

Comfort

my people

8 STUDIES OF ISAIAH 40-55



INTRODUCTION

The Book of Isaiah presents us with a massive vision that reveals the very mind of God. It's an awesome revelation that moves from judgment to salvation – one that has implications for us all as it moves from the corruption of the Israelites in Isaiah's own time to the recreation of the entire universe. The book was written by 'Isaiah son of Amoz' as a result of a vision he received 'concerning Judah and Jerusalem' during his lifetime, from about 740BC until about 695BC (Isaiah 1: 1). During that period Assyria captured the northern kingdom of Israel (722BC), and came perilously close to capturing Judah as well. In that setting, Isaiah saw clearly that Israel's privilege of being in a special covenant relationship with God did not guarantee deliverance from their enemies regardless of their moral condition (Isaiah 1-39). However, Isaiah's vision spanned well beyond his own lifetime, covering not only the Babylonian exile (Isaiah 40-55)¹ but also the events that will bring history to a close and usher in eternity (Isaiah 56-66).

Our focus in these studies will be on Isaiah's ministry of comfort to the exiles in chapters 40-55. When Jerusalem fell and the Israelites were carried off into exile, the belief which the Israelites held dear - the assurance of God's eternal choice of Jerusalem as his earthly seat and his unconditional promises to David of an everlasting dynasty – appeared to have been dealt a fatal blow. However, years before the exile occurred God had already ensured that his people would not be left without hope. Just as he commissioned Isaiah to a ministry of judgment in chapter 6, God commissioned Isaiah a second time in chapter 40, only this time to a ministry of comfort. Here Isaiah speaks wonderful words of comfort that his disciples would preserve and safeguard until Israel was finally ready to hear them. In the dark days which lay ahead, Israel would be clothed with the shameful identity of a defeated nation, rejected by God. Isaiah's ministry of comfort addressed in advance the questions raised by Israel's exile, and provided assurance and hope to a broken and demoralised people who were living in a foreign country and questioning whether they would ever be forgiven by God and restored to their own land.² Broadly speaking, chapters 40-55 may be divided into two halves: chapters 40-48 and 49-55. Isaiah's chief concern in chapters 40-48 is to convince

¹ Babylon succeeded Assyria as the leading power in 605BC, when its forces overcame those of Egypt at the Battle of Carchemish. When Judah fell and went into Babylonian exile in 587BC, Isaiah had been dead for about a century. Jewish tradition has it that Isaiah was sawn in two by king Manasseh during one of the darkest periods in Israel's history. For a summary of Manasseh's wicked reign see 2 Kings 21: 1-18.

² Isaiah 40-55.

the exiles that God is both able and willing to deliver his people from the physical bondage of Babylon and its gods. In chapters 49-55 Isaiah turns to the ministry of the Servant on behalf of the Israelites to demonstrate God's ability and desire to deliver his people from the punishment and separation that he had afflicted upon them as a result of their sin. 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended...'³

Why study Isaiah 40-55 today?

We could provide many answers to this question, the most basic being that Isaiah is part of God's Word, not just to the exiles living in Babylonian captivity but to us as Christians living in Melbourne in the 21st century. As followers of Jesus, the true Servant 'who was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities',⁴ we too are God's chosen people.⁵ Just as the Israelites lived as exiles in Babylon and faced uncertainty and seeming instability, so too we now live as exiles in this sinful fallen world.⁶ Isaiah reminds us that we must not fear! For as God spoke sweet words of comfort and promise to the exiles, so he now speaks sweet words of comfort and promise to those of us who are in Christ. He has promised us eternal life,⁷ and that nothing can separate us from his love.⁸ He has promised to be with us and to journey with us through the wilderness of this life as we make our way toward the New Jerusalem,⁹ and to provide for our every need along the way.¹⁰ What's more, Isaiah's words of comfort call us to remember that when dark days come and the world seems out of control - when the stock market crashes, when our politicians pass bills that disregard human life, when terrorists attack, when sickness comes - that all of creation, every event and actor on the world stage, are but instruments in the Almighty's hand. In troubling and confusing times the greatest comfort is God himself, the Holy One of Israel who is not only sovereign and just, but also gracious and loving. It is this God who sent his own divine Son into the world and laid upon him the chastisement that brought us peace.¹¹ Through the prophet Isaiah God now speaks tender words of comfort to us 'Fear not for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine'.¹²

³ Isaiah 40: 1-2.

