

## ISAIAH — LESSON FIFTEEN

### ISAIAH 40-41

#### PART TWO

### HOPE FOR TROUBLOUS TIMES

#### Chapters 40 – 66

#### CHAPTER FORTY

##### Introduction

“In your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society but upward to the Great Society.”

President Lyndon B. Johnson spoke those words at the University of Michigan on May 22, 1964. Reading them nearly five decades later, we might wonder how the Jewish captives in Babylon would have responded to what the President said?

A *rich* society? They were refugees whose land and holy city were in ruins.

A *powerful* society? Without king or army, they were weak and helpless before the nations around them.

A *great* society? They had been guilty of great rebellion against God and had suffered great humiliation and chastening. They faced a great challenge but lacked great human resources.

That is why the prophet told them to *get their eyes off themselves and look by faith to the great God who loved them and promised to do great things for them*. “Be not afraid!” he admonished them. “Behold your God” (9)!

There is some “bumper-sticker wisdom” that says: “Look at others, and be distressed. Look at yourself, and be depressed. Look to God, and you’ll be blessed!” This may not be a great piece of literature, but it certainly contains great practical theology. When the outlook is bleak, we need to follow Isaiah’s advice to “Lift up [our] eyes on high, and see who hath created these, that bringeth out their host by number; he calleth them all by name; by the greatness of his might, and for that he is strong in power, not one is lacking.” When, like Israel of old, we face a difficult task and an impossible tomorrow, let us look up and remind ourselves of *the greatness of God*.

### **Vv. 1-11 – A Prologue**

Vv. 1-11 are a prologue to the remainder of the book. Part One (Chs. 1-39) closed with the dark anticipation of captivity. Part Two opens with the joyous assurance of comfort and redemption. Isaiah speaks to a people who will find themselves in Babylonian captivity over a hundred years in the future. They will be oppressed under the heel of a tyrant; their beloved city will be in ruins; the temple will be destroyed.

All the major themes contained in Part Two are introduced in these eleven verses: comfort (1), atonement (2), the way of the Lord (3), the glory of the Lord (5), the power of the word of God (8), the city of God (9), and the might and tenderness of the Savior (10-11).

#### **a) Comfort: pardon through grace (1-2)**

These great verses begin with three imperatives – comfort, speak, cry (proclaim). V. 1 is the theme of the rest of the prophecy. God speaks to the remnant. There will still be threatening tones of accusation and the lightening and thunder of judgment, but above all it is the song of comfort in hope.

The keynote is struck at once. Using his favorite mode of emphasizing what is important, Isaiah declares that he has a direct mission from God to “comfort” Israel. Note the encouragement contained in the expressions, “*my* people,” and “*your* God.” Israel is not cast off, even when most deeply afflicted (1). He is to speak comfortably (to the heart of) Jerusalem, addressing her inmost feelings, her very spirit and soul.

The words were spoken before the captivity had ended and before Judah's iniquity had been pardoned. By Divine inspiration Isaiah sees all as already accomplished and declares it as certain to God's people. Judah's captivity will come to a close; she will turn to God; her iniquity will be pardoned; she will have paid double for her transgressions (see Exod. 22:9). This language does not indicate that the law of Divine judgment is to exact double. It is to assure Judah that, having been amply punished, she need fear no further vengeance (comp. 61:7).

**b) Make preparation (3-5)**

The speaker here is not identified. It is not Jehovah because it is for him that the way is being prepared. The message, not the speaker, is the important thing. Ezekiel recorded the departure of Jehovah from the temple (Ezek. 11:23), and now Jehovah is returning to Jerusalem after an absence of fifty years. The language used is that used of preparing for the journey of a great king – "Make level in the desert a highway for our God" (3-4).<sup>1</sup> The road building is not a literal highway, but the preparation of the hearts of the people for God's return. They are to remove every barrier and fill every hindering depression so that they will be prepared for a new relationship with Jehovah for the rich outpouring of blessings that he has promised.

