

Isaiah Part 22: Comfort and Strength for God's People

Isaiah 40

Outline of the Book of Isaiah

Section 1: Chapters 1 to 35 – God's Judgment upon the Nations

Section 2: Chapters 36 to 39 – Historical Interlude

Section 3: Chapters 40 to 66 – The Messiah

- Isaiah 40 to 48: the purpose of the Messiah
- Isaiah 49 to 57: the suffering Servant
- Isaiah 58 to 66: the reign of the Messiah

Comfort for God's people (Isaiah 40 v 1 to 5)

“Comfort, comfort my people” (v 1) – Isaiah knew what it was to warn and instruct God's people; but God also wanted his people to receive comfort. 2 Corinthians 1 v 3 and 4 speaks of the Lord as the God of all comfort; God wants his messengers to speak comfort to his people! In any group, there may be hidden hurting hearts, so it is important for them to hear a word of comfort from God's messenger. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem” (v 2) – the comfort comes with tender words, literally ‘to the heart’, a phrase also used in Genesis 34 v 3.

- In verse 2, what truths are proclaimed by God to give comfort to his people?

“That her warfare is ended” – military battles may still loom, but as far as God is concerned, Jerusalem's spiritual ‘warfare’ is over, because “her iniquity is pardoned”. Jerusalem was well aware of her sin; yet Isaiah speaks of a day when comfort is offered because her iniquity is pardoned. “She has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins” – where ‘double’ may better be translated ‘ample’. This declares the basis for that pardon: the sin has been paid for. In Old Covenant terminology, Jerusalem bears the curse for disobedience, as described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. But for the Christian believer under the New Covenant, iniquity is pardoned because our sin has been ‘amply’ paid for, by Jesus on the Cross.

“Prepare the way of the LORD” (v 3) – God is coming to his people as a triumphant king, who has the road prepared before him so that he can travel in glory and ease. Every obstacle must be removed; every valley lifted up, every mountain and hill made low; “the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain” (v 4). In this ‘civil engineering’ picture, whatever was wrong in the road must be corrected. The problems were not the same everywhere. In some areas the road in the valley needed to be lifted up; in other sections the road had to be cut through the mountains. Building a road is like the preparation God must make in our hearts. When the way is prepared, the glory of the LORD is revealed (v 5), without regard to nationality (“all flesh shall see it together”) – his glory is revealed not just to Jerusalem or Judah, but to every prepared heart. The certainty of this promise is assured, because “the mouth of the LORD has spoken”.

This passage has a direct fulfillment in the New Testament, in the person and ministry of John the Baptist. Zechariah, John's father, knew this at the birth of his son (Luke 1 v 76), and all four gospels directly relate this passage to John's ministry (Matthew 3 v 1 to 3; Mark 1 v 2, 3; Luke 3 v 2b to 6; John 1 v 23)...

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The Word of God stands forever (Isaiah 40 v 6 to 11)

“What shall I cry?” (v 6) – the message is twofold: (1) *The frailty of man*: “all flesh is grass.” Isaiah thinks of beautiful green grass covering the hills of Judah after the winter rains, and how quickly the grass dies and the hills are left brown and barren. “When the breath of the LORD blows on it” (v 7) – man is in this frail state, according to God’s will and purpose. (2) *The permanence of God and his Word*: “The word of our God will stand forever” (v 8) – in contrast to the fleeting glory of man, the Word of our God endures. The Bible has survived centuries of manual transcription, persecution, ever changing philosophies, all kinds of critics, neglect both in the pulpit and in the pew, doubt and disbelief, and still the word of God stands forever!

- How do these prophecies of the future and coming and glory of the LORD find fulfilment in the New Testament? See Matthew 3 v 3, 1 Peter 1 v 22 to 25, John 10 v 11.

“Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news” (v 9) – Isaiah speaks of a message so great, and news so good, that it must be spread as widely as possible. It is a message that should be shouted out, so the messenger is told, “Lift up your voice with strength.” What is this news that should be proclaimed fearlessly? It is an invitation to “Behold your God!” There is no greater cause than to study and to know God.

“Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might” (v 10) – one aspect of God we should remember is the fact of his return: Jesus will return to this earth, with power, to reward his servants and judge his enemies. “He will tend his flock like a shepherd” (v 11) – another aspect of God to bear in mind is his loving care as a shepherd. Jesus is given three titles for his role as shepherd: (i) Jesus the Good Shepherd (John 10 v 11 to 15); (ii) Jesus the Great Shepherd (Hebrews 13 v 20); (iii) Jesus the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5 v 4).

The greatness of God (Isaiah 40 v 12 to 31)

- In verses 12 to 26, how is God shown to be beyond the mind of man to comprehend or to explain?
- In what ways can we draw upon God’s infinite strength and power (verses 29 to 31)?

Another aspect of God is his authority over all creation. God is so great, and so dominant over all creation that he “has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span” (v 12). Yet another aspect of God is his wisdom: “what man shows him his counsel?” (v 13) – see Romans 11 v 34.

“Do you not know? Do you not hear?” (v 21) – Isaiah cannot believe that anyone could doubt the greatness of God when they see the glory of his creation: he sits “above the circle of the earth”, (v 22, suggesting the earth is round), and “stretches out the heavens like a curtain” – see Job 37 v 18; Psalm 104 v 2. Isaiah’s amazement is well placed: how can anyone look at the glory and design evident in creation, and fail to understand that there must be a glorious designer? He “brings princes to nothing” (v 23) – when people have political power it is easy for them to think of themselves as ‘gods’; but all God needs to do is to blow on them, and they will wither (v 24). “He... brings out their host by number, calling them all by name” (v 26) – with billions upon billions of stars in the universe, it is staggering to know that God can number and name them all!

“Why do you say, O Jacob... ‘My way is hidden from the LORD?’” (v 27) – understanding the greatness of God persuades us that there is nothing in our life hidden from God, and nothing neglected by God. “He gives power to the faint” (v 29) – after explaining the greatness and glory of God, Isaiah explains that God gives his power to the weak and weary, but not to those who are proud and confident in their own wisdom and strength. How do we receive this strength from God? We receive it as we ‘wait for him’ (v 31). He brings it to us as we seek him and rely on him, instead of our own strength and resources.

Prayer – O Lord, you are the everlasting God, Creator of the ends of the earth. You sit above the circle of the earth, and stretch out the heavens like a curtain. You do not faint or grow weary; and your understanding is unsearchable. As we wait for you, as you have promised, we shall renew our strength; we shall run and not be weary; and we shall walk and not faint. We praise you in Jesus’ name, Amen.