

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Captivity and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 3 – Isaiah: His Visions of the Future
Isaiah 40-66

Introduction

The first half of Isaiah (1-39) focused on the theme of judgment. God's people would face divine discipline because of centuries of disobedience to the covenant with Yahweh. The Assyrian and Babylonian invasions (722 and 586 B.C.) would wipe out both the northern and southern kingdoms. The second half of Isaiah (40-66) focuses on comfort and hope. Because God is *faithful*, He will never abandon His people; on the contrary, He will act to fulfill His promises in the future. Because God is *incomparably great*, nothing can stop Him from fulfilling His promises. Thus, a nation headed toward captivity is given a reassuring picture of the future. *Nothing will stop Yahweh from restoring His people after a time of discipline.* Included in this hopeful vision of the future are numerous pictures of the ONE who would someday come from God to redeem Israel from all her sins – the “Servant of the Lord,” or the “Messiah.” Isaiah chapters 40-66 naturally divides into three mini-books with specific themes:

- I. God's Strength brings Security: 40-48
- II. God's Servant brings Salvation: 49-57
- III. God's Servant brings the Kingdom: 58-66

I. God's Strength brings Security: 40-48

Comfort because of God's Incomparable Majesty: 40

The second half of Isaiah opens with a clear announcement of the theme: Comfort because of God's incomparable majesty.

“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God. “Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins” (40:1,2).

The good news of Israel's future restoration should be proclaimed from the highest mountain.

Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news,

lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him. Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes" (40:9-11).

The longest part of chapter 40 is devoted to a stunning description of the majesty and might of Israel's incomparable God (40:12-26). (We will not quote this long section; but you should read it.) This description is a critical part of Isaiah's message of comfort because: *It is God's incomparable greatness that assures His people that He will overcome ANY adversary in order to restore their place in the world.*

Thus, the question . . .

Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God" (40:27)?

has a definitive answer . . .

"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary" (40:28-31).

The people of God must not lose heart. They must turn to God in the midst of their desolations and keep their hope in Him. If they "wait for the Lord, they will gain new strength" from Him.

Whatever challenges we face in life, the picture of God in Isaiah 40 should encourage us. There is NO problem too great for God to handle. Thus, we must learn to "wait for the Lord" (to rest in Him, rely upon Him, trust Him) with our problems. When God decides it is time to move on our behalf, NOTHING will stop Him from accomplishing His purposes for our lives. Is there a situation in your life right now that you need to completely hand over to the Lord? Use Isaiah 40:9-31 as a guide. Read it through and commit your ways to the God who can hold the entire universe in the palm of His hand. Surely He is strong enough to take care of you!

Other nations trust in vain idols: 41

Israel was terrified by the powerful nations that threatened them; but the reality was that Israel had a GOD that was unlike the “gods” of the other nations, therefore, they could rest assured:

“But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham My friend, you whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its remotest parts and said to you, ‘You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you. Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand’” (41:8-10).

The Servant will bring forth Justice on Earth: 42:1-9

Sprinkled throughout the second half of Isaiah are the “Servant Songs.” These are fascinating. In some passages, the Servant is Israel (see above, 41:8-10); but in other passages, the Servant is a special Israelite; a man that God would raise up to save His people. Chapter 42 provides the first clear example of a Servant prophecy that has a special person in view, the Messiah:

“Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise His voice, nor make His voice heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed until He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law” (42:1-4).

This passage was quoted by Matthew with reference to the public ministry of Jesus (see Matthew 12:18-21). Further, the Servant will bring the light of God’s truth to all nations:

“I am the LORD, I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, and I will appoint You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison” (42:6,7).

This passage, along with 61:1-3, formed the basis of Jesus’ sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth, in which He set forth His mission as Israel’s Messiah and Savior of the world (see Luke 4:16-19).

Note: Isaiah the prophet is *quoted 55 times in the New Testament*; second only to Psalms, which are quoted 68 times.

