

## **Notes on Isaiah 40:1–41:20**

By [David Linden](#)

We come to a section of Isaiah (40-55) that has much in it about Christ, the Servant of the Lord. The setting in the next chapters is the Lord's promise of a return from Babylon. Isaiah died many years before this happened. He had spoken of Babylon in Isaiah 13,14 & 21 and he told Hezekiah (39:5-7) that there would be a Babylonian captivity. Yet earlier God had promised a future of safety and peace for Jerusalem in 33:20-22 and 35:8-10. These prophecies create a tension; how can both be true? The Lord did not leave these predictions without resolution; He promised a return from Babylon and gave that promise long before they were carried into captivity!

The emphasis now is comfort and good news, good news with increasing detail. In Isaiah 42 the prophet gives the first of four special passages that speak about Christ, the Servant Songs. Eventually the good news will be about the coming of Christ, His sacrifice and His success in bringing salvation to nations far away. The Bible sometimes uses language like "near" and "far off" to express this universal message, (Ephesians 2:17; Acts 2:39). Isaiah will concentrate much attention on the truth of God as Creator and the One Who controls human history. His power and control are necessary for us to have confidence in His ability to make words of comfort become genuine deliverance from the oppression of enemies.

### **40:1-2 – The message to be sent**

The opening word is "comfort" – not a statement that people should be comforted, but a command from God to give comfort. Comfort comes in believing a message, which v.2 gives in very brief form. The message must be given with gentleness, because those who will hear it some day suffer despair and discouragement. The message was to God's suffering people in Babylon with no hope of returning to their own land. Their God has not forgotten them.

The message is that the hard time of captivity is over. These words would be read by people still in captivity. God later revealed through Jeremiah that the captivity would be 70 years (Jeremiah 25:8-14). Daniel in Babylon took God's promise through Jeremiah seriously (Daniel 9:1-3). Thus Isaiah, who had died more than 100 years earlier, spoke a word that remained in writing all that time, a word they would understand when the fulfillment was about to happen.

In Leviticus 26:14-46, in the time of Moses, God warned of captivity for disobedience but promised to remember His covenant with them. The comfort is that their sin has been paid for. The question is whether the Lord means that they suffered enough in captivity thereby paying for their sins, OR, is it that another payment (not yet identified) has been made and accepted. In all other places where this verb is used in the passive [i.e. 'has been paid', which is passive; rather than 'he paid', which is active] it always means that God has accepted a substitutionary blood sacrifice for His people. One example is Leviticus 1:4, "It will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him." Isaiah 40 is announcing the comfort that sin has been paid for. Isaiah is merely introducing the subject; later in Isaiah 52,53 he will say Who it was Who paid for sins.

### **Sin paid for in Isaiah 53**

We were wrong about Him; we thought Jesus was rejected by God, but what He really did was take our trouble on Himself (v.4) and so was pierced for our transgressions (v.5), because the Lord had laid on him the iniquity of us all (v.6). It was for the transgression of God's people He was stricken (v.8). It was the Lord who made his life a guilt offering (v.10) when Jesus bore their iniquities (v.11) and bore the sin of many (v.12). Therefore we should read "sin has been paid for" in 40:2 in light of Isaiah's later words that the Servant of the Lord has paid in His sacrifice.

This message is fortified in another way. She has received something from the Lord's hand for her sins. Does Isaiah mean here that Jerusalem has received *punishment* from the Lord for all her sins? Such an interpretation, possible elsewhere, does not fit in here with the theme of comfort. The comfort message is that she benefits because of something the Lord has done to pay for her sin. It is not that she has had enough punishment in Babylon. I think it means she has received the Lord's provision for her sins. The gospel is that Jerusalem does not need to provide for her sins, because it is the Lord who has done so, and so she receives the benefit of forgiveness. (Any payment provided by God and made by Christ is surely acceptable to Him!)

Why does v.2 say double? The idiom of a foreign language can be difficult. It could mean that something is folded, or 'doubled' over, so that two parts line up and match exactly. Then this verse would mean that the payment made fits the sin committed precisely. That is, the sin of God's people and the sacrifice provided for those sins, line up in the mind of God. For this reason God says the sins have been paid for. Isaiah begins a message of comfort that entails the sacrifice of Christ; Jerusalem has been granted from the hand of the Lord a payment for their sins that God's people do not have to make.

