

Isaiah

July 21, 2024

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Isaiah 40:1-31

Session Outline

1. The Lord's Desire (Isaiah 40:1-11)
2. The Lord's Might (Isaiah 40:12-26)
3. The Lord's Proclamation (Isaiah 40:27-31)

Theological Theme

The more you know the character and nature of God, the more you will experience the comfort He brings.

Call to Action

Be reminded of how God works in and among His people. Prayerfully consider who needs to hear these truths and commit to sharing with them about the love of God.



Leader Guide

Isaiah

Introduction

We all have things that keep us up at night: searching a solution for a dilemma, stress over big decisions, worry about the future. These are common concerns that easily overwhelm us when we are trying to relax and rest.

These kinds of thoughts are not new to people. For centuries, people have been plagued with worry, doubts, stress, and questions about the future. Sometimes it seems like the more you try to resolve issues, the more they intensify. Today, we are looking at a passage of Scripture given to bring comfort to God's people that has as much application now as it did when it was first received.

- ❓ What are some of the thoughts that keep you up at night or plague you throughout the day?
- ❓ When you feel stress or anxiety, where do you turn for help?

Session Summary


The Israelites had received warnings and dire predictions from the prophet Isaiah. The more details they learned, the worse they felt. But in Isaiah 40, God shifted from warnings to comfort. They had heard about the realities they would face, and they needed to be encouraged that God was still with them.

Isaiah reassured them that God loved them and wanted to deliver them. He also made it clear that nothing was too much for God to handle. He has complete power to deliver. One of the most comforting things believers can do in times of trouble is focus on the nature and character of the Lord. When the people grasped the power of God to deliver, they could also understand He wanted to deliver them. He is the Lord, full of compassion, comfort, grace, and mercy. He is love and the more we know about who He is the more we learn the comfort He offers those who wait on Him.

1. The Lord's Desire (Isaiah 40:1-11)


Isaiah chapter 40 moves from warnings of coming judgment to hope for restoration and deliverance. This passage gives hope and comfort that the Israelites greatly needed. Although the warnings of Isaiah earlier were serious and necessary, so was the comfort and encouragement that followed. The Lord is a God of comfort and desires for His messengers to speak comfort and blessings to His people. The concept of “speaking comfort” does not merely mean making someone feel better in the moment but gives focus to the goodness of the Lord on behalf of His people throughout the ages.

Isaiah referred to the prophets crying out in the barren places. Those who were tasked with speaking for the Lord to His people in exile were some of the ones crying out in barren places. He used the analogy of preparing the way or building a road. Obstacles must be removed so the to make way for the Lord as the triumphant King. As the construction of roads face various obstacles to be removed, so does the preparation of the hearts of people. Both are difficult. Both take time. Both require expert help and advice. But God reveals His glory as He prepares our hearts to receive Him. This passage would also have prophetic fulfillment in the person of John the Baptist in the New Testament (John 1:23).

-  What are some obstacles in the human heart to receiving the truth about Jesus? How has the Lord made “straight the way” (John 1:23) in your life?

Emphasizing the fleeting glory of man with a comparison to the flowers and grass that wither and fade, Isaiah stressed where permanence was found. The Word of God has endured and will continue to do so. God’s ways and decrees will endure and stand for eternity. God is the standard for truth and righteousness through all time.

Isaiah announced a message so great and powerful that it should be proclaimed to as many people as possible. The call to behold the Lord is to study and learn everything possible about Him. This prepares and empowers us as Christ followers to live our faith in the world and to be ready for when the Lord returns.

-  What are some ways we can practice “beholding” the Lord daily? Why is this important?

Isaiah highlighted God’s care and character as he spoke of the comfort and blessing for God’s people. The Lord promised to come with power and might. When the Lord returns at the end of the age, it will be to inspect

The Divine Shepherd

Like a shepherd tenderly holding his sheep to his chest, the Lord would carry the exiles back to the land. The same mighty arm that destroyed His enemies would protect His people (Isaiah 51:9-10).