Who can reverse what God has planned? 43,44

There was much uncertainty in the hearts of God's people (as a result of the prospect of captivity in Babylon). Their fears are met by strong words of reassurance, based on God's greatness:

“Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me. I, even I, am the LORD, and there is no Savior besides Me. It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed . . . Even from eternity I am He, and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?” (43:10-13).

Even Babylon would someday fall under the mighty hand of Israel's God (43:14-21). The message is: *Have no fear! There is NO OTHER GOD besides YAHWEH!*

The Cyrus prophecy: 44:26-45:4

As proof of the certainty of Israel's blessed future (and of the power of God over against the false gods), God gave Isaiah the supernatural prophetic ability to name the specific Persian king that would someday arise to overthrow the Babylonians. This king (Cyrus) would also issue a proclamation for Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem to rebuild God's house. (Note: Isaiah prophesied about 150 years before Cyrus, lived and reigned!)

It is I who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.’ And he declares of Jerusalem, ‘She will be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation will be laid.’ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed . . . ‘I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden wealth of secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me’ (44:26-45:4).

How reassuring to know that God can even raise up a pagan king (who does not worship God) to fulfill His purposes in the world. Perhaps there are people in your life right now who are not making things easy for you. Consider this: God uses even your opponents to further His purposes in and through your life. Take some time to ponder: How might God be using this seemingly difficult person (relationship) to bring about His purposes in your life? How is He growing you through this situation? How might He use your life as a witness in this very situation?

The One True God will be Worshipped! 45

The uniqueness and preeminence of God is a major theme throughout this part of Isaiah. Now, the call is made to all people to turn to Him and be saved.

“Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance” (45:22,23).

This passage points to *the supremacy of God* in the world; but it also points to the *deity of Jesus Christ*. The apostle Paul used this precise verse to describe the Lord Jesus Christ:

“For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that EVERY TONGUE WILL CONFESS that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Babylon’s idols cannot save her from the True God: 46-47

The people of Israel are reassured once again that the “gods” of other nations, like Babylon, are worthless and impotent.

“I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (46:9,10).

Ch.47 is a lament sung over a fallen Babylon (a fall that would occur much later in history at the hands of the Persians). Yes, it was God who raised up the Babylonians to chastise His people, Israel. Yet, their pride and idolatry as a nation would be judged by God. Their beauty and power would be stripped from them.

Israel’s stubbornness and God’s faithfulness: 48

In the closing chapter of this first mini-book (chs. 40-48), God reminds Israel of her longstanding hardness of heart toward Him (48:1-11). Nevertheless, His covenant loyalty makes their future deliverance and restoration a certainty!

Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldeans! Declare with the sound of joyful shouting, proclaim this, send it out to the end of the earth; say, “The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob” (48:20).

Each of the three mini-books ends with a warning to the wicked (compare 48:22 with 57:20,21 and 66:24).

“There is no peace for the wicked,” says the LORD (48:22).

II. God’s SERVANT brings Salvation: 49-57

The second mini-book (chs.49-57) emphasizes the role of God’s Servant in bringing salvation to the world. There are Servant passages elsewhere in the book, but the major ones occur here, especially the monumental Servant Song in ch.53.

The Servant will bring Judah and Israel back to God: 49:1-13

Chapter 49 opens with a clear, extended reference to the Messiah.

Listen to Me, O islands, and pay attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called Me from the womb; from the body of My mother He named Me. He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; and He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver . . . And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and My God is My strength), He says, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One, to the despised One, to the One abhorred by the nation, to the Servant of rulers, “Kings will see and arise, Princes will also bow down, because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You” (49:1-7).

God’s Servant (Messiah) will not only bring Judah and Israel back to the Lord, but also the Gentile nations so that the salvation of God may reach the ends of the earth. Yet, in the process, He will be *“abhorred by the nation.”*

God’s will never forget His people: 49:14-26

But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me, and the Lord has forgotten me. Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me” (49:14-16).

What a beautiful picture of the *faithfulness of God* toward His people!

Isn't it reassuring to know that God never forgets His beloved children? I love the picture here: "I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands." I like to imagine that God has my name tattooed on His hands, so that whenever He looks at His hands, He is reminded of me. God never forgets you. He never stops thinking about you. He never abandons or forsakes you.

