

Isaiah 40–66

An Introductory Overview
—by Rev. Kevin M Duffy—

I have been asked to introduce twenty-seven of the most theologically dense, poetically compelling, and prophetically significant chapters of Hebrew scripture in the entire canon—Isaiah 40–66. These chapters serve as a prophetic foundation to most of the New Testament. It was in Isaiah that Jesus recognized His calling; that John the Baptist found his ministry; that Paul received the understanding of the New Creation, and that the writers of the gospels learned the significance of the story of Jesus. There is so much revelation, wisdom, encouragement and education in Isaiah that no one could begin to unpack its riches in a day, a week, a month or a year, let alone in a morning.

As you begin this study, you'll notice that the territory you'll cover will look and feel quite different from the territory you studied in the first thirty-nine chapters. Nonetheless, it is all of a piece with the principle theme of Isaiah: *the Lord's deliverance of Jerusalem*. Those first thirty-nine chapters overwhelm us with pronouncements of God's judgment on the nations, on Israel and on Judah. Yet even in that judgment there was a message of redemption. In Isaiah 5:1–27:13, we learned how God delivered His people from the Aramean/Ephramite coalition. Then 28:1–38:37, we read of the overthrow of Assyria. Nonetheless, as we turn the pages to the start of chapter 40, we encounter Judah in her deepest crisis—in the darkest hour in Israel's life and history, the captivity in Babylon.

The Setting

Imagine the scene: God's people are in a foreign land, held captive against their will. They have been relocated to a dry, dusty, unproductive place, so different from the fertile, verdant land of promise. The meager crops they produce require enormous effort; every day they must carry water from the river to water the crops, only to see the hot sun bake them dry in minutes. At night they sat under the stars, frightened by the prospects of the future. The camp reverberated with the cries of women, children, and yes, even men, lamenting their loss and bewailing their hurts.

It hadn't always been like this. After all, they were Israelites, the people of God, specially chosen out of all nations, heirs to the covenants of peace, protection and prosperity. They had known the Almighty from their earliest days; they worshipped in the most Holy Temple in the world, where the

Almighty had promised His eyes would reside forever. Yes, the Almighty, the Creator, *El-Shaddai* was **their** God. He had revealed Himself to **their** fathers and entrusted them with His Word of revelation.

God had sworn an oath to their fathers to give them the land of Canaan, and He helped them dispossess the Canaanites and take the land for an inheritance. Their fathers were once a small, insignificant tribe of wandering Arameans; yet God had made them into a mighty nation who possessed a country of their own in which to worship the Most High.

Though many other nations surrounded them, they had stood confident in the Lord's protection. God had a special plan for their nation—He had delivered them from a people that enslaved them and brought them to a land where they could make a new beginning. Judah watched as the Assyrians swept in and carried off their brethren to the north, but *those tribes* had despised the temple, the Law and its sacrifices and turned their backs on the Most High. They “deserved” exile... but now here Judah sat broken and impoverished, by the banks of a river in Babylon, listening to the cries of all those who were forcibly marched off their farms and out of their homes. How many of the people had died in the war, or wasted away in the siege that the Chaldeans laid out against Jerusalem. *Oh, Jerusalem—the Holy City, the city of our God and kings, how you were spoiled by the Chaldeans!* They destroyed the temple and robbed the riches of the heart of the nation. Suddenly there was no more Temple, no more sacrifice offered for the nation or the people. Priests were killed; the king locked up a prisoner.

Where was God? Why had he forsaken them? No doubt the people sat in the night stifling their anguished cries, remembering the song the psalmist sang on the last Shabbat (Ps. 137):

*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, “Sing us
one of the songs of Zion!”
How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?*

*If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!
Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set
Jerusalem above my highest joy!*

Into this dark, dangerous, desperate time, the words of God spoken by the prophet Isaiah (40:1–5) drifted sweetly through the air:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Nonetheless, as they sit in the dust of captivity, where the splendors of the Temple had become nothing but mythology for their children, and the beauty of the land nothing more than a failing memory—these exiles began to wonder. Will God deliver us? *Can* God deliver us? Does He want anything to do with us? And if He does, how will He deliver us? And into what will He bring us? These are the questions—and the complaints—that God answers in Isaiah 40–66.

The Story

There are a couple of points we need to remember in order to correctly understand this section of Isaiah. First, because it is prophecy, we need to appreciate that there is more than one horizon of interpretation. There is the horizon of the prophet and his first audience—therefore the words have an immediate application to those who first hear them. For those Israelites, Isaiah's prophecy held out hope of a deliverance from the bondage of Babylon.