### **40:3-11 – Three voices**

### **40:3-5 – The first messenger**

The first messenger ordered to comfort God's people, announces as his good news the coming of God. (The approach of God is never good for those whose sins have not been paid for!) This highway in the wilderness differs from the one in 35:8. On that one the people travel back to the Lord; on this highway God comes to them. The response is to make a way for Him, not that He needs help, but that they must by faith look for Him. They should not be casual about this but diligent. God would travel and come to them and show His glory to all mankind.

The earth has always been full of the glory of the Lord (6:3). God rules the nations in the glory of His justice, judging sin. Now He will show the glory of His grace saving men from sin.

The New Testament relates this Scripture to the ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:3). How fitting that it does so. Who was coming after John, but God the Lord, Whose Name is Jesus! Certain parallels are evident: a messenger announces; God is coming; the glory of the Lord will be revealed (John 1:14). Men must prepare by turning from sin.

### **40:6-8 – The second messenger**

It may not seem like comfort to say that all flesh is like grass that withers. But it is a rule we must learn: we can never enjoy the glory of God unless the glory of man is humbled (2:17). Admitting we are like grass – weak in ourselves physically and morally – shows the glory of our salvation. Note it is even the people of God who are like grass, when we might expect more of them! In Hebrew the *breath* of the Lord is the same as the *Spirit* of the Lord. The Spirit so often is the giver of life; here He blows death on man. No truth about ourselves so clarifies the work of God to save us as understanding that in ourselves we are dead in trespasses and sins. Only then will we grasp what it means that God makes dead men alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:1-5). The second messenger brings comfort – not everything has the kiss of death, for the Word of our God stands forever. His word is that He is coming to save.

### **40:9-11 – The third messenger**

Before the message itself is given, there is instruction to be sure it will be heard. To use a loud voice on a high location helps spread the good news; it must be proclaimed (52:7). The message is the essence of the gospel, "Here is your God." It is not gospel to speak of ourselves or our works (2 Corinthians 4:5); the gospel is a message of what God has done. The first messenger said He is coming (vv.3-5); this messenger tells of God's arm, the metaphor that speaks of

personal strength. (Later in Isaiah Arm is a title for Christ as in 53:1.) He comes with a reward, one for what He has done – His reward for His work. This statement reappears in Revelation 22:12 when Christ speaks of His coming to recompense and repay everyone for what he has done. He also has the fruits of His victory, like a warrior coming home with his prize. Later Isaiah will reveal that the Lord Jesus will divide the goods with His own (53:12).

*40:11* – Kings are sometimes called shepherds, a word used of Christ in the New Testament (John 10:11; 1 Peter 5:4; Hebrews 13:20). So when Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd, those knowing Isaiah 40 should have recognized that the coming of God was being fulfilled. When John the Baptist quoted v.3 about himself (John 1:23), that too should draw attention to Isaiah.

The rest of Isaiah 40 is in the form of an argument. Courtroom contests, with the other side called on to appear and respond, is one of Isaiah's formats. (See 41:21.) In 40:12-31 the argument revolves around Israel's mistaken complaint in v.27 that his way is hidden from God, meaning that God has forgotten His people. They were far off in Babylon under the rule of Gentiles. What good was it to have God as their God? Isaiah 40:12-31 answers this. An answer is given before the question (v.27) appears!

#### **40:12-17 – God the Creator**

*40:12-14* – The Lord has made the earth and the heavens. What is huge to us is small to Him. This truth prepares the mind to believe He can do whatever He wishes and is able to keep His promises. His power is combined with wisdom; He needs no advice. We are fools to ignore His counsel, and God would not be God if He needed ours. If we could know God fully, we would be His equal. (The finite cannot contain the infinite.) Only the Father, Son (Matthew 11:27), and Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10,11) know each other that way. We do not, counsel, teach, help, or fully comprehend God. (See Romans 11:33-36.)

*40:15-17* – The Maker of the universe is Lord over the nations. In comparison with the Lord, the mountains and oceans are small. The nations are as nothing. Israel has already seen that with Egypt and Assyria. Now they need to know that is also true for Babylon. We know Daniel read the Prophet Jeremiah; maybe he had Isaiah to read as well, and had his view of these Gentile powers formed by such Scriptures as Isaiah 40. If the nations are powerless, a return from Babylon will be (for God) a very simple thing. If all the cedars of Lebanon are not enough for his altar fire and its animals not enough for sacrifice to Him, He must be very great and not easily satisfied. Since Jesus was rewarded because of His sacrifice, His offering was sufficient to satisfy God (53:12).