The Servant will obey God's specific instructions: 50

As the Servant Songs progress, it becomes clear that the Servant will obediently follow God down a path that involves *suffering at the hands of wicked men*.

***"The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. The Lord GOD has opened My ear; and I was not disobedient nor did I turn back. I gave My back to those who strike Me, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. For the Lord GOD helps Me, therefore, I am not disgraced; therefore, I have set My face like flint, and I know that I will not be ashamed"* (50:4-7).**

The Servant will suffer for the sins of the world: 52:13 – 53:12

This particular Servant Song is of utmost importance. It describes the suffering, death and restoration of the Servant. Here we learn that the Servant *suffers as a guilt offering for the sins of the people*. We will examine this song section by section.

- He will be highly exalted because of His suffering.

***"Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted. Just as many were astonished at you, My people, so His appearance was marred more than any man and His form more than the sons of men. Thus He will sprinkle many nations, kings will shut their mouths on account of Him; for what had not been told them they will see, and what they had not heard they will understand"* (52:13-15).**

His exaltation comes as a result of His suffering. The word "sprinkle" has connotations of the blood of the atonement that was sprinkled on the altar by the High Priest, bringing forgiveness of sins. The message: The Servant will be abused and marred; but in the process of suffering, He will sprinkle nations with the blood of atonement, leading to the forgiveness of sins. Then, He will be exalted as the King of all kings as people realize Who it was that suffered.

- He will have an obscure, vulnerable beginning.

“Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He grew up before Him like a tender-shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should-be attracted to Him” (53:1,2).

He will not have a stately, majestic upbringing, as a typical royal heir. In fact, His beginnings will be so fragile that God will have to provide special care over Him. People will not recognize that a future King is in their midst.

- He will be despised by men; a man of sorrows.

“He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (53:3).

The typical messianic vision in Israel was of a *mighty son of David* who would come to rule the world from his throne amidst an exalted Israel. Yet, the Messiah that Isaiah sees is rejected and forsaken; a *“man of sorrows.”* We can now begin to see why many Jews pondered the possibility of two separate Messiahs – a royal, reigning Messiah from the line of David, and a priestly, suffering Messiah from the line of Levi. It was inconceivable to them how these two very different pictures of Messiah (suffering and ruling) could be united in one person.

- He will suffer as a substitute sacrifice for the sins of others.

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (53:4-6).

The Old Testament sacrificial system was built around the idea of substitutionary atonement (a sacrifice given in place of the sinner). Thus, animal sacrifices would be given to “bear the sins” of the one coming to receive forgiveness from God. Here in Isaiah 53, the Servant is depicted as the One sent by God to “bear the sins” of the people – to be the substitute sacrifice. It would be the LORD Who would cause *“the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”* WE have gone astray . . . but HE takes the penalty for our straying! That is the very definition of GRACE!

- He will suffer willingly and silently.

“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth” (53:7).

- He will die and, surprisingly, be buried in a rich man’s grave.

“By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due? His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth” (53:8,9).

Jesus, as a condemned criminal, would have been buried on the garbage dump outside the city of Jerusalem. Yet, it was Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the Jewish Council (and a secret follower of Jesus) who asked Pilate for the body of Jesus so that he could bury Jesus in his own (rich man’s) grave (Matt.27:57-60).

- He will be restored so that He can see His offspring.

“But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities” (53:10,11).

The Lord was pleased to crush the Servant as a *guilt offering*. Then, the Servant will have *“His days prolonged”* and He will be allowed to *“see His offspring.”* His *“children”* are all those who have been *“justified”* (declared righteous) by means of His guilt offering. Of course, the resurrection of Jesus explains how the Servant could die, yet live again to see His *“children.”*

- He will be exalted because of His suffering.

The Servant song ends as it began (see 52:13-15) with the exaltation of the Servant as a result of His willingness to suffer unto death.

“Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors” (53:12).

The suffering Servant will become the exalted King. What a mystery!

