

# Comfort for a people in Exile

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[ 0 : 00 ] We do keep that passage in Isaiah chapter 40 open. It's where we're going to spend our time this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I don't know what your favourite TV series is, but very often, if it's a series that goes on for a long time, you get to the end of a series and you are left on a mighty cliffhanger.

The things that used to happen in Dallas, if you can think far back, and someone would be shot. Oh, no! How is this going to turn out? Or the West Wing, there's a couple of real cliffhangers there, and one that the president has just been exposed for having MS and lying about it in his election campaign, and he gives a press conference where he puts his hands in his pockets and says that he's going to run.

And then you've got to wait. You've got to wait for the next series to come round, and when it does, it starts exactly at that moment, as the shot rings out, as the press conference continues. When we carried on, when we spent some time in Isaiah last year, we got to the end of chapter 39.

And that leads us on a bit of a cliffhanger. King Hezekiah has been healed from a disease that might have ended at his death. He is reprieved. He's given more years of life.

[ 1 : 40 ] And as people come to see him from different countries, some envoys come from Babylon, and he shows them all his treasures. And at the end of chapter 39, Isaiah says, these people that have just been shown around, this nation you think is of no value at all, at some point soon they're going to come back with a mighty army, and all you've shown them will be theirs.

And you think, don't you, you get to the end of that chapter, and it's going to carry on the next little bit. But actually, we are fast-forwarding over 100 years today, in that gap between Isaiah 39 and Isaiah chapter 40.

And over that time, Babylon has grown into a mighty empire. It's taken over other lands, and it has now set its sights on the kingdom of Judah. The land is invaded.

City of Jerusalem is laid siege. And after a number of years of terrible, terrible times for those inside, the walls are broken down, the city is destroyed, and the temple, the sign of God's blessing, place of his presence, was burnt and ransacked.

And there were few survivors from God's people. Most of those who had made it through were actually now in exile. They'd been taken away already. Just a tiny remnant was left in the land.

[ 3 : 00 ] But in his grace, God had given Isaiah, all those years before, words of encouragement to speak to these people who would be taken into exile. Chapters 40 to 55 are written to them.

God's beleaguered and defeated people, now a long, long way from home, away from the land and away from God's presence. Now, given all that's come in chapters 1 to 39, all of the warnings Isaiah and other prophets have given, you might have expected God to begin this with, or you're in trouble now, aren't you?

And it's your own fault. You should have listened to me. But that's not how it begins. Maybe someone has reacted to you like that. Maybe you've reacted to someone in that kind of way. Maybe, as I said today, it's Father's Day. Maybe it was your own father. He gave you lots of advice. You turned around in your youth and went, now I know better, Dad.

And you did it your way and you ended up in a terrible mess. And he turned around and said, this, your bed, you lie in it. And there was no help. But if that's your story, then I'm sorry.

[ 4 : 07 ] That's a sad thing to happen. That must have been incredibly hard. Maybe it still is very hard. But our Father in heaven is different in the way he deals with his children.

His mercies are new every morning. His grace never runs out. And his love never runs dry. In fact, out of his deep love and mercy for his children, God comes seeking for us when we are lost and helpless.

In fact, even more than that, he seeks and reaches out to us, even when we are still sat in our own mess, with our fingers in our ears, trying to close our eyes to every approach that he makes. He still comes to us. Romans 5 verse 8 puts it this way. It was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. Over my years as a minister, I've had lots of people speak to me and say, you know, I'd love to come to church, but my life is so much of a mess.

When I get my life sorted, then I'll come. Because all those people in church already have their lives completely sorted out. That's not true, is it? It's not true.

[ 5 : 12 ] The best time to come to God is when we are in a mess. He sets no requirements for coming except empty hands and a humble, contrite heart. Because it's when we are hungry that he can feed us, when we are most thirsty that we will drink his living water.

We have a heavenly father who never leaves us in our mess, but comes seeking the lost, knocking on our hearts, standing, waiting at the door, water and towel ready to wash us clean, and making a path to lead us home.

And that's what we've got here in this chapter. To a lost people, a defeated, broken, exiled people, people who have lost all hope, God comes to them in their pit of despair that he might lift them up and give them a new life of hope, of light, and he might bring them home once again.

So a quick outline where we're going over the next few minutes. Verses 1 to 11, we get God's comforting message to his people. Verses 12 to 26, God's incomparable majesty, helping us to see that he really can do this.

And verses 27 to 31, God's answer to the fearful, when we think, ah, that's great, but it doesn't apply to me. And of course, this isn't just ancient history, is it?

[ 6 : 30 ] This is God's living words, a word which speaks to us today. So keep in mind this question as we talk about these things. Where are we in this? Well, we're not in exile in Babylon, but we are away from our home with the Father.

