

“Comfort My People”

The book of Isaiah has been compared to a great symphony in which several dominant themes and many lesser themes are harmonized. Beginning with Isaiah 40, a whole new movement in God's dealings with his people will unfold.

In the previous 39 chapters, Isaiah warns of the judgment and destruction that will come to a nation that will not entrust itself to God. During Isaiah's lifetime the Assyrians captured the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and came very close to taking Judah as well. Now, Isaiah predicts that a more powerful invader is on its way (39:6-7). This prophecy will not come to pass immediately, however. Between 39:8 and 40:1 lay 100 years of moral and political collapse, the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, and the deportation of the nation to Babylon in 587 B.C. (2 Kings 25:1-21). The Timeline may help you orient yourself.

When Isaiah 40 opens, Isaiah is addressing the dispirited exiles of a future generation, whose whole world had been shattered. Judgment was meted out as God warned, and as they deserved, but He still loved them. He was “the Holy One of Israel” who could not abandon His own people.

Invitation to pray: Our Father, help us to see how Your holy justice and Your holy love fit together.

1. When have you seen the sadness of a ruptured relationship?

2. Begin by reading Lamentations chapter 1. These verses provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of the Jews during the period of the exile. Notice especially 1:2, 9, 16, and 21. Then, **read Isaiah chapter 40**. Imagine that you are among the remnant in Babylon looking back on their failure and sin.
 - a. Briefly explain what these words would mean to the exiles in Babylon.

 - b. To the Judites of Isaiah's day, whose descendants still faced the trauma of the exile?

 - c. To Isaiah, who witnessed the devastating consequences of their apostasy?

Note: “*Speak tenderly*” literally means, “*speak to the heart.*” The repetition of the command, “*Comfort, comfort my people,*” suggests emotional intensity. The verb form indicates that the Lord would have this comfort reiterated over and over again, until the unbelieving and doubting heart finally begins to accept it.

Carefully re-read the first 11 verses of chapter 40. This prophecy was probably addressed to the prophets of this period. Mark the commands that are given and observe the series of “voices.” Note that all speakers, except God Himself, are in the background.

3. Verse 2 begins to explain what the divine message of comfort has to offer, and how God could offer sinful people comfort.

a. What does the tender, wooing voice declare to Jerusalem (v.2)?

b. What truths are emphasized in the three phrases beginning with the word “that”? Consider Leviticus 26:40-46 before writing your answers.

Paying back double may be an expression indicating proportionate payment, making the punishment equivalent to the crime.

4. Verses 3-5 reveal that there is far more to this announcement of pardon than first meets the eye. Stress is laid on the spiritual preparation that is greatly needed in the life of the nation. Note: Before the captivity of Jerusalem, the Lord withdrew from the holy place. He departed from the Temple, and vanished out into the desert lands of the east (Ezekiel 10:18, 19, 11:23). This state of affairs prevailed during the entire period of the captivity.

a. Now, who will travel the way that is to be prepared? (Compare Jeremiah 29:10-11.)

b. What does the wilderness and desert represent? (Also refer to Matthew 3:1-3.)

c. Consider what is involved in “preparing the way for the Lord.” In a general sense, this is to be interpreted spiritually. What do you think the geographical barriers symbolize? Look at verses 4 and 5 carefully and compare with 2 Chronicles 6:36-39. Write your thoughts below.

We often fail to realize the importance of the preparing work of the Lord. Generally, any great work of God begins with a time of preparation. Before the return of the Lord Jesus at His second coming, there will be another preparation accomplished by the Tribulation.

5. According to verse 5, what is the result of properly “preparing the way for the Lord”? (See also Isaiah 52:10.)

6. As with many prophetic passages, the fulfillment can be viewed in several different set of events. See below. Study the sections of scripture that refer to each fulfillment. Then tell what the *watching world* could observe about God as He manifests His glory on these momentous occasions.

The return of the remnant from Babylon: Isaiah 40:9-11; Jeremiah 29:10-14, 23:3-4

The first coming of the Messiah: Isaiah 40:3-4, 9-11; Luke 2:9-14; John 1:19-23; John 1:14-16, 2:11

The return of the Messiah to earth: Isaiah 40:9-11; Matthew 24:30; Rev. 1:7; 1 John 3:2

7. How can you “prepare the way” in your life for Jesus? What needs leveling or shoring up?

8. How is the preparation (vv. 3-4) related to the experience of God’s comfort?

9. What is the guarantee of the comfort that is promised (v. 8)? Also consult 1 Peter 1:23-25.

For your own heart: Take time to reflect on the frailty and temporality of man expressed in verses 6-8—compared with the Eternal God and His Holy Word. Understanding the significance of these words is crucial for turning to the Lord and knowing His comfort.

10. **Re-read Isaiah 40:12-26 thoughtfully.** From the tone of this section it is evident that Israel's initial reaction to the great promises God had just given may well be: "These things can never come to pass; no nation has ever returned from captivity and survived; how could we?" Because they doubted God's ability to rescue them and bring them back to Israel, Isaiah gave them a breathtaking description of God's incomparable power and greatness. Through a series of rhetorical questions, they are compelled to focus on the greatness of God, rather than on the size and nature of their problems.
 - a. Locate the verses that express the idea that God's power is limitless.
 - b. That His wisdom is unsearchable.
 - c. That His authority is absolute.
 - d. That His being is incomparable.
11. How do you respond to the spectacular evidence of God's uniqueness, wisdom and power?
12. How will this passage alter your perspective of the difficult or "impossible" problems you encounter?
13. Consider the importance of regularly placing one's attention or focus on the God of Scripture.
 - a. What are the benefits of constantly beholding God through His Word?

 - b. What are the consequences of self-focus?
14. **Re-read Isaiah 40:27-31.** In verses 27 and 28, Isaiah looks at one of the consequences of a wrong focus. To reveal and highlight their problem and ours, Isaiah asks two sets of questions designed to bring reproof and correction.
 - a. What practical results are available to those who behold God in faith (28-31)?

 - b. When have you most recently experienced the promises found in verses 28-31?
15. For your own comfort and encouragement, review chapter 40 and note the ways in which God's comforting nature is revealed.

Worship God for His character and attributes that you have observed.