

Isaiah 40

Comfort for God's people

1. Introduction

God's people have been carried into exile. The Promised Land has been conquered and the inhabitants have been forced from their homes. There appears to be no future for the land or the people.

Has God forgotten his people?

It is understandable that the Israelites raise this question. We ourselves sometimes struggle with doubts about God's way. When there are troubles in our life, we can have scores of questions: Does God really care for us, why does he allow this to happen? Doubts about God's care for his people form the setting of this chapter in Isaiah. But God overcomes these questions by pointing to his wisdom, power and mercy. God does not let go of his people even though they more than deserved it because of their sins. But in love for his people, he again opens a way to the future.

2. General remarks

1. Who are addressed here?

Isaiah 40 begins with the words, "Comfort, comfort my people". Comforters have to encourage Jerusalem. Why does Jerusalem need to be encouraged? In what difficult circumstances do God's people find themselves?

In the first part of Isaiah we find prophecies that especially relate to Isaiah's own time. The second part takes us to a different era.

We now find the people living in very different circumstances. In Isaiah 39 the exile is foretold. In Isaiah 40-66 the exile has become a fact. We hear Isaiah speak that her warfare is ended and that her iniquity is pardoned (Isaiah 40:2). Isaiah also lets the people speak: "Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"?" (Isaiah 40:27) These words reveal how discouraged the people are: Surely God has forgotten his people.

Israel is doomed. It has been trampled underfoot by the world powers, first Assyria, then Babylon. There is no hope for the future.

In this time of exile, in a seemingly hopeless situation, Isaiah may speak words of comfort. The LORD, who indeed has punished his people severely, returns to his people. He will restore, he will send salvation.

God is indeed able to do that. Israel may be an insignificant nation compared to the world powers, but the God of Israel is incomparable. He is the Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth. The awesome

power of God is emphasized here to comfort the people: he is *your* God (note the possessive pronoun, see vv. 1, 3, 8, 9).

We do not know for sure when the people heard these words of Isaiah. They may have heard already before the exile that a time of restoration would come again for them. It is also possible that these words were kept until the time when the exile was already a fact. (cf. Introduction in Outline 1)

2. A great perspective

In Chapter 40-66 Isaiah often prophesies about the coming salvation. We should not limit that salvation to the return from exile. The goal has not been reached when Israel once again lives in the Promised Land. Living again in the Promised Land has a different purpose. Israel will be restored as a nation because the LORD wants the Messiah to come forth from them.

Restoration in the national-political sense was actually very limited. Zedekiah was the last king of David's house to sit on the throne in Jerusalem. Foreign powers reigned over Israel after the exile.

But this limited restoration is sufficient for what God has in mind for his people: according to the promise of old, God's Son will be born from the tribe of Judah in the town of Bethlehem. The fulfillment of this promise is the focus of the temporary restoration of Israel as a nation.

The words of Isaiah have a wide scope. It is amazing how often his words, exactly from the second part of his prophecy, are quoted in the New Testament and applied to Christ. When we wonder what Isaiah is referring to, we will do well to keep this greater perspective in mind.

3. Isaiah called again?

Verse 1-11 is often explained in the sense that we are dealing here with the calling of a prophet. We read about Isaiah's call in Chapter 6. But here a new prophet is supposed to have been called to prophesy. Especially those who are of the opinion that Chapter 40-66 was not written by Isaiah will defend this (see Outline 1, Section 1).

Even though it is not impossible that we may also find words of Isaiah's disciples in the book of Isaiah, that does not imply that we are dealing here with the calling of a new prophet. It is also possible that after the reign of king Hezekiah, for some time Isaiah had been inactive as a prophet, and that after this time God calls him again to prophesy because he has new things to tell and uses Isaiah for that purpose.

A certain time difference between prophecies could also explain the difference in subject and style between the first and second part.

