



Highlights From the Book of Isaiah

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Outline of the Book of Isaiah

- I. Warning of Judgment on Israel (1-39)
- II. The Promise of Future Hope in the New Jerusalem (40-66)
 - A. The Announcement of Hope (40-48)
 - B. The Servant Fulfills God's Mission (49-55)
 - C. Everlasting Deliverance and Everlasting Judgment (56-66)

Introduction to Isaiah 40-66

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- When we turn from chapter 39 to chapter 40 in the book of Isaiah, it's as though we step out of the darkness of judgment into the light of salvation.
- The contrast is great, and yet it's clear that chapter 39 is a *preparation* for chapter 40.
- In chapter 39 Babylon is prophesied to be the nation that would take God's people into captivity.
- Chapter 39 then *concludes* on this tragic note.
- There was to be "*peace and stability*" in Hezekiah's lifetime (the period of Assyrian supremacy), but the *descendants* of Hezekiah would go into *exile*.

Introduction to Isaiah 40-66

- There had been earlier hints in the book of Isaiah that Babylon would be the power that would rise to oppose the theocracy of God's people (cf. Isaiah 14:4-22).
- And subsequent history makes it clear that Babylon did indeed replace Assyria as the dominant Mesopotamian world power.
- And so we see later in the book of Daniel, Babylon is the "head of gold" (2:31-37) and the lion with eagle's wings (7:4).
- Babylon is the first and greatest part of the human kingdom whose purpose was the overthrow of the people of God.

Introduction to Isaiah 40-66

- Isaiah 40-66 serves to *remedy* the dark picture that **chapter 39** had created.
- These chapters see the people of God in human bondage, but they go far deeper and show that the people are really in *spiritual* bondage, subject to the taskmaster of their own *sin*.
- From this bondage there is to be a deliverer – the “*servant*” of the LORD.
- As they face the future the people of God are assured that the LORD will be with them in all their troubles.

Today's Text:

God's Promised Deliverance
Isaiah 40:1-11

God's Promised Deliverance (40:1-11)

- Isaiah 40:1-11 is often referred to as the “prologue” to the second half of the book of Isaiah.¹
- No longer is the prophetic message to be *primarily* one of judgment.¹
- That point has been made and will be confirmed in the fires of the Exile.¹
- Now, however, the message is to be one of *hope*.¹
- This section is to encourage the exiles that their captivity is nearly over, and that their God will display both his power as a great “*warrior*” and his gentleness as a “*shepherd*” to bring them home.²
- They need not doubt this deliverance, for the word of our God endures forever: once he has declared it, it *will* happen.²

¹ Oswalt, John . *Isaiah (The NIV Application Commentary)* (p. 444)

² Wegner, Paul D. – *Isaiah An Introduction and Commentary – Tyndale OT Commentaries*

God's Promised Deliverance (40:1-11)

- I will be covering today's text in *four* sections:
 - Comfort for God's Afflicted People (40:1-2)
 - A Call to Make Ready the Way for the Lord (40:3-5)
 - The Frailty of Man and the Enduring Character of God's Word (40:6-8)
 - Zion's Proclamation: God Has Come to Her (40:9-11)

Comfort for God's Afflicted People (40:1-2)

40:1 *“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. 2 “Speak kindly to Jerusalem and tell her that her time of warfare is over, that her punishment is completed. For the Lord has made her pay double for all her sins.”*

- Isaiah begins this section with a **command**: *“Comfort, comfort”*.
- It is God who **speaks** and who **commands** men to accomplish His purpose.
- Instead of saying, “I shall comfort my people,” he issues a **command**: *“Comfort my people.”*
- To **whom** is God **addressing** this command?
- It **appears** to be a command directed to the prophets **in general**, but probably with Isaiah **particularly** in mind.
- For it is Isaiah who, in the words of the following chapters, brings the comfort that comes with his announcement of salvation.

40:1 *“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God.*

- The repetition (*“Comfort, comfort”*) serves to bring out the great significance of the command and the fullness and richness of the comfort being offered.
- As the subsequent chapters show, true comfort consists in setting forth the entire truth concerning the people’s tragic and sinful condition and in causing them to see God as their only hope.
- When the heinousness of sin is finally faced, the announcement of deliverance can then be made.
- Isaiah designates the *object* of this *“comfort”* as *“my people”*.
- The people belong to God, for He has chosen them – even though they may forsake Him, He will not abandon them.
- In tender covenantal language, the speaker is identified as *“your God”*.