And maybe right now, we look at our life and actually it looks as if it is in ruins. Maybe we have made a mess of things through some crazy decisions. We can't see a way out. Maybe at the moment, it feels like all our hope is gone.

And we think, however, can things be put right? Well, there was plenty in Babylon that felt that way. And if that's you, then there is hope here this morning. Maybe you've been brought down by the behaviour of others though.

The collateral damage in your life is because of someone else's choices and decisions. And that's left you smarting, weak and angry. I guess many of the children of the exiles must have felt like that, wasn't they?

This is my parents' fault, my grandparents' fault. They're the ones who disobeyed. I'm just suffering from their disobedience. We know from the scriptures that some adults had kept the faith, yet judgment had fallen on the whole nation.

[ 7 : 41 ] Jeremiah is in the midst of all this. You read his book. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are taken off into exile. And again, it's easy to feel utterly helpless, yet Isaiah again wants to offer us some light this morning to point us to the one who can change our lives and bring even great good out of our times of deepest suffering.

But maybe while your own life is okay, you look on the world and you are fearful about the way the world looks and what the future holds for your children or your grandchildren. You see power increasingly in the hands of those who seem to have no morals.

Well, there's hope for us here too. Because Isaiah is going to remind us of the power and authority of God. And it's as we look to him that we see a bright future and a glorious ending.

And of course, whilst we might fit ourselves with one or two of these different situations, I guess we will all know people who feel like this at the moment, who have these worries and struggles, who have lost hope.

Well, my prayer this morning for us is that Isaiah's words would equip us with this message of hope to take out to them a message they need to hear of a God who comes to comfort us, a God who is able to protect and save, a God who is able to keep us and take away our fears and bring us home to him.

[ 9 : 13 ] So let's dive in. Let's have a look at verses 1 to 11. God's comforting message. Sometimes in the midst of those times of pain and suffering, time seems to stand still, doesn't it?

You're on a boat, travelling across the Bay of Biscay, and you think this storm is never going to end. You think you have been as seasick as it is possible to be, and you don't think you're ever going to reach port.

Oh, no, another wave. When's it going to end? Well, you're in the dentist's chair. And he's told you, it'll only take 15 minutes, but by gun, those 15 minutes seem to last an eternity.

Maybe you know that it was your decision to take that boat or your eating of sweets that has led you to these multiple fillings. And you know in your minds that this feeling can't go on forever, but it feels like that.

It feels like that. But then you hear the words, Captain coming on the loudspeaker. It's been a rough voyage, but we're just coming into port now. The dentist's drill turns off.

[10:21] If that's it, we're all done. Swill your mouth out. And suddenly it's all over. You can breathe again. That's a great feeling, isn't it? As God's people reflected on Isaiah's words here in chapter 40, they must have known that feeling.

God speaking to them at the end of a 70-year exile, comfort, comfort my people. Your time of trial is over. Your struggle is done. Like the prisoner whose long jail term has come to an end, they've just heard the words from the prison warden.

Day of your release is here. Collect your things. It's time to go home. That's verses one and two. Can you imagine how they would have felt? Joy, relief, peace.

But also those questions. Okay, how? Is it real? If I walk through that door, will that be it? And what do we do now? How do we get back home? We're a long way. And how do we get past all those people who put us here in the first place?

Well, God's full answers to some of those questions will take some time. Isaiah will give us clues, illustrations later in his book. And ultimately, of course, we need to wait for Jesus to first come the first time and then to return for all the things that Isaiah is pointing us to to be completely fulfilled.

[11:39] fulfilled. But as well as fulfillment in the short term, what Isaiah says to here speaks to our predicament too. We're in a broken world, aren't we?

Where we're almost always our own worst enemies. How do we recover from the sin and mess that we make of our own lives? How do we come out from that devastation someone else has caused us?

How do we find hope in a broken world where we look to the God who has come to rescue us? The God who has sent a saviour to save us. He was able to save to the uttermost those who came to him.

So look at verses 3 to 5. Wonderful images here. Nothing stands in the way of God's salvation. Physical issues, getting God to Old Testament people home, were vast.

There were mountains, valleys, deserts, lack of water, of shade and shelter. Yet none of this seems an issue for God, does it? Isaiah pictures a massive divine road building program up more extensive than HS2.

[12:44] Mountains laid low, valleys filled up, a level path put down. It's picture language of course, but showing that when the time comes nothing would stop God saving his people and bringing them back.

And historically speaking, the exiles he wanted to return did so after 70 years of exile, others followed later. But spiritually speaking, of course, Isaiah is taking us to the cross. That's where the ultimate obstacle between us and our perfect holy God is taken away.