4. Corresponding passages in the book of Isaiah

In this first chapter of the second part of Isaiah some themes recur in the following chapters. Repeatedly Isaiah speaks of the *comfort*, which God offers his people (cf. 49:13; 51:3, 12; 52:9; 66:13).

Also the *messenger of good tidings* comes back time and again in the following chapters (see 41:27 and 52:7). Isaiah also emphasizes repeatedly the incomparable *omnipotence* of God, which is apparent in particular in the creation and government of all things (cf. 42:5; 44:24ff.; 45:12, 18ff.).

3. Annotations to the text

There are two clearly distinguished parts in Isaiah 40. The first part, verse 1-11, may be seen as an introduction to the entire second section of Isaiah. The name “book of comfort” for Isaiah 40-66 is taken from the first words of this section. In the second part, verse 12-31, Isaiah speaks words of encouragement to the people with regard to the uniqueness of God.

Verse 1-2

Here the word “comfort” is not a noun, but an imperative form of the verb “to comfort.” God commands others to comfort his people. We cannot be certain who receives the command to comfort. We should in the first place think of Isaiah himself because the second part of his book is full of words of comfort. But together with and also after Isaiah, other prophets may speak words of comfort as well. After a time of oppression God will again bring salvation to his people. The word “comfort” does not only refer to the speaking of comforting words; comfort also means that God is going to do something about the suffering of the people.

The comforters are allowed to encourage Jerusalem. Everyone has to hear the good news; let it be shouted from the rooftops: “The time of suffering is finished!” We have to understand the “time of suffering” as the time that Israel was in exile. That time has come to an end, for Israel has paid double for her sins.

Since it is Christ who pays for our sins, we should not interpret this paying for sins too literally. God punishes the sins of his people with exile, in order to bring them back on the right path.

Verse 3-5

After a time of suffering comes a time of restoration: the LORD returns to his people, but is the way prepared for him? “Hear, someone calls, prepare the way of the LORD in the desert,” a herald going before the king.

Who does the calling is not immediately clear here. However, this text is quoted in the gospels and refers to John the Baptist, in Matthew 3:3, “This is he [John the Baptist] who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah ...” (cf. Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23; also Malachi 3:1). The four evangelists leave no doubt that Isaiah speaks here of John the Baptist. Is Isaiah directly pointing to John the Baptist? It is clear that the LORD must find the way prepared when he comes to redeem his people. The same is true also when he comes to seek his people to redeem them after the exile. But again, we should not think of this restoration, which God gives after the exile, in a limited sense. God restores his people in order to fulfil his promise about the Messiah. John the Baptist is his herald par excellence.

When these verses are explained, reference is often made to the exodus of Israel out of Egypt and their subsequent trek through the desert. But this comparison is not valid. It is not the people who are travelling through the desert, but it is God who through the desert is coming to his people. This is not a literal desert but refers to the spiritual condition of the people. The way has to be prepared, in other words, the people have to repent. Also here we may again point to the work of John the Baptist, who teaches the people about their sins and calls them to repentance and to prepare themselves for the

coming of Christ.

The LORD will come on the way prepared for him, and his glory shall be revealed. His majesty, the power of his work, shall become visible to all *living* (literally: "all flesh"). Without a doubt, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Verse 6-8

The meaning of these verses within the context is difficult to determine. Someone gives the order to cry out. We can think of a voice from heaven. Isaiah must be the one who is called, for he answers, "What shall I call?" Perhaps we should interpret this question as: What is there left to proclaim in this situation? Is it not hopeless? Humanly speaking, yes! Israel is an insignificant nation; it is as grass that withers, as a flower that fades. That applies not only to Israel, but to Babylon and other nations as well. No nation can stand when the breath of God goes over them. Then there is only one way out: to trust in the LORD.

"His word endures forever." That does not just refer to the spoken words, for the LORD has the power to make his words come true. Nothing and no one can stop him. These words of Isaiah come back time and again in the Scriptures (cf. Job 14:2; Psalm 103:15; 1 Peter 1:24-25). Over against the changeability of man is the eternal and never changing God.

