

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus, You have demonstrated and given us the priceless gifts of compassion, forgiveness, kindness, and of peace. The world thinks little of these things, but they are a reflection of Your glory in our midst, and we give You thanks. They are the some of the most enduring of spiritual qualities, and we praise You. May we use these gifts as You would have used them, Lord Jesus, AMEN.

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: AID

1. For yourself

If you are having a break from work for Christmas, pray that God will bless the time you have for vacation and rest

2. For your friends and family

Pray that those of your family and friends who have to work over Christmas time; pray that they will be blessed in what they do

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the church's work amongst the poor, and its charitable work giving aid to people of other countries and your own country

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray that the spirit of Christmas will come and influence this world for good once again. Pray in earnest, and pray that those who suffer in this world would be given help, as a sign of God's coming Kingdom

Meditation

Be free, Brothers and Sisters; be free in the Spirit of God.

Be free, for you are gloriously different but equal,
Free from the cultural pressures which bind you;

Be free, sister, to be a woman in God's image,
Free in the Godly qualities of being 'female';

Be free, brother, to be a man in God's image;
Free in the Godly qualities of being 'male',

Be free to be the person God made you to be,
Free to reflect God's image back into society;

Be free within the church to receive His gifts,
Free to minister your God given calling.

Be free, God saves you; and you are saved to be free.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 40:1-5

¹ *Comfort, yes comfort my people,
says your God.*

² *Speak to the heart of Jerusalem,
and call out to her*

- that her warfare is ended,
that her sin is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*
- ³ *A voice is calling:
'Clear the pathway of the LORD in the wilderness'
Prepare in the Arabah
a highway for our God.*
- ⁴ *Every valley will be lifted up,
every mountain and hill levelled;
Then the rough land will be smooth,
and the uneven ground, a plain.*
- ⁵ *And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all humanity will see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'*

Review

The words which we have just read are deeply emotional. They are a prophetic announcement of the compassionate love of God for Israel after they have endured the horrors of warfare as punishment for their sins. They speak of God's love in a new way not found anywhere else in the Old Testament, and this compassion of God begins to answer the many deep questions raised by Isaiah's prophecies of punishment given when he was first called as a prophet (Isaiah 6f.). The first part of Isaiah (chapters 1 to 39) agonises over the sins of Israel and her punishment by war and invasion, yet Isaiah remains convinced of God's love and he prophesies the coming of a new King (7:14, 9:6; 11:1,2 etc) born as a child and the eternal love of God (see ch.35). The second part of Isaiah now reveals the passion of God to deliver His people, overcome their rebellion and redeem them. The way that God does this through His 'servant' is radical and utterly new; it is unparalleled in the Old Testament, and points to the New.

Some people believe that this chapter begins a new set of prophecies, different in style from the rest of Isaiah and written by someone else. The reasons for this are largely because the prophecies appear to apply to Israelites who had endured the Exile (596-520BC), more than 120 years after the life of Isaiah. I disagree with this and suggest that Isaiah received a series of expansive visions which built on all he had experienced during his lifetime (762-680BC). These mature prophecies are now preserved for us in chapters 40 onwards and they resolve the many problems raised by Isaiah's earlier prophecies. When people of later years discovered that Isaiah was right and God's people had been judged by Assyria and then Babylon, they affirmed his work as being of God. The prophetic scroll of Isaiah has remained intact since then, and there is no evidence that it was ever been split into two halves.

The whole scene presented to us here is that of a heavenly council or court (a common scriptural theme, see Gen 1:26 or Job chapter 1). Isaiah saw this council in a vision, hearing words spoken about God's plans and will for His people (40:1,2) spoken by both angels and God Himself. The time of punishment for God's people because of their sins had come to an end, and God's intention was now comfort and compassion! The powerful words, '*Comfort, yes comfort my people, says your God*', gives a double blessing to restore the people after the double punishment meted out for sins (40:2), and Isaiah's report opens the door to a new relationship of God with His people!

Verses 3 to 5 mean nothing less than this; God is coming to be with His people! At the beginning of the prophecy, God affectionately calls His people '*Jerusalem*' (40:2), and He is intent upon returning there, ordering preparations to be made. This passage is sometimes thought to depict the return of God's people to Jerusalem through the desert from Babylon, but this is simply not what is said. It is the Lord who returns in glory (see also 40:9), and if the people return then they follow their God, who has made the way clear! All the work done to straighten roads, smooth them out, fill in valleys and flatten mountains (40:4) is to be done not by people, but by God's agents and messenger. Remember this is a vision into the counsel of God's Word, and we can see the spiritual significance of God's work to 'remove barriers' which people cannot remove for themselves; this is a vision of the Gospel message!

This astonishing vision of the glory of God is unparalleled in literature, and although it is Jerusalem who receives the Lord, 'all humanity will see it together' (40:5). This is no private goodwill of God for His people alone, it is the eternal plan of redemption by God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, who will overcome sin forever; 'for the mouth of the Lord has spoken! (40:5).