⁴ Isaiah 53: 5.

⁵ Ephesians 1: 11.

⁶ 1 Peter 1: 1.

⁷ John 3: 16.

⁸ Romans 8: 38-39.

⁹ John 14: 17-20.

¹⁰ Matthew 6: 25-34.

¹¹ Isaiah 53: 5.

¹² Isaiah 43: 1.

STUDY 1

The God of All Comfort *Isaiah 40: 1-31*

1. What are some situations in our culture where people turn to idols (i.e. money, power, sex, education, ambition, work, sport, etc.) as a source of comfort for their fears?

Read Isaiah 40:1–31.

2. What three pronouncements are made in verses 1-2 (hint: each begins with the word *that*) and how would they have comforted the Israelites in exile?
3. How would these exiles have felt as they heard these wonderful affirmations (for the mood of the exiles see Psalm 137; Lamentations 1: 2, 9, 16, 21)?
4. How will God act to give concrete expression to the fact that the exiles have been forgiven (vv. 3-5)?
5. Explain why God's actions reveal his glory (v.5). Where in the Bible is God's glory most clearly seen?
6. How does the good news Isaiah announces here foreshadow the gospel of Jesus?
7. What do we learn about God's word in verses 6-8? Why would this have been a comfort to the exiles?

8. What picture does Isaiah paint of God in verses 12-26?
9. Having explained the power and greatness of God in verses 12-26, it doesn't take long for Israel to begin to complain and doubt his goodness and his care (v. 27). How does Isaiah respond to these doubts (vv. 28-31)?

Think/Grow/Live

- A number of years ago I was at the funeral of a close family friend. After the funeral I overheard the grandchildren being told that 'poppy is now a star in the sky that watches over you'. How do Isaiah's words of comfort differ from the cheap words of comfort we often hear in today's world? What lessons can we learn from this passage about how to encourage one another when we face distressing times?
- How are you comforted by the truth that God's word can be relied upon (It might be helpful to think about what some of the implications would be if God's word was not reliable)? Practically what does it look like to live in the light of this truth?
- Think of a difficulty you are either currently experiencing or have experienced recently. In the midst of that difficulty are you more prone to think of God as inadequate or forget what he is like? How do the truths of verses 12-26 speak into your situation.

Prayer Points

- Praise God for the comfort of knowing that he has pardoned our iniquity and given concrete expression to the fact that we have been forgiven.
 - Ask God to help you to trust his word.
 - Remember to pray for your global partners, shoulder to shoulder partners, as well as the requests from this week's Fuel for Prayer.
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STUDY 2

How Great is Our God! ***Isaiah 44: 1-28***

1. Barry Webb rightly points out that 'Idolatry is the worst sin of all, because it moves God to the periphery of our lives and puts something else in his place. It gives to something else the glory that should be God's alone. Chameleon-like, it constantly disguises itself so that we are scarcely aware of its presence, even when we are most in the grip of it'.¹³ What are some the idols in our culture?

Read Isaiah 44:1–28.

2. How does God's word in verses 1-5 provide the Israelites with strong encouragement in their present circumstances (cf. Genesis 12: 1-3)?
3. In the pagan world of Idolatry that the exiles lived in - where it was commonplace for cultured and powerful countries to attribute their success to the power of their gods - why would it be particularly difficult for them to witness to the fact that their God was supreme (vv. 6-8)?
4. How does Isaiah's attack on idolatry expose the real nature of idols (vv. 9-20)? How would this have helped the exiles in their current circumstances?
5. What is the effect of idolatry on the worshipper (vv. 18-20)?
6. How is the Lord different from idols (vv. 21-28)?

