

AS YOU BEGIN

When the cry of “comfort, comfort” is heard in Isaiah 40 there has been a span of approximately 160 years since the events recorded in the previous chapter. Isaiah Part Two tells the story of the destruction brought about by Nebuchadnezzar as he led the Babylonian armies to overrun the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and a significant number of the community was deported to Babylon. As stated in the introduction to the study *Isaiah, Part Two—Do Not Be Afraid!*, the person referred to as Isaiah in these chapters is Second Isaiah, the prophet who wrote at a time after Isaiah, son of Amoz.

In these chapters Isaiah’s prophetic message to the defeated and exiled community is announced in the opening vision. In the heavenly court God cries out, “Comfort, comfort!” When “a voice cries out” within the heavenly court, Isaiah is issued his prophetic call. Yahweh comes as a shepherd rather than a warrior. The metaphor builds on a foundational image for the people of Israel: “The LORD is my shepherd.”

Within chapters 40–55 very little is shared about the prophet. In reading the prophecies within these chapters we are predominantly listening as Isaiah proclaims the words of the Lord; Isaiah is called to be God’s voice to the people.

Yahweh as creator and sustainer of all life is central to the theology of Isaiah. Instead of relying on the foundational history of their exodus liberation, Isaiah pictures God the creator’s mighty creating and transforming power. Therefore, Isaiah has little time for idols, anything substituted for Yahweh, the Lord God.

Not only are the visions majestic but the language is also beautifully poetic. As a prophet, Isaiah is also a poet, using language to open the eyes of the people with vivid and memorable word pictures, images, similes, comparisons, and metaphors.

At a later time, in 1963, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was inspired by Isaiah’s vision and included the prophet’s evocative words in the speech that came to be known as “I Have a Dream.”

Basic Bible References

Isaiah 40:1–11

Isaiah 40:12–31

Supplementary Bible References

Psalms 23:1

Jeremiah 3:15

Amos 5:24

Luke 3:4

John 10:11

Word List

Jerusalem

glory

Judah

Lebanon

Holy One

Jacob

Israel



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PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

SILENCE BETWEEN THE TIMES

The visions of Isaiah Part One (chapters 1–39) concluded with the alarming warning:

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the LORD. Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” (39:5–7)

In 598 BCE the Babylonians did return to Judah; the words of Isaiah were fulfilled. The power of the Assyrians, who had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 721, had been superseded by the military might of the Babylonians. By 587 their armies led by Nebuchadnezzar had overrun the southern kingdom of Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, burned the temple, and deported a significant number of the population to Babylon. Even so, the power of the Babylonians would last fewer than forty years, for the Persians, led by Cyrus the Great, were rising to power in the east.

A major reason for designating three parts of Isaiah is the changing historical references within the text. There is a large span of time between the end of chapter 39 (700 BCE) and the beginning of chapter 40 (540 BCE). Within those 160 years the foundations of the life and faith of Judah had not only been shaken but had also collapsed. Imagine a time of displacement when the social, political, and theological structures that had once been in place have been destroyed. Isaiah Part Two speaks the word of the Lord to Jewish exiles in Babylon following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. In addition to the historical references, the themes

expressed in this part of Isaiah are related more closely to the theology of this time than to the earlier prophets of the eighth century BCE. These themes include “the explicit monotheism (e.g., 45:5–6, 14, 18, 21, 22), the ridicule of idols (e.g., 44:9–20), the daring ‘New Exodus’ motifs (43:18–21), and the concept of vicarious suffering (53:4–6, 11–12).”⁴

GOD CRIES OUT WITH COMFORT

Just as Yahweh earlier called a prophet to strengthen the faith and trust of the people of Israel in advance of an approaching crisis, Yahweh calls a prophet to speak to the Judean community of exiles clustered in Babylon.

Read Isaiah 40:1–11.