#### **40:18-20 – God vs. Idols**

The true and living God has made man. The gods men make are false and dead. Can a created god compare to God the Creator? No. Whatever material is used will reveal truth about the idol. Unlike God they do not exist on their own; men must make them. They have only a physical beauty applied to them; maybe they are covered with gold, a beauty not inherent to the idols, but taken from the Creator's world and added to them. They are not living, and unlike the Lord God coming in power (v.10), they are motionless and powerless to stand on their own; they need chains to keep them from toppling. In Isaiah 40-48, the folly of idolatry is a repeated theme. One reason we are not allowed to make any representation of God (Exodus 20:4-6) is that every material image is inadequate, unable to convey His glory. So what is God like? He is transcendent; God is like Himself and nothing in all creation is truly like Him. Later He would send His Son, the One Who really is the radiance of His glory. He is the true image of God. (Hebrews 1:1-4)

40:21-24 Men ought to know God is not the product of the earth or its people; He sits above it all as God over all (v.22). But they should know this! The people of Israel have had a heritage of the knowledge of God. He calls them to return to the faith and theology of their fathers, which is a doctrine of a God unlike idols, a Lord above the earth rather than part of it. The comparisons are not literal but given to emphasize a contrast rather than likeness. Men are grasshoppers in comparison with God, for whom the entire heavens would be needed as a tent covering. Some think "above the circle of the earth" means the Bible is telling us the earth is a sphere, but it refers to the circle of the horizon.

On this earth are great men of great power: the princes and rulers of this world. To God they are the ones He constantly removes as He brings them down in death. He blows and they are gone like chaff, most unlike the Son of David Whose kingdom lasts forever (9:7). Since this is all true, the interests of Israel do not depend on the King of Babylon, rather the life of Babylon's king depends on the God of Israel. (See Daniel 5:23.) The kings and rulers do not merely die, with God in the role of a passive observer. The truth is that God actively takes their life from them. He continues in human history to impose death as the penalty for Adam's sin (Romans 5:12).

#### **40:25,26 – The God Who knows His stars**

God is called Holy. One might expect in a context of creation that it would say 'mighty' or 'powerful', but here He has the title 'Holy'. Sometimes holiness refers to His moral purity, different from the sinfulness of men. Holy means more than that. Holiness has to do with being separate. God is not part of the creation. He is God, different, distinct and unique in what He is and separate from it all.

"To whom will you compare" is repeated from v.18. There idols are dismissed; here no alternative to God is even suggested. Who could ever be like the Holy

One Who made the stars? Israel is called to look up and see His works, not in adoration of the heavenly lights (Deuteronomy 4:15-19), but in reverent observation. The God Who made and named each star is the Lord now speaking in this verse to His people. The heathen worship the stars, the Israelites have as their God the Maker of those stars, each of which is known to God; not one of His stars is missing. The point is: if He knows the stars, He must know the plight of His people. In this way the objection of v.27 is answered before it is stated.

#### **40:27-31 – Encouragement for the weary**

Israel's mood is despondent. They have been through 70 years of captivity. Many in the nation have never known the land given to their fathers. They were promised to be the head and not the tail among nations (Deuteronomy 28:13), yet they were in captivity. They might consider only their bleak circumstances. To these weary people, Isaiah brought God's word and a reminder of God's covenant faithfulness. He had made large promises to Abraham, and had bound Himself to maintain them and bless them. When His people were in captivity, it seemed He had forgotten all about them.

They suffered from a bad theology when they assumed God did not know. They suffered from a bad experience; their pleas seemed to be ignored. The solution was to set the theology straight and then to call for faith in the Lord who cannot break covenant with His people. Isaiah called on that future generation to relearn what they already knew. Israel's trouble cannot be from divine weariness. Since He is eternal, He does not run out of time. With perfect understanding, He cannot be surprised or wonder what to do. It is beyond man to grasp all of God's ways, so we must humble ourselves and trust. Nothing is outside His control and power. Israel was complaining from a stance of error. Since we cannot have faith in a God of Whom we know nothing, Isaiah calls for truth and then trust.

Not only does God have strength, He gives strength. He has all power and provides power for the weak. Young men in good physical shape will tire and fall, but those who trust the untiring Lord will have renewed strength and not succumb to despair and unbelief. Isaiah will proceed to give promises of the activity of God Who will help His people, a people that often forgot Him (51:13) but a people He could not forget (49:15). Hope consists of waiting with certainty and trust in His word. In these chapters, Isaiah will give much to encourage their hope.

