

“Comfort My People”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Isa. 40:1, 2; Isa. 40:3–8; Isa. 40:9–11; Isa. 40:12–31.*

Memory Text: “Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, you who bring good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, be not afraid; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’ ” (*Isaiah 40:9, NKJV*).

World War II ended in 1945 while a Japanese soldier named Shoichi Yokoi was hiding out in the jungle on the island of Guam. Leaflets dropped from U.S. planes proclaimed peace, but Yokoi thought it a trick. A loyal, patriotic soldier of the emperor, he had vowed never to surrender. Because he had no contact with civilization, he lived on what he could find in the jungle, a sparse, hard existence indeed.

“In 1972, 27 years after the end of World War II, hunters came across Yokoi while he was fishing, and he only then learned that the message of peace had been true. While the rest of his people had been enjoying peace for decades, Yokoi had been enduring decades of privation and stress.”—Roy Gane, *Altar Call* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Diadem, 1999), p. 304, adapted.

Many centuries earlier, through the prophet Isaiah, God announced that the time of His peoples’ stress and suffering was really over: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (*Isa. 40:1, 2, NRSV*).

Let’s take a look at what this means.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 20.

Comfort for the Future *(Isa. 40:1, 2)*

In Isaiah 40:1, 2, God comforts His people. Their time of punishment has finally ended. What punishment is that?

There are many answers to this question. There was the punishment administered by Assyria, the rod of God's anger (*Isaiah 10*), from which God delivered Judah by destroying Sennacherib's army in 701 B.C. (*Isaiah 37*). There was the punishment administered by Babylon, which would carry away goods and people from Judah because Hezekiah had displayed his wealth to the messengers from Merodach-baladan (*Isaiah 39, NRSV*). And there was the punishment administered by one of the other nations against which Isaiah wrote messages (*Isaiah 14–23*).

Meanwhile, though "Assyria" and "Assyrian[s]" are mentioned 43 times from Isaiah 7:17 to 38:6, this nation appears only once in the rest of Isaiah, where Isaiah 52:4 refers to past oppression by Egypt and then by "the Assyrian." In the latter part of Isaiah, deliverance from exile in Babylon is mentioned (*Isa. 43:14; Isa. 47:1; Isa. 48:14, 20*), and it is Cyrus, the Persian who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., who is to free the exiles of Judah (*Isa. 44:28, Isa. 45:1, Isa. 45:13*).

Isaiah 1–39 emphasizes events leading up to deliverance from the Assyrians in 701 B.C., but at the beginning of chapter 40, the book leaps ahead a century and a half to the end of Babylon, in 539 B.C., and the return of the Jews shortly thereafter.

Is the theme of return from Babylon linked with anything earlier in Isaiah? If so, what?

Isaiah 39 serves as a transition to the following chapters by predicting a Babylonian captivity, at least for some of Hezekiah's descendants (*Isa. 39:6, 7*). Furthermore, the oracles of Isaiah 13, 14, and 21 predict the fall of Babylon and the liberty this would bring to God's people: "But the LORD will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land. . . . When the LORD has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon" (*Isa. 14:1–4, NRSV*). Notice the close connection with Isaiah 40:1, 2, where God promises His people there is an end to their suffering.

What do Bible promises about the end of suffering mean to you now, amid your present suffering? What good would our faith be without those promises? Why, then, is it so important to cling to them, no matter what?

Presence, Word, and Roadwork (*Isa. 40:3–8*)

How do God’s people receive comfort? (*Isa. 40:1–8*.)

An unnamed herald announces that God is coming to reveal His glory (*Isa. 40:3–5*). Another voice proclaims that although humans are transient like foliage, “the word of our God will stand forever” (*Isa. 40:8, NRSV*).

After the exile, God’s people gain back what they had received at Mount Sinai and then rejected all throughout their apostasy, for which they were punished: *God’s presence and His Word*. These are the basic ingredients of God’s covenant with Israel, which were enshrined at His sanctuary in their midst (*Exod. 25:8, 16*). Because they had violated His Word, God had abandoned His temple (*Ezekiel 9–11*), but He is coming back. His presence and His eternally dependable Word bring comfort, deliverance, and hope.

What preparation is necessary for the Lord’s coming? (*Isa. 40:3–5*.)