40:2 “Speak kindly to Jerusalem and tell her that her time of warfare is over, that her punishment is completed. For the Lord has made her pay **double** for all her sins.”

- Isaiah sees a day when God’s servants will be crushed to the ground under the burden of their sins.
- They will feel sure that all is lost and that all the promises have been nullified by their rebellion.
- But the message to be proclaimed to them is that this is not so.
- The Exile is not to **destroy** them but only to **punish** them.
- Now that ample (“**double**”) punishment has been meted out, God has a word of hope for them.

A Call to Make Ready the Way for the Lord (40:3-5)

40:3 A voice cries out, “In the wilderness clear a way for the LORD; build a level road through the rift valley for our God. ⁴ Every valley must be elevated and every mountain and hill leveled. The rough terrain will become a level plain, the rugged landscape a wide valley. ⁵ The splendor of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it at the same time. For the LORD has decreed it.”

40:3 ***A voice cries out***, “In the wilderness clear ***a way for the LORD***; build a level road through the rift valley for our God.

- “***A voice cries out***” – By whom is the proclamation here being made?
- Answer: It doesn’t matter, and therefore the speaker is not identified.
- The ***message*** is what’s important, ***not*** the one who speaks it.
- ***Preparations*** are to be made – “***a way***” is to be made ready.
- Who will ***make use*** of this “***way***” that is to be prepared?
- Answer: “***the LORD***” himself.
- Which is why it’s called “***a way for the LORD.***”

40:3 *A voice cries out, "In the wilderness clear a way for the LORD; build a level road through the rift valley for our God.*

- At this point, it is helpful to remember the passages in the book of *Ezekiel* which describe the Glory of the LORD departing from the temple, out the east gate of Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives and the desert lands to the east. (Ezek 9:3; 10:18-19; 11:22-23)
- That state of affairs continued during the *entire period* of the Babylonian Captivity (587–538 B.C.).
- But now Isaiah tells us a *new* day is dawning!
- The LORD will again take up his habitation among his people. (cf. Ezek 43:1-3)
- Therefore there is a call for the people to *prepare* to receive their King.

40:3 *A voice cries out, “In the wilderness **clear a way for the LORD**; **build a level road** through the rift valley for our God.*

- In the ancient East, it was common to find roads that were not properly maintained.
- So, when a king was going to visit an area, it was customary to send a herald in advance to command the local residents to “*build a level road*” where the king would be coming.
- Of course, the LORD doesn’t use roads to travel.
- So what is meant here by “*clear a way for the LORD*” and “*build a level road ... for our God*”?

40:3 *A voice cries out, “In the **wilderness** clear a way for **the LORD**; build a level road through the **rift valley** for our God.*

- The “*wilderness*” and the “*the rift valley*” describe a land that has suffered divine discipline for its sin.
- This indicates that there are *obstacles* which have to be dealt with to before “*the LORD*” can return to dwell among his people.
- The preparation the people are being admonished to make for *this* king is a *spiritual* preparation – in other words, *repentance* (cf. Luke 3:3-9).

40:4 *Every valley must be elevated and every mountain and hill leveled. The **rough terrain** will become a **level plain**, the **rugged landscape** a wide valley.*

- The description of what must be done to prepare for the arrival of the LORD is expanded here.
- Every possible obstruction is to be removed from the royal route.
- Both “*rough terrain*” and “*rugged landscape*” will be transformed into a “*level plain*”.
- The picture of the removal of physical impediments **symbolizes** the eradication of **all spiritual hindrances** in the way of the LORD’s return to his people.
- It emphasizes the removal of obstacles of **every sort**, no matter how great.
- And this is to be done **in faith**, anticipating the arrival of the one whose coming is announced.

40:5 *The splendor of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it at the same time. For the LORD has decreed it.”*

- The royal herald continues to speak.
- After all the preparations have been made, “*The splendor of the Lord will be revealed*” – that is, the LORD himself will make a grand disclosure of his majestic splendor.
- “*and all people will see it*” introduces an eschatological dimension to the vision which anticipates the final, universal revelation of divine greatness and grandeur that will be perceptible to all mankind “*at the same time*”, at what we call the ***second coming***:
 - *Look! He is returning with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes on the earth will mourn because of him. This will certainly come to pass! Amen. (Rev 1:7)*
- There should be no doubt about this coming to pass, “*For the LORD has decreed it*” (cf. 1:20; 58:14), and it is therefore guaranteed and certain.