The glory of Jehovah will be revealed when Jehovah raises up Cyrus to deliver his people out of Babylon.<sup>2</sup> The remnant will go back to Jerusalem where they will settle and rebuild the temple. But a greater wonder is in store when John the Baptist came crying in the wilderness, "Make ye ready the way of the Lord (Matt. 3:1-3). He will claim to be only a voice (John 1:23) and his mission will be to introduce him in whom the glory of God will be revealed (John 1:14, 18). It was sure to happen because "the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it (5).

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1. Every valley shall be exalted – see that the poor and lowly are raised up, the proud and self-righteous depressed, the crooked and dishonest induced to change their ways for those of simplicity and integrity, the rude, rough and harsh rendered courteous and mild.
  2. Isaiah foretold the event over 100 years before its occurrence.

**c) The enduring word (vv. 6-8)**

The voice said “Cry.” A second voice responded, “What shall I cry?” Another voice (A third?) The answer was one that glorified the word of God. All flesh is a grass that withers and fades away, as also does the people. In contrast, the word of God will abide forever.

**d) Declare the tidings (vv. 9-11)**

The time of Israel’s restoration has drawn nigh. The preparation has been made. The voice calling to preparation is silent. The promises are now on the verge of receiving their accomplishment. It is fitting that some one should announce that fact to the nation. Isaiah calls on the company of prophets living at the time to do so (v. 9). They are to take up a commanding position, to speak with a loud voice, and to proclaim the good tidings to Zion, to Jerusalem, and to the cities of Judah (comp. 44:26). The terms of the proclamation are then given (vv. 10, 11). 1) He will come as a mighty one; 2) his arm will rule for him; 3) his reward is with him and his recompense before him – he rewards the redeemed and the redeemed are his reward (10). From a figure of power and rule Isaiah turns to a figure of compassion and tenderness. 1) He will feed hi flock like a shepherd; 2) he will gather the lambs in his arm and carry them in his bosom; and 3) he will gently lead those that have their young (11).

This is an appropriate way to end the prophecy that began with comfort and hope. Isaiah introduces the trials and victories that lie before the people, and foreshadows the redeeming word of God through Cyrus and ultimately through the Messiah.

**Vv. 12-31 – The Incomparable Greatness of Jehovah**

If captive Israel is to be induced to turn to God, and so hasten the time of its restoration to his favor and to its own land, it must be by rising to a worthy conception of the nature and attributes of Jehovah. In the remainder of this chapter Isaiah paints in glorious language the power and greatness, and at the same time the mercy of God, contrasting him with man (vv. 15–17, 23, 28–31), with idols (vv. 19, 20), and with the framework of material things (vv. 21, 22, 26), and showing his infinite superiority to

each and all. In contrasting him with man, he takes occasion to bring into prominence his goodness and loving-kindness to man, to whom he imparts a portion of his own might and strength (vv. 29–31).

**a) Jehovah and creation (vv. 12-14)**

Isaiah exalts God for his creation with a series of questions. God has given all things in heaven and on earth their proper quantities and form and their place in the universe. Man can hardly comprehend it much less perform it or counsel Jehovah on how it should be done. Jehovah's omnipotence and omniscience requires no counsel from his created beings.

**b) Jehovah and the nations (vv. 15-17)**

From exalting Jehovah as Creator Isaiah turns to exalting Jehovah as Ruler of the nations. For man, ruling over one mighty nation is a demanding task that borders on the impossible. Ruling over all of the nations is no more to God than a drop of water in a pail or a speck of dust on a scale (15). It is even impossible for man to offer adequate sacrifices to the Creator of the universe. The fire from all of the wood in Lebanon and all of the animals on earth are insufficient (16). All of the nations of the earth are nothing, even less than nothing, to the Almighty (17).

**c) Jehovah and idols (vv. 18-21)**

Having established that Jehovah is God and that there is no other, Isaiah now set about to arm Judah to resist the seductive power of idolatry. He does so with a series of questions. In scorn, which at times is one's most effective weapon, he laughs the idols into oblivion. To whom will you liken God or to what will you compare him (18). What is an idol – the workman casts it, the goldsmith overlays it and casts it for silver chains (19). One who cannot afford such a fine god uses wood that will not rot and seeks out a craftsman who will carve from it a graven image. If it is carved from a stump that is still in the ground it cannot even be moved (20). Isn't it amazing how absurd man can be? Let us not console ourselves that these were ignorant barbarians. The gods that we create are no less absurd!

