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# Isaiah Series 2

## Lesson 9

### “Isaiah 40:1-17”

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**Objective** - To understand the meaning of specified passage from Isaiah for both the original audience, and what it came to mean to those that came later; especially to the Jews of the first century A. D. The passages were specifically selected because of their usage in the Gospel of Mark, either as direct quotes, or as allusions. The goal is to understand this material better in its original context, to its original audience, and in the fall to be able to examine the Gospel of Mark with a better understanding of the role of Isaiah in the theology of that Gospel and of the church.

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**Materials** - Commentaries, Journal articles, Targums, Books.

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**Procedures**

1. We will seek to set the basic background for the writing of the book of Isaiah.
2. Choose the texts that are applicable to Mark's Gospel.
3. Translate those texts from the Masoretic Text, with reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targum of Isaiah.
4. I will search commentaries, journal articles, and books for understanding of these texts both to their original audience and to later Judaism, especially the Judaism of the 1st century A. D. and the early church.

<sup>1</sup> Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly (upon the heart) to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that she has fulfilled her term, that she has paid off her punishment that she accepted from the hand of Yahweh, double for all her sins. <sup>3</sup> A voice cries out in the wilderness make clear from obstacles the way of Yahweh, make straight in the desert plain the highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be made low, and steep ground will be made a level place, and the rugged ground into a plain. <sup>5</sup> The glory of Yahweh will be revealed and all flesh will see together that the mouth of Yahweh has spoken. <sup>6</sup> A voice saying, “cry out” and someone says, “what will I cry?” “All flesh is grass and all their loyalty is like the flower of the field. <sup>7</sup> The grass dries up, the blossom withers, when the breath of Yahweh blows upon it, certainly the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass dries up, the blossom withers, but the word of our God will stand forever. <sup>9</sup> Go up to the high mountain, announcing to Zion, shout loudly with your voice, announce to Jerusalem, shout loudly, do not be afraid,” say to the cities of Judah, “behold your God.” <sup>10</sup> “Behold the Lord Yahweh will come in might, and his arm rules for him,

**behold his wages are with him and his recompense before his face.**

**<sup>11</sup> As a shepherd he will tend his flock, in his arm he will collect the lambs, and in his lap he will carry them, and he will lead the ewes.**

**<sup>12</sup> Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and the heavens measured with the span, and contained the third part of the dust of the earth, and weighed in the balance the mountains, and the hills in the balances? <sup>13</sup> Who tested the Spirit of Yahweh, or what man counseled him as his instructor? <sup>14</sup> Who advised him and gave discernment to him, and who taught him the way of judgement and taught him knowledge and way of understanding to be able to know? <sup>15</sup> Behold the nations are as a drop from the bucket, and are considered as dust on the scales, behold he will lift up the islands as if they are fine dust. <sup>16</sup> There is not in Lebanon enough to burn, nor enough animals for a burnt offering. <sup>17</sup> All the nations are as nothing before him, and formlessness (tohu תהו) they are considered to him.”**

As we come to chapter 40, we come to a new emphasis in this prophesy with the focus being upon the exiles taken into Babylonian captivity. As was mentioned in the introduction, for many modern

scholars Isaiah is seen as a text written by multiple authors over multiple centuries. Such ideas are more modern ideas brought about by the concepts that we are now wiser than all the generations that have gone before and we can now understand things that they were too ignorant, or unenlightened, to understand. Most modern authors will follow the concepts of what is called the *critical* understanding of Isaiah. In the *critical* understanding of the book there is not agreement either; some say there were two Isaiahs, some say there are three, and some say there are the hands of multiple editors at work. They do this in order to explain basically how it is more reasonable to believe that the words of the prophesy were written at different times by different hands. Indeed it is highly possible that different hands were involved in the writing down of these prophesies, but this is unclear and not something that we find expounded on by the author, or authors of the text of Isaiah. Did Isaiah write the oracles with his own hand or did a scribe write them? Indeed, are all of these prophesies to be attributed to one man in the way that the Psalms are attributed to David? These are questions we might have, but in reality we have no real way of knowing. Whatever

theories are put forth, they are based heavily upon speculation and must be treated as such, as speculation.