*41:1* This is a courtroom setting, where people meet together and state their arguments for a judicial decision. It is God Who has summoned all to come – in this case the distant islands. God is speaking to Gentiles.

*41:2-4* God has a question. Without using a name, God speaks of some individual who will arise from east of Judah. This man will terrify nations (v.5). God says that He has called this warrior into His service (just as He used the Assyrian as His tool in chapter 10). The Lord proclaims it is righteous of God as

God to use this individual in this way. This is a truth that always surprises us when we resist God exercising His sovereign rights. This aggressor will have one victory after another. God will hand nations to him. It is the God of Israel Who brings rulers down (40:23) in every age. With this man's sword, the Lord turned nations to dust. With such rapid conquests, it says his feet did not touch the ground. Later God identifies *Cyrus* by name (44:28; 45:1,13). The question in this text is not to identify this mystery conqueror, but to discover Who called and ordered all these events.

Who has stirred up this man and carried through His plan? It is the Lord. He is the first, and in the end He is with the last. He is the "I am he", which is the answer to His own question of vv.2 & 4.

41:5-7 What do the heathen do in response to God's summons? Invited to approach God to hear and learn from Him, they run instead in fear to their idols. Later Jesus, Who will be a light for the Gentiles (42:6), will go and get them when He brings God's salvation to the ends of the earth (49:6) in the preaching of the gospel (Acts 13:46-48). In 41:5-7, they are still bound to their idols and they hold each other to their old ways. Part of the strength of error is that God has given us a communal nature. We live as families, a strength when we worship the Lord together. Social solidarity is a powerful factor to hold people in traditions of error. Nations bound by deceit reinforce each other in it. The idols never answered the Lord's question. They cannot even ask the question, yet the worship of idols holds nations in bondage.

#### **41:8-20 – Three pictures of God's help**

##### **41:8-13 – The chosen servant**

Here Israel is called a servant. In 42:1 it will be Christ as the perfect servant, with more of Him as *the* "Servant of the Lord" in chapters 49, 50, & 52/53. It is a mistake to think of *servant* here in v.8 as a lowly slave. The opposite picture is given; Israel is from Abraham, and God is still calling him His friend (James 2:23). The picture is of intimacy. How can God choose Israel, bring their forefathers from a distant land to a new land and then have no interest in them? He cannot do that. That He has elected them means He cannot reject them. God cannot be for and also against His chosen ones (Romans 8:31-39). So the appeal not to fear rests in God's unending commitment. By Isaiah's words God reaffirmed His covenant: "I am your God." This relationship has its effects: He will uphold them and does so by His righteous right hand. (In v.13 He takes their right hand, a fatherly thing to do.)

Such consolation comes in the presence of real danger. There are those who rage, oppose, and war against them. Since the Lord is with them, their enemies will fail and never be found. With such commitment and help, they should not be

afraid.

### **41:14-16 – The mighty worm**

This Scripture never loses sight of the weakness of Israel. (Jerusalem had been destroyed and they were slaves in a land farther away than they were when they were slaves in Egypt.) A worm is not a mighty force. One worm can do little damage as it moves across the ground. Jacob is the worm God will help and transform into a mighty threshing machine. No longer will nations defeat them; instead they will make captives of their captors (14:2). Modern machines cannot crush mountains. Such is the change brought about by the Lord who is the Redeemer of Israel. Their Redeemer has adopted them as His 'next of kin' and assumed their burdens as His. No longer trampled as a worm, they will have joy in the Lord and make their grateful boast in the Holy One of Israel.

### **41:17-20 – The needy supplied**

The two previous pictures show help against a foe. This one is of the Lord's supply in hard circumstances. The picture is of people in danger in the desert, where water and shade are hard to find. God's answer goes far beyond basic needs to show the wonder of a transformed creation.

The poor and needy are the crushed and helpless, as in Matthew 11:28. Isaiah does not mention their prayer but the answer God gave them. To pray to God is to recognize Him as God. Prayer glorifies Him as God, and so does the answer He gives. He promises to hear (Jeremiah 29:12)

The God of Israel will help. He cannot forsake His own. Yet He always wants us to realize that His supply is really His supply. To protect His glory, He makes sure His people learn they need Him. Israel in all its trouble saw their plight clearly and prayed, and God answered with a superabundant answer. Rivers do not flow on the top of hills, nor is the desert pools of water, nor do all those trees grow there. All that would be dramatically rearranged to meet the need of His own. Then they recognize that "the hand of the Lord has done this," and all the trouble was worth it when His people understand such a valuable lesson about the Lord.

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