

ISAIAH 40

GOD COMFORTS HIS PEOPLE

The first half of the book of Isaiah that we concluded a few weeks ago addressed the nation of Judah, the southern kingdom, in her situation during the time of Isaiah's ministry which covered a period of about 53 years from 739 until 686 B.C. During this time Israel, the northern kingdom, because of their disobedience and idolatry, was overrun and exiled from their land, and would never return. Judah, the southern kingdom, refused as well to be obedient and trust God, and consequently they too were on their way to a similar fate experienced by the northern kingdom. Beginning in Isaiah 40:1 and continuing to the end of the chapter, Isaiah speaks of the **Babylonian captivity** of Judah as though it were already a present reality, when in effect that captivity did not begin for another 80 years, sometime during the year 605 B.C. In 605 B.C. the first stage of the captivity began, with the majority of people taken captive in 585 B.C.

The second half of the book of Isaiah is divided into three parts: chapters 40-48, 49-57, and 58-66. In chapters 40-48, we learn of the hope and comfort of a blessed future for Judah following God's judgment during the upcoming Babylonian captivity.

The book of Isaiah takes a giant step into the future beginning in chapter 40. The following chapters will talk about the wonder and majesty of God and the future rule of Christ over the earth. God will reunite Israel and Judah in the end times and restore them to glory once again as a single nation.

When you feel miserable, depressed, and anxious, what part of the Bible do you turn to? When you feel that everything in life is going against you, what words from Scripture comfort you? For me, the greatest expression of **God's sovereignty, power, and majesty** is in these next few chapters of Isaiah. When I feel helpless and like everything is going against me, this is the part of the Bible that I turn to, to remind me that God is in charge. As you will see, the next few chapters are some of the most glorious in the whole Bible for giving us a glimpse of the glory, the majesty, and the sovereignty of God! Words fall short of describing the picture of God we are about to see.

For reasons we'll soon better understand, instead of warning the people of Judah about the upcoming judgment which will involve 70 years of captivity in Babylon, Isaiah tried comforting them instead by talking, not about the judgment they will endure, but of their restoration when one day the nation of Israel will once again be restored to glory. This foretells the end times when "*Babylon*," the future evil world system, will be destroyed and the persecution of God's people will end. Although this is still all in the future, God wanted His people to be able to read this chapter while they were in captivity in Babylon and still have hope.

Isaiah 40:1,2 NAS:

1 *“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God.*

2 *“**Speak kindly** to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her **warfare** has ended, That her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the Lord’s hand Double for all her sins.”*

When Isaiah wrote these verses, it was still about a hundred years before Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonian Empire and begin their exile. And during those hundred years they would live mostly in disobedience. Then there would be 70 more years of exile in Babylon itself. So God tells Isaiah to speak tenderly and to comfort Jerusalem regarding the time they’ll spend in exile. As the remnant in Babylon looked back on the recent history of Israel and Judah, they saw failure and sin; and they needed encouragement for the future in order to endure the tough times during the exile. When they read these verses they would be assured that God had not abandoned them.

The nation had sinned against the Lord over and over and over again with their idolatry, injustice, immorality, and insensitivity to God’s messengers (Jeremiah 7). But they were still His people and He loved them. Though He would chasten them, He would not forsake them. “*Speak kindly*” means “*speak to the heart,*” and “*warfare*” means “*severe trials.*” “*Double,*” in verse 2, doesn’t suggest that God’s discipline was unfair, for He is merciful even in His punishments (Ezra 9:13). God disciplined them in a manner that was equal to their sin, in accordance to what they had done (Jeremiah 16:18). **We should not sin; but if we do, God is waiting to forgive us,**¹ 1 John 1:5-2:2:

5 *This is the message God has given us to announce to you: God is light and there is no darkness in him at all.*

6 *So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness. We are not living in the truth.*

7 *But if we are living in the light of God’s presence, just as Christ is, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin.*

8 *If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth.*

9 *But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.*

1 *My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if you do sin, there is someone to plead for you before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who pleases God completely.*

2 *He is the sacrifice for our sins. He takes away not only our sins but the sins of all the world.*

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. 1996, c1992. Be comforted. An Old Testament study. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.

Now let's get back to Isaiah and continue with

Isaiah 40:3-5 NRSV:

*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."

