

"COMFORT MY PEOPLE"
Isaiah 40:1 – 41:29
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I'm truly excited to provide the lesson from Isaiah 40 – 41. It's a privilege but also a daunting task to distill the wonderful poetry of these chapters into a half hour lecture. Let me start by playing something wonderful for you.

(Play Handel's Messiah)

Let me begin by transporting you back to August of 1741. Handel was praying or weeping or just staring deeply into the Scriptures and was overcome by the power of God's Words. The servants from time to time heard his sobs as he labored over the inspired text. He finished the original libretto and score in just 24 days. It is the most performed music in all of history – Handel's "Messiah."

The wordbook fortunately gives us this remarkable preamble: "This amazing body of music sings of salvation, peace, purity, comfort, rest, reformation, revolution, redemption, resurrection, restoration, atonement, victory, eternity, security, providence and worship." Much of the initial portion of the Messiah is taken from Isaiah chapter 40.

Having completed 39 chapters that focused on history, warnings and judgments, in chapter 40 there is a major shift in subject matter. Because of that, some consider that the second half of Isaiah was written by a different author. However, discovery of the Isaiah scrolls found in the caves of Qumran did not have an interruption between chapters 39 and 40.

So, what is the focus of the second half of Isaiah?
Chapters 40 – 48 concern the supremacy of the Lord
Chapters 49 – 53 concern the Servant of the Lord and
Chapters 54 – 66 concern the future plans of the Lord

As we begin with chapters 41 – 42, most commentaries hold two views: one view states that this portion of Isaiah is concerned about the Jews return from exile in Babylon; another view holds that Isaiah wrote these chapters in his later life and was primarily speaking about the Messiah's appearance and the future condition of a spiritual Israel. I believe that both could be correct. Certainly, in either viewpoint the message is one of comfort and assurance.

In chapter 40:1 God instructs His prophet Isaiah to "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." God is equally as concerned about comfort for His despairing people as He is about judgment on their pride. Their hard service in captivity had been

completed; they had paid double for their sins. Now it was time for encouragement and a proclamation of release.

Can you imagine the United States being conquered by an outside force and taken captive for 70 years? Would we not lose hope and be in total despair? What joy would there be to hear the Lord is coming to our rescue!

Vs. 3 "A voice of one calling: In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God." This reminds us of John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. This refers to an ancient custom whereby an ambassador was sent ahead to make preparations for the king's visit. These preparations included removing all obstacles that were present.

What obstacles do you and I have that block the King's way? What valleys of despair, mountains of ego, or rough places in my life are in the way? Once I have cleared the obstruction, I can expect the glory of God to be revealed.

Joseph Stowell, the former President of the Moody Bible Institute, states: "All of creation was created to glorify God. God intended that we would join the created world in reflecting the beauty and strength of His manifest character. Pain and trouble are the graffiti that Satan scribbles across the face of God's glory."

The glory of God – what does that mean to you? We often use the word without fathoming its significance. I find it difficult to explain but John Piper gives us his view when he says: "In the church our view of God is so small instead of so huge, so marginal instead of all determining, and is so uninspiring instead of realizing that the responsibility to live to the glory of God is a thought without content. The words come out of our mouths but ask the average Christian to tell us what they know of the glory of the God that they are going to live for, and the answer will not be long."

So, what is the glory of God? The glory of the Lord is God Himself becoming visible. God has displayed His beauty and His presence by sending His Son to become the true answer to our deepest longings. My deepest longing is to love and be loved. This has already been established. I must hold fast to that awesome truth and open my heart completely so this glory can be revealed. This glory was seen at the Transfiguration; this glory was seen as it shone around the shepherds; this glory was seen at the cross; and this glory will be seen in His Second Coming, and in the New Jerusalem where there will be no sun or moon, for the glory of God gives us light, and its lamp is the Lamb. (Rev. 21:23)

Verses 6-8 remind us that we are changeable and transient (look at the example of fresh cut flowers or even our own bodies over the years). All flesh is grass. We know this because we can look at the nations that have come and gone from the past to the present. Are we aware that the average lifespan of a nation is 200 years? There is no

certainty in this world apart from the Word of God – it stands forever. Wow!! What a promise! I can totally place my hopes on the eternal, enduring, imperishable Word of God. Luke 21:33 tell us, "... because earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

What better way to encourage a nation or your neighbor than to share the good news. "Here is your God! See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." (vs. 9-10)

To share the good news, you must have had it penetrated your own heart. C. H. Spurgeon stated that, "The gospel is unknown, not from want of explanation, but from an absence of personal revelation. This, the Holy Spirit is willing and ready to give and will to those who ask Him." How wonderful when we can to ourselves and others, "Behold your God!"

