

Isaiah

“Comfort My People”

Lesson #8 for February 20, 2021

Scriptures: Isaiah 40.

1. We have come to a major junction in the book of Isaiah. There are tremendous differences between the historical sections in Isaiah 1-39 and the more prophetic portions we are starting to study in Isaiah 40-66.
2. Isaiah 39 forms a kind of transition chapter. It talks about Hezekiah, showing his wealth to the Babylonians and God telling him through Isaiah that, one day, the Babylonians would come and take all that wealth and take the people of Judah into captivity.
3. But, for the time being, the threats that had faced Judah from almost all sides were exhausted. After the destruction of the Assyrian army, would anyone dare to attack Judah?

Isaiah 40:1-2: ¹ “Comfort my people,” says our God. “Comfort them!

² Encourage the people of Jerusalem.

**Tell them they have suffered long enough
and their sins are now forgiven.**

I have punished them in full for all their sins.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Isaiah 40:1–2). New York: American Bible Society.[†]

4. It is not clear exactly what God had in mind when He said that their time of punishment was completed. Babylon had not yet taken them into captivity!

There are many answers to this question. There was the punishment administered by Assyria, the rod of God’s anger (*Isaiah 10*), from which God delivered Judah by destroying Sennacherib’s army in 701 B.C. (*Isaiah 37*). There was the punishment administered by Babylon, which would carry away goods and people from Judah because Hezekiah had displayed his wealth to the messengers from Merodach-baladan (*Isaiah 39, NRSV*). And there was the punishment administered by one of the other nations against which Isaiah wrote messages (*Isaiah 14-23*).—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sunday, February 14.[§]

5. As one illustration of the change in content, we note that Assyria, the big bully that we have been talking about, is mentioned 43 times in Isaiah 7:17-38:6. But, Assyria appears only once in the rest of Isaiah—the prophetic section of Isaiah.
6. The difference in tone and information in these two sections is so remarkable that many scholars believe that Isaiah 40-66 was actually written by a second person and not by Isaiah himself. There are, however, very good reasons to believe that Isaiah himself wrote all of the book named for him.
7. More interesting things about the book of Isaiah are: (1) Just as there are 66 books in Protestant Bibles, there are 66 chapters in Isaiah. (2) There are 39 books in the Old Testament, just as there are 39 chapters in the first portion of Isaiah. (3) There are 27 chapters in the second part of Isaiah, just as there are 27 books in the New Testament. However, the chapter and verse divisions were many centuries later, not by Isaiah.

8. Of course, as you might expect, **the challenge for critical scholars of the Bible in believing that Isaiah wrote all of those last chapters is that there are a number of prophecies which critical scholars do not believe are possible because they do not think that even God is able to predict the future.** For example, see the prophecies about Cyrus mentioned in Isaiah 48:28; 45:1; and 45:13. That event was still almost 200 years in the future in Isaiah's day. Do we believe God knows the future and sometimes tells us?
9. The downfall of Babylon was predicted in Isaiah 13, 14, and 21. Such a prophecy, of course, would be impossible if not even God could know/predict the future.
10. We need to remember that as recorded in Isaiah 39, those emissaries from Babylonia, a distant and downtrodden kingdom in Isaiah's day, came to Judah to visit King Hezekiah after the sundial was turned back ten degrees. Later, Isaiah said to Hezekiah:
- Isaiah 39:6-7:** ⁶ "A time is coming when everything in your palace, everything that your ancestors have stored up to this day, will be carried off to Babylonia. Nothing will be left. ⁷Some of your own direct descendants will be taken away and made eunuchs to serve in the palace of the king of Babylonia."—*Good News Bible*.* [They carried off the wealth that had been collected by David!][‡]
11. But, God made it very clear that there was still work to do if the children of Israel wanted to return to God and continue to receive His blessing.

Isaiah 40:3-8: ³ A voice cries out,

"Prepare in the wilderness a road for the LORD!

Clear the way in the desert for our God!

⁴ Fill every valley;

level every mountain.

The hills will become a plain,

and the rough country will be made smooth.

⁵ Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,

and the whole human race will see it.

The LORD himself has promised this."

⁶ A voice cries out, "Proclaim a message!"

"What message shall I proclaim?" I ask.

"Proclaim that all human beings are like grass;

they last no longer than wild flowers.

⁷ Grass withers and flowers fade,

when the LORD sends the wind blowing over them.

People are no more enduring than grass.

⁸ Yes, grass withers and flowers fade,

but the word of our God endures for ever [*sic*] ["forever" in the print edition of *Good News Bible*]."—*Good News Bible*.*[‡]

12. As we know very well in our day, human life is very transient. Even the lives of healthy

people can be snuffed out because of motor vehicle collisions, flooding, earthquakes, fires, or pandemics!