Isaiah closes with an appeal to history. Had not Israel been warned against idolatry from the beginning (Exod. 20:4-6; Deut. 5:8-10). Time and time again they had seen the impotency of idols to deliver them from disaster. Those who, like ancient Judah, create their own idols will, like ancient Judah, live to rue such folly.

**d) Jehovah and the princes of the earth (22-25)**

Isaiah continues to describe the incomparable God. He sits upon the circle or dome of the earth and looks down on people and princes as grasshoppers. They are insignificant and totally dependent upon the one who stretches out the heavens like a tent, brings the princes to nothing, and the judges of the earth as vanity (22-23). The great of the earth as like the grass that withers and are blown away like stubble by the whirlwind (24). Given the frailty of man and the divine power and glory, to whom will you liken God? Where will you find one who is equal to God (25)? The only possible answer is that there is no being or creature with whom God can be compared. He transcends his creation and he and his Messiah are the sole beings in the universe who are worthy of man's worship and devotion.

**e) Jehovah and the glorious assurance (vv. 26-31)**

"Lift up your eyes on high, and see who hath created these, that bringeth out their host by number; he calleth them all by name; by the greatness of his might, and for that he is strong in power, not one is lacking" (26). There are times when man needs to lift up his eyes to the stars, not to worship them as did the ancients, nor to look for guidance as do modern astrologers, but to see behind them the face of their Creator. What wonderful language to the captives in Babylon who might be tempted to believe that their God has forgotten and forsaken them. Just as God calls the stars by name he will care for his sons and daughters.

So why do they declare that their ways are hidden from Jehovah and that they are not getting the justice that they deserve (27)? Given the divine power of Jehovah and his tender care for each individual, how can they have such little faith? Their despondency is groundless. The all-powerful Jehovah neither grows weary nor faints. He will give power to the faint, give strength to him who has no might. Men, both young and old,

may and often do fail, but if they will but turn to Jehovah their needs shall be supplied – they shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

## SECTION ONE

### THE CONTEST BETWEEN JEHOVAH AND THE IDOLS

#### CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

#### JEHOVAH'S CONFRONTATION WITH THE IDOLS

Isaiah has already spoken to God's rulership over the nations (a drop in the bucket or a speck of dust on a scale). However, it should not be surprising that a conquering nation such as Babylon might not appear so insignificant to those beneath its heel. The fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC tested Judah's faith, perhaps more than any other event in Old Testament history. Isaiah had seen and prophesied that it would happen (39:5-7). He never regarded it as calling God's sovereignty into question. Babylon, like Assyria, had a role to play in God's drama, but it was God, not Babylon, that wrote the script. As soon as Babylon had played its part, it, like Assyria, would exit the stage.

With this in mind, Isaiah addresses those to whom Babylon's imperial might must have seemed an established and unassailable fact. He sets out to convince them of two things. First, he speaks of events to come,<sup>3</sup> especially the rise of the Persian king Cyrus (explicitly named in 44:28 and 45:1) and assured that they are of the Lord (2-4, 25-27). Second, Isaiah wants them to know that they themselves, as the surviving

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3. The rise of Cyrus was some 100 years in the future.

remnant, are God's servants. He had chosen them and would not abandon them (8-10). Therefore, they are to see the fear that has gripped them as irrational and baseless and they are not to give in to it (10, 14).

Isaiah uses different names for God in making his points in this section. *El*, used 15 times, means "the mighty one," the personification of strength and power. *Eloah*, used once (44:8),<sup>4</sup> is an ancient word for God that sometimes appears in parallel construction with *Rock*. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, speaking of its use in this passage, says that it addresses "Yahweh's ability to protect and to help his people as a Rock sets him apart as the only true Rock." *Elohim*, which occurs 21 times is translated in various passages as "gods," "judges," and "angels." The plural form conveys may be a unique development of the Hebrew Scriptures and represent chiefly the plurality of persons in the Trinity of the godhead, conveying the unity of the one God while allowing for a plurality of persons.