His work and reward His people. It will also be as a loving shepherd who cares for His sheep. A good shepherd feeds his sheep, cares for his sheep, protects his sheep, and leads his sheep to good places. God has promised to care for His people in this same way.

- Application: Where do you feel in need of deliverance right now? How can Isaiah's words bring you comfort, even if that doesn't mean immediate relief?

2. The Lord's Might (Isaiah 40:12-26)

God can do anything and has all the power He will ever need. He has might and authority over creation as the One who has measured the waters and the heavens. That alone should be enough to convince us that He can do anything, but Isaiah didn't stop there.

God is not only powerful, but He is also infinitely knowledgeable and wise. If He knows how heavy the mountains are, then He surely knows what His people need. The Lord needs no counsel, instruction, or teaching.


- How do you see the wisdom and intelligence of the Lord in creation? In your own life?

Isaiah compared the greatness of God to the most powerful nations. Isaiah challenged the people to think of the greatest nations with their powerful military presences. But compared to the Lord, the greatest power on earth is like a drop in a bucket. Those who take pride themselves and think that they are as supreme display foolishness before the Lord. He has no tolerance for that kind of pride and will come against it.

- What is the most powerful force you can think of in earthly terms? Consider that no matter what that thing is, it is insignificant compared to the Lord. How does this encourage you?

Israel had been in exile and surrounded by people who worshipped all kinds of different idols. These were typically some kind of statue, carving, or other image to represent various gods. Isaiah made clear there was no comparison between the Lord and these empty idols of the nations. Although these carved images were abundantly visible and available, God has no rival.


In verses 21-26, Isaiah used strong language to emphasize the greatness of God revealed in the glory of His creation. He sits above creation, and He created it all. He is the Lord of it all. God's mastery over creation is displayed by His ability to count all the stars and call them by name. When you consider the vastness of the night sky, it is mind blowing that God knows the exact number of stars in the heavens and he is familiar with each one. God not only wants to deliver His people, but He also has abundant power to do so.

 Application: Consider the truth that God knows each star by name. What does this tell you about the way He knows you?


3. The Lord's Proclamation (Isaiah 40:27-31)

We don't only need to understand God's desire and His power, but we also must understand how this makes a difference in our lives. Too many times Christ followers stop short of applying what they know about the Lord. They believe these truths and understand them to a point but unless these truths are taken in and applied to our daily lives, we are missing the point. Isaiah answered the question: if God wants to deliver us and He can deliver us, will He choose to?

Isaiah quoted the Israelites as saying their way was hidden from the Lord and their claim was ignored by Him. Essentially, they were saying: God doesn't see me or care about me. They had believed false claims about the Lord and needed to hear what Isaiah had to say. Many around us believe these same falsehoods and need to know the truth.

 When have you questioned if God saw what was happening with you or cared? How does the cross answer this question for us?

Isaiah responded with the reminder that God gives His power to the weak and those who have no might—those who see their need of Him. Those who are proud and confident in their own strength will not receive strength from the Lord because they have chosen to rely on their own. God's strength is reserved for those who know they are weak and have no might.

 How do we reject the power and strength of God when we rely on our own strength as sufficient?

When you know you need strength from the Lord, you should wait on Him. His strength comes as we wait and trust in His timing. This kind of waiting is not passive but is actively seeking Him and relying on Him as we move forward trusting Him.

Our weak strength is renewed when we wait on the Lord. Isaiah used the image of an eagle in flight, a person running, and one with strong walk to describe those who wait on the Lord and receive His strength. As we do, we are renewed by Him continually.



Application: Where do you need the Lord to renew your strength? How will you rely on Him to do so?

Conclusion

Following warnings and dire predictions of what they would experience due to rebellion, God knew what His people needed—comfort. Anytime God’s people struggle with fear, worry, or anxiety, the answer is not found in our own solutions but in focusing on who God is and how He comforts His people. Knowing God better is the only lasting antidote for the worries of the world.

