

## Lesson 20 Isaiah 40:1-11 The Consolation of Zion

### Introduction

Isaiah		
"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."		
Book of the King 1-39	Book of the Servant 40-55	Book of the Anointed Conqueror 56-66

Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).  
\*Motyer views 38 and 39 as preface to the Book of the Servant.

We have hit a major milestone. We have completed our study of the Book of the King and are moving on now to the Book of the Servant! I've referred to the Book of the King as the first third of Isaiah. That's only true in the sense that Isaiah has three main divisions. In terms of content, the Book of the King is more than half of Isaiah: chapters 1-39, which is 57% of the text. So we finished just over half of the book. The section we are turning to now, chapters 40-55, the Book of the Servant, is half of that at 27% of the content of Isaiah. And the final section, chapters 56-66, the Book of the Conqueror, covers just 16% of Isaiah.

I am going to do two things in this lesson. First, I'm going to introduce the Book of the Servant by addressing two major themes developed through all of Isaiah. Second, I'll address our very first subsection of text - Isaiah 40:1-11 – titled, Three Voices of Consolation. So first, our introduction to the Book of the Servant.

Isaiah overlaps and develops themes as he goes. Identifying some of those main themes helps us to see the unity that runs through Isaiah and also see the special contribution of each main section. We begin to get a sense of what to look for in the Book of the King, what to look for in the Book of the Servant, what to look for in the Book of the Conqueror. The three main sections of Isaiah share themes, but they do not repeat the same content about those themes.

Since we are right now at the transition point between the Book of the King and the Book of the Servant, let's consider by way of example the two themes: Messiah and righteousness. Messiah and righteousness.

#### *The Messiah Theme*

The development of the Messiah theme is apparent in the titles we are using, Book of the King; Book of the Servant; Book of the Conqueror. Isaiah does not use the word "Messiah." The word means "anointed one." A king is an anointed one. Messiah specifically refers to the prophesied anointed son of David who will come to save. That concept of Messiah is what we see developed through Isaiah.

The Book of the King is framed by the bad king Ahaz and the good king Hezekiah, both sons of David. A future king is prophesied. Most of what we know about the future king comes from chapters 9 and 11. He is flesh and blood of the line of David. He is also divine, Mighty God, Wonderful Counselor, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. He will establish His government in righteousness and justice. And it will be an ever increasing government. Neither Ahaz nor Hezekiah is the kind of king we need. Isaiah teaches us to hope for a new kind of king who will establish a new kind of society.

That's all in the Book of the King, but that's not all Isaiah has to say about the Messiah. Not only do we need a new kind of ruler; we also need someone who can save us from sin. Isaiah develops the idea of the suffering servant in the Book of the Servant. He gives us four servant songs in chapters 42, 49, 50, and 53. The Messiah is both the King who reigns, and the servant who saves His people from sin through His own suffering.

Not only do we need a king who will rule and a servant who will save, we also need a conqueror who will put an end to the brokenness of this world, who will put an end to wickedness and death. Isaiah develops the idea of an "anointed conqueror" who vanquishes evil in the Book of the Conqueror. Each Book contributes something unique to our understanding of Messiah.



beings. In the Book of the Servant, God steps in through a righteous action to deal with the sin of His people. And in the Book of the Conqueror, those who believe are called to do righteousness as a response to the righteousness of God.

Seven hundred years later, the Apostle Paul makes the same arguments in his letter to the Romans. Paul raises the issue of God’s righteousness and human righteousness in his thesis, Romans 1:16-17, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith’.” (Romans 1:16-17). Isaiah has developed his argument through poetic prophecy. Paul developed a similar argument through prose discourse. And you have to believe, the way Paul writes and the phrases he uses, that he is completely familiar with this argument in Isaiah, that he has this wonderful advantage of having lived after the time of the cross. So he is bringing the cross and the resurrection into the argument, something Isaiah was only able to look forward to.