The need for sin to be punished and justice to be done is dealt with there by Jesus. Jesus. And that's the message we get to declare to the world.

Jesus has opened the way to glory. So spiritual exiles, sinners, failures can come home to God. And just as nothing can stand in God's way, so no one can obstruct God's will, verses 6 to 8.

Those Jews in Babylon must have thought the possibility of rescue, return, was impossible. After all, the Babylonians had ransacked the city, destroyed the temple, but what does Isaiah tell them about these powerful, this powerful Babylonian empire?

[14:01] Look at them. They're like grass. They're like flowers in the field. They're temporary. They're fragile. They're weak. Just as flowers pop up and they fade away quickly.

So these enemies of yours will do the same. And whilst, verse 8, their enemies will wither and fade, God's promises are certain. Indestructible, secure, utterly trustworthy.

No one, no power in heaven or earth can derail God's plans once they are announced. No wicked people or powerful leaders. They might seem impregnable, untouchable, all powerful, yet with a blow of God's breast, the enemies of God and God's people are gone while God's promises remain. That's a great encouragement, isn't it? Verses 9 to 11 should encourage us as well because they speak about the character of our God. Compassionate, redeeming, rescuing.

How is he described? A God of sovereign power, which means he has the ability and authority to intervene in his world. A God of justice whose recompense is with him.

[15:16] A God of compassion and mercy. The image there is beautiful, leading his flock tenderly like a loving shepherd. A God of tenderness and love, carrying those lambs, those battered, broken, weak ones close to his heart.

That's the character of our God. Gentle and lowly, kind and merciful. This is Jesus, isn't it? Described some 700 years before he came.

No wonder Isaiah calls on God's people to rest in and rejoice over the character of the God who comes to save them. If life is hard for you right now because of your own folly or sin in the past or because of the wickedness of others or the fallenness of the world, then be encouraged.

Our exile from the kingdom Jesus will one day bring is only temporary. temporary. The road back to God the Father has been leveled by Jesus.

The people in our way have no authority over Jesus and his love for you is enough to make you cry and sing as you experience its depth and gentleness and find yourself like the lambs in this passage wrapped up in the arms of Christ, holding you close to his heart, bringing you out of captivity and into the freedom of the children of God.

[16:40] Beautiful picture. So be encouraged. Banish your despair and fears. Take hold of the hand of the shepherd and start to come home. Okay, you say, that sounds really great day.

Thank you very much. But the world's a scary place. What about the might of whole nations, of other gods, of nature, of science, of worldly wisdom? Can I really commit myself to trust in God or are these just nice but empty promises?

We need to know that, don't we? Following Jesus means putting our entire life into his hands. It is a costly path. Our reading from Matthew chapter 10 told us that. As disciples of Jesus, we're to take up our cross.

We're to walk his way, live his way, love his way. Can we trust him? Can God really deliver? Well, that's what Isaiah deals with in this next chant, verses 12 to 26.

As he points to God's incomparable majesty, verses 12 to 14 speak of God's uniqueness. There is none like him, none compared to him.

[17:51] In terms of God's vastness and magnificence, God is unsurpassed. The world's oceans, they're in his hands. Like you pick up a bucket full of water on the beach.

But God picks up them all and holds them there. The size of the universe, nothing more than a hand breath. The vastness of matter, the weight of the mountains held between God's fingers.

Not that God has fingers, but you get the idea, don't you? The biggest, widest, heaviest, grandest things we think about, the things that loom large in our minds are nothing to God.

As for his wisdom, God is wisdom. He doesn't need to consult Google or an AI bot to work out the right thing to do. There is no divine privy council that debates things backwards and forwards.

God is wisdom. He needs to consult no one. He knows everything. He sets the measure of truth and goodness. He has no rivals and he knows no equals.

[18:52] And as for human might and power, such as the might of those great Old Testament empires like Babylon or maybe more, recent ones, the Soviet Union or China right now.

Well, what about them? Verses 13 to 17 tell us they're no obstacle. Compared to God, they're like a pinch of dust that makes no impression on the scales. The vast forests of Lebanon, which would burn all the animals of the land, would still not be a worthwhile sacrifice for God.

Such is his greatness. And as for the idols the nations followed, well, they might be very well made, beautifully crafted, gilded, painted, decorated with diamonds.

Yet despite their beauty, they have no power, no influence. They're not gods, just bits of art, things that need chaining down, pegging down to stop them toppling over.

How can they stand in the way of the one true God? They can't. In Isaiah's day, as parts of the world today, stars and planets were worshipped as powers in their own right.

[ 20 : 01 ] But they don't require worshipping any more than those crafted wooden idols. For the stars and planets in their vast array were put there by the hand of God. He spoke and there they were.