It is not fitting for a king to be jolted by a rough road. So, his coming is preceded by roadwork. The more so for the King of kings! His coming, apparently from the east, where He has been in exile with His people as a sanctuary to them (*Ezek. 11:16*), would require major rearrangement of the terrain. Construction of a literal, level super-highway through the rugged hills east of Jerusalem would be daunting, even with dynamite and bulldozers. God is the only One who can do the work; it is He who turns “the rough places into level ground” (*Isa. 42:16, NRSV*). But He doesn’t need a literal road for transportation because He has an airborne chariot of cherubim (*Ezekiel 1, 9–11*).

The New Testament explicitly applies Isaiah’s prophecy to the spiritual *roadwork* accomplished through the preaching of John the Baptist (*Matt. 3:3*). His message was: “ ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’ ” (*Matt. 3:2, NRSV*) and the baptism that he performed was “of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (*Mark 1:4, NRSV*). So, the *roadwork* was repentance, willingness to turn away from sin, in order to receive the comfort of God’s forgiveness and presence.

Jeremiah 31:31–34 proclaimed the same spiritual message in plenty of time for the exiles of Judah to understand the spiritual nature of roadwork for God. In this passage, the Lord promises those who are willing a fresh start: a “new covenant” in which He puts His law in their hearts and pledges to be their God. They know Him and His character, because He has forgiven them.

Read carefully Isaiah 40:6–8. What hope can you, who fade away as does the grass, derive from what these verses say? In what should they warn us against putting our trust?

The Birth of Evangelism (*Isa. 40:9–11*)

What kind of event is described in Isaiah 40:9–11?

Later in Isaiah there appears a male herald of good news for Jerusalem (*Isa. 41:27, Isa. 52:7*). But in Isaiah 40:9 the herald to proclaim “‘Here is your God!’” (*NRSV*) from a mountain is female, a fact brought out in the Hebrew.

In Psalm 68, David praises God because He “gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity” (*Ps. 68:6, NRSV*). Though here these words apply to the Exodus from Egyptian bondage, Isaiah uses the same ideas with reference to the proclamation of a second “Exodus”: the return from Babylonian captivity.

Meanwhile, the New Testament applies Isaiah 40:3–5 to John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ, the eternal Word who *became* the Lord’s presence in flesh among His people (*John 1:14*).

Even earlier than John, others spoke about the good news of His coming. Among the first of these were the elderly Simeon and Anna, who met Baby Jesus when He was dedicated at the temple (*Luke 2:25–38*). Like Isaiah’s heralds, they were male and female. Simeon was looking forward to the consolation/comfort of Israel in the form of the Messiah (*Luke 2:25, 26*).

In light of Isaiah’s prophecy, it does not appear coincidental that Anna, a prophetess, was the very first to announce *publicly at the temple mountain to the people of Jerusalem* that the Lord had come: “At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (*Luke 2:38, NRSV*). This was the birth of Christian evangelism as we know it: proclamation of the gospel, the good news, that Jesus Christ has come to bring salvation. Later, Christ entrusted to another woman, Mary Magdalene, the first tidings of His triumphant resurrection (*John 20:17, 18*), which ensured that His gospel mission to planet Earth was accomplished. Flesh is like grass, but the divine Word who became flesh is eternal (*see Isa. 40:6–8*)!

Look at Isaiah 40:11. What kind of imagery is presented here? Write out for yourself a paragraph on how you, personally, have experienced shepherding by the Lord. Why is it good to recount in your mind the way the Lord has led you?

Merciful Creator *(Isa. 40:12–31)*

How does Isaiah 40 develop the themes of God’s mercy and power?

Throughout this chapter, God’s mercy and power are interwoven (see below) and even blended together, because they are both necessary in order for God to save His people. He wants to save them, because He is merciful; He is able to save them, because He is powerful.

Mercy (*Isa. 40:1–5*): comfort, coming of the Lord to deliver

Power (*Isa. 40:3–8*): glory, permanence versus human weakness

Mercy (*Isa. 40:9–11*): good news of deliverance, Shepherd of His people

Power (*Isa. 40:12–26*): incomparable Creator

Mercy (*Isa. 40:27–31*): as Creator, gives power to the faint

Having introduced God’s might in terms of His glory and permanence (*Isa. 40:3–8*), Isaiah elaborates on His power and superior wisdom, which make earth and earthlings appear puny (*Isa. 40:12–17*). Here Isaiah’s style, with rhetorical questions and vivid analogies referring to the earth and its parts, sounds like God’s answer to Job (*Job 38–41*).