Other names used in these chapters are *Jehovah* (66 occurrences), which designates him as Israel's covenant God, the "I Am," the eternally existent one (43:10). The term *Lord I* (Adonai – 40:10; 48:12) emphasizes his rule over all (the KJV translation of *Yahweh* as "Lord" is confusing). *The Holy One of Israel* (which occurs 10 times) sets him in contrast to Israel's sins. As the Holy One of Israel he is Israel's *Creator* and *King* (44:21. He is Israel's *Redeemer* (six occurrences) a just God and *Savior* (43:3; 45:21) who *blotteth out their transgressions*, remembering sins no more (43:25; 44:22). These names clearly set Jehovah apart from the idols; only he can make genuine claims to these titles and to what they signify.

## Vv. 1-7 – Jehovah Addresses the Nations

Cyrus is not introduced by name until 44:28, however, the allusions in these verses clearly describe Persia's leader who conquered Babylon in 539 BC. The islands or coastlands are a reference to the far-off reaches of the Mediterranean, or any place that could be reached by sea travel. These people are called to do several things: keep their

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4. This term is used primarily in poetic books, e.g., it is used 41 times in the book of Job.



silence, renew their strength (see 40:31), and come near. They are then to speak and come near together for judgment. The NIV translates the last phrase, “let us meet together at the place of judgment.” *Keil & Delitzsch* translate it, “let them come near, then speak; we will enter into contest together.” Isaiah seems to be calling upon those who had seen God’s work to testify to it. Notice that v. 2a asks a question – who has raised up one from the east, whom he calls in righteousness to his foot? The answer comes in v. 4b – I, Jehovah, the first, and with the last,<sup>5</sup> I am he. Between the question and the answer God’s strong instrument is described. He subdued nations and kings as he conquered new territory. Cyrus fits within Isaiah’s description. Isaiah’s message is clear. What god had the power to raise up such a world leader and bless him in such a way? Only the Lord God, the deity of seemingly insignificant Judah. God had used Assyria and Babylon as his instruments of judgment, and now he would use Cyrus as his instrument of blessing (1-4).

The parallel invitation to renew strength (40:31; 41:1) is a subtle extension of the invitation to all of the earth. Unfortunately, as many people witnessed God’s work, fear gripped them and they responded by seeking their own deliverance through the idols they had worshiped for generations. Craftsman teamed with goldsmiths to prepare an idol that would stand firm without tottering. Isaiah consistently contrasted the worthlessness of idols with God’s all-embracing power (40:19-20; 41:21-29; 44:9-20; 46:5-7).

The people’s response made no sense in light of Isaiah’s proclamation of God’s power. The exile proved God was God because he had predicted it. Now he was bringing his people home, using Cyrus as his instrument. And what was the response of many?

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5. The expressions “I am he” and “I am the first and the last” occur several times in Isaiah 40-48. They complement well the threefold emphasis of Isaiah 40-66: 1) God’s people are in captivity for their sins; 2) the captivity proves God is God, because he predicted it; and 3) now God will redeem his people through Cyrus and in other ways. The Lord is “he,” the only one with the power to make good on his promises. He is also “the first and the last,” the beginning and the end of everything. He holds history in his hands; he is its source and its ultimate destination. The expressions also appear in the book of Revelation, where they describe the Lord God and his risen one, Jesus Christ.

They built idols. Ironically, human beings created the idols that they worshiped from materials the Lord created.

### **Vv. 8-20 – Jehovah Addresses Israel: What He Will Do**

In these verses Isaiah introduces the theme of servanthood, a theme to which he will return often in chapters 40-66. “Servant” appears 40 times in the book of Isaiah. Only 9 occur in chs. 1-39, leaving 31 to appear in 40-66. It sometimes refers to Israel and sometimes to an individual.

Israel is described and as God’s servant, his chosen one, and his friend. God had called Israel from the ends of the earth (9) where they had been spread in exile. The time of their restoration was at hand; therefore, they were not to fear<sup>6</sup> (10, 13). Their enemies would feel shame as God’s intervention ended their opposition (11-13).