Paul’s thesis picks up on another theme of Isaiah, the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles together. That is not new to Paul. We have already read that Jews and Gentiles gathered together in the renewed Zion. There are a number of themes intertwined with the two I have mentioned, Messiah and righteousness. We could look at the themes of grace, judgment, Zion, holiness, pride, humility, glory, the remnant. These themes come together in the Book of the Servant around the particular idea that God must do something to save His people, not only from outward evil but, more importantly, from their own sin. To just bring Israel back from exile will not do, because they bring their own sinful hearts with them. God must make a way for His sinful people to live in relationship with Him without falling again into judgment. It is the old question of the burning bush in Exodus, “How does the Holy One of Israel live among a sinful, flammable people without burning them up?”

Isaiah answers that question with greater clarity in the Book of the Servant than it has ever been answered before in the Bible. With that thought, we begin the second major section of Isaiah.

<b>Isaiah</b>			
<small>“He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples.”</small>			
Book of the Servant 40-55			
<b>The Consolation of the world</b>  40:1-42:17	<b>The Redemption of Israel</b>  42:18-44:23	<b>The Great Deliverance</b>  44:24-48:22	<b>The Greater Deliverance</b>  49:1-55:13

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).  
\*Motyer views 38 and 39 as preface to the Book of the Servant.

We are going to divide the Book of the Servant into four sections using Motyer’s titles. In 40:1-42:17 we see the Consolation of the World. In 42:18-44:23 we see the Redemption of Israel. In 44:24-48:22 we see the Great Deliverance. And in 49:1-55:13 we see the Greater Deliverance. Those titles will come into focus more as we go through the text. We start with the Consolation of the World in 40:1-42:17.

<b>Isaiah</b> <small>"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."</small>						
<b>Book of the Servant</b> 40-55						
<b>The Consolation of the world</b> 40:1-42:17						
<b>The Consolation of Zion</b> 40:1-41:20				<b>The Consolation of the Gentiles</b> 41:21-42:17		
Three Voices of Consolation 40:1-11	The Incomparable God of Israel: The Creator 40:12-31	The Incomparable God of Israel: The World Ruler 41:1-7	Three Pictures of Consolation 41:8-20	A court scene: The idol-gods exposed; the world's plight apparent 41:21-29	Remedy: The servant as the answer to the world's plight 42:1-9	The new song: The world's joy in the Lord's victory 42:10-17

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

To console is to comfort. That's how chapter 40 begins. "Comfort, O Comfort my people." It is a request straight from the heart of God. The larger section is the Consolation of the World. But we do start with the Consolation of Zion, and then move to the Consolation of the Gentiles.

The Consolation of Zion begins with three voices of consolation and ends with three pictures of consolation. Consolation, or comfort, knowing that God is the foundation of comfort in our sorrow, in our trials, that's going to be the middle two parts of this section: the incomparable God of Israel, first as Creator and then as world Ruler. Since I have already done a lot by way of introduction, we are going to limit ourselves in this lesson to just the first subsection, Three Voices of Consolation in Isaiah 40:1-11.

### Three Voices of Consolation

#### *Context of Consolation*

As we enter into this passage, remember the context. The context of consolation is exile in Babylon. Remember the prophecy just given to Hezekiah in 39:7, "And *some* of your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon." One of the failures of Hezekiah was the care. He is just happy there is going to be peace in his time. There is no sorrow or grief for the future generations. But that's exactly what we get here. God's heart is, "Somebody, comfort my people!" God looks ahead and sees His people in exile. And though the prophecy speaks of an event 100 years in the future, God sees it as clearly as though it is already in the past.

His people are suffering because of their own persistent sin. They brought to pass Moses' prophetic word that they would break covenant with God, generation after generation, until God finally comes to the point of shouting, "Enough!" And then the end will come. The Israelites will be spit out of the land, just as the wicked Amorites had been expelled before them. The prophecy that God spoke through Isaiah to Hezekiah is line with those words from Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. There's going to be an exile. Israel is going to fail.

And yet, even in His just judgment of their sin, God's heart hurts for His broken people. He wants them to be comforted. He wants them drawn back into relationship with Himself.

As we look at this section, we are going to see that proclamation is very important. The speech of God is going to be mentioned three times. Another voice calls out twice. And Jerusalem is also told to speak. The good news must be communicated. The Word of God stands forever. God does not remain aloof and separate from this world. He acts. And He communicates truth about His action in order to bring strength, and hope, and comfort to His people.

I'll read the whole text first. Then we will consider its four parts: the Commissioning of the Heralds, followed by three voices. This is Isaiah 40:1-11.