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- The unity of the book of Isaiah
- A word of comfort
- The glory of God revealed

Notes on the translation of the passage

V1 'Comfort, yes comfort my people ...'

This verse begins with two Hebrew words 'comfort' and 'comfort'. The double use of a word is emphatic in Hebrew and there are a number of ways to express this emphasis in English. I have chosen the simple form 'Comfort, yes comfort ...'

V2 'speak to the heart of Jerusalem'

You will be used to the words 'speak tenderly to Jerusalem' but the Hebrew words are exactly as I have translated. Translators have assumed that to 'speak to the heart' means to speak tenderly; this is reasonable, but by using the Hebrew exactly, the translation makes sense and we can include the meaning of the powerful Hebrew word 'heart' (see study).

V2 'that her warfare is ended ...'

This is the traditional wording, where modern versions have 'that her punishment is ended'. The traditional rendering is to be preferred because it reminds us that Isaiah prophesied Jerusalem's punishment by warfare (10:12f.). Other versions which have 'has completed her service' (NIV) rely on changes to the Hebrew text which I believe are unnecessary.

V2 'that she has received double from the Lord's hand'

There are several theories about the meaning of receiving 'double' from the Lord's hand. The doubling of a word in Hebrew is a standard form of emphasis, so an alternative good translation would be 'she has received a full punishment from the Lord's hand for her sins.' But it is more poetic to leave the word 'double', because the previous verses say enough about punishment and sin.

V3 'A voice is calling: clear the pathway of the Lord in the wilderness.'

It is not at all certain whether the phrase 'in the wilderness' is attached to 'a voice is calling', or to the phrase which comes next; different versions have one or the other. I prefer to attach it to the description of the pathway of the Lord simply because this is the theme of what comes next in the prophecy.

V3 'Prepare in the Arabah ...'

Most versions of the Bible have 'prepare in the desert', and the Hebrew word 'ARABAH' does indeed mean desert, but it is a technical word which refers to the desert regions of the rift valley which go south through the Dead Sea in the direction of Egypt. We need to know this to understand what is being said here (see study).

The unity of Isaiah

One of the things we will discover about the rest of Isaiah is that it is written almost wholly in abstract, and without specific references to any time or place. We can easily see how these words might apply well to people at the time of the Exile, but this is not necessarily what the text is all about. It would be equally possible, for example, to interpret this passage as a prophecy in response to the lifting of the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians (721BC), as described in the previous four chapters of Isaiah. This is one good reason for retaining our belief that these words come from Isaiah himself. There is only one text in the second half of Isaiah (40-66) which refers to a specific historical event or person, and it mentions King Cyrus of Persia (45:1), who liberated the exiles from Babylon at the end of the 6th century BC. But this is an exception, and we will study this in due course.

The process whereby Isaiah's mature visions came to be used in later years and thus become 'attached' to the Exile is relatively simple to explain. In his own day, Isaiah saw the potential for Babylon to invade Jerusalem (see chs 13,14, 39) just as the rest of Israel had been invaded by Assyria (ch10), and he also believed firmly that the Lord would not bring an end to His people. Despite their sins, He would save at least a 'remnant' (10:19f.). In his later years after the days of King Hezekiah (whom he had helped during the Assyrian invasion – see chapters 36-39), Isaiah lived under the rule of the godless King Manasseh. Manasseh was utterly opposed to the Lord and virtually destroyed all the traditional forms of worship of God left in Jerusalem (see 2 Chron 33). As an old man, Isaiah must have been horrified and wondered what would become of God's people. They had been judged once for their sins through the Assyrian invasion,

and observing their sins yet again, he would have known that punishment and exile would threaten Jerusalem yet again. Perhaps this accounts for the double 'comfort' for 'double' sins in our text?

As a man of God who had received his call in a vision from the Lord (Isaiah 6), Isaiah was committed to listen to the Lord. He believed that despite the awful rejection of God by Israel and Judah (6:10,11), the Lord would save His people (6:13). If you read all of Isaiah 6 (the call of Isaiah), you will find voices 'calling out' God's prophetic Word of punishment on His people (6:3,8), and read Isaiah's response to this and his questioning (6:8,11) saying 'Lord, how long?' It is possible that in the vision of chapters 40 Isaiah again saw into God's court and heard voices calling out the Lord's words (40:1,2,3 etc.), but this time, not with conundrums and prophecies of doom, but with answers rooted in the deep love of God for His people. Isaiah 's long experience as a prophet enabled Him to see beyond people's sins and other historical events to the very heart of God and His plan for the redemption of humanity. The significance of the text lies in this. The Exiles perceived this, the early Christians perceived it, and so may we.

