in high school. He was named to the all-conference and all district teams. Things turned out well for him. And your friend who is struggling? Please do the same. **"ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER"** when anxiety threatens to overwhelm. Encourage them with a picture of God's gift of paradise. He will come to save us.

AMEN