What is the answer to Isaiah’s rhetorical question: “To whom then will you liken God?” (*Isa. 40:18, NRSV*)

For Isaiah, as for Job, the answer goes without saying: no one. God is incomparable. But Isaiah picks up on his question and refers to the answer that many ancient people implied by their actions, which is that God is like an idol (*Isa. 40:19, 20*).

To this notion Isaiah responds. Already it looks foolish to use an idol as a likeness of God, but just to be sure people get the point, he elaborates on God’s uniqueness and brings in the unanswerable argument that He is the holy Creator (*Isa. 40:21–26*).

How does verse 27 reveal the attitude of the people addressed by Isaiah’s message? In what ways are we guilty of having the same attitude?

The purpose of God’s message is to comfort people who need it! Like Job, their suffering had made them confused and discouraged concerning His character.

Look through the verses for today. They talk not only of God’s mercy and His power but also of the fact that He is the Creator. Why is this truth so important to understand? How does the Sabbath, each week, help reinforce this crucial point?

The Problem With Idolatry *(Isa. 40:19, 20)*

Idolatry destroys a unique, intimate relationship with God by replacing Him with something else (*Exod. 20:4, 5; Isa. 42:8*). So, prophets refer to idolatry as spiritual “adultery” (*Jer. 3:6–9, Ezek. 16:15–19*).

Read Isaiah 41:29. How does Isaiah characterize idols? How do you understand what he is saying there about them? Why is that so accurate a depiction of any idol, no matter what it is?

Ancient idolaters believed they worshiped powerful divine beings through images or symbols of them. Worship of an idol representing another god breaks the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (*Exod. 20:3, NRSV*). But if an idol is intended to represent the true God, as the golden calf was (*Exod. 32:4, 5*), the Lord rejects it as a likeness of Himself, for nobody knows how to depict Him (*Deut. 4:15–19*), and nothing can represent His incomparable glory and greatness. Thus, an idol itself functions as another god, and worshiping it breaks the first and second commandments.

God’s people don’t need idols, because they have His real Shekinah presence with them in His sanctuary. To worship an idol is to replace and, therefore, deny His real presence.

What kinds of idolatry do we face as a church today? Does idolatry appear in more subtle forms in the church today? If so, how?

“Many who bear the name of Christians are serving other gods besides the Lord. Our Creator demands our supreme devotion, our first allegiance. Anything which tends to abate our love for God, or to interfere with the service due Him, becomes thereby an idol.” —Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, pp. 1011, 1012.

We learn from ancient writings that idolatry was attractive, because it was about materialism. Using modes of worship people could relate to, idolaters honored forces they believed could give them fertility and prosperity. It was *self-help* religion. Sound familiar?

Just before the Lord comes again, with His way prepared by the *roadwork* of a final Elijah message of reconciliation (*Malachi 4*), the choice will be the same as in the days of Isaiah: Will you worship the Creator, or will you worship something else (*Revelation 13, 14*). For in the end, we always worship something.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Behold Your God!” in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 311–321.

“In Isaiah’s day the spiritual understanding of mankind was dark through misapprehension of God. Long had Satan sought to lead men to look upon their Creator as the author of sin and suffering and death. Those whom he had thus deceived, imagined that God was hard and exacting. They regarded Him as watching to denounce and condemn, unwilling to receive the sinner so long as there was a legal excuse for not helping him. The law of love by which heaven is ruled had been misrepresented by the archdeceiver as a restriction upon men’s happiness, a burdensome yoke from which they should be glad to escape. He declared that its precepts could not be obeyed and that the penalties of transgression were bestowed arbitrarily.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 311.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Summarize in your own words the message of Isaiah 40:12–31. Write it using modern images, such as modern scientific discoveries that show even more graphically the awesome power of our God. Share your summary with the class.
- 2 How does Isaiah’s description of the permanence of God’s Word versus the fragile transience of human life (*Isa. 40:6–8*) speak to your fear of death? How does it relate to your hope of resurrection? (*Job 19:25–27, Dan. 12:2, 1 Cor. 15:51–57, 1 Thess. 4:13–18.*)
- 3 By taking Isaiah 40:12–31 to heart, how could one be cured of pride and arrogance?

Summary: Through Isaiah, God brought comfort to those who had been suffering. Their time of trouble had ended, and God was returning to them. Rather than being discouraged and confused, they could trust God to use His creative power on their behalf.