The label of “worm” (14) for Jacob has seemed odd to some.<sup>7</sup> The Holy One of Israel now appears as the one who will redeem Israel from captivity. God will even use Israel as threshing instrument of judgment and they shall rejoice in Jehovah (15-16).

The description of the Judean desert is one that those who had been there would recognize. All of that would change by the creative hand of God. While this language speaks to the return from Babylonian captivity, it also looks far into the future. Four

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6. Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed; I, I am thy God, and will still give the aid; I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, Upheld by My gracious, Omnipotent hand. *How Firm a Foundation*, stanza 2.

7. There are some today who refuse to sing *Alas and Did My Savior Bleed (At the Cross)* because it asks the question “Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I.” It has been changed in some books, including ours, to “for such a one as I.” Proponents of the change loudly proclaim, “I am not a worm.” Certainly that is true if taken literally. They don’t even have to proclaim it, much less proclaim it loudly. But it is not to be taken literally. Here it designates the relatively weak and powerless state in which the nation found itself apart from God’s restorative work. When those who object to the original wording of the hymn have the power to save themselves I will join them in singing “for such a one as I.” Until then, I will sing and urge them to sing the hymn’s original words regardless of what the hymn book says. I think *THE BOOK* has it right.

verbs define God's purpose in providing water and trees: 1) *that they may see* – look upon, discern, and comprehend; 2) *know* – through acquaintance with Jehovah the people will become aware of and recognize truth; 3) *consider* – the Hebrew word sometimes means “to assign something to someone”; hence, they will assign to God a new position in their thinking; and 4) *understand* – they will realize who their benefactor is. God's purpose is that they, *together* as one, united as one, might realize *that the hand of Jehovah has done this*, and that the ultimate realization of their objectives will be his doing(17-20).

The people were soon to go into Babylonian captivity as a result of their low spiritual and moral state. Return from captivity would be accompanied by a long period of subjection to foreign powers. God is surely preparing his people for the coming ordeal by assuring them that he would care for them throughout it all.

### **Vv. 21-29 – Jehovah Challenges the Idols: What Can You Do?**

One of the major themes in chs. 40-66 is that “this captivity proves God is God, because he predicted it.” This theme is strongly proclaimed in these verses.

God calls the idols into court and challenges them to make their case.<sup>8</sup> He calls upon them to list the things that they have declared would happen in the future. Proclaim what purpose you have had in the past and what you have done to bring it to pass so that they may be considered. V. 23 is sarcastic – do good (what you will do for your worshipers) or do evil what you will do to other nations) as you may please so that we may be dismayed. Whatever it is we can behold it together. Surely any god has a purpose for its people and can now demonstrate what it has done to bring that purpose to pass.

Jehovah has placed himself in opposition to the heathen and their gods, as the God of history and prophecy. It now remains to be seen whether the idols will speak, to prove their deity. By no means; not only are they silent, but they cannot speak. Therefore

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8. The Hebrew word translated “cause” (“case” in some translations) often appears in legal texts.

Jehovah breaks out into words of wrath and contempt. “Behold, ye are of nothing, and your work is of nought; an abomination is he that chooseth you” (24).

God demands nothing of the idols that he is not willing to do. He now lays out his credentials. First, he has raised up one to bring down other rulers (25). Cyrus would do God’s bidding and even call on God’s name (2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ez. 1:1-4).<sup>9</sup> The Lord had announced this plan long before. No one else has joined him in doing so (26). God had planned Judah’s judgment and had announced Judah’s restoration (27).

Both sides have presented their case; the evidence is in; the final verdict is rendered. The Lord performed his work with his people. No other deity in the universe had provided him counsel, let alone an answer to any of his questions (28). Therefore, the final verdict came down in language similar to v. 24. All idols were false, nothing! Their deeds amounted to nothing at all. Isaiah even compared their idols to “confusion,” a term that was used to describe the condition of the universe prior to creation.

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9. How could Cyrus come both “from the North” and “from the rising sun”? Some think this is an error in scripture. It is not. The solution lies in recognizing both Cyrus’s location and his route of travel. The Persian kingdom lay due east of Judah. However, any Mesopotamian ruler traveling to Judah would follow the Euphrates River northwest and then descend southward into the region.