¹³ Barry Webb, *Isaiah*, (BST; Nottingham: IVP, 1996), p. 180.

7. According to Isaiah, what should we do if we fall into idolatrous patterns of thinking and behaving (vv. 22-24)?
8. "Cyrus... is my shepherd, and he shall fulfil all my purposes;" saying of Jerusalem, "She shall be built," and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid" (v. 28). How as this passage fulfilled in history (Ezra 1: 1-4)?

Think/Grow/Live

- In what ways are your eyes and ears constantly confronted with lies about God and attractive alternatives to serving him?
- Which of these do you find most difficult to resist?
- How does the truth of who God is, and the truth of the gospel - which declares that our sins and transgressions have been blotted out – confront and correct our idolatrous hearts?
- What lessons can we learn from the fact that God strongly disapproves of idolatry, and yet is able to use a pagan idolater, like Cyrus, to achieve his good plans and purposes?

Prayer Points

- Praise God that he is so much greater than the false gods that surround us.
 - Ask God to help you to turn away from idolatry and to keep you trusting and serving him.
 - Remember to pray for your global partners, shoulder to shoulder partners, as well as the requests from this week's Fuel for Prayer.
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STUDY 3

Stubborn Sinners, Patient God ***Isaiah 48: 1-22***

1. We all have examples of times in our lives when we've been hard of hearing and failed to listen. Share with the group some of the consequences you've experienced when you've not listened to something or someone you should have?

Read Isaiah 48:1–22.

2. How are the Israelites described in verses 1-10?
3. How is the exile described and how satisfied is God with the results (vv. 9-10)?
4. Despite Israel's continued stubbornness and rebellion God remains patient and will not cut them off. Why (vv. 9-11)?
5. What was the heart of Israel's problem (v. 1, 12, 16, 17-18)?
6. How could Israel's experience have been different if they had listened to God's word (vv. 18-19)?
7. Why must the Israelites leave Babylon (vv. 20-21 cf. Isaiah 37)?
8. How is their journey back to Jerusalem described (vv. 20-21 cf. Exodus 17: 6)?

9. If their sin and failure to listen to God's word is not resolved, what will happen to Israel in this next chapter of their history (v. 22)?

10. How will Israel's spiritual problem be resolved (v. 16 cf. 42: 1-4; 49: 1-6; 52: 13-53: 12)?

Think/Grow/Live

- Sadly there can be times when we are as hard of hearing as the Israelites of Isaiah 48.

Answer the following:

- Are there any ways that you are failing to listen God in your own life? Discuss what this looks like in practice.
- Why is it so important that we repent and turn away from such behaviour (cf. 2 Timothy 3: 1-9; 4: 3-4)
- What characterises true disciples of Jesus (cf. John 14: 15; 15: 10)?
- Why does God remain patient with us and stay true to his choice to save us (Ephesians 1: 3-14)?

Prayer Points

- Praise God that he has chosen to save us through Jesus Christ to the praise of his glorious grace.
 - Ask God to forgive you for those times when you fail to listen to him, and to help you to turn away from such behaviour.
 - Remember to pray for your global partners, shoulder to shoulder partners, as well as the requests from this week's Fuel for Prayer.
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STUDY 4

The Servant Restores Isaiah 49: 1-26

1. In what ways do you seek to make the truth about God known to others? Discuss.

Read Isaiah 49:1–26.