To know God is to know comfort because that’s who He is. Isaiah reassured the people of the plans that the Lord had for them. It is important to recognize that God has great plans for His people and desires abundant life for them. He does not want His people to be in bondage of any kind, especially as a direct result of their own sin.

Finally, Isaiah moved to who God is and what He has the power to do. God will never change. He will never leave us, and He is powerful to do anything. God never grows weary or tired, and His Word endures forever. When you need His strength, the key is to wait on Him and stop trying to achieve according to your limited power. He loves you and wants to exchange His power for yours. Understanding the character and nature of God brings comfort no matter what we face.

- ❓ What do you need to know or remember about the nature and character of God? How can you remind yourself of this regularly?
- ❓ How can we as a group encourage one another to rely on the Lord instead of trusting in our own strength?
- ❓ Who will you share with about the goodness of God?

Prayer of Response

Praise the Lord for who He is. Thank Him for loving and strengthening you. Ask for wisdom to see how you need to be intentional about waiting on and trusting Him.

Memory Verse

But those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not become weary, they will walk and not faint. — Isaiah 40:31

Additional Resources

- *Isaiah: Holman Old Testament Commentary* by Trent Butler
- *The Message of Isaiah* by Barry Webb
- *Isaiah 40-66: The New American Commentary* by Gary Smith

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Isaiah

Purpose

Isaiah's message is relatively simple. First, Isaiah accused God's people of sin: rebelling against the one who made them and redeemed them. Second, Isaiah instructed these sinners to reform their ways and act obediently. Third, Isaiah announced God's judgment on the people because of their sin. Finally, God revealed his future restoration of the people, or at least of the faithful remnant that survived the judgment. As part of the restoration of God's people, Isaiah foresaw both judgment on the nations (chaps. 13–23) and a future turning of the nations to God (2:1–4). The first part of the book (chaps. 1–39) emphasizes sin, the call to repentance, and judgment; the second part (chaps. 40–66) emphasizes the hope of restoration.

Author

The book presents itself as the writing of one man, Isaiah son of Amoz. The superscription to the book dates his prophetic activity as spanning the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah (783–742 BC, Isaiah's call is dated to this king's last year, 6:1); Jotham (742–735 BC); Ahaz (735–716 BC); and Hezekiah (716–686 BC). On Uzziah (Azariah) see 2Kg 15:1–7; 2Ch 26:1–23. On Jotham see Kg 15:32–38; 2Ch 27:1–9. On Ahaz see 2Kg 16:1–20; 2Ch 28:1–27. On Hezekiah see 2Kg 18:1–20:21; 2Ch 29:1–32:33. Not much is known about Isaiah apart from his prophecy.

Setting

Uzziah's reign was a particularly prosperous time in the history of Judah, but storm clouds were on the horizon. Assyria was on the rise again in the person of Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BC). The Assyrian king threatened to engulf Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel. After the death of Tiglath-pileser, his successors, Shalmaneser and Sargon, defeated the northern kingdom in 722 BC and deported its citizens. This event brought Judah even more under the shadow of that great empire. Isaiah 37:38 suggests that the prophet lived until the death of Sennacherib in 681 BC.

Special Features

Isaiah was an eighth-century BC prophet. His book is the first of the Prophets in the English canon and the first of the Latter Prophets in the Hebrew canon. Isaiah is powerful in its poetic imagination, intriguing in its prophetic vision, and complex in its structure. One can never read or study the book without gaining new insights into the nature of God and our relationship with him. The authors of the New Testament read the book of Isaiah in light of the coming of Christ and realized that this prophet anticipated Messiah's coming with remarkable clarity. For this reason they quoted or alluded to Isaiah more than any other Old Testament book.

Extended Commentary

Isaiah 40:1-31

40:1 Though the hearer of God's words is not here specified, it is best to see these words as being directed to the prophet Isaiah, who was commanded to bring words of comfort rather than judgment to God's people. The words address the prophet as if he were living in the time of the future exile of Judah to Babylon. God anticipated the questions that his people would have as they experienced his judgment.