<sup>1</sup> "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.  
<sup>2</sup> "Speak kindly to Jerusalem;  
that her warfare has ended,  
That she has received of the LORD's hand  
Double for all her sins."  
<sup>3</sup> A voice is calling in the wilderness;  
"Clear the way for the LORD  
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.  
<sup>4</sup> "Let every valley be lifted up,  
And every mountain and hill be made low;  
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;  
<sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
And all flesh will see *it* together;  
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."  
<sup>6</sup> A voice says, "Call out."  
Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"  
All flesh is grass,  
and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.  
<sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,  
When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
Surely the people are grass.  
<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,  
But the word of our God stands forever.  
<sup>9</sup> 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!"  
<sup>10</sup> 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.  
<sup>11</sup> 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.

*The Commissioning of the Heralds (40:1-2)*

This passage begins with God commissioning heralds. At His call in chapter 6, Isaiah was commissioned to speak for God to a hardened people in such a way that the good news would reveal their hardness of heart beyond any shadow of a doubt. Isaiah's preaching would render their hearts insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim. He was to speak, "until cities are devastated and without inhabitation, houses are without people, and the land is utterly desolated." That sounds like exile.

At the end of the exile, God calls for a different kind of voice. He calls for heralds that will proclaim comfort to the people with an announcement of His coming. Isaiah is a foreshadow of these voices. Even though His message affirms a hardness of heart among the majority that eventually results in exile, he does begin proclaiming this message now, and it offers hope for the small remnant that receives it.

Perhaps we are to take this commissioning as an expansion of Isaiah's original call. Isaiah is to speak words of comfort to the ones in exile. That may be how we are to take this call for a speaker. We cannot be sure, since the first two voices are not identified, and the third voice is Jerusalem.

In this commissioning, the repetition of the word, "comfort," increases the emotion of the speaker, who is God. It's not just, "Comfort my people." It's,

<sup>1</sup> "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.

This comfort is spoken in a Covenant context. God says, "Comfort my people. They are in exile but they are still my people." You cannot see it in the English, but the word "comfort" is a plural imperative. Many voices are to speak comfort. Alter comments, "Perhaps it is simplest to assume that those addressed are people in general, or even the nations, enjoined to comfort Israel."<sup>2</sup>

Motyer understands the plural to apply to the three voices below. He imagines the scene to be a Heavenly court, such as one pictured in Jeremiah 23:22.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1888.

<sup>22</sup> But if [these prophets] had stood in My council,      Then they would have announced My words to  
And would have turned them back from their      My people,  
evil way      And from the evil of their deeds.

Jeremiah speaks of prophets who did not speak the words of God. But if they had stood in His council, kind of in His presence, at the court of the King, then they would have heard God's words and they would have announced them to God's people, and there would have been a spiritual impact. And that may be the image we are to imagine here, that God, surrounded in His court by His servants, He stands in council. And those who hear God's word are commissioned to speak it. What is the word they are to speak? Verse 2.

<sup>2</sup> "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."

"Speak kindly," or, "speak tenderly" is literally in Hebrew, "speak to the heart." Speaking to the heart implies both kindness and a desire to convince or persuade, so that the one spoken to takes to heart and benefits from the message. Jerusalem needs to hear this. Jerusalem needs to understand this. Speaking to Jerusalem implies a word to all Israelites. But it also invokes the image of a decimated city, defeated, unable to keep her citizens from exile. The city is about to experience comfort because the exiles are going to return. The three truths spoken develop the same idea.

First, Jerusalem's warfare has ended. That's the way the NASB and ESV Bibles translate the phrase. Oswalt, Alter, and the NIV translate it this way, "her hard service has ended." Warfare ended for Jerusalem when she was defeated by Babylon. The hard service of the Israelites continued in the exile.

The second, related truth announced to Jerusalem is "that her iniquity has been removed." That's similar to the burning coal on Isaiah's lips and Hezekiah's sins being put behind God's back.

The cause of exile - the iniquity of Jerusalem - has been removed. Presumably, it is the hard service of exile that has removed the iniquity of the Israelites. The people have done their time and they are now able to be released. That's the sense of the third phrase, "she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

It's not clear to scholars what "double for all her sins" means precisely. Why double? We know these two things about the punishment of the Israelites. One, it is a just punishment. God does not punish unjustly. "Double" cannot mean "twice as much as she deserves." Two, we know the implied punishment does not actually fulfill the required punishment for sin. The required punishment for sin is not hard labor in exile. It's not anything you can work off in this life. The required punishment for sin is eternal death.