*“A critical understanding of the book of Isaiah is reflective of the intellectual world of the West in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and focused attention on historical issues.”*<sup>1</sup> Such an understanding relies upon human wisdom, or perhaps what we call science today, more than it does upon the word, and the power of God. This is conceded from the beginning by scholars who pursue this line of speculation. Childs records three major arguments for assigning chapters 40-66 to a sixth century author (note he only refers to two authors rather than the sometimes proposed three authors). 1. He says that the historical setting of chapters 40 and following appear to reflect an exilic period after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and the ensuing deportation of the Judaeans captives (and this indeed seems to be correct). 2. He says that there are striking differences in language, style, and concepts between the first and second parts of the book (others have the same idea about what they consider to be a third part of the book which begins at chapter 56

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, in the Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 3.

and goes through the end of chapter 66<sup>2</sup>). 3. If chapters 40 and following, were spoken by an eighth-century prophet to the needs of a people exiled one hundred and fifty years later this would represent a situation that is unparalleled in the remainder of the Old Testament, according to Childs.<sup>3</sup>

I find none of these reasons to be completely persuasive. They seem to be based upon human wisdom, reason, science and bias. God has no reason to abide by anything that we see as reasonable, wise, or scientific. If God chooses to prophesy something more than 150 years in advance this seems quite a small thing. I am not sure what Childs means by this being without precedent in the Old Testament. It seems to me that the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah came far more than one hundred and fifty years in advance of the event. For most of the history of their reading these verses (in Isaiah) have been seen as being delivered by an 8th century prophet and I see no reason, thus far given, to hold any other view. Saying that, let it be said that I believe that it is no

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<sup>2</sup> Paul V. Niskanen, *Isaiah 56-66*, in the Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry series (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), pp. ix-xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, in the Old Testament Library series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), pp. 289-290.

more difficult for God to see one hundred and fifty years into the future than it is for him to see two years into the future such as at Isaiah 7:14, where according to Matthew (1:23) there is a prophesy concerning the coming of Emmanuel, the coming of Jesus, which was more than 700 years away. The perspective that a person has will affect their interpretation of this passage to some degree, but as for me I am not at this time prepared to accept the modern perspective of dividing the book in an arbitrary fashion based on the current disagreements of modern scholars. John Willis notes that even for those that hold that Isaiah should be divided into parts written by three different authors the scholars are not satisfied.<sup>4</sup> Under every rock and behind every bush they see another editor, or redactor, and the variety and imaginative speculations are endless.

Moving on from the issue of authorship will not be an easy one and to be sure there are things about the multi-author theories that make interpretation less difficult at times. The fact is, never have we found any manuscript evidence to indicate multiple authors. The oldest copy of Isaiah was found at Qumran and dates to between

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<sup>4</sup> John T. Willis, *Isaiah*, in The Living Word Commentary of the Old Testament series, Vol. 12 (Abilene TX: ACU Press, 1984), pp. 20-21.




150-125 B.C.<sup>5</sup> All of this being said, the real author of these prophecies is Yahweh and if more evidence comes to light to show that he used multiple authors in multiple times, it will not change the true source of the message, which is God. With all of this in mind we will move on to interpreting the message that God had for his people in the past, and the message that he still has for us in this ancient Hebrew poetry, now in the present.

Clearly, the message of this chapter was intended for a people who were in distress and in need of comfort. The first two words of chapter 40 are imperatives calling for comfort (נַחֲמוּ) for God's people. The setting in which this need for comfort appears to be set is after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. The people have been in captivity, a captivity that was predicted (Isaiah 39:6-7 - conceded by even most modern scholars to be attributed to the 8th century prophet), which ends on this ominous note of foreboding and then there is a pause, a long pause. The space between the events of the end of chapter 39 and the beginning of chapter 40 appears to be a gap of about 160 years

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<sup>5</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Revised Edition (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005, p. xlvii.



from some time after 700 B.C. to around 540 B.C. During this long gap a great deal transpires: Assyria collapses, Babylon rises as the new superpower, good king Josiah dies and there is the time of his sons that brings about a situation that can only be described as near anarchy. Most importantly though, is the massive destruction of the entire Jerusalem establishment, city, dynasty and temple, along with the complete infrastructure of that social and theological entity.<sup>6</sup>

