

Looking Forward to Christmas

Session 1

December 1, 2024

*Looking Forward with Hope*

**Session Passage:** Isaiah 40:1-5,9-11

**Isaiah 40:1-2**

**Connection to The Point.** Comfort would come to God's people through the pardoning of iniquity, a pardon that was delivered through Jesus.

**The Setting for Isaiah 40.** Isaiah was called to be a prophet of God primarily to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. He ministered between the years of about 740–700 BC. The overarching theme of Isaiah's preaching was that God's will for His covenant people someday would come to fruition, but only after His judgment cleansed the nation of those who denied His authority and rebelled against His law.

Chapters 1–39 trace the judgments God would bring on Israel and Judah through foreign powers, but also the judgments He would bring on those foreign nations as well. But God's judgment is not the end for His people. Isaiah 40 introduces the second section of the book (ch. 40–66) and is a call from the Lord for Isaiah to comfort His people with words of hope of a coming return of God's glory.

**Comfort** (v. 1). The word *comfort* (*nacham*) means to console in the sense of having pity or compassion for someone. The repetition of the term both emphasizes the urgent nature of the command and the deep love God has for His people. In this context it also emphasizes that people's suffering for their sins had ended.

**My people . . . your God** (v. 1). These terms echo God's covenant relationship with His people and emphasize that in spite of the people's sins they remained His people and He their God.

**Speak tenderly** (v. 2). This phrase is literally "speak to the heart." The Hebrew phrase is used in the Old Testament to express encouragement, assurance, affection, and concern (Gen. 34:3; 50:21; Ruth 2:13; 2 Sam. 19:7; 2 Chron. 30:22; Isa. 40:2; Hos. 2:14). It emphasizes the depth of God's love for His people. The term **Jerusalem** is often used in the Old Testament as another word for the people of Israel and/or Judah.

**Hard service** (v. 2). The term (*tsaba*) refers to warfare or military service. The verb form means “to go to war.” *Tsaba* usually appears in reference to military service, although it also describes service in the tabernacle/temple (Num. 4:23; 1 Sam. 2:22). The term also appears in the title for God “the Lord Almighty,” “the Lord of hosts,” or “the Lord of armies,” which refers to God being the commander of both the armies of heaven and the armies of Israel. The exact nature of this *hard service* is not stated. However, there would be a future time of peace when there will be no war and therefore no need for armies (Isa. 2:1-4).

**Iniquity** (v. 2). God’s judgment had come upon His people because of their *iniquity* (*avon*). The term has the meaning of perversity (moral evil) and is derived from a word (*avah*) meaning to distort, make crooked, or pervert. *Avon* emphasizes both the guilt for evil actions and the consequences or deserved punishment for those actions.

**Pardoned** (v. 2). God proclaimed that His people’s sins had been *pardoned* (*ratsah*). The word means to be favorably accepted. God would make a way for His people to be forgiven for their sins and made acceptable before Him. This was ultimately done through Jesus’s sacrificial death. Through His death and resurrection Jesus atoned for the sins of, and reconciled to God, all those who will repent of their sins and place their faith in Him.

**The Lord’s hand** (v. 2). *Lord* is a substitution for the Hebrew *YHWH*, which is God’s covenant name He revealed to Moses (Ex. 3:13-15). Most likely the name was pronounced *Yahweh*. When reading the Scriptures aloud, the Jews would never speak this name out loud for fear of mispronouncing it. Instead they substituted the Hebrew word for “Lord” (*Adonai*) whenever *YHWH* appeared. Even today, most English Old Testament versions do not transliterate *YHWH* as *Yahweh*, but rather substitute Lord in its place. Isaiah attributed the chastisement of God’s people to *the Lord’s hand*. This anthropomorphic phrase (attributing human characteristics to God to explain or emphasize something about God; God does not have literal hands) usually signifies God’s omnipotent power and righteous judgment. The Lord’s judgment was due to Judah’s disobedience to God and eventually came primarily through the Babylonians’ defeating Judah militarily and taking them into exile in Babylon.

**Double for all her sins** (v. 2). The punishment of God’s people’s had been *double* for their sins, meaning it had been exceptionally severe (Jer. 16:18). Though they had suffered harshly for their sins, there would be a future time when God would pardon their iniquity and they would receive a double portion of God’s blessings (Isa. 61:7).

## Isaiah 40:3-5

**Connection to The Point.** God called for His people to prepare for the coming and appearance of the glory of God.

**A voice of one crying out** (v. 3). In response to the Lord's command to give comfort and speak tenderly to God's people, a *voice* cried out. The speaker is not identified, but the words come from the mouth of the Lord Himself (v. 5). Matthew quoted this verse from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament and applied it to John the Baptist (Matt. 3:3). In John's Gospel, John the Baptist applied it to himself (John 1:23).