We may have to assume that this declaration includes the idea of atonement: that Israel has received the penalty for her punishment in that Jesus Christ became the representative of Israel when He took that punishment on himself.

I don't think that's what this means. I think God is communicating the civil, or earthly punishment for the sin of Israel. The civil law of Moses included punishment for sin. That punishment was meant to prevent crime. That punishment was also meant to satisfy the victim and restore the criminal back into society. I am reminded of Exodus 22:4, which says that a thief caught with a stolen animal, an ox, or a donkey, or a sheep, shall pay back double. A car thief would not be required to simply return the stolen car. You know, wash it up and give it back, but would have to return that car and another car.

That penalty is intended to make a person think twice about the cost of thieving. It's supposed to be preventative. That penalty is also intended to satisfy the victim who has suffered more than the loss of an animal. He has suffered a violation of his home and his property. And that feels like a violation of your person. By receiving double, he is enabled to relinquish his claim against the thief. He has

gotten twice as much back. And the thief is able to be restored to society, truly saying, “I paid a just penalty.” The double penalty was the just penalty.

That thief still needs to go and offer sacrifice to God for forgiveness of sins. The civil penalty allowed for restoration in human society, but it did not remove the stain of wickedness that separates a person from God.

I think this idea of civil punishment is the idea expressed here. Jerusalem’s people have paid double for her sins. No one can object to her restoration. She has paid her time. The need to pay the spiritual penalty for sin still exists. The Israelites cannot pay that on their own. That will have to be addressed later.

I do find it interesting that God begins in this call to comfort by assuring the people that their sins are forgiven. Comfort requires the hard honesty of addressing sin. We cannot be fully comforted, fully spiritually okay, emotionally okay if we do not acknowledge our guilt and our need for forgiveness. A major part of human comfort is the word, “I accept you. I have taken care of your sin. Go, sin no more!” God has declared to Jerusalem that she is forgiven. He has declared that she is ready for restoration. He calls for heralds to declare that good news, and more. He is going to add three additional components to the message and we are going to see these in each of the three voices.

*The First Voice: The Glory of the Lord (40:3-5)*

The first voice is to declare the glory of the Lord. That voice is in verses 3-5.

<sup>3</sup> A voice is calling; Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;  
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

The phrase “in the wilderness” could modify the voice, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” Or it could modify the way, “Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness.” That second option works well with the repetition of the third verset, which is going to say, “Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.” But the Greek translation of the Hebrew, known as the Septuagint has the first interpretation, and that is the interpretation used by all four of the Gospels when they applied this verse to John the Baptist. Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4, and John 1:23 all use, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” John the Baptist fulfills the prophecy in both senses. His ministry out by the Jordan river made him both a voice calling in the wilderness and one who was clearing a way for the Lord in the wilderness. So, either way, it works.

Jesus certainly is the revelation of God’s glory. John 1:14, “The word became flesh and we have beheld his glory.” When the Israelites did return from exile and they rebuilt the Temple, God did not fill the Temple with the miraculous light of His glorious presence as He had for the tabernacle of Moses in the wilderness, and as He had for the temple of Solomon. The “shekinah” glory of God was not shining in the rebuilt Temple.

The Jews continued to consider themselves in exile as long as a foreign power ruled over Israel. Whether Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, or Rome. They were looking for the son of David to come and set up his kingdom. They were looking for the coming glory of the Lord prophesied here. The received both in Jesus Christ. But when He came to His own, they did not recognize Him. They did not receive Him. They rejected Him.

We might wonder how should we see Jesus as coming on a highway in the desert. But the text does not say He comes from the desert. The highway passes through the desert. And over valleys. And across mountains.

<sup>4</sup> “Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low;  
And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley;  
<sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see *it* together;  
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

It’s more like we are imagining a road that goes all across the land of Israel into Jerusalem, right up to the Temple. The people of Jerusalem are instructed to clear a road fit for the procession of a king.