- *Notice the impact of the opening words. What has happened that causes God to respond with words of comfort?*
- *Focus on who is speaking within the passage. When is God’s voice heard? Who is indicated by “a voice cries out”? How do you recognize Isaiah’s words?*

In words reminiscent of the dramatic encounter in Isaiah 6 (“Holy, Holy, Holy”), another glimpse into heaven is given as God cries out to the heavenly court, “Comfort, O comfort my people.” In the Hebrew, “comfort” is plural; the words are spoken to the people and are not God’s specific direction to Isaiah. God’s forgiveness, pardon, and now comfort of those who have served the sentence of exile, having suffering greatly for the sins of the people, becomes a constant theme of the prophet:

Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the
LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. (52:9)

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be
comforted in Jerusalem. (66:13)

4 John F. A. Sawyer, *Isaiah Volume 2*, Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 44.

What do you hear and see in the vision? A voice within the heavenly court calls out to Isaiah and gives him the message he is to proclaim:

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (40:3)

A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” (40:6)

The directive to “prepare the way of the LORD” does not focus on the streets of the ruined city of Jerusalem nor the corridors of the destroyed temple; it directs attention to the wilderness. The listeners are summoned to envision a barren landscape, for in the midst of a desolate setting they will witness the glory of the Lord. The vision captures a great leveling of the terrain—the heights crash down and the depths rise up, the rough places are flattened, and the bumps are smoothed out. No obstruction will get in the way of anyone wishing a good view of Yahweh’s triumphant return. Listeners are set on tiptoe awaiting returning exiles, led by Yahweh, who will proceed home along the desert highway stretching from Babylon to Israel. Six centuries later, the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ will include a picture of a highway. All four Gospels put Isaiah’s words into the mouth of John the Baptist as he cries out, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Luke 3:4).⁵

Isaiah’s vision continues with another evocative image contrasting the faithlessness of the people with the faithfulness of God:

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. (40:8)

If little else had come down to us from the prophet, this affirmation would be sufficient reason to offer our thanks. If little else were remembered from Isaiah, this affirmation would be enough to hold close to our hearts.

As good tidings are shouted from the mountains—the Lord God is coming!—think about the expectations among the listeners, especially since God comes “with might, and his arm rules for him” (40:10). Their expectations of might and power may have been shattered. The one who desires to comfort comes not as a warrior but as a shepherd. Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, was known as a shepherd: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1). The rulers,

⁵ Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; John 1:23.

anointed by Yahweh, were also acknowledged as shepherds: “I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15). Indeed, it is ultimately how Jesus identified himself: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

In visualizing this tender prophecy given to Isaiah, we are given a preview of changes to come in the lives of God’s people. Think what happens when Yahweh, the Lord God, surpasses all expectations by embracing those who have been living in exile with forgiveness, comfort, and hope in a new beginning. As Isaiah will show us, the amazing love of God leads to wonderful surprises.

HAVE YOU NOT KNOWN? HAVE YOU NOT HEARD?

Compared to what is known about some biblical prophets, including Isaiah, son of Amoz, of chapters 1–39, little is known about the Isaiah of chapters 40–55. About the prophet himself, Claus Westermann writes:

He had not been made a prophet because he had some clearer insight into the existing situation than they, or because he kept hoping and trusting that this situation would change, or because of the strength of his faith. The thoughts of his fellow-exiles were his thoughts, too, and he had been every bit as flagging and weary as they. It was a word outside himself, a command, that made him a prophet, as it had done his predecessors. This was the source of all that he was to say, as well as its substantiation. It was “the word of our God” and it alone, as God guaranteed, would not become void (Isa. 55:6–11). Since God still spoke it, Deutero-Isaiah [Second Isaiah] was able to preach. This is why Deutero-Isaiah’s preaching is throughout simply the putting forth of this word that was not being spoken. It is also the reason for the complete concealment of himself in its shadow. It was essential that there should

be a spokesman for the new word which God was now speaking. But he is merely the voice.⁶

Isaiah is called to be God's voice to the people even as the heavenly voice continues to respond to Isaiah's question, "What shall I cry?" (40:6).

Read Isaiah 40:12–31.

- *Notice how Isaiah engages the listener's imagination through vivid images: dust, grasshoppers, a curtain, withered plants, and eagles' wings. What do you see when you are reading?*
- *Focus on how Isaiah proclaims the good news of the Lord God. He repeatedly calls on them to remember and to trust: "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" What is crucial for them to know?*

As essential as the exodus liberation from Egypt is to Isaiah (and he will get there soon enough), the majesty of Yahweh the creator and sustainer of all life is even more central to his theology. So, before telling the exiles the familiar story of God's power in freeing the captives from bondage in Egypt, he recalls the awesome power of God the creator:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the creator of the ends of the earth. (40:28)

Those living in exile had been exposed to a pantheon of deities often represented in human form, to foreign beliefs, to prolific idols, and to magical trinkets. Some of them, such as the fertility deities, must have been tempting to those away from the restraints of home. Isaiah even jokes about finding an artisan who will craft an idol "that will not topple" (40:20)! However, he does not joke when he proclaims that in contrast to any tipsy idol, Yahweh's power extends to all the nations, every ruler, and even the heavenly powers.