13. But, God had formed a covenant with His chosen people way back at Mount Sinai, promising them that He would be with them and that His Word would bless them. At the time of Isaiah, God, once again, encouraged them to reestablish that covenant.
14. Unfortunately, we, living so many centuries later, know that the children of Israel did not reestablish that covenant with God. About 100 years later in the days of Ezekiel, God finally abandoned Jerusalem and His temple, and He departed. (See Ezekiel 9-11.)

Ezekiel 11:22-25: The living creatures began to fly, and the wheels went with them.

The dazzling light of the presence of the God of Israel was over them. ²³Then the dazzling light left the city and moved to the mountain east of it. ²⁴In the vision the Spirit of God lifted me up and brought me back to the exiles in Babylonia. Then the vision faded, ²⁵and I told the exiles everything that the LORD had shown me.—*Good News Bible*.*

15. Isaiah spoke about preparing the road for the arrival of a new king. When a king announced that he was coming, it was expected that the roads and the buildings and everything would be prepared to show off for that king. While it would have been very difficult to prepare a good road from Babylon back to Jerusalem through the mountains and desert, etc., **what God was really talking about was repairing the breach and the rough parts in the relationship between Himself and His people.** The “roadwork” that God was talking about was repentance, willingness to turn away from sin, and reestablishing a relationship to bring comfort via God’s forgiveness and presence.
16. Jeremiah spelled out that proposed new relationship very well in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Jeremiah 31:31-34: ³¹ The LORD says, “**The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.**

³²It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. Although I was like a husband to them, they did not keep that covenant. ³³The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: **I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.** ³⁴None of them will have to teach his fellow-citizen to know the LORD, because all will know me, from the least to the greatest. **I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs.** I, the LORD, have spoken.”—*Good News Bible*. *† [There is nothing wrong with God’s memory!][‡]

Isaiah 40:9-11: ⁹ Jerusalem, go up on a high mountain

and proclaim the good news!

Call out with a loud voice, Zion;

announce the good news!

Speak out and do not be afraid.

Tell the towns of Judah

that their God is coming!

¹⁰ The Sovereign LORD is coming to rule with power,

bringing with him the people he has rescued.

¹¹ He will take care of his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs together

and carry them in his arms;

he will gently lead their mothers.—*Good News Bible*.*

17. If the children of Israel still living in Judah had been willing to set aside their sins and return to God and “prepare the roadwork” for His return, He would have come back; the words spoken in this passage in Isaiah would have proven an enormous blessing. Isaiah repeated them in several later passages with the same message. (See Isaiah 41:27 and 52:7.)
18. But, when Protestant Christians in our day read Isaiah 40:3-5 about the preparation of a road for the Lord, they should immediately think about the work of John the Baptist.

John 1:19-23: ¹⁹ The Jewish authorities in Jerusalem sent some priests and Levites to John, to ask him, “Who are you?”

²⁰ John did not refuse to answer, but spoke out openly and clearly, saying: “I am not the Messiah.”

²¹ “Who are you, then?” they asked. “Are you Elijah?” [Malachi 4:5]

“No, I am not,” John answered.

“Are you the Prophet?” they asked. [Deuteronomy 15:15,18]

“No,” he replied.

²² “Then tell us who you are,” they said. “We have to take an answer back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

²³ John answered by quoting the prophet Isaiah:

“I am ‘the voice of someone shouting in the desert:

Make a straight path for the Lord to travel!’ ”—*Good News Bible*.*†‡

19. But, even before John proclaimed anything about Jesus, there were two older individuals living in or around Jerusalem who prophetically saw that the Baby Jesus was the Messiah. Look at the experiences of Simeon and Anna recorded in Luke 2:25-38.
20. Try to imagine yourself standing in the temple courtyard in Jerusalem and seeing that very ordinary-looking couple coming in to have their son anointed and/or circumcised and being told by God that He was the coming Messiah. How would you have reacted? Would you have been skeptical? Would you have been amazed? That couple looked very ordinary!
21. Of course, Mary and Joseph had been given messages about the pregnancy and the Child that had been born. Thirty-three years later, Mary Magdalene, weeping and lingering near the empty tomb, received that message that seemed almost impossible to her—that message came from Jesus Christ Himself—saying that He was risen from the grave. She was told to go and tell the disciples, and she did.