Verse 9-11

Isaiah calls "Zion" and "Jerusalem" to proclaim the glad tidings. Jerusalem and Zion are personified here, and from this central point in Judah their voice is to go out to the other cities. For "messenger of glad tidings", compare 41:27 and 52:7, and note how 60:6 and 61:1 use the word in a slightly different form.

The message of the glad tidings is that the LORD shall come and his reward is with him (cf. v.2). His recompense and reward are signs that God takes away the calamities that have befallen the people. In these verses we see not only God's awesome power by which he works redemption, but also his tender mercy. With his strong arm he delivers them and continues to lead them with his tender, loving care and careful attention to everything that is needed.

Verse 12 begins the second part of Chapter 40. Verse 12-26 may be considered an introduction to verse 27-31. The latter verses reveal that Israel has doubts about the LORD's way. But the God who has just been portrayed as wise and almighty, certainly is concerned about his people.

Verse 12-14

In this section only questions are asked. What answer should be given? To the question in verse 12, the answer could be God. But since the questions in verses 13 and 14 can only be answered with no one, it makes sense to give the same answer to the questions in verse 12. Creation cannot be measured. The "hollow of a hand", a "breadth" (the distance from the end of the thumb to the end of the little finger of a spread hand, a span), a "measure" (a small measuring unit) and the "scales" or a "balance", are all instruments used in daily life. They are absolutely useless for measuring God's work.

Also God's wisdom cannot be measured. Can God consult anyone who is wiser than he himself? Should

his Spirit seek advice from human intelligence, so that human beings can show God the way? All these questions must be answered with a resounding *no*: no one can or needs to advise God.

Because of God's omnipotence and wisdom, we do not have to have any doubt at all about the work of the LORD. Would he not know how to lead his people by his almighty power? Compare Romans 11:34 where these words are quoted in connection with God's work of election and reprobation (see also 1 Corinthians 2:10-11,16).

Verse 15-17

God's greatness is evident also when we compare "nations" to him. No matter how powerful, the nations are nothing compared to God. God regards them as worthless and less than nothing. This does not mean that he does not care about them, but that God far surpasses them in power.

Any thought of being able to influence God with sacrifices should quickly be abandoned: all the trees of *Lebanon*, an extremely dense mountain forest, are not enough to serve as *firewood* for sacrifices. All the animals of that forest are not sufficient for "burnt offerings". God is not dependent on what people offer him.

In this section we again have to bear in mind Israel's situation: they were trampled under foot by the world powers. But what do these powers amount to when we realize who our God is?

Verse 18-20

Although it is not easy to decide whether verse 18 belongs with the preceding or the following verses, it does not make much difference. This verse expresses the theme of the whole section, that God is incomparable to anyone or anything whether they are nations or idols (see also v.25).

Expensive and beautifully made idols are nothing compared to God.

The *chains* may refer to decorations or chains to anchor the idols to their pedestals in case they would topple. Compare that to God who "sits enthroned above the circle of the earth" (v.22).

Verse 21-24

Here Isaiah points again to the greatness of God. He questions God's people about their ignorance and misconceptions: "Do you not know...?" Indeed they did not realize God's great power or his intentions. But the God of Israel is enthroned high above the earth and from heaven looks down on the swarming activity of men. Even the most powerful on earth are nothing compared to him; the greatest among them are like a flower of the field: tomorrow they are no more (cf. vv. 6-8). These words are meant to make Israel trust again while they are oppressed by foreign powers.

Verse 25-26

Verse 25 is actually a repetition of verse 18 and stresses, by pointing to the starry heavens, that God cannot be compared to anything or anyone. God has created the innumerable celestial bodies, which are still under his dominion and all obey his will. If you take the time to look at the stars you can't help but be impressed by the infinite power of God.

Isaiah calls God the “Holy One”. He often uses this name for God, especially when he calls God the “Holy One of Israel” (look it up in a concordance). This name expresses that God truly is God, majestic, highly exalted, and untouchable.