2. In chapter 48 Isaiah highlighted the problem of the spiritual state of the exiles, now in chapter 49 the Servant of the Lord reappears on the scene.¹⁴ Answer the following:
 - a. Who is speaking in verses 1-6?
 - b. How is the servant identified in these verses (i.e. what is his name)?
 - c. What mission is the Servant given by God?
3. In verse 7 the word Israel reverts back to its normal sense (i.e. it is referring to the nation Israel, no longer the Servant who represents and embodies the all that Israel was meant to be – the ideal Israel).¹⁵ What two messages are given to the exiles in verses 7-12?
4. What role do God's people have in extending salvation to all peoples (vv. 8-13 cf. Isaiah 42: 6)?
5. Having been given such a grand plan and vision, the exiles immediately raise an objection. What is it and why do you think they object in this way (v. 14)?

¹⁴ cf. Isaiah 42: 1-6.

¹⁵ This is clear from Isaiah's use of the formula 'Holy One of Israel', in which Israel always means the nations. Notice that here, as in Isaiah 47: 4 and 48: 17, Holy One is combined with the title Redeemer. See Webb, *Isaiah*, p. 194.

6. In light of the fact that God has not abandoned his people, but still very much identifies with them, how should the nations and the peoples of the world respond (vv. 22-23)?
7. What will happen to the nations if they refuse to co-operate with God by blessing his people, but chose instead to defy him and continue to persecute them (vv. 24-26)?
8. Does God still identify with his people today (Acts 9: 1-5)?

Think/Grow/Live

- According to the flow of this chapter, God's people (i.e. those who God restores and saves by the work of his Servant) become one with God's Servant in his worldwide mission to extend salvation to all peoples (cf. vv. 8-12). Practically speaking how is this truth impacting the way you live your life? (It might be helpful to think about some specific areas like work life, family life, church life, your finances, etc.).
- It is not possible to claim to have a relationship with God that ignores identifying with his people (Matthew 25: 31-40; John 13: 34-35; Acts 9: 1-5; James 2: 14-17; 1 John 4: 20-21). How has this, or how should this truth shape the way you live your life?

Prayer Points

- Praise God for sending Jesus, the perfect Servant, so that we can be saved.
 - Thank God for the privilege of being included and used by him in his plan to bring salvation to people from all nations. Ask God to help you to be faithful to this mission.
 - Ask God to help you to live in loving committed relationships with other Christians, especially those from within your own church family.
 - Remember to pray for your global partners, shoulder to shoulder partners, as well as the requests from this week's Fuel for Prayer.
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STUDY 5

Israel Sins, the Servant Obeys *Isaiah 50: 1-51: 16*

1. Who has been the greatest example in your Christian life and why? Discuss.

Read Isaiah 50:1–51: 16.

2. What reasons does God give for the Israelites being sent away into exile (vv. 1-3)?
3. What evidence is there that Israel's problem still persists (v. 2)?
4. How does the Servant contrast with Israel and in what way does he provide the perfect example to them (vv. 4-9)?
5. How do verses 4-9 give clues to the true identity of this Servant (cf. John 12: 49; Matthew 26: 67; 27: 26; Luke 9: 51)?
6. What distinguishes those who are truly God's people from those who are not (vv. 10-11)?
7. Who is God addressing in Isaiah 51: 1-16 (i.e. is it one person or two)?
8. List all the ways God encourages and comfort his people in Isaiah 51: 1-16?

Think/Grow/Live

- The Servant shows us that what God requires of his people is whole-hearted, costly obedience (cf. Luke 9: 23-24). With God's help, are there changes that you need to make to ensure that sincere and costly obedience, not empty profession, characterises your life?
- One of the ways God encourages and comforts his people is by assuring them that he is their God, therefore they have nothing to fear (vv. 12-14 cf. Romans 8: 31, 39). What practical difference might this truth make in your life this week?

Prayer Points

- Praise God for the ministry of Jesus, the flawless Servant who obeyed God perfectly and paid the ultimate price.
 - Ask God for strength to obey Jesus and follow his example of costly obedience.
 - Thank God for the assurance of knowing that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
 - Remember to pray for your global partners, shoulder to shoulder partners, as well as the requests from this week's Fuel for Prayer.
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STUDY 6

Where Wrath and Mercy Meet ***Isaiah 51: 17-52: 12***

1. Can you think of situations in which someone might feel condemned by God when in fact they are not? Discuss.

Read Isaiah 51: 17-52: 12.