While the Saviour was in God’s presence, receiving gifts for His church, the disciples thought upon His empty tomb, and mourned and wept. The day that was a day of rejoicing to all heaven was to the disciples a day of uncertainty,

confusion, and perplexity. Their unbelief [793] in the testimony of the women gives evidence of how low their faith had sunk. **The news of Christ's resurrection was so different from what they had anticipated that they could not believe it. It was too good to be true, they thought. They had heard so much of the doctrines and the so-called scientific theories of the Sadducees that the impression made on their minds in regard to the resurrection was vague. They scarcely knew what the resurrection from the dead could mean. They were unable to take in the great subject.**—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages** 790.4.† [See Luke 18:31-34.]‡

22. Those were times of enormous rejoicing to those who could take in the truth; but, the gospel is much older than any of these events or ideas. How are these presentations of the gospel related to the “everlasting/eternal gospel” mentioned in Revelation 14:6?
23. **The real good news is the truth about God's character, His government, and how He runs the universe.** It has always been true, and it always will be true. In these verses, Isaiah began talking about a new theme. After discussing God's mercy and His love, Isaiah went on to describe God's power and the facts that separate the true God from all imitations. He is the Creator. **He can create out of nothing.** In comparison with Him, human beings are nothing more than ants or blades of grass. But, in this chapter, the themes of mercy and power are interwoven.

Mercy (Isa. 40:1-5): comfort, coming of the Lord to deliver

Power (Isa. 40:3-8): glory, permanence versus human weakness

Mercy (Isa. 40:9-11): good news of deliverance, Shepherd of His people

Power (Isa. 40:12-26): incomparable Creator

Mercy (Isa. 40:27-31): as Creator, gives power to the faint.

Having introduced God's might in terms of His glory and permanence (*Isa. 40:3-8*), Isaiah elaborates on His power and superior wisdom, which make earth and earthlings appear puny (*Isa. 40:12-17*). **Here Isaiah's style, with rhetorical questions and vivid analogies referring to the earth and its parts, sounds like God's answer to Job (*Job 38-41*).**—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Wednesday, February 17.†§

24. The wording and the style of writing in Isaiah 40 should remind us of Job 38-41 where God addressed Job's four friends and Job himself. In those chapters, God spelled out in detail how far superior He is to any other possible “god.” He created our world, set boundaries on the oceans, set up the mountains, and created the beasts including the hippopotamus and the crocodile. When we have considered all of this, we must agree with Isaiah's words recorded in Isaiah 40:18-20.

Isaiah 40:18-20: ¹⁸ To whom can God be compared?

How can you describe what he is like?

¹⁹ He is not like an idol that workmen make,

that metalworkers cover with gold

and set in a base of silver.

²⁰ The man who cannot afford silver or gold
chooses wood that will not rot.

He finds a skilful craftsman

to make an image that won't fall down.—*Good News Bible*.^{*‡}

25. The answer is clear, “No one!” No one else in the universe comes even close to being able to be compared with our incomparable God.
26. And yet, the people were complaining as if God did not exist or that He was not aware of their problems! (See Isaiah 40:27.) That is exactly what Satan wants us to think.
27. How does it make you feel to recognize that the infinite God of the universe—omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent—wants to be your personal Friend? (John 15:15)
28. So, Isaiah, being aware of what was going on in Judah in his day, asked the people why they had turned to idolatry. And then, he began to show how foolish that was.
29. People were trying to produce imitations of powerful forces that they believed would bless them with crops and fertility. But, idolatry, in effect, is trying to substitute a useless piece of metal or wood which could not even stand up without being supported in the place of our unique, intimate relationship with God. (See Exodus 20:4-5; Isaiah 42:8.) **This turning away from the true God to idolatry is referred to in the Bible as *spiritual adultery*.**

Jeremiah 3:6-9: ⁶ When Josiah was king, the LORD said to me, “Have you seen what Israel, that unfaithful woman, has done? **She has turned away from me, and on every high hill and under every green tree she has acted like a prostitute.** ⁷I thought that after she had done all this, she would surely return to me. But she did not return, and **her unfaithful sister Judah saw it all.** ⁸Judah also saw that I divorced Israel and sent her away because she had turned from me and had become a prostitute. **But Judah, Israel’s unfaithful sister, was not afraid. She too became a prostitute ⁹and was not at all ashamed. She defiled the land, and she committed adultery by worshipping stones and trees.**”—*Good News Bible*.^{*‡}

Ezekiel 16:15-19: ¹⁵ “But you took advantage of your beauty and fame to sleep with everyone who came along. ¹⁶You used some of your clothes to decorate your places of worship, and just like a prostitute, you gave yourself to everyone. ¹⁷You took the silver and gold jewellery [*sic*] that I had given you, used it to make male images, and committed adultery with them. ¹⁸You took the embroidered clothes I gave you and put them on the images, and you offered to the images the olive oil and incense I had given you. ¹⁹I gave you food—the best flour, olive oil, and honey—but you offered it as a sacrifice to win the favour of idols.” This is what the Sovereign LORD says.—*Good News Bible*.^{*‡}

30. And what happens to people who choose to worship idols instead of the true God?

Isaiah 41:29: “All these gods are useless;

they can do nothing at all—

these idols are weak and powerless.”—*Good News Bible*.^{*}

2 Kings 17:15: They refused to obey his instructions, they did not keep the covenant he had made with their ancestors, and they disregarded his warnings. **They worshipped worthless idols and became worthless themselves,** and they followed the customs of the surrounding nations, disobeying the LORD's command not to imitate them.—*Good News Bible*.*†

31. Ancient peoples believed that by worshiping these symbols of so-called powerful divine forces or beings, they would be blessed and their animals and crops would be fertile. But, God had made it very clear how they should relate to such things.