Verse 27-31

This section is actually the pastoral conclusion of the second part of Isaiah 40. From the greatness of God, the Israelites may draw conclusions for themselves.

The tone of these verses is somewhat reproachful. “Jacob” (Israel) is under the impression that God has forgotten them: “My way is hidden from the LORD.” Surely God does not see that we are living in exile, God does not defend our cause. Isaiah uses the old name “Jacob”, which shows that God’s way with his people goes back a long way. Even though they cannot scrutinize God’s way, he certainly does not abandon his people, not even when it seems that way. He, who never suffers from weariness, is always a source of strength for those who are waiting for him.

It is not a question of physical or political power, for “young men” the picture of strength, grow weary, while “those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength”. There is hope for God’s powerless people, if only they put their trust in God.

The eagle is used here as the symbol of tireless strength (see also Psalm 103:5).

4. The meaning for us today

The words of Isaiah 40 have not lost their power. Also today there can be grave doubts about God’s providence. Surely, when we look at the situation in our own country, we may have burning questions regarding the future of the church. Church attendance is rapidly decreasing while secularization is increasing. Christian norms and values are fast disappearing in our society. Those who want to live according to God’s Word are more and more a minority. Does God not defend his church anymore? Is the church not trampled underfoot by the world?

Isaiah calls on us not to doubt God’s government. We cannot examine or verify God’s rule over creation and the world. His wisdom is immeasurable. How then could we criticize him and demand that he gives account? An unlimited trust in this God is always required. There is more than what we can see or experience. God knows what he is doing. In all things he remains the almighty God for his people. For a while the church may be very small and seem to have disappeared, but God preserves her against the raging of the whole world. Christ the King cannot be without subjects (cf. BC, Art. 27).

This may give us confidence for the future. The continued existence of God’s people does not depend on human efforts. God himself takes care of his people and comes to save them. To this coming of the LORD we may look forward. He will bring full salvation and put an end to the suffering and oppression of his people.

Let us then make sure that the LORD is not hindered by us, but that we may confidently look forward to his coming. When we repent from our sins and seek God with all our heart, we are preparing the way

for him to come to us with salvation. The voice of the herald has sounded!

5. Suggestions for the introduction and preparatory study

1. Use a concordance to find the places where Isaiah uses the word *comfort*, and try to explain how we may apply this comfort practically.
2. Discuss the validity of a twofold fulfillment of prophecy: an immediate or initial, and the final and definite fulfillment.
3. Discuss the significance of John the Baptist and the connection between his work and the words of Isaiah in the first part of Chapter 40.
4. Use a concordance to understand uses of the words *create*, *creator*, and *form* in the book of Isaiah. Explain why Isaiah speaks repeatedly about God's work of creation.
5. Use some easy to understand literature about the universe to gain an understanding of what Isaiah says about the starry firmament and tell something about numbers, measurements, and distances within the universe. Explain what comfort this gave to God's people then and to us today.

6. Ideas for the discussion

1. May we still say today that for certain sins God inflicts temporal punishments on his people or on someone personally? Or is this something of the old covenant only and are these punishments a thing of the past, since Christ has suffered for us?
2. Isaiah speaks of the way that has to be prepared for God. We are waiting for the second coming of Christ. How should we be busy preparing the way for him?
3. Are we allowed to criticize God's work or his guidance in our life, and to what extent (cf. vv. 12-14)?
4. What are the similarities and/or differences between the exodus from Egypt and the return from Babylon?
5. Isaiah was allowed to speak words of comfort to the people of Israel in straitened circumstances. May we apply these words to God's children who suffer from oppression today? May we apply these words in general to anyone who suffers?
6. Isaiah speaks extensively about God's omnipotence. God's people have to be thoroughly aware of this almighty power. Do we realize that sufficiently? How can we develop a greater awe for God, and for what purpose?