The Jews would have a rough road ahead of them as they returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple after their captivity in Babylon from 586 to 537 B.C., but the Lord would go before them to open the way. The picture here is of an ambassador repairing the roads and removing obstacles, preparing the way for the coming of a king. The image of the highway is frequent in Isaiah's prophecy (see Isaiah 11:16). The Jews return to Jerusalem was necessary so that when it came time for Christ to come, He could be born in Judah as the Old Testament prophets had predicted. Of course, the ultimate fulfillment here is in the ministry of John the Baptist as he prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 3:1-6). Spiritually speaking, Israel was in the wilderness when Jesus came; but when He came, God's glory came (John 1:14). Whatever we might be captive to in this life, Christ offers a way to be restored if we only trust and obey Him.

Isaiah 40:6-8 NAS:

6 A voice says, "Call out." Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"

All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness 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 stands forever.

"*All flesh is grass!*" Assyria was gone, and now Babylon was gone. Like the grass, nations and their leaders fulfill their purposes and then fade away, but the Word of God abides forever. We can depend on God's promises any time. **As Israel began their long journey home from captivity, they could depend on God's promises.**

But this doesn't just speak of nations. "*All flesh is as grass*" also reminds each of us of our mortality and the brevity of human life. Job, in his distress, said,

Job 14:1-2, NAS

1 "Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.

2 He comes forth like a flower and fades away; he flees like a shadow and does not continue.

David, a man after God's own heart, said,

Psalm 103:15-16, NAS

15 As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes.

16 When the wind has passed over it, it is no more; and its place acknowledges it no longer.

James, the brother of Christ, wrote in his epistle:

James 1:10, NAS:

And let the rich man glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away.

Another psalmist said in Psalm 102:11, NAS:

My days are like a lengthened shadow; and I wither away like grass.

Yet that's not the end of the story. What lasts? What is it we can always count on? These same people followed up the comments we just read with some additional statements. Job said,

Job 14:15-17, NIV:

15 You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made.

16 Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin.

17 My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin.

David recalled,

Psalm 103:17-19, NAS:

17 But the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children,

18 To those who keep His covenant, and who remember His precepts to do them.

19 The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all.

James followed up his statement by saying,

James 1:12, NAS:

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

And the psalmist knew that,

Psalm 102:12, NAS:

Thou, O LORD, dost abide forever; and Thy name to all generations.

Peter, who was encouraging Christians who were enduring persecution, quoted this passage from Isaiah 40 as part of his comfort:

1 Peter 1:22-25, NAS:

*22 Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart,
23 for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God.
24 For, "All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off,
25 But the word of the Lord abides forever." And this is the word which was preached to you.*

So whether it is a nation and its leaders or a single individual, they all are “here today, gone tomorrow” so to speak. In such a fleeting existence Isaiah points out what is not fleeting, what lasts forever. He goes on to bring more words of comfort:

Isaiah 40:9-11 NIV:

*9 You who bring good tidings to Zion (Jerusalem)², go up on a high mountain. You who **bring good tidings** to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!”
10 See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.
11 He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.*

Shout from the mountain top, “*Here is God! This is what He is like!*” And what is it we are to shout? That God is sovereign and powerful. He rewards His servants and tenderly leads His children. He is also proclaiming Good News.

When a very important message was to be delivered by God, it was often associated with going up to the top of a mountain so that everyone could hear when the messenger shouted out the news. Here the Good News is the Gospel, the coming of Jesus Christ and the message He will bring. This was the function of John the Baptist in announcing the first coming of Jesus Christ. There are also suggestions in this verse of the second coming of Jesus in the end times. Jesus is God and will have the power to defeat any enemy, and the most powerful enemy He defeats is Satan. He will also come bringing rewards for those who are righteous and punishment for the wicked.

He cares for His people like a shepherd cares for his sheep, lovingly caring for all of

² Parentheses added.

them, especially the weak and deprived.

Isaiah 40:12

12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span³, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?

God created the universe from nothing, no raw materials. One could say He created it out of thin air. He didn't need any help from anyone. Who can claim that kind of power? God did something that could not be duplicated by mankind and He did it for mankind. The Jews were few in number, only a remnant would make the journey back to Jerusalem, and they faced a long and difficult journey. The victories of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia made it look as though the false gods of the Gentiles were stronger than the God of Israel; but Isaiah reminded them of the greatness of Jehovah. When you behold the greatness of God, then you will see everything else in life in its proper perspective.⁴

He is such a great Creator that all the waters of the globe were held, as it were, in His hand. Figuratively, He can measure the vast starry universe with the breadth of His hand. Also, God could place all the earth's dust in one of His baskets; and the mountains and hills, though vast, are so small compared with Him that, figuratively speaking, He could weigh them all on small scales.⁵

Isaiah 40:13,14:

13 Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or as his counselor has instructed him?