**Prepare the way of the Lord** (v. 3). The unnamed voice instructs the people to prepare *the way*. The imagery of verses 3-4 is borrowed from the practice of issuing a proclamation that roads be repaired in expectation of a visit from royalty. Since the visitor is *the Lord*, the reference is not to a physical road.

The term *prepare* (*panah*) means to make clear in the sense of being free from all obstacles. While in some instances it is God who prepares a highway for the return of His people, in other places as here "the people are to make appropriate spiritual preparations for God's arrival (Pss 24:3-10; 50:23; 68:1-4; Isa 42:16; 48:17-18; 55:6-9)."<sup>1</sup>

John the Baptist's ministry prepared the way for the Messiah, Jesus (Matt. 3:1-12; Luke 3:1-18). John proclaimed the coming of God's Messiah and preached a message of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by him, John the Baptist instructed them to "produce fruit consistent with repentance" (Matt. 3:8; see Luke 3:8-14).

**Wilderness** (v. 3). The term (*midbar*) refers to land which is rocky and barren. It could be uninhabited land which served as pasture for sheep and goats or land that was uninhabitable. While the background for this image may have been the desert lands between Israel and Babylon, the nation to which the people of Judah would be exiled, the *wilderness* in the Old Testament often symbolized servitude and punishment for sin, as when the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years after they refused God's command to enter the promised land (Num. 14).

**Straight highway** (v. 3). In ancient times a *highway* was usually an elevated road carefully constructed to hold a heavy amount of foot, animal, and wagon traffic (62:10). The imagery here is metaphorical, since God could not be hindered in His coming by physical

obstructions (or anything for that matter). The term for *straight* (*yashar*) literally means to be smooth or straight, but it can also be used in an ethical sense of walking a straight path (living a moral life). In Isaiah, the imagery of a highway is used as a metaphor for deliverance/salvation and a future time of peace when God will bring His scattered people back to Himself (35:8; 49:11-12; 62:10-12).

**Desert** (v. 3). The term (*arabah*) refers to a region of wilderness or wasteland.

**Lifted up . . . leveled** (v. 4). These terms would have resonated with people who were familiar with the difficulties of travel in the ancient world. The construction of a road, both in that time and today, requires that areas of low elevation be filled in while those of higher elevation be flattened down to a reasonable grade so that people can travel on the road. That **every valley** will be lifted up, **every mountain and hill** will be leveled, the **uneven ground** smoothed, and the **rough places** made a plain emphasize that nothing can hinder or stop the coming of the Lord. What He has purposed will come to pass.

**The glory of the Lord** (v. 5). The term for *glory* (*kabod*) refers to something heavy or weighty. In this context it describes the shining majesty of God's presence. One of the most powerful displays of God's glory was at Mount Sinai (Deut. 5:24-25). People are to acknowledge God's *glory* (His presence, honor, power) in their reverence and worship of Him. The ultimate manifestation of God's glory in this world is His revelation of Himself through Jesus Christ, the Messiah (John 1:18).

**All humanity together will see it** (v. 5). The fact that *all humanity* will see God's glory points to a future time when God will reveal Himself to the entire world. While God has revealed Himself to the world through the incarnation of Jesus Christ (John 1:14-18) and the proclamation of the gospel of salvation to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:18-20), there will be a future time when all people will see Jesus at His return (Matt. 16:27; 24:30; Mark 8:38).

**The mouth of the Lord** (v. 5). The authority behind the words spoken by the voice (v. 3) is God Himself. The words of Isaiah the prophet come from God and have His authority behind them. The promised return of the glory of the *Lord* is sure to come to pass because Almighty God has spoken, and He is faithful in keeping His word and fulfilling His promises (Ps. 145:13).

## Isaiah 40:9-11

**Connection to The Point.** God would come to establish His kingdom and shepherd His people.

**Zion** (v. 9). This is the transliteration of the Hebrew term *Tsiyyon* which originally referred to a fortified hill between the Kidron and Tyropean Valleys (at an elevation of about 2500 feet) in what would later become the Israelite city of Jerusalem. It is first mentioned in the Old Testament in relation to David's conquest of Jerusalem from the Jebusites (2 Sam. 5:6-10; 1 Chron. 11:4-9). *Zion* is used in some of the Psalms in reference to the mountain on which Solomon's temple rested (Pss. 48:1-2; 132:13-14).

In Isaiah, *Zion* most often refers to the city of God from which He will reign in the age to come (Isa. 33:5; 60:14). It is also used in reference to the capital of the nation of Judah or to the people of Judah (1:27). In the New Testament, the term is used to refer to the heavenly city of God known as the New Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 21:2).

**Herald of good news** (v. 9). A *herald* was a royally appointed messenger who would declare a king's edict (Dan. 3:4) or go ahead of a king to a city or town to prepare it for the king's visit. John the Baptist was the herald who proclaimed the coming of God in the person of Jesus Christ (Matt. 3:1-3; Luke 3:1-18). The Hebrew of this verse can be translated in two ways regarding the identity of the herald: (1) Zion/Jerusalem is commissioned to bring the good news or (2) an unspecified person is bringing the good news to Zion/Jerusalem.