The movement from being the establishment, to being in exile, is the story line of this part of the book of Isaiah. Those taken into exile are urged through the words of the prophet Jeremiah to “... seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (NRSV Jeremiah 29:7).<sup>7</sup> It appears to be in the context of this event, that the words of Isaiah find their meaning whether written 160 years earlier and left waiting, or actually being written during, or after, the time of the exile itself. If this is written before the event then it provides comfort in knowing that even as these things descend upon the people of Jerusalem there will be an end,

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 9.

and God has not forgotten his people. These words also provide comfort to those that are in the midst of the event, and then for those who have completed the term of the penalty (נִרְצָה) of exile; there would also be comfort in knowing that the end had come while at the same time the opening up of the challenge for what is to come next: the return to Zion.

The internal history of Judah is marked by, and deeply impacted by, the rise and fall of the ancient superpowers. During the seventh century B.C., the Assyrian Empire, who had greatly vexed Judah during the 8th century B.C. disintegrated and its capital city, Nineveh was leveled (Nahum). In the vacuum left behind by the disintegration of the Assyrian Empire, Babylon becomes the next major superpower. Babylon, however is but a brief blip on the geopolitical screen of the region, because by 550 B.C. a new power emerges to the east of Babylon. The kingdom of Persia, first led by Cyrus, becomes the dominant power in the world until the rise of Alexander the Great some 200 years later. In a theological sense, the book of Isaiah expounds an understanding of the coming of the devastating deportation to Babylon, which is because of the wayward

ways and failed public faith of the people of Jerusalem. If the prophecies of Isaiah ended at 39:6-7 then it is likely that the episode of Israel with would have been just finished, but of course that was not the end of the story.<sup>8</sup>

The tone of the message of Yahweh changes dramatically at chapter 40 and now Yahweh speaks of bringing comfort in place of the retribution. Yahweh, using the instrument of his power, Persia, will defeat Babylon and in turn permit Judah, at least a part of Judah, to return to Zion. The storyline that follows is that Yahweh is behind Persia's great victory over Babylon and his beneficent policy toward Judah is because of the hand of Yahweh. Yahweh is victorious, Babylon has lost, and Judah is free. Then in verse 3, there is this cry for preparation to be made for the desert highway of Yahweh. What might have been expected in the announcement of this monstrous highway is that it is speaking about a highway from Babylon back to Jerusalem for the exiles to travel upon. However, that is not what is described here. This highway does not come to Jerusalem from the

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<sup>8</sup> **<sup>6</sup> Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. <sup>7</sup> Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.** NRSV. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 9.

northeast, from the north from Babylon, nor even from the south from Egypt. This highway comes from the southeast, the Arabah and it is not a highway for pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem it is a highway to bring Yahweh back to Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup>

Ezekiel had given a vision of Yahweh abandoning the city (Ezekiel 9-11) of Jerusalem. The vision given here in chapter 40 is a vision of his return. The return comes in a manner that was familiar from temple traditions of Yahweh coming from Sinai, or Edom (cf. Isaiah 34; 63:1-6) through the Arabah south of the Dead Sea in order to approach Jerusalem from the east. The central theme of the message here is that Yahweh is returning to take up residency in Jerusalem, among his people once more. This is the good news, the gospel message conveyed here in the words of Isaiah 40. The vision given by Isaiah here relies heavily upon the paradigm of the exodus. The intensity and the fulness of the exodus symbolism in Isaiah 40-55 is however, unique. The passage contained in this section of Isaiah draws heavily upon the promises to the patriarchs and its intensity is extremely high. Isaiah is a book about movement and change. Israel

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<sup>9</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Revised Edition (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), pp. 608-609.



is a people that are “on the way” from Canaan to exile, and from their exile back to Judah.<sup>10</sup> This is a time of promise, a time of new beginnings and of new possibilities to avoid the mistakes of the past and to begin anew.