I find particular comfort in the metaphor of a ruling, powerful arm integrated with a loving arm that tends His flock, gathers the lambs, and identifies with those who have special needs. It's a display of the sovereignty of God. Sovereign is defined in the dictionary as: superior, greatest, supreme power and authority, ruler, and independent of all others. Revelation 21:6 tells me, "God is above all things and before all things. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He is immortal and He is present everywhere so that everyone can know Him."

The remainder of chapter 41 (verses 12 – 31) kind of reminds us of God's answer to Job – remember when we did that study? Job was in a pit of despair in his circumstances . . . the Jews would be a nation in the despair of Babylonian captivity and probably asking, like Job – where is God? He answers in His majesty:

LISTEN UP anyone who doubts who God is or His ability to deliver you.

He is the sole Creator of the universe. He does not need a counselor as Marduk, god of the Babylonians, needed. e alone has the wisdom to do the work of creation. Can you imagine God's ability to measure the waters of the earth by cupping them in His hands or spanning the heavens between His thumb and index finger? There is thought to be 360 million trillion gallons of water on the earth. Or imagine holding a scale to measure the dust of the earth in one basket and the mountains of the earth in another? The mass of the earth is 1.3×10^{25} pounds. To us those numbers are unimaginable and massive; to God it's nothing – He created it all.

The immensity of the creation is quickly brought to our attention by the nations being referred to as a drop in the bucket – worthless – less than nothing. He is God! There is nothing that compares to Him. Certainly not man-made carved idols covered

with gold or silver. Their wood rots and they topple over. God does not sit in one place, immobile and nailed to the floor.

God is God!! He is enthroned above the earth; He is king; the whole universe is His tent. Compared to the Almighty, people are like grasshoppers. As for men with earthly power, He can blow them away like chaff in the wind. He is the one who creates the heavens and knows the names of the stars. By the way, did you know that the observable universe seen from earth is a sphere with a radius of 37 trillion light years with 300 sextillion stars?

With a God like this, why do you doubt? People may grow tired and weary, but God does not. He is omnipotent – He gives strength to the weary and power to the weak. Those who hope / wait on the Lord, however, will not be disappointed. They will be sustained by faith and hope in the same way that the eagle is borne aloft by its majestic wings or the runner who is sustained by that second wind. (I am reminded of the play *Les Misérables*.)

How many of you have a plaque in your house somewhere with Isaiah 40:31 on it? Next time you look at it, think about that word “hope or wait” upon the Lord. In Hebrew that word is “kah-wah” and means a “twisted rope” in noun form. It means to be tied to the Lord. Those who are tied to the Lord will renew their strength, soar like eagles, run and not grow weary, walk and not faint.

It’s no mistake that Isaiah uses the metaphor of the eagle. The eagle is a truly magnificent bird. It is in fact, the king of birds. The eagle is a symbol of strength and blessed with powerful vision. We begin like an eaglet hatched high on a mountain cliff, protected and fed by our Father God. The eaglet must be fed to grow. The father will leave the nest but its mother covers the young eagles with her vast wings.

Psalm 91:4 offers me assurance that “He will cover me with his feathers, and under His wings I will find refuge.”

As the eaglet grows in size and appetite, it begins to develop new feathers. His molted feathers and that of his parents line the outer shell of the nest and make the eaglet more comfortable. However, at the appointed time, the parents begin to stir the nest and make the nest less comfortable. Have we had our nest stirred? Has our comfort been afflicted?

Eventually, the eagle must fly. He must leave the nest. The parent eagle bears the eaglet on her wings to 6,000 feet of altitude and tips her wings. The eaglet must fly on its own; but if the eaglet grows weary, the parent will swoop at speeds of 75 – 100 miles per hour to bear the eaglet on her wings again. What a visual reminder to ask myself: Am I willing to rely on His strength in my weakness?

Charles Swindoll, in his book Encourage Me, states “. . . the Lord doesn't promise us something to take when we can't handle weary moments, He offers Himself. That is all. That is enough.”

God continues in chapter 41 to assert not only His sovereignty, but also His Divine Presence in the affairs of men. He asks Jew and Gentile to approach and stand before him, speak to Him, and make a decision based on the evidence. Some people now and then have a misconception that God is not involved in their lives. Nothing could be further from the truth.

God claims that it is He that called “one from the east” into service to subdue kings and turn them to dust with the sword. This could be a reference to Cyrus, king of Persia, who was known to command soldiers reputed for their speed and fear they engendered. It was God who gave Cyrus the victory to conquer Babylon. Everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen is in His hands. Listen to this quote from A. W. Tozer:

“The God of the Bible is a God who is personally and actively involved in the affairs of the universe today. He sustains, governs, cares for the world He has created; He shapes the whole present history of the world . . . He reigns and makes even the wrath of men to praise Him, and the remainder of wrath doth he restrain. The Kaiser may rage, armies may clash, force and violence and outrage may seem triumphant for the passing hour, but God stands back of all; and through all the outrageous atrocities, discord, turmoil, agony and ruin making men's hearts stand still with horror, He is carrying out His own purposes of love and making all things work together for good to those who love Him.”