**Go up on a high mountain . . . raise your voice loudly** (v. 9). The herald is commanded to climb to an elevated location to proclaim the good news to all the cities and towns around him. Just as from a high vantage point a speaker could proclaim his message to all the people, so too God's message is to be heard by all people in **the cities of Judah**.

**Jerusalem** (v. 9). *Jerusalem* can refer to the physical city situated in the hills of Judah which was the capital of the nation of Israel during the reigns of David and Solomon and Judah after Israel divided in the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Samaria) and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. It was also known as "the city of David" (2 Kings 9:28) and "Zion" (Mic. 3:10-12). The term *Jerusalem* is also used for the entire city in contrast to Zion, a low hill on the south side of Jerusalem. Finally, it is used of the people of Israel or Judah in reference to both their sins and their salvation.

**Raise it, do not be afraid!** (v. 9). The herald of God's good news is commanded to proclaim the message boldly and fearlessly. He can do so because he is speaking in the name and with the authority of Almighty God.

**Here is your God** (v. 9). This is the content of the herald's message and the reason for the people's comfort. Verses 1-8 referred to great news; now it is shouted so that all will hear it! The Lord Himself has come! "This is a startling development, a final fulfillment of God's prophetic plan, and a word of assurance and joy . . . he will personally be present in power, accomplishing his will among his people."<sup>2</sup> In Isaiah 52:7, the prophet proclaimed this good news of salvation that "your God reigns!"

**See** (v. 10). The Hebrew word *hinneh* is usually rendered a little more emphatically as "Behold!" or "Surely!" Zion's message accentuates how God's people not only will hear of the Lord's coming audibly, they also will experience it visibly. They need to keep their eyes wide open!

**The Lord God** (v. 10). The Hebrew wording for God's name is unusual in this phrase. It is *Adonai YHWH*. The term *YHWH* is usually rendered Lord in English Bible translations. The reason this is not done here is that *Adonai* is the Hebrew word for "lord." So rendering it "Lord Lord" would be a bit awkward. *Lord God* emphasizes God's sovereign lordship and strength.

**Strength** (v. 10). The term (*chazaq*) can refer to one's physical strength, the strength of an army, or of the royal power of a king. Like a powerful warrior-king, God maintains His sovereign dominion over His creation. Through His omnipotent power, God will accomplish His people's salvation and establish His messianic, eternal kingdom.

**Power** (v. 10). The term (*zeroa*) literally means "arm" and emphasizes that it is the power of the Lord alone which **establishes** His rule.

**Wages . . . reward** (v. 10). Like a victorious king who takes the spoils of war from his defeated enemy, the Lord has His *wages* and *reward* with Him. The terms refer to the salvific work the Lord would accomplish through His Messiah. Isaiah used similar language in chapter 62 when he spoke of Zion's restoration and the redemption of His people. "Look, the Lord has proclaimed to the ends of the earth, 'Say to Daughter Zion: Look, your salvation is coming, his wages are with him, and his reward accompanies him' " (62:11). Through Jesus Christ, God has accomplished salvation for His people and blesses them with all its benefits.

**Shepherd** (v. 11). A shepherd tending his flock would have been a familiar sight in ancient Israel. Sheep, shepherds, and shepherding are some of the most commonly used images in the Scriptures. They are mentioned over two hundred times in the Old and New Testaments. Shepherds kept close count of their flocks in the fields and sheepfolds (Luke 2:8). Kings, prophets, and religious leaders were often compared and contrasted to good and bad shepherds, and God referred to Himself as a shepherd who protects and watches over His people (Jer. 23:1-4; Ezek. 34). Jesus is the “good shepherd” who provides redemption, eternal life, and protection to His followers (John 10:1-18; Heb. 13:20).

**He gathers the lambs in his arms** (v. 11). The picture of God as a shepherd gently holding lambs in His arms is a dramatic illustration of His love and care for His people. God’s infinitely strong and powerful arms reach out to save and preserve His people (Isa. 51:5-6; John 10:28-29).

**The fold of his garment** (v. 11). A shepherd often had a pouch-like fold in his robes where he could carry a lamb close to his chest. It gave the little sheep a sense of security and warmth. Sheep closely bonded with their shepherd and would have known his unique voice when he called them (John 10:27). Similarly, God holds His people close to Him, providing for and protecting them in His infinite love and through His omnipotent power.

**He gently leads those that are nursing** (v. 11). A newborn lamb is helpless. Without the care and nourishment of its mother, the lamb will not survive. In a similar way, the Lord gently cares for and sustains His people.

1. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, vol. 15b, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 96.

2. *Ibid.*, 99.