

The Book of Isaiah

Lesson 16: Comfort My People; the Greatness of God -- Isaiah 40:1-31

Something changes the moment you turn the page into Isaiah 40. For thirty-nine chapters the air has been heavy with judgment, with woes and warnings and the dark certainty that Babylon will one day carry Judah off into exile. Then, like a window thrown open in a stuffy room, a new voice breaks in: 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God' (40:1). The repetition is not an accident. God says it twice because His people will need to hear it twice, and a thousand times more, in the long night of captivity ahead. He is speaking tenderly to a people who have not yet even gone into exile, telling them in advance that He has not forgotten them and that mercy will have the last word.

Isaiah is writing comfort to people who will be far from home, surrounded by the glittering temples and towering ziggurats of Babylon, tempted to believe that Babylon's gods had simply proven stronger than their own. So the prophet does the most pastoral thing imaginable: he lifts their eyes off their circumstances and fixes them on the size of God. Who measured the waters in the hollow of His hand (40:12)? Before whom are the nations like a drop from a bucket (40:15)? Who sits above the circle of the earth and stretches out the heavens like a curtain (40:22)? Who calls every star by name and never loses count (40:26)? Comfort, it turns out, is not pretending the trouble is small. Comfort is remembering that your God is immeasurably large.

Right in the middle of this comfort comes a promise that the New Testament will not let us miss: 'A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD' (40:3). Centuries later a wild-looking preacher named John stood in the Judean desert and announced that he was that voice, sent to make ready a people for the coming of the Lord (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). The new exodus Isaiah promised, the road home through the wilderness, was never finally about geography. It was about the road God Himself would build to bring His people out of the deeper bondage of sin and into the freedom of the gospel. The comfort of Isaiah 40 reaches its fullness not when Judah marches home from Babylon, but when Christ comes to redeem true Israel, the church.

And so this chapter does for us exactly what it did for them. It hands the weary a word that will outlast every empire: 'The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever' (40:8). It promises that the God who never grows tired will pour His own strength into those who wait on Him, until they 'mount up with wings like eagles' and 'run and not be weary' (40:31). If you have come to this lesson tired, anxious, feeling small against forces you cannot control, you have come to the right chapter. Lift up your eyes. Behold your God.

Group Discussion: Isaiah 40 comforts a people by enlarging their picture of God, asking 'To whom then will you compare me?' (40:25). As a group, discuss how a small, shrunken view of God feeds our worry, and a large, biblical view of Him steadies us. Where do you see your

congregation, or yourself, tempted to act as though God is too small or too distant to handle what you are facing?

Personal Reflection: Isaiah 40:31 promises that 'they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength.' Honestly, waiting is hard for most of us; we would rather act, fix, or worry. Where in your life right now is God asking you to wait on Him instead of running ahead in your own strength, and what would genuine, trusting waiting look like this week?

Read Isaiah 40:1-31

Study Questions

1. Isaiah 40 opens with God's command, 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God' (40:1-2), spoken to people facing exile. What does it reveal about the character of God that He sends words of comfort and announces that 'her warfare is ended' and 'her iniquity is pardoned' before the discipline has even fully come, and how does this shape the way we understand His dealings with His people?
2. The comfort of 40:1-2 is anchored in the promise that 'her iniquity is pardoned.' Think about a burden of guilt or a hard season you have carried. How does it change you to hear God speak comfort to you not by ignoring your sin but by pardoning it, and where do you most need to receive that comfort right now?
3. Isaiah 40:3-5 announces, 'A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,' and the New Testament identifies this voice as John the Baptist preparing the way for Christ (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). What does it mean to 'prepare the way of the LORD,' and why does God insist that valleys be lifted up and mountains made low before His glory is revealed?
4. John came preaching repentance to 'prepare the way of the LORD' (40:3; Mark 1:4). What are the 'mountains' of pride or 'crooked' places (40:4) in your own heart that need to be made level so that the Lord has clear access to you? Name one honestly.

5. Isaiah 40:6–8 declares, ‘All flesh is grass... The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever,’ a passage Peter applies to the gospel (1 Peter 1:24–25). What is God teaching us about the difference between human frailty and the permanence of His word, and why is that contrast meant to comfort rather than frighten us?
6. If ‘the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever’ (40:8), then your life is brief and God’s word is permanent. What does it look like, this week, to build your life on the one thing that lasts rather than on things that fade, and where have you been investing yourself in ‘grass’?
7. Isaiah 40:12–17 piles up rhetorical questions: who ‘measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,’ and before whom are ‘the nations... like a drop from a bucket’ (40:12, 15)? What is the prophet doing for an anxious, exiled people by parading the sheer greatness of God, and how should the immensity of God reframe the size of our problems?
8. Isaiah 40:18–20 mocks the man who shapes an idol and bows to the work of his own hands. What are the modern idols you are tempted to trust, the things you ‘fashion’ to feel secure, and what is one you sense the Lord asking you to tear down?
9. Isaiah 40 climbs to a height in verses 21–26 and 28: God ‘sits above the circle of the earth,’ stretches out the heavens ‘like a curtain,’ brings princes ‘to nothing,’ calls every star by name so that ‘not one is missing,’ and is ‘the everlasting God... who does not faint or grow weary.’ Drawing these together with the way prepared in 40:3–5, how does the incomparable greatness of this God ground the comfort of the gospel, and why is it good news that the One who measures the universe is also the One who comes near in Christ to redeem His people?

10. Isaiah 40 ends with the promise that 'they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles' (40:31). Where are you most weary right now, and what is one specific way you will let the Lord form you through trusting Him this week, whether by waiting on Him, resting in the word that stands forever, or receiving the comfort of the gospel?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 1 Peter 1:24–25, Peter quotes Isaiah 40:6–8 and identifies the abiding word of God with the gospel preached to us; Mark 1:1–4, the gospel 'begins' with Isaiah 40:3 fulfilled in John the Baptist preparing the way of the Lord; Psalm 147:3–5, the God who heals the brokenhearted is the same God who counts and names the stars, joining tenderness to greatness as Isaiah 40 does; Galatians 6:14–16, the true 'Israel of God' is defined by the cross of Christ, the spiritual people Isaiah's comfort ultimately reaches; Romans 8:18–25, creation and the redeemed wait with hope for glory, the New Testament shape of waiting on the Lord

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