Comfort

The Lord's amazing words of comfort are spoken to 'the heart of Jerusalem' (40:2 – see notes above). Here, Jerusalem clearly means 'God's people'; the beloved city of God which contained a remnant of those who were faithful to the Lord. These words were initially meant for them, and they were not just words of sympathy, but from the heart of God to the 'hearts' of the people. In previous prophecies Isaiah had already observed that the Lord desired the worship of people's hearts; 'The Lord said: because these people draw near to me with their mouths and honour me with their lips while their hearts are far from me ... so I will do amazing things ...' (29:13,14). So according to our passage the comfort of the Lord was available not just generally, but to those whose hearts were open to the Lord. In addition, the Hebrew word for 'heart' does not imply emotional attachment (as we tend to think), it means committed and purposeful intent, and this is what the Lord was looking for within His people so that He could deliver His comfort and blessing.

For those who were so committed, God had no more punishment, they were free, their sins were 'pardoned' and God had no more intention to punish (40:2)! Can you imagine what it must have felt like to hear such words for the first time? For us, the very idea that God forgives sin and will not change His mind is a Gospel theme rooted in the life of Christ, but it is here in Isaiah! Increasingly as we read these prophecies, we will find that they deliver messages in parallel to the Gospel. This is yet another reason for treating Isaiah 40-66 as timeless visions of a mature man who knew the true nature of humanity.

Glory revealed

Another voice is heard (40:3), this time, calling for the direct return of the Lord to Jerusalem; 'prepare a highway for our God!' (40:3 etc.). We do not know who calls out this message but can only assume it is an angel or messenger, but Isaiah's report of this voice becomes an important part of scripture. It tells us that the Lord's return to His people is to be announced, and it begins the long association of the coming of the Messiah with 'a voice ... calling prepare the way of the Lord' (Matt 3:3, Mal 4:5).

The route to be prepared is special, and one which is not often understood. In my notes above, you will have read that many versions of the Bible have 'prepare in the desert a highway for our God' (40:3). The word used for 'desert' here is 'Arabah', which was not the desert route to Babylon, but a southern route through the barren desert regions of the rift valley beyond the Dead Sea, heading towards the Sinai peninsula. For the people of Israel there had always been a close association between God and Mount Sinai and the route between the two. God had given the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai, and the pathway from there to Jerusalem was (in general) the route of Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan; an epic journey etched into Israel's memory as the 'Exodus'. Here, however, God pledged to return to His people in Jerusalem by a straight path from Sinai, not the wandering and troublesome path experienced by the ancient people of Israel! By God's authority and power, all hills and valleys and pathways were to be smoothed out for the Lord to return as immediately and directly as possible. The Lord did not intend to delay!

Discipleship

Application

The awesome promises of God within this passage do indeed transcend time, and they remind us very powerfully of the promises Jesus made to be with His disciples (John 14:15f.)! The people of Israel first realised the power of Isaiah's prophecies when they were released from Exile and allowed to return to Jerusalem in the late sixth and fifth centuries BC, but they point forward directly to the Gospel! Scripture, of course, is one, and this passage together with the Gospel brings us a precious message of the love of God for His people whoever they are. Jesus has come, bringing the counsel of God in human form and making

possible the pardoning of sins, the redemption of souls, and liberation from the punishment of slavery to the world.

Even today, the evangelist is called to appeal to people's 'hearts' and 'clear a pathway for our God'; but the work of levelling the ground is not physical, it is spiritual. Everyone who proclaims God's Word today must seek to remove all those barriers of culture, language, worldliness and sin, which get in the way of the message of God's love. The tragedy of our world today is that God's love is still there for all, but the range and extent of the barriers is immense! In my own country of England the vast majority of people believe in God and think Jesus was a great man, but somehow they cannot accept the church and say that they cannot find God there! Jesus said that those who have faith even as small as a mustard seed will be able to 'move mountains' (Matt 17:20, Mark 11:23). I suggest that this word of Jesus' was not intended to advise us about what we can obtain from God with just a little faith! It was linked with this great prophecy of Isaiah in the hope that his disciples would move mountains and make straight pathways for God to bring His message of comfort and love into the world. Faith for salvation and faith for the mission of the Church are not different things!

Isaiah's mature prophecies from chapter 40 onwards are the very gold mine of the Old Testament, waiting for us to rediscover how God first began to reveal some of the greatest mysteries of His salvation plan for the world.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group how this passage makes you feel, and describe the picture of God that is generated within you as you read these words.
2. How is the 'glory of God' shown or seen in the world today?
3. What are the 'pathways to be cleared, mountains moved and valleys raised' today?

Discipleship challenges

- *Take time to think about how open you are to hearing the things God might wish to say to you. What times of day are you listening? When do you have the space in your life to consider what the Lord is saying to you?*
- *This text is about the Lord working at getting through to His people. Pray with someone else about the task of the church to make the way of the Lord plain and clear in our world today.*

Final Prayer

Mercy and love and peace belong to You, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Just as you care for each hair of my head, You assure me that Your love surrounds me every day of my life, that I might live to Your praise and glory. Thanks be to God, AMEN