Jesus was not just a great teacher, a prophet, or a religious leader. He was GOD in flesh Who came to offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, in order to bring people back into relationship with God. Did Isaiah and the other prophets fully understand WHO they were describing and WHAT He would do when He came to earth? It seems that even they were left with much mystery surrounding their own prophecies. Read 1 Peter 1:10-12. Prophets like Isaiah were told by God that their messianic prophecies would be fulfilled in a later generation; but they were not told the specifics of WHO and WHAT they were being allowed to describe under the supernatural inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (See also 2Peter 1:21 on how “inspiration” happened.)

The Future Joy and Fertility of God’s People: 53-57

After the powerful Servant Song of ch.53, the picture shifts to the future joy and glory of God’s people – precisely because of the Servant’s willingness to bear their sins and bring God’s forgiveness. There are several calls for people to *respond to God’s grace*:

“Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (55:6,7).

This second mini-book, like the first, ends with the identical warning to the wicked who spurn God’s grace and mercy:

“There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked” (57:20-21).

III. God’s Servant brings the Kingdom: 58-66

The final “mini-book” (chs.58-66) depicts the future glory of Israel as a result of the Servant’s ministry of redemption.

Israel will take center stage in the Lord’s Kingdom: 60

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness will cover the earth and deep darkness the peoples; but the LORD will rise upon you and His glory will appear upon you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (60:1-3).

The Servant will announce both liberty and judgment: 61-63

The Servant takes center stage again. *The following passage is the one that Jesus chose to quote and apply to Himself in His defining sermon in His hometown synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-19).*

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the LORD and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified” (61:1-3).

The Servant will not only proclaim “*the favorable year of the Lord*” (a reference to the Year of Jubilee, in which all debts were forgiven); but He will also proclaim “*the day of vengeance of our God.*” The future holds bright prospects for those who respond to God’s redeeming love; but it holds the prospect of judgment for those who spurn His love and mercy.

A final call to humble repentance: 66

Thus says the LORD, “Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being,” declares the LORD. “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (66:1,2).

God does not need our temples. The universe is not a big enough temple for Him (recall ch.40 on the immensity and magnificence of God). What God wants is our hearts – in a humble and contrite condition. He wants people who have a deep reverence for His Word. Does this passage describe your spirit before God? Are you humble and contrite over your own brokenness before a holy God? Do you have a receptive, reverent countenance toward His Word? What an amazing thought: the universe is not big enough to be His throne; but He willingly enthrones Himself in the hearts of those who bow before Him. “For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite’” (57:15).

Discussion Questions

1. Read Isaiah 40. The promise is that the strength of God is available to all who wait for Him. Is there some area in your life where you need Almighty God to come through for you?

2. Review the following 4 Servant passages: 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-7; 52:13-53:12. 61:1-3. How do these passages enrich your understanding of Jesus and His mission?
3. Read Acts 8:26-40. Notice that the Ethiopian man was reading from Isaiah 53, yet he did not know *who* Isaiah the prophet was referring to. What do you think Philip told the man when he asked him about this passage? Is there someone that God is leading you to in order to point them to Jesus?
4. What is the biggest ah-ha that you will personally take away from our brief journey through the book of Isaiah?

Historical Note: In 1946 the **Dead Sea Scrolls** were discovered in caves by the Dead Sea in Israel. An entire library of ancient Jewish sacred scrolls had been preserved in pottery jars. This was the library of a radical Jewish sect known as the **Essenes** who lived in these caves right around the time of Jesus. Among the scrolls was a complete **Isaiah scroll**, dated by scholars to have been written around 200 B.C. Before this discovery, the earliest scroll of Isaiah was from roughly 1,000 years later. When scholars compared the scrolls that were 1,000 years apart in date, they found that there was very little difference between them, proving the *integrity* of the Hebrew Bible over the centuries. Thus, the argument that *time* had introduced *corruption* and *error* into the books of the Bible was proven false. God had seen to the careful preservation of His Word over the centuries. (The integrity of the New Testament documents is based on the vast number of ancient manuscripts that are available for comparison – roughly 10,000.)

