

Isaiah 40 notes

Isaiah 40 is a turning point in the book of Isaiah. The contrast of its opening words with the proclamations of judgement in the preceding chapters is stark. Chapters 40-55 are addressed to the exiled nation. Isaiah's prophecies of the consequence of Israel's disobedience (39.5-7) would become reality as the people were carried off to Babylon, to exile (see psalm 137). Verse 27 is a pivotal verse and records the Israelites cry – It seems as if God is defeated or has forgotten them. They are suffering alone. Isaiah 40 is God's response.

It's important to get your group to flick through previous chapters, remind themselves what we learned of God's holiness and justice in chapters 1, 2 and 6. The people's rebellion against God has been punished – the land (the result of God's covenant promise – see Deuteronomy 30.11-20, also 28).

Try to imagine what it must have been like – things seemed hopeless, and into that situation God offers hope. Throughout it does seem as if Isaiah/God uses sarcasm

1-11 God calls His people back

The language is personal as God calls His people back into a loving relationship with him.

1-2 Tender grace. God speaks tenderly (language of romance) offering grace to His people – Isaiah's message of hope is that they have served their sentence, God offers grace, the slate is wiped clean. Instead of judgement, in the midst of hardship and exile God offers his comfort. The language reminds us of Jesus description of the Holy Spirit as comforter.

3-5 Preparing the way. God promises action to demonstrate his grace and we must respond. These words claimed by John the Baptist (Luke 3.3-6, Mark 1.2-3) in preparing the way for Jesus. Jesus instituted an upside down kingdom where with faith anything is possible (v4 valley raised up, mountain made low). The glory of the LORD will be seen in delivering his people from exile but ultimately in Jesus (John 1.14) as he delivers us from exile out of God's presence and welcomes us back in. We join in preparing others for the message of Jesus and ultimately in preparing for His return.

6-8 A reminder of faithfulness. What is the prophet to declare? Compared to the transience of life, God's word (and goodness) endures forever. While everything may pass away God is faithful – sometimes its only is the crises we remember this. Again see John the Baptist.

9-11 Shout it out! The good news needs to be declared to the people – they need to hear. And who is the God who offers hope and grace? He is the powerful sovereign (all powerful, in control of history) victorious Yahweh of Isaiah 6, and also the gentle shepherd caring for each of his sheep individually – see Psalm 23, John 10 who risks his life for the sheep's protection.

12-31 Who is God?

Isaiah ridicules a small idea of god, flagging faith and idol worship. The awesome Yahweh created us, reigns over us and cares for us. The tone is semi-mocking and sarcastic reminding them (and us) who God is. The poem climaxes with v31 where human imaginings (18) and doubts (27) give way to humble expectancy of live lived under God.

12-20 Creator

Matter/physical world (12), our minds/knowledge (13-14) and living creatures (15-17 including nations seen as pinnacle of power and might) are put in their place before the creator as we are given a God's eye perspective of His creation Isaiah . In contrast with God in his majesty Isaiah ridicules the poverty of the idols the people worship.

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18-20 become all the more ridiculous when flanked by 2 passages full of the glory of God, yet idols and their 'easiness' entrap us still.

It may be an idea to write 18-20 in modern day terms.

21-26 The God who reigns

With poetry Isaiah continues to reinforce the awesomeness of God on His throne (chapter 6) in control. When it seems as if evil is triumphing we need to remember the awesome power of the one who knows each star by name, who is eternal, and sovereign over history. This is our God.

28-31 The God who cares and sustains

Isaiah's poem comes to a practical climax, the God who names the stars is not removed, and cares most of all for us – the summit of his creation. (in response to the questions of 27). The wrong way to understand God's transcendence is that he is too great to care. God cares and sustains and will never fail (v28). This is a gentle rebuke for not trusting God's strength. Our response should be to put our hope and trust in him. The reminder of human frailty in 30 clears the way for trust and transcending natural resources, with divine strength. Renew gives the idea of exchanging our strength for God's. This divine strength overcomes in 3 metaphors – one natural impossibility, two natural weaknesses are overcome. Interestingly it ends with the idea of steady progress.

The Bible Study

Once again there is a lot to this. It is important to understand what it meant for the people it was written to – it enhances our understanding when we come to apply it to our situation.

We read this passage in the light of Jesus. With much Old Testament prophecy there are levels of fulfilment. In 3-11 it was fulfilled in the return from exile, and ultimately in the coming of Jesus. However we also play our part in its fulfillment as Jesus said "As the Father has sent me, so I send you". In Jesus God's kingdom (rule in the world, in our lives) has come but will only come completely when Jesus returns and every knee bows and acknowledges Him as Lord. We are still preparing people's heart for the message of Jesus, we are preparing for His second coming, we are to declare the good news from the rooftops. In this context of the call to declare it is important that we know and experience God's comfort – as the task comes with suffering and hardship, and in the face of disappointment and opposition we need to remember God is sovereign and will complete the task. Often we need comforted and pastored, we need the words of Psalm 23, to be carried close to our good shepherd's heart. However, often we need forcibly reminded of the truth, and need to speak truth to each other in the way Isaiah does in 12-31, pointing out the absurdity of our sin- our refusal of God's glory and settling for crap instead.

It's a good idea to come up with a few practical actions as a result of this bible study – it may be setting up prayer triplets, taking time each week to pray for what's happening in each others lives, memorising some of the verses to remind ourselves who God is, having a worship slot each week for a few minutes where you remind each other who God is, how you will practically (and creatively) share this comfort and good news with people around you – not just talk about it but come up with how you will do it and when.