Yet as the word of God, Isaiah's prophecy also has horizons of future fulfillments. Isaiah's words unfold a vision of a deliverance that transcends the temporal deliverance of Judah from Babylon. The liberation described in Isaiah 40–66 calls for people to come out from all the tribes and tongues and nations of the earth, and to be gathered together into a new people of God. Isaiah describes how this *new people* will then celebrate a *new religion* in a *new Jerusalem*, which will be the central city of an entirely *new creation*, consisting of a *new heavens* and a *new earth*.

The story told in Isaiah 40–66 contains numerous echoes of the foundation narrative of Israel—the Exodus from Egypt. Yet Isaiah's vision far transcends that original story. In Isaiah's telling, there is something greater than Moses, Aaron and the Pillar of Cloud and Fire at work amidst the people. Their journey is somehow greater than that first journey to Mt Sinai and across the river Jordan. This second exodus transcends the first. So in Isaiah 40–66, the prophet encourages the captives in Babylon by reminding them that the Lord has delivered them in the past. Yet he goes

beyond those memories to offer them a vision for the future, a future that moves out and beyond their own lifetimes to encompass the very end of days.

Highlights from Isaiah 40–66

There are a variety of ways to outline and organize the material in Isaiah 40–66, yet I want to suggest an organization displays the work of the entire Godhead in this great second exodus of God's people. In response to the concerns and questions of His people held captive in Babylon, God describes the activity of each member of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—in His own section: God the Father in Isaiah 40–48; God the Son, in Isaiah 49–55; and God the Holy Spirit in Isaiah 56–66.

God the Father

To anyone who wonders if God is able to redeem and rescue His people, Isaiah answers an unqualified yes! In Isaiah 40 gives us a powerful picture of the God of Israel, as *the* source of *all* power and strength. Obviously Israel's God is able to deliver His people.

In 40:9–11, Isaiah describes God as having strength and authority (*arm*); *reward* and *recompense* suggest that God The fair and just (v. 10). The God who comforts Israel is strong and powerful, a fair and just ruler. His vision continues with an image of the shepherd, teaching us that this strong and mighty God is also tender and loving, attentive to other's needs and capable of gentleness with the weak (v. 11).

The God that will redeem Israel, Isaiah continues, this God is the Creator! (v. 11) God is not just an authority figure, a powerful being, a tender lover or a compassionate, just judge. He is the Creator of all. And He is entirely sufficient in Himself (v. 13). The NIV captures this in its translation: "*Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor?*" Obviously the answer is no one! Isaiah continues emphasizing the extent of God's wisdom and knowledge in v. 14—God is omniscient. This is the God who comforts Israel—this is the God who will deliver them.

Isaiah goes on to show how God towers over any power or entity known to humanity. He tells us that before God, the nations are nothing (vv. 15–17). Nothing crafted by the hands or imagination of men compares with God (vv. 18–20). And nothing under heaven or earth can stop the plans and

purposes of God (vv. 21–26). God scolds those who wonder if He is willing or able to deliver them (vv. 27–28). Therefore, the Israelites should be comforted, for their deliverance will come from God.

Obviously, this was wonderful news to those captive Israelites in Babylon; but it is also tremendous news for us today, for we too are held captive in a different Babylon. These opening chapters of Isaiah 40–66 remind us, even as they first taught the Israelites, that deliverance does not come from men or nations, but from God alone. And our God is more than able to redeem us. And yet the exiles still wonder; how will God redeem us? How will He deliver His people from Babylon? God answers through the prophet Isaiah—He'll redeem us through His Servant.

God The Son

Isaiah 49–55 is characterized by the repeated appearance of what are called *Servant Songs*. These songs—psalms, if you will—are descriptions of the Lord's *Agent of Salvation*. While they are found predominantly within this section, the first song comes in chapter 42. There the nation of Israel is identified as the Servant of the Lord. However, the passage goes on to state that Israel fails in that role (42:18–20). As Isaiah's visions move forward, the Servant is particularized; now the nation could not fit the Servant's description. The Servant had to be an individual person. Yet that person had to be quite special, for as Isaiah continues, he shows us that the Servant is closely united with the Lord God Himself.

Many interpretive difficulties surround the servant songs; they are conveyed with obscure language, befitting descriptions of mystery. Because of this, any attempt to determine the identity of Servant was ultimately frustrated. That shouldn't surprise us; we know that it takes faith to recognize the Son of God! It was Jesus, the Son of God, who fulfilled the prophecies of the Servant, the Agent of God's deliverance of His people.