14 Whom did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice? Who taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?

The enormity of creation is mind-boggling. No one on earth could ever be God's equal. Isaiah spoke of the infinite knowledge and skill that God possesses. No one on earth can claim to have taught God anything. He didn't need to consult anyone. Isaiah was probably thinking of the Creation account in Genesis 1 in which **God spoke** and creation came into being. Similarly God had also pointed out to Job that his knowledge was nothing compared with God's (Job 38:2-39:30).⁶

Isaiah 40:15-17:

15 Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales; see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.

³ Distance between two boundaries.

⁴ Wiersbe, W. W. 1996, c1992. Be comforted. An Old Testament study. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.

⁵ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. 1983-c1985. The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures . Victor Books: Wheaton, IL

⁶ Op Cit.

16 Lebanon would not provide fuel enough, nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering.

17 All the nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.

Compared to the awesome splendor of God's creation, the people of the nations are as nothing before Him (like a mere drop of water or dust particles on scales). All the wood and the animals in the great forests of Lebanon would be inadequate as sacrifices before our great God. The nations who do not know the Lord are worthless and less than nothing before Him.⁷

Isaiah 40:18-20:

18 To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?

19 As for the idol, a craftsman casts it, A goldsmith plates it with gold, And a silversmith fashions chains of silver.

20 He who is too impoverished for such an offering Selects a tree that does not rot; He seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman To prepare an idol that will not totter.

Isaiah wrote about two idols, one made of metal by a craftsman and then overlaid with gold and decorated with silver ornaments, and another selected by a poor man from wood and fashioned so that it will not fall over. Both of these idol-makers used materials God created, and skills that God gave them. God, however, is unlike any idol. He is the Creator of all things including people. God is unique.⁸ How blinded people are to think something they make can have the power of God. And Isaiah asks the question:

Isaiah 40:21,22:

21 Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

*22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and **its inhabitants are like grasshoppers**; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them **like a tent to live in**;*

Throughout all of human history people had heard from God through the many ways He has made Himself known that He, not idols, and He alone had created all things. Yet in spite of the overwhelming evidence of His existence, people continue, generation after generation, to deny God's authority over His creation.

They replace the true God with a god they fabricate in their own minds. Usually a god that doesn't call them to any accountability other than what they themselves are willing to

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. 1983-c1985. The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures . Victor Books: Wheaton, IL

accept as truth. It's much more comforting to a person to feel that their god sees things just the way they do.

But the truth is that God sits above the earth and as He looks down upon His creation that He is in constant control of, people seem like insects to Him, and the clouds and stars in the heavens are like the covering of a tent that God has created for His children to live under. That's how big and how great our God is! The vast starry universe is merely His tent.

Isaiah 40:23,24:

23 who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

What a statement about God's sovereignty. No matter how great a prince or a government, it's like nothing, compared with God's rule.

God has planned and is controlling all of history. No matter how strong a nation becomes, if it does not live within the will of God, He can destroy it if and when He chooses. The average life of every great nation and empire throughout history, with some recent exceptions, has been about 200 years. That's usually about the maximum period of time it takes for greed and self-interest to take over both the government and the general population. When God sees this happening, He will withdraw his hand of protection and then it's not long afterwards that the nation falls from power. The United States is rapidly approaching this point in its history and our fate will be the same if we don't reclaim America for God.

Isaiah 40:25,26:

25 To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

26 Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

Israel was just plain foolish to compare their almighty God with the gods of the Babylonians. Rather than worshipping the Sun, Moon, and stars as gods (Isaiah 47:13; Deuteronomy 4:19), Israel should have seen in them the evidence of God's awesome ability to create wonders beyond human understanding. Astronomers have estimated that there may be a hundred billion stars in the universe. Verse 26 tells us that God knows them all by name, just as He knows every person by name. And not one of these stars varies its position from its designed location as determined by God. In fact the entire universe operates in absolute mathematical precision by the scientific principles that God designed and implemented. If for no other reason, people should believe in the God of the Bible when they consider the universe and all these stars, planets, moons, asteroids, and

whatever circulating in mid air without falling. Do you think something like that could just happen without a master plan from a supernatural God? There can be no other sound explanation for this miracle. And if God can do that, He certainly can control the activities of people and nations on this speck of the universe called Earth.