The Frailty of Man and the Enduring Character of God's Word (40:6-8)

^{40:6} *A voice says, "Cry out!" Another asks, "What should I cry out?" The first voice responds: "All people are like grass, and all their promises are like the flowers in the field.*

⁷ *The grass dries up, the flowers wither, when the wind sent by the LORD blows on them. Surely humanity is like grass.* ⁸ *The grass dries up, the flowers wither, but the decree of our God is forever reliable."*

40:6 *A voice says, "Cry out!" Another asks, "What should I cry out?"*
The first voice responds: "All people are like grass, and all their promises are like the flowers in the field."

- Isaiah records that *"A voice says, 'Cry out!'"*, as one prophetic figure exhorts another to discharge the mandate given to them.
- The second speaker, however, responds in a puzzled tone that borders on dejection.
- He asks, *"What should I cry out?"*
- The reason for his question is that he is unable to see how declaring the promises of God will be able to achieve anything because of the unfaithfulness and powerlessness of those addressed.
- Grass is often viewed in Scripture as short-lived and perishable (cf. 37:27), and *"All people are like grass"* is a general statement regarding the frailty of mankind.

40:6 *A voice says, “Cry out!” Another asks, “What should I cry out?” The first voice responds: “All people are like grass, and all their **promises** are like the flowers in the field.*

- It is not just *physical weakness* that is the problem, but *moral untrustworthiness*.
- “*promises*” translates the Hebrew word *hesed*, which *usually* refers to the LORD’s covenant love and loyalty.
- The Septuagint (quoted in 1 Peter 1:24) seems to have read it as a different word, “*glory*”, in the sense of “beauty”, and this is often assumed to fit the context better.
- However, the thought is not focused on the outward gracefulness of grass, but on the inability of mankind to remain true to their word.
- Just as the grass starts off fresh and green and the flowers are colorfully resplendent, so men make promising beginnings which they fail to live up to: “*your faithfulness is as fleeting as the morning mist; it disappears as quickly as dawn’s dew.*” (Hosea 6:4).

40:7 *The grass dries up, the flowers wither, when the wind sent by the LORD blows on them. Surely humanity is like grass.*

- The thought is further brought out by stating the general truths: “*grass dries up, the flowers wither*”
- This would especially be the case when the wild flowers that grew abundantly in the spring were blasted by the searing wind that blew in off the eastern desert in May.
- A play is made on the twofold meaning of the Hebrew word *rûaḥ* as “*wind*” and “*spirit*”.
- The wild flowers could not withstand the desert “*wind*” (Ps. 103:16),

40:7 *The grass dries up, the flowers wither, when **the wind sent by the LORD blows on them**. Surely humanity is like grass.*

- Likewise, humanity can no longer flourish, because “*the wind [i.e., Spirit] sent by the LORD blows on them*”, causing them to dry up (cf. 40:24).
- The energizing power of the Spirit of the LORD often *imparts life* to mankind, but *here* we see that the Spirit sometimes “*blows*” on them in *judgement*.
- How can those who have become dried up before the scorching imposition of divine wrath exhibit any form of spiritual life?
- What is the point of issuing any divine exhortation to them?

40:8 *The grass dries up, the flowers wither, but the [but the word of our God stands forever. (NIV)].*

- “*The grass dries up, the flowers wither*” – this solemn thought is reiterated from the previous verse.
- But the writer does not end on this note of weakness.
- He knows a power by the use of which eternal results *can* be achieved.
- That power is the “*word of our God*”.
- Heaven and earth may pass away; not that Word.
- *Trusting* in that Word and *using* that Word, God’s people can confidently face the future, which will bring for Israel results that are *otherwise* humanly *impossible*.