40:2 The time of forced labor refers to the future Babylonian exile (586–539 BC). That the people had received double punishment is a way of saying that their sentence was fully satisfied before God.

40:3–4 A herald rallied his hearers to prepare a road that would make quick and easy access for God to return to the promised land in order to restore his people. The wilderness was difficult to cross because it had deep wadis and high mountains, but in preparation for the return this rough terrain would become like a plain, easy to travel. The fulfillment most immediately in view is the return of Jewish people after the end of the exile, but the ultimate fulfillment of these verses is in the work of Jesus Christ as signaled by the quotation of v. 3 along with Mal 3:1 in Mk 1:2–3 and the identification of the voice as that of John the Baptist. Also see Mt 3:3; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4–6; Jn 1:23.

40:5 Sin had broken the fellowship between God and his people, but Isaiah looked beyond their punishment to the return of the glory of the Lord.

40:6–8 Another herald compared humanity to grass and the flower of the field, both of which have short-lived and fragile beauty. The contrast is with the word of God that endures. Perhaps the contrast implies that the Babylonians, though seemingly powerful, would fade, but God's word that had promised his people restoration would not fail. Peter quotes these words in 1Pt 1:24–25.

40:9–10 Here Zion is instructed to spread the news of God's coming to the other towns of Judah. His power is literally "his arm," which is found frequently in Isaiah (30:30; 33:2; 48:14; 50:2; 51:5, 9; 52:10; 53:1).

40:11 In the Bible and throughout the ancient Near East, the shepherd was a familiar image for a ruler. Judah had been subject to weak and evil shepherds or kings (Ezk 34), but the nation would once again have a strong and compassionate shepherd—God himself (Ps 23).

40:12–26 The series of rhetorical questions that appear in these verses have one intention—to demonstrate the uniqueness of the one true God. This assured God's people that God not only wanted to deliver them, but he was able to do so.

40:12 God is in control and knows everything about his creation, both heavens and earth. Unlike the gods of the surrounding nations that were identified with aspects of nature (Baal was the god of storm, thunder, and lightning), Judah's God created the world and measured it.

40:13–14 God does not need a teacher. He is inherently wise and gives advice to others (Jb 38:1–42:5). Paul quotes these words in Rm 11:34 and 1Co 2:16.

40:15–17 Babylon must have seemed invulnerable once Judah suffered defeat by the Babylonians and her leaders were carted off into exile, but no human power, not even Babylon, could compare with God. They were like a drop in a bucket. Lebanon was famous for its massive forests and its abundant wildlife, but they were not sufficient to produce a burnt offering before God. The message is that God could and would deliver Judah from Babylonian captivity.

40:18–20 God is nothing like the gods of the nations. Many thought otherwise, believing that Babylon was able to defeat Judah because the Babylonian gods were stronger than Yahweh, but the Babylonian gods were nothing but wood and metal—the creations of human craftsmen (41:6–7; 42:17; 44:9–20; 46:5–7; 48:5).

40:21–24 God is not only superior to the gods of the nations; he is far above the rulers of the nations as well (princes . . . judges). He is the ultimate ruler. His throne is not on earth, but above the circle of the earth. Like grass (vv. 6–8), they are fragile and short-lived and as easily disposed of as stubble carried away by a whirlwind. They are no match for God.

40:25–26 Nothing compares to God—not even the stars. The religions of the ancient Near East believed the stars were gods. Judah’s religion asserted that God created the stars. The fact that he knew them by name indicates that they were his creation and they were protected (not one of them is missing) by his power.

40:27 When Judah experienced God’s punishment, Isaiah anticipated that the people would ask why God had abandoned them. The following verses summarize the answer given in the first part of the chapter. God wanted to deliver his people, and he was fully able to do so.

40:28 God had the power and wisdom to bring about Judah’s deliverance.

40:29–31 God not only had strength, but he distributed that strength to his people. The criterion for receiving God’s strength was not youth but trust. Those who trusted God would have an unlimited source of strength.¹

References

1. Tremper Longman III, “Isaiah,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1098–1100.