Now Isaiah applies these comforting truths that he's spoken of about God in verses 1-26 to Israel's situation **when they would be held captive in Babylon**. But down through the ages these words have also been comfort and inspiration to all who love and worship the Lord God.

Isaiah 40:27 NAS

Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God"?

How often have you been in situations where you felt everything was against you? The powers that be were treating you badly and God seemed distant? If we're honest, we've all been there at some time. But this question in verse 27 serves to refocus our perspective. God's people should never think He has forgotten them. **Jacob** and **Israel** are synonyms for all 12 tribes. God was watching over the few believers who remained true to Him. God's people should never think that God could forget about them for even a second. Isaiah goes on to remind them of why:

Isaiah 40:28-31

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

29 He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

*30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 but those who **wait** for the Lord shall **renew** their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and **not faint**.*

Instead of praising the Lord, the nation was complaining to Him that He acted as though He did not know their situation or have any concern for their problems (Isaiah 27; 49:14). Instead of seeing the open door, the Jews saw only the long road before them; and they complained that they didn't have strength for the journey. They complained that God was asking them to do the impossible.

But God knows how we feel and He knows what scares us, and we need to know that He's able to meet our every need. No matter how weary we grow, God is always there with His strength to help us. We have His strength to draw on. We can never obey God in our own strength, but we can always trust Him to provide the strength we need, Philippians 4:13: "*For I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need.*" If we trust ourselves, we'll grow tired and often fail; but if we trust in God by faith, we will be given strength for whatever we have to face throughout this life.

The word, “*wait*,” doesn’t suggest that we become couch potatoes and do nothing. It means, “*to hope*,” to look to God for everything that we need (Isaiah 26:3; 30:15). This involves reading and understanding our Bibles and then living our lives according to God’s instructions. This means relying on His character and His promises, praying, and glorifying Him in worship, both individually and corporately..

The word “*renew*” means “*to exchange*,” as taking off old clothes and putting on new. We exchange our weakness for His power. Not a bad deal, is it? That’s not only the key element in coming to salvation but also to growing in our walk with Christ. 2 Corinthians 12:9,10:

9 but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.
10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

As we wait before Him, God enables us to soar when there is a crisis, to run when the challenges are many, and to walk faithfully in the day-by-day repetition of life. I don’t know how you feel but I think it’s far more difficult to endure the ordinary pressures of life than to fly like an eagle in a time of crisis. The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. The greatest heroes of faith are not always those who seem to be soaring and getting the recognition and headlines. They are more often the faithful who are patiently plodding along faithfully through the pain and hardship of life. As we *wait* on the Lord, He enables us not only to fly higher and run faster, but also to walk longer. Blessed are the plodders, for they eventually arrive at their destination.

Since God is this omnipotent Creator and Sovereign Lord, His people need never fear that their problems and difficulties are too much for Him to handle, or that He’s not capable of defeating their enemies and one day bringing to judgment those that have oppressed them. God will see His people through everything and that includes death. His wisdom and ability to control the affairs of mankind is beyond comprehension. To his children, who may think they lack both stamina and strength, He lovingly grants all they need, provided they trust Him and seek Him in prayer and obedience.

God is greater than anything on earth (verses 12–20) or anything in Heaven (verses 21–26). Creation itself reveals His wisdom and power. He is greater than anything in the universe. He created the earth and rules over it from His throne in Heaven, and nothing is equal to God. The next time you’re tempted to think that the world and all your problems are bigger than God, remember the “*drop in a bucket*” (verse 15) and the “*grasshoppers*” (verse 22). And if you ever feel so small that you wonder if God really cares about you personally, remember that He knows your name as well as the name of every star (verse 26).

John 10:3, 27:

*3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.
27 My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me.*

The same God who numbers and names the stars wants to heal your broken heart if it needs healing, Psalm 147:3–4: “*He heals the brokenhearted, binding up their wounds. He counts the stars and calls them all by name.*” This is the hope one has who believes in Jesus Christ as their Savior and who trusts in Him to provide for all their needs. If you’re here this morning and you don’t have that hope and assurance, it’s available just for the asking. And if you’d like, Betty and I are available to help you take that step, and believe me, there’s nothing in life that we would rather do.