2. What new reality does Isaiah call for God's people (note: 'Jerusalem' stands for the people of Jerusalem who were in exile) to wake up to (51: 17-23)?
3. Why do you think Isaiah needed to call God's people to wake up to this new reality?
4. How had God's people been viewed and treated when in exile, and how do you think that made them feel (52: 1-6)?
5. How does God view his people and what is he calling them to do (52: 1-6)?
6. God's people had suffered terribly in exile. What is the good news that is to be brought across the mountain tops and proclaimed to God's people by God's messengers (52: 7-10)?
7. Isaiah announces that God is coming for his people, a new exodus is about to take place. Answer the following:
 - a. How is this new exodus similar and different to the first exodus (52: 11-12; cf. Exodus 12: 11, 36; 13: 21; Deuteronomy 16: 3)?
 - b. In light of the fact that God was coming and about to perform a new exodus, how were his people to live (52: 11-12 cf. Exodus 12: 11)?

8. Do you think that God is calling his people to leave behind more than simply Babylon (52: 11-12 cf. 2 Corinthians 6: 14-7: 1)?

Think/Grow/Live

- As a Christian, have there been times when life circumstances have made you feel condemned by God? Discuss and then answer the following:
 - In the midst of such circumstances does God call you to trust and live in the light of your circumstances or his word (cf. Romans 5: 1-5; 8: 1-4)?
 - Practically what would it look like to trust God's word more than your circumstances?
- The Israelites were to live as ones expecting the Lord at any moment to come and deliver them. Answer the following:
 - In what way is this also true of the way we should live as Christians (Revelation 22: 6-21)?
 - Practically what difference would it make to your life right now to start living more expectantly, as one ready to leave and be taken home by the Lord (cf. 1 John 3: 2-3; Romans 13: 11-14)?

Prayer Points

- Praise God that because of Christ Jesus we are no longer condemned, but are declared righteous before God and have peace with him.
 - Ask God to help you trust and live by his word rather than your circumstances.
 - Ask God to help you to wake up to the great salvation that is coming when Christ returns and to start living more expectantly.
 - Remember to pray for your global partners, shoulder to shoulder partners, as well as the requests from this week's Fuel for Prayer.
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STUDY 7

The Suffering Servant's Victory ***Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12***

1. When has someone sacrificed a lot for your good and how did you respond? Discuss.

Read Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12.¹⁶

2. What reaction did people have to the servant and why (52: 13-15)?
3. What is indicated by the Servant sprinkling many nations (Exodus 29: 21; 14: 1-9; Hebrews 9: 13-14; 1 Peter 1: 2)?
4. In 53: 1-6 we see the Servant through the eyes of those who had come to understand the meaning of his sufferings and who announce it to the world. Answer the following:
 - a. How did they initially view the Servant and his sufferings (vv. 1-3)?
 - b. What new understanding do they come to (vv. 4-6)?
 - c. Who crushed the Servant and why?
5. How did the Servant conduct himself in the midst of his suffering, and where did his suffering lead (53: 7-9)?

¹⁶ Barry Webb helpfully notes that this passage, the fourth of the so called Servant Songs (cf. Isaiah 42: 1-9; 49: 1-7; 50: 4-9; 61: 1-3), is 'the jewel in the crown of Isaiah's theology, the focal point of his vision. And yet it comes upon us suddenly, almost intrusively. It is as though, just as we were in danger of forgetting his central importance, the Servant steps forward again and insists that we look at him and acknowledge that nothing that we have just been contemplating is possible without him. He is the key to it all... We have just seen the people of God as priests carrying holy vessels (52: 11). But the previous chapters have repeatedly drawn attention to their endemic sinfulness. How can this tension and sinfulness be resolved? That question has never been answered. Forgiveness has been announced, but the basis on which it rests has not been clarified. Now at last it is: *my righteous servant will justify many...he will bear their iniquities* (53: 11)'. See Webb, *Isaiah*, p. 209.