Deuteronomy 4:15-19: ¹⁵ “When the LORD spoke to you from the fire on Mount Sinai, you did not see any form. For your own good, then, **make certain** ¹⁶**that you do not sin by making for yourselves an idol in any form at all—**whether man or woman, ¹⁷animal or bird, ¹⁸reptile or fish. ¹⁹Do not be tempted to worship and serve what you see in the sky—the sun, the moon, and the stars. The LORD your God has given these to all other peoples for them to worship.”—*Good News Bible*.*†

32. Surely, anyone who has experienced even the early stages of a relationship with the true God and realizes His potential would turn away from any kind of idol. That seems so logical. But, what do we learn from history?

Many who bear the name of Christians are serving other gods besides the Lord. Our Creator demands our supreme devotion, our first allegiance. **Anything which tends to abate our love for God, or to interfere with the service due Him, becomes thereby an idol.**—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*,* January 26, 1882, par. 12; Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*,* vol. 2, 1011.7.†

Multitudes have a wrong conception of God and His attributes, and are as truly serving a false god as were the worshipers of Baal. Many even of those who claim to be Christians have allied themselves with influences that are unalterably opposed to God and [178] His truth. Thus they are led to turn away from the divine and to exalt the human.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 177.1.†

Seeing the failure of his efforts to crush out the truth by persecution, Satan had again resorted to the plan of compromise which led to the great apostasy and the formation of the Church of Rome. **He had induced Christians to ally themselves, not now with pagans, but with those who, by their devotion to the things of this world, had proved themselves to be as truly idolaters as were the worshipers of graven images. And the results of this union were no less pernicious now than in former ages; pride and extravagance were fostered under the guise of religion, and the churches became corrupted. Satan continued to pervert the doctrines of the Bible, and traditions that were to ruin millions were taking deep root.** The church was upholding and defending these traditions, instead of contending for “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” [Jude 3] Thus were degraded the principles for which the Reformers had done and suffered so much.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy**

33. Somehow, people came to believe that they could improve their situation by worshiping those useless items. It was a kind of self-help religion. Could anything like this affect us in our day? Don't we have a correct picture of God? **Are we worshiping a false picture of God?** Are we depending upon our jobs? Our homes? Our vehicles? Or, our retirement plans to support us? Or, are we returning to the true God?

In Isaiah's day the spiritual understanding of mankind was dark through misapprehension of God. Long had Satan sought to lead men to look upon their Creator as the author of sin and suffering and death. Those whom he had thus deceived, imagined that God was hard and exacting. They regarded Him as watching to denounce and condemn, unwilling to receive the sinner so long as there was a legal excuse for not helping him. The law of love by which heaven is ruled had been misrepresented by the archdeceiver as a restriction upon men's happiness, a burdensome yoke from which they should be glad to escape. He declared that its precepts could not be obeyed and that the penalties of transgression were bestowed arbitrarily.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 311.1.[†]

34. Recognizing the transience of human life, shouldn't we want to turn to something much more permanent like the Word of God? God promises to come back and raise to life those who have been faithful to Him. (See Job 19:25-27; Daniel 12:2; 1 Corinthians 15:51-57; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.)
35. In answer to those who believe that the second portion of Isaiah, starting from chapter 40, could not possibly have been written by the same prophet who wrote the first 39 chapters, it is notable that Isaiah, just as the other pre-exilic prophets did, delivered a message in which a double aspect emerges. On one hand, there are messages of judgment; on the other hand, there are messages of salvation and comfort. God has promised to deal with all of our problems if we remain faithful to Him. Are we ready for Him to come back? Does this chapter in Isaiah have any words of wisdom for us?
36. Are we preparing His way? In our day, God is just waiting for us to spread the gospel to all parts of the world so that everyone has an opportunity to make an intelligent decision about whether or not they want to follow Him.
37. Does it ever seem to us like God is not there when we need Him? Do we feel like we are crying in the wilderness? Do we have any questions about God's ability to forgive our sins? Are we prepared for that glorious day when Jesus Christ will appear accompanied by millions of angels, to take His faithful people back to heaven?

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