He called them and they came into being. All the movements of the heavens are not just subject to great scientific forces. God himself made them and put them in place, set them in motion and now holds them in place.

Verse 25, God asks Isaiah's listeners, who is his equal? The answer, no one and nothing. So cannot this God who brought the stars into being, who keeps them in motion, who calls them by their own name, can this God not save us when we go astray?

Might his arm not be long enough to reach us and bring us all the way home? Might his power, might it be able to overcome all the forces and powers of the nations?

Of course, of course it can. Isaiah wanted his first readers in exile and us here today to grasp this truth that when God gives his word, no power on heaven or earth or under the earth can resist him or get in the way of it coming to pass.

[ 21 : 21 ] And no matter how many times we've failed him, no matter how many times others have said that we are worthless, no matter how dark our night or deep our pit, nothing and no one can stop God's salvation and call made to us in Christ.

God's power and might and authority are incomparable. Sometimes we know that in our heads but we don't live like it in our hearts.

So think of Peter going out on the water or the lake. He hears Jesus' voice, he goes out but what does he do? Well, he takes his eyes off Jesus and he sees the waves and starts to get petrified and so he sinks.

Sometimes too we can take our eyes off Jesus and look at the problem and not our saviour. That's easily done. That's easily done. But in the midst of those storms, if our eyes are on the problem or on ourselves or on others who mock our faith then we will sink and doubt and fear.

But if our eyes are on Christ when no waves can stop us, we will find that our way has been levelled. Jesus is holding us by our hand and leading us home.

[ 22 : 42 ] So where are your eyes this morning? Are they on the battles you're facing, the issues that surround you, the difficulties in the world? Or are they on the one who died to wash you clean?

Sometimes we can think that science has got all the answers and we doubt that the scriptures are true. Or we see the other gods that other people worship and think that maybe, well, maybe there are other powers here that I need to be frightened of.

Not a bit of it. God is supreme over all. Let us fix our eyes on Christ. Let us trust his promises and let him lead us home.

Lastly, verses 27 to 31. Much more briefly this time, God's answer to the fearful. With all those encouragements, you might have expected Isaiah's chapter here to end with praise and a long line of hallelujahs, but instead he recognises that sometimes we hear good news and we think, that's wonderful, but it doesn't apply to me.

It applies to everyone else, but not me. It's an eeyore, glass half empty, pessimistic attitude. There's a tax cut coming, oh yeah, but it won't apply to people in my situation.

[ 24 : 01 ] The economy is booming, there's bound to be jobs, but there won't be one for me with my skill set. God's grace sounds wonderful, but it won't reach me.

I'm too lost, I'm too weak, I've been forgotten, I've been passed by on the other sides. You sometimes feel like that? The blessings that God has are for other people but not for you?

Then listen to how Isaiah finishes this great chapter. First there's a reminder in verse 28 that God's power and wisdom never run dry. If you ever queued up for an ice cream or a cold drink on a hot day and you get to the end of the queue, and the guy closes the hat.

Sorry, we're sold out. What a disappointment. God isn't like that. He has power to save all who come. He has wisdom for all, however long we are in coming.

He does not grow tired or weary. He won't run out of grace or steam before he gets to you. In fact, the wearier you are, the weaker you feel, the more easily God is able to strengthen you and provide for your needs.

[ 25 : 11 ] It's to the weary that God gives strength, the weak he equips with his power. Those who feel strong and secure on their own times won't come to God for aid. We think we're all right on our own. Those who feel equipped for the challenges ahead won't ask for help.

But those who do, the weak and the weary, the tired and the stressed, the broken, the overlooked ones, well, if they look to the Lord, how does he react?

Verse 31, those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint. You feeling the weight of your sin and folly this morning, sinking perhaps under guilt and shame, then come to Jesus.

Come to him, confess your sins to him and he will forgive you and wash you clean. You feeling squashed by the world or the behaviour of others, feeling trapped and hopeless, helpless to change anything.

Well, come to Jesus. Place yourself in his caring arms. Let him lead you into new pastures and bring you home. Does the world frighten you?

[ 26 : 24 ] Do you look to the future and think that it all looks bleak? Well, fix your eyes again on Christ. Look to the cross, see his victory there over the powers of sin and death and this world and then cast your eyes past the cross to the far horizon.

See the kingdom that Jesus will one day bring into being. Find your hope renewed in Jesus today. Isaiah chapter 40 is a beautiful chapter. It's words of comfort and hope, of forgiveness and pardon, of grace and welcome and they are for you this morning.

For you this morning and for all those who know they are weak and weary. Let's take them to hard ourselves and let's take them out to those who need their hope renewed.

Amen.