Isaiah 49:1–6 tells us a lot about the Servant: he is *from* Israel (v. 3), called by God to *redeem* Israel (v. 5) **and** to save the nations (6). We can hear in that verse the source of Jesus' own self-understanding—*"I am the light of the world"* (John 8:12). We also learn that the Servant works with the Word (v. 2). The rest of chapter 49 unpacks that extent of the Servant's work; it involves the restoration of Israel (49:8–13) and the fulfillment of the promise to Zion (49:14–26).

Isaiah 50:4–9 teaches us more about the Servant’s work. Interestingly, we discover that the work involves rejection and suffering. The servant is characterized as a disciple of God (vv. 4–5), whose work involves suffering (vv. 6–7), and yet who will eventually be vindicated by God (vv. 8–9). Now stop and think of these traits. Can you appreciate how they might contradict someone’s view of the Messiah? How could the redeemer, the deliverer, suffer and require vindication? No wonder no one recognized Christ!

But then again, God said that no one would recognize the Servant. The greatest of the Servant Songs reveals that in its opening verses (53:1–3). No one recognized Jesus, no matter how we might idealize Him in our minds. Yet again, it is hard to imagine that anyone would recognize the Servant as Messiah given the picture in 53:4–6. In this section Isaiah paints a picture of the Cross, the place of the Great Exchange, where all the penalties that were due humanity were laid upon Christ—the Agent of God’s Salvation. This extraordinary passage conveys Isaiah’s vision into the Cross of Calvary, written some 700 years before the time of Christ. Isaiah sees with the eyes of the Spirit. He does not see what the disciples saw; Isaiah did not see what happened to Jesus in the “natural.” Instead, he sees beyond the veil into the real meaning of Christ’s death. In 52:13–15 Isaiah “sees” the sin of the entire world placed upon Christ Jesus, which so corrupted, polluted and disfigured Him, that he is rendered into something less than human. That is the effect of sin; it dehumanizes humanity. That is the devil’s objective; for humanity is made in the image of God; and the only way the devil can harm God is to spoil His image. **Selah**....

God laid upon the Servant the iniquity of the world, so that the world through Him might be delivered. The work of God the Son is as the Lamb slain for the Second Exodus. He works the Father’s plan of redemption for His people.

God the Holy Spirit

Once God’s people are delivered and restored to relationship with God through the plan of God and the work of Christ, they require a new habitation—a new land. This land must be something greater than the land of Canaan. Thus, as Isaiah 40–66 ends, God begins to reveal the “what and where” of this deliverance. In the plan of God, the “what and where” is a *new creation*, a new heavens

and a new earth with a *new Jerusalem*. And so we encounter the work of the third member of the Godhead—the Holy Spirit, who is the Creative Light, Force and Power of God.

Creation language dominates passages in these closing prophecies of Isaiah. Look at Isaiah 60:1–5. These verses echo the opening verses of Genesis—can you hear it—*light arising on the darkness covering the face of the earth*? The light represents God and his heavenly glory. This is God breaking in to a(nother) dark world and creating abundance and wealth for His people.

The New Creation is described in more detail in Is. 65:17–25. This is the destination of the Second Exodus. This is the destination of all the people God delivers from captivity in this world.

Conclusion

In your study of Isaiah 1–39, you have spent a lot of time in the language of judgment and woe, ending at Israel's darkest hour—the captivity in Babylon. Demoralized, destroyed, the people wonder if there will ever be a way for them to be redeemed. And into their despair, God spoke a word of hope through Isaiah—*Be comforted, my people, for I the Lord God Creator of Heaven and Earth—I will redeem and rescue you!*

As you study Isaiah 40–66, remember the multiple horizons of interpretation that must be brought to the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. The words had an immediate fulfillment and application, *yet they also contain the hope of yet future fulfillment*. Which means that these are not old stories having little significance or relevance to our life. This is the Word of God spoken to you today, right here at KPC, right here in Virginia Beach.

You will encounter each member of the Godhead in these prophecies of Isaiah. Do not forget: upon entering the presence of God, you are always expected to worship. Take the time to make this time of study a time of worship. Take the time to pray your way through this material. You are stepping onto holy ground, ground carefully read, recited, prayed over, and meditated on, by Jesus, John the Baptist, Paul, John Mark, Luke, Matthew, and scores of other early church fathers and saints throughout history. You can travel through these chapters without prayer, without spending quiet time before the Lord, and you will learn the story. You will accumulate another book of notes, but you'll miss the meaning. Meaning is a product of revelation, and revelation comes from the Holy Spirit. And it takes patience, faith and quiet to hear the voice of the Spirit. Wait on Him to hear His voice.