The language is expansive. It's, "Fill in valleys, lower entire mountains, smooth out the desert." It's like, "Make a true path." And then the glory of the Lord will be revealed. The image emphasizes royal preparation. Believe that God is going to reveal Himself in glory, and ready yourself for His coming. It's a call to faith and the expectation of the revelation of the glory of the Lord.

The first voice emphasizes the glory of the Lord. The next voice emphasizes the word of the Lord.

*The Second Voice: the Word of our God (40:6-8)*

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| <p><sup>6</sup> A voice says, "Call out."<br/>All flesh is grass,</p> <p><sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,<br/>Surely the people are grass.</p> <p><sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,</p> | <p>Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"<br/>and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.<br/>When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;<br/>But the word of our God stands forever.</p> |
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One voice says, "Call out." Another voice says, "What shall I call out?" Again, we do not know who the voice is. The message is more important than the identity of the messenger. The message consists of seven closely connected versets. Alter comments, "The fondness of this poet for evocative repetition is evident here. In this case, it amounts to an incremental repetition, in which the increment is a strong antithesis to what has been repeated.<sup>3</sup> Each verset repeats the idea of the previous verset with a small, incremental change that builds up the whole idea that has been set in contrast to the final idea. Let's move slowly through the versets. Try to imagine the first verset as a drawing on a sketch pad. Then turn the page and imagine a drawing of the next verset with only small adjustments to the drawing. The end product is like a cartoon book you would flip through to create movement.

Starting with 6b, "All flesh is grass." Imagine a field of grass. What is meant by "all flesh?" And how is it "like grass?" We can guess, but we don't know, so you don't have to imagine that. We only have a field of grass. Maybe it is tall grass with slight movement caused by a gentle breeze. And get a picture in your mind of the grass. Then flip the page. "And its loveliness is like the flower of the field." Add flowers to your field of grass. Put some vibrant red, or oranges, or yellow, or purple into your field. Human flesh has a loveliness that is like the flower of the field. Fix that image, then flip the page. "The grass withers, the flower fades." This could be two or three pages. There is action over a span of time. Imagine green grass turning brown and then kind of withering, laying down flat. Imagine the bright colors of the flowers fading as the season passes. Flip the page. "When the breath of the Lord blows upon it." Aha! The withering and fading is not a result of natural causes. Imagine the Lord blowing on your flowers and grass, causing the withering and fading. Flip the page. "Surely the people are grass."

We have come back to the original simile with a little more specificity. "All flesh is grass" does not mean all animals are grass. It means "all people are grass." Isaiah introduced the simile in the first verset. He created a sense of movement in the next three versets, and then brought us back to the initial comparison. "The grass withers and fades." "Surely the people are grass." We come then to this truth, "All people wither and fade."

Isaiah is not done. This whole image has been set up to make a contrast. He repeats, "All grass withers and fades." That's the image he has fixed in our mind. We know he means people. Then we get the "But," the contrast.

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| <p><sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,</p> | <p>But the word of our God stands forever.</p> |
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How do you want to imagine that? A powerful, rocky mountain? You know, something that stands forever. This is the next message of comfort. People may seem to live forever when we are young, but we lose that sense of immortality as we go through life. We learn that there is no security in human life. We get old, and so does everyone else. All our young, exuberant, powerful, beautiful friends now have grey hair, wrinkles, spots, aches, slowed reflexes, weakened muscles. The beautiful

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<sup>3</sup> Alter, 1889.



The comfort of these words to this particular generation that Isaiah writes to becomes a call of consolation to all people everywhere, now that we have understood that the Lord coming is Jesus Christ. Be prepared for the coming of His glory. Be prepared for the coming of His arm of salvation.

At the same time, these words were meant to comfort the present generation, even though they are not even yet to the exile, and they certainly haven't seen the fulfillment that occurs in Jesus.

They can still take comfort in the fact that, though exile is coming, God promises restoration. There is hope for future generations. There is hope in the present. They can live with the hope that God will remove sin, that God will make His glory known, that God's Word stands forever, and that God's arm will protect and care for His people.

Now we just want to see how Isaiah is going to develop these themes. How will the arm of the Lord work with power to fulfill the Word of the Lord spoken in accordance with the glorious character of the Lord? We will find out as we study this second major section of Isaiah, chapters 40-55, the Book of the Servant.