Look at Isaiah 41:5-7. The nations have seen the power of the Lord and rightfully should approach Him in fear and trembling. Fear is a powerful force that can destroy us from within, and often finds us grasping for anything that will float our boat of despair. Rick Warren is quoted as saying, “Fear is a self-imposed prison that will keep you from becoming what God has intended you to be. You must move against it with the weapons of faith and love.”

That is why as Christians we find comfort and assurance in 1 John 4:18 “But perfect love drives out fear.” One might think that people and nations would draw near to this awesome caring God, but we know the reality is that often they turn to other human beings or their own self-confidence for substance and strength. It reminds me of the United States as it has drawn away from God.

Revelation 3:17-19 was written to the church at Laodicea but we should let the words penetrate our soul. John writes:

"Because you say I am rich, have become wealthy, and in need of nothing and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked – I counsel you to receive from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich, and white garments that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed, and anoint your eyes with salve, that you may see that as much as I love, I rebuke and chastise."

Just as God's hand chose Cyrus to destroy idolatrous nations, those same hands would deliver Israel. God has chosen Israel. Vs. 10 "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." God has also chosen us – you and me – to be the bride of Christ.

E. M. Bounds writes, "The church is not a democracy in which we have chosen God, but a theocracy in which He has chosen us. The church is the only society in the world that never loses any of its members by death. The church upon its knees would bring heaven to earth."

Ephesians 1:4 states: "For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight." If, in fact, God has chosen us, what do we have to fear? He has told us "Fear not." He upholds us with His righteous right hand. Psalm 44:3 says, "It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them."

God's righteous right hand would not only uphold, but in verses 11 – 20 God's hand would help Israel vanquish enemies, provide for His people and refresh a land that had become parched and barren. Could Israel do this without God? No way. Vs. 20 God intervenes "so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it."

I was intrigued by the word "worm" used in vs. 14 to describe Israel. Frankly, it isn't a term we like to hear in reference to a person or a nation. In fact, Isaac Watt's hymn "At the Cross" changed the word "worm" to "a sinner such a one as I." But Isaiah meant "worm." It's used elsewhere in Scripture – Job 25:6 and Psalm 22:6 – to describe a man. God is making the point that compared to Him and His power, we are like a worm.

C. H. Spurgeon in one of his many sermons is quoted as saying, "I am so little that I shrink into nothingness when I behold the almightiness of Jehovah . . . Labor, O soul, to know thy nothingness, and learn it by contemplating God's greatness."

Just as Israel had a mountain of obstacles to conquer, enemies to defeat and a thirst unquenched that needed God, so too our lives need that hand of God to

intercede. What mountain is facing you? How has the enemy tried to rob you of your joy this week? Have you satisfied your thirst by the water of the Word this week? God has promised to take our lives that were once barren and provide us with an orchard. He is a wonder working, sheltering God who is worthy to be praised and glorified!

As chapter 41 closes, again God is challenging those who trust in idols. (vs. 21 – 29) Can they predict the future or tell of things in the past? Can they say anything good or bad? Anyone who chooses you is detestable. They are all false! Their deeds amount to nothing; their images are but wind and confusion.

Vs. 25 "I have stirred up one from the north, and he comes – one from the rising sun who calls on my name. He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay." This is another reference to Cyrus being called to be God's instrument. Earlier in vs. 2 he's referred to as "one from the east." It's not a conflict. Cyrus was born in the east but moved early to the north, Media, and became king of the Medes and Persians. The point is that God says in vs. 27, "I was the first to tell Zion . . . I gave Jerusalem a message of good tidings" – not some worthless wooden idol.

There is just one conclusion to reach as we study Isaiah 40-41 and that is God is a God of love, caring, compassion and strength. He is the eternal creator and is greater than any being or power in the universe. How wonderful that He would choose me. I have come to realize that as I come closer to God, or better said, get out of the way and invite Him to be closer to me, I am awestruck by how much He loves me. That same God that knows the names of all the stars, knows me.

Martin Luther said it best, "Now to give grace, peace, everlasting life, forgiveness of sins, to justify, to save, to deliver from death and hell, surely these are not the works of any creature, but the sole majesty of God; things which the angels themselves can neither create nor give."

I would like to offer this song as a praise to the Mighty One of Israel: play (Mighty One of Israel)

May we close in prayer: Lord, help me to understand how great Thou art, and how small I am. Help me to live as a redeemed person who has been chosen and to live for You accordingly. Show me those obstacles that block my vision from a clear view of You. Thank you immensely for what You have already done in my life, and are presently doing and will continue to do as I keep my focus on You. As the song goes, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace." Amen.