6. What will happen after the Servant's sufferings and death (53: 10)?
7. What will be the result of the Servant's sufferings (53: 11-12)?
8. What are the parallels between this passage in Isaiah and 1 Peter 2: 21-25?
9. Why does Peter allude to Isaiah 52: 13-53:12?

Think/Grow/Live

- 'Isaiah 53: 5 is the heart not just of Isaiah's vision, but of the Old Testament and indeed the Bible' Agree or disagree? (Give reasons).
- 'All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isaiah 53: 6). In this verse, those who bear witness to the meaning of the Servant's sufferings speak in very personal terms about their sin, acknowledging that his sacrifice was for their own sins. In pairs or groups of 3, with people of the same gender, spend some time confessing your sin, talking about what repentance will look like, and expressing why you're personally thankful to God for the sacrifice of Jesus on your behalf.
- Practically how else should you respond to the suffering and death of Jesus on your behalf to pay for your sins?

Prayer Points

- Praise God that Jesus 'was wounded for our transgressions' and 'crushed for our iniquities'.
 - Ask God to forgive you for the sins you've confessed and for the strength to turn away from them in repentance.
 - Remember to pray for your global partners, shoulder to shoulder partners, as well as the requests from this week's Fuel for Prayer.
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STUDY 8

God's Richest Banquet *Isaiah 55: 1-13*

1. If you were invited to a banquet, what things would you hope to see on the menu?

Read Isaiah 55: 1-13.

2. What invitation is given in verses 1-2?
3. What is the rich food on offer in this banquet (i.e. in this banquet image, what is food a metaphor for? [v. 2 cf. v. 7])?
4. The invitation has gone out, the banquet is spread, and compassion and pardon are available. How are people called to respond (vv. 6-7)?
5. To the exiles living in Babylon, the offer of pardon and life with God in an everlasting covenant (v.3) in a permanently renewed world (v. 13), must have felt like a dream that was hard to comprehend and believe. Answer the following:
 - a. What does God declare to those who find this offer hard to fathom (vv. 8-9)?
 - b. What assurance does God give that salvation will actually happen (vv. 10-11)?
 - c. What will be the first step towards the fulfilment of God's promises of a new world (vv. 12-13)?
 - d. When will these promises finally be fulfilled (Revelation 19: 6-9; 21: 1-4)?
6. What principles of salvation in Isaiah 55 are seen in Paul's explanation of the gospel in Romans 3: 21-26?

Think/Grow/Live

- Isaiah 55 tells us that the invitation has gone out, the banquet is spread, and compassion, pardon and life with God in a renewed world are all available. All that remains is for the guests to come. You won't be forced to come and the offer will not last forever. Answer the following questions:
 - How have you personally responded to God's invitation?
 - Who do you know that needs to be informed of God's free invitation? How might you go about informing them in the weeks ahead?
 - How does this vision of life with God in a renewed world encourage and comfort you in your present situation? Do you find it hard to believe? Why?
- What insight's does Isaiah 55: 6-7 give us into the nature of true repentance? What evidences are there of true repentance in your own life?
- What do we learn about God's word in Isaiah 55: 10-11? Practically how should this impact the way we minister to one another?
- Do you ever doubt your salvation? Why/Why not? Which of the principles in Isaiah 55 help you most in addressing your doubts?

Prayer Points

- Thank God that because of Jesus, the perfect Servant, we are freely offered salvation from our sins and life with God in a renewed world.
 - Pray for opportunities to inform others of this free invitation.
 - Ask God to help you to trust the power of his word.
 - Remember to pray for your global partners, shoulder to shoulder partners, as well as the requests from this week's Fuel for Prayer.
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BIBLIOGRAPHY

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