Zion's Proclamation: God Has Come to Her (40:9-11)

40:9 Go up on a high mountain, O herald Zion. Shout out loudly, O herald Jerusalem! Shout, don't be afraid! Say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ *Look, the Sovereign LORD comes as a victorious warrior; his military power establishes his rule. Look, his reward is with him; his prize goes before him.* ¹¹ *Like a shepherd he tends his flock; he gathers up the lambs with his arm; he carries them close to his heart; he leads the ewes along.*

40:9 *Go up on a high mountain, O herald **Zion**. Shout out loudly, O herald Jerusalem! Shout, don't be afraid! Say **to the towns of Judah**, "Here is your God!"*

- We now reach the *climax* of what the “voices” that have been saying in previous verses.
- The true believers among the people of God (“*Zion*”) are to make known what their faith has grasped: the fact that God is graciously returning to his people, and in fact, has returned.
- They are to proclaim these glad tidings throughout the whole land, i.e., “*to the towns of Judah*.”

40:9 *Go up on a **high mountain**, O herald Zion. Shout out loudly, O herald Jerusalem! Shout, **don't be afraid!** Say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"*

- The message to be proclaimed is so momentous that Zion is told to go up into a "*high mountain*" in order that her voice may carry far and wide (cf. Judg. 9:7).
- The same admonition is given to Jerusalem, which here apparently is used as substitute for Judah, since the term Jerusalem is used more than thirty times in these chapters for Judah.
- In fact, all the members of the nation are to mutually reassure one another of the good news that is breaking.
- All timidness about the future is to be banished—
"don't be afraid!"

40:9 *Go up on a high mountain, O **herald Zion**. Shout out loudly, O **herald Jerusalem!** Shout, don't be afraid! Say to the towns of Judah, "**Here is your God!**"*

- The title "*herald*" that is used here of "*Zion*" and "*Jerusalem*", is a term that could well be translated "bearer of good news."
- But the message that is to be proclaimed is: "*Here is your God!*"
- The proclaimers are, as it were, to point directly to the one who has just appeared on the scene, and to exclaim: "Here he is! He is in your midst!"

40:10 Look, the **Sovereign LORD** comes as a **victorious warrior**; **his military power establishes his rule**. Look, his **reward** is with him; his **prize** goes before him.

- Two figures are used to describe the “**Sovereign LORD**” who appears.
- First of all, he is a conquering hero, or a “**victorious warrior**.”
- The same thought is expressed by the statement “**his military power establishes his rule**.”
- But the statement now following adds a very significant thought:
- The “**reward**” or “**prize**” that this conquering hero brings **with him** is **his people**, whom he has regained as his own and delivered from the power of the enemy.
- The victor and those whom he has redeemed are both on the scene.

40:11 Like a *shepherd* he tends his flock; he gathers up the lambs with his arm; he carries them *close to his heart*; he *leads* the ewes along.

- As so often happens in Isaiah, the figure swiftly changes.
- Now it is the “*shepherd*” who is approaching, a figure often used in the Old Testament to describe God’s relation to his people (cf. Mic 2:12; Jer 31:10; Ezek 34:11ff; Ps 78:52; 80:1).
- His most tender care is reflected in the various activities that the Shepherd engages in for his flock: he “*leads*” them rather than drives them.
- He gathers the newly-born lambs in his arms and carries them “*close to his heart*”.
- These are the things that Zion is to proclaim throughout the cities of Judah.
- But she cannot proclaim them effectively unless she first appropriates them in faith.

Next Time

I plan to look at the New Testament usage of **Isaiah 40:3-8** which includes the following passages:

- Matthew 3:3
- Mark 1:2-3
- Luke 3:4-6
- John 1:23
- 1 Peter 1:24-25

Class Discussion Time



Class Discussion Time

- In our lesson today, we observed that true comfort consists in setting forth the entire truth concerning the people's tragic and sinful condition and in causing them to see God as their only hope.
- The New Testament writers seem to affirm this idea as well. For example, the Apostle Paul in his *magnum opus* on the Christian faith (the book of Romans) spends three chapters establishing that all men are sinful, before he introduces the idea of salvation by faith.
- How should this idea impact how we think about our own relationship to God? And how might it impact our approach to evangelism?

Class Discussion Time

- In previous lessons we have talked about there being “layers” to the ideas that Isaiah presents.
- Today’s text speaks of the coming of God to deliver his people. Do you see any layers to that coming in today’s text? If so what are they?
- I see three:
 - The deliverance of the Israelites from Babylonian exile
 - The coming of Christ as announced by John the Baptist at the First Advent.
 - The Second Coming when the LORD returns with his people in tow and “every eye will see him”.