The opening words of Isaiah Part Two—"Comfort, O comfort my people," — announce God's tender forgiveness in light of the suffering of Jerusalem. In the words that follow,

⁶ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969), 7.

God's comfort is fleshed out with the good news that God's word is everlasting (40:8); that God's strong arms are those of a loving shepherd (40:11); and that the God of creation even knows all the stars by name (40:26). Then, in a dazzling finish, the comforter is revealed as one who "gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (40:29). It is a brand new day for the people of God; a glorious new future awaits the people of Judah.

DISCOVERING THE PROPHET IN WASHINGTON, DC

On August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to more than 250,000 people who had joined the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The draft of the speech that Dr. King had prepared for the occasion bears the title "Normalcy, Never Again!" Yet as he delivered the speech, he departed from the written words in response to his friend Mahalia Jackson's request. From the crowd she shouted, "Tell them about the dream, Martin." Thus, due to Dr. King's repeated use of the evocative phrase "I have a dream," his speech that day became known by those words and galvanized the civil rights movement in the United States.

The words of scripture and the words of spirituals frequently formed the foundation for the speeches King, a preacher of the gospel, delivered. God's demand for justice and the prophet's call for mercy and righteousness established the foundation for his actions—"I have a dream . . ." Therefore, when King quoted the prophet Amos in his speech, it was no surprise: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24). In addition, the prophet Isaiah also showed up in his speech. In one expansion on "I have a dream," King led into the words of the prophet Isaiah:

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.⁷

⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," quoting Isaiah 40:4–5.

On that day in Washington, DC, an ancient message to those held captive in a foreign land became a contemporary word to those desiring justice in their own land. God’s word spoken through the prophets, whether heard in the past or proclaimed in the present, draws us close to God’s heart.

It is fascinating to view twenty-two study notes written while Dr. King was studying Isaiah as a student at Crozer Theological Seminary. These notes are accessible on the website of the King Center in Atlanta (www.kingcenter.org). They contain no early intimation of “I have a dream,” but it is apparent that he was becoming grounded in the prophetic scriptures. In one note on Isaiah 61:8 the young seminarian writes, “Here it is affirmed that God loves justice and hates wrong doing.”⁸ That truth was one of the seeds that brought forth a harvest decades later and is still sending workers out into the fields.

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

- Memorize Isaiah 40:8.
- Memorize Isaiah 40:11.

Reflection

What do you hear in these words of comfort from Isaiah? Imagine that you are in exile, that you are away from home, family, and friends. How might you feel being disconnected from what once had meaning and held your life together: work, community, and worship? What is in the vision that gives you hope? What aspects of exile expose your fears and anxieties? Isaiah affirms that “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” (40:31). Reflect on what it means for you to wait for the Lord.

Read this verse in other translations to find other words used to express the meaning of to “wait for the Lord.” For example, in the Common English Bible, Isaiah 40:31 is translated as, “But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.” In the New Jerusalem Study Bible, Isaiah 40:31 is translated as, “But those who hope in Yahweh will regain their strength.”

⁸ “Isaiah,” the King Center website, www.thekingcenter.org.

In the Contemporary English version, Isaiah 40:31 is rendered as, “But those who trust the LORD will find new strength.” Do the various translations of this verse help to clarify its meaning for you?

Further Research

In the introduction of his commentary on Isaiah, John Goldingay challenges readers to use their imaginations:

The opening verse of the book called Isaiah proclaims it to be a vision. Elsewhere the OT implicitly rejoices in the creativity of the human imagination that tells stories and composes prayers and paints word pictures and knows that these human productions can open eyes to God’s truth and can have God’s creativity behind them. But this is not how it presents the work of a prophet. A prophet is one who has seen something, and has seen something because Yahweh has made the seeing possible. It is as if God opened a window in heaven.⁹

Goldingay goes on to discuss the multiple authors of Isaiah not in the accepted way of First, Second, and Third Isaiah but in what he identifies as “the four human voices.” Thus, he introduces the reader to the prophet by looking at the voices of Isaiah as Ambassador, Disciple, Poet, and Preacher. “Poet” is the voice expressed in Isaiah 40–55. Above all, as a commentator he keeps the reader’s attention focused on what Isaiah sees and reveals when God opens a window in heaven.

⁹ John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 1.