The vision here is that the glory of Yahweh, and his presence, will be experienced once again in Jerusalem (verse 5). This is an event of significance for all people (flesh), it is of universal significance, as will become clearer from the verses that follow. Jerusalem has a significance for the whole world, while at the same time a unique significance in that it is the place that Yahweh chooses to reside. It is the place of his unique and special presence. This is Yahweh’s decision and once again we have the prominent theme of the sovereignty of Yahweh displayed. A voice of skepticism cries out in the midst of this announcement. Pessimism is continually a companion of humankind, especially pessimism with regard to Yahweh.<sup>11</sup> Pessimism of one form or another is the continual companion of humanity when it comes to viewing the promises and the hope sent to his people by Yahweh. It can be seen in the

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<sup>10</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, pp. 609-610.

<sup>11</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, pp. 610-611.

continual questioning, a questioning that is not a questioning of faith and hope, but a questioning that is deeply rooted in mistrust and faithlessness.

Toward the end of verse 6 the issue of the loyalty of the people is brought into view. The loyalty of human beings is compared to the flowers of the field that bloom with such bright promise and beauty and then the heat and the dry winds come and the promise and beauty are dried up so quickly. We are like this grass of the field that appears to hold such promise, but when the breath (spirit רִיחַ) of Yahweh touches them they wither and dry up like the grass of the morning that dries up and dies in the midday heat. This inconstancy and transitory nature is contrasted then in verse 8 with the “word of our God” (דְּבַר־אֱלֹהֵינוּ), which is for eternity (לְעוֹלָם). The word of God, unlike the loyalty and the humans themselves will stand as a monument for eternity. It does not wither, or fail, but remains as a constant. We as human beings are frail and weak, but the word of Yahweh is immortal.

The characteristic of the grass and the flowers that is the dominate theme of this comparison is that they are unable to


withstand the “Spirit of Yahweh.” The image here plays on that double meaning between “breath” and “spirit.” There is a bitter reminder here that all that has happened to Israel has been attributed to Yahweh. The implication is that just as one is unable to stand against God so also one is unable to stand with God, because after all we are only like grass by comparison. This imagery reflects upon the reality of human frailty, but then turns to the source of hope, the word of God. Despite the frailty of the loyalty, and nature of humanity, still by the word of Yahweh his people are gathered. They are not forsaken nor left to the weaknesses of their own reality. The arguments given here are a strong counterargument against complaints regarding Yahweh’s disregarding of the welfare of his people. Yahweh has indeed not forgotten, nor forsaken his people.<sup>12</sup>

In verse 9 the people are called to get up to Zion and they are challenged to become what they were always intended to be and that is the heart of the good news of Yahweh. The promise here in verse 9 is that Yahweh is going to come into the midst of his people and this good news is to be proclaimed to the cities of Judah. God is

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<sup>12</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, pp. 610-612.





coming with his might and his strength to care for and to judge his people. He will gather them (verse 11), gently, and carefully, and then he will gently lead them. This is a powerful image of Yahweh and his power gathering those that have been scattered into his flock. Yahweh is here described in terms of being a shepherd for his people who are like sheep, like lambs, who need his protection, his guidance, and his care. He is their sustainer, their source of life and security.

The initial announcement of 40:9-11 projects a vision of Yahweh as being strong enough to counter Babylonian claims and able to overcome the submissive despair of the Jews in exile in Babylon. The core announcement of this section is “Here is your God.” God is shown in these verses to be stronger than Babylon and attentive to the exiles. On both counts of attentiveness and of power it is asserted that Yahweh is incomparable. He is without partner, or rival. Yahweh defies all conventional descriptions and conventions, because he is the original creative agent of the universe and there is nothing with which to compare him. He governs the affairs of the nations, whether they see it, or not, and he guards the well-being of



his people Israel even when they fail to understand it and are living in despair and pessimism.<sup>13</sup>

Verses 12-17 serve both as a doxology and an expression of trust in Yahweh. These words serve as a polemic to any who might doubt and they call, using rhetorical questions, for the people to recognize the true nature and power of Yahweh along with his right to judge. Who, besides Yahweh, has measured the heavens using the span of his hand and is able to enclose and measure things of the huge things of the earth that are huge in the hollow of his hand. The words here are meant to indicate the sovereignty and the power of Yahweh to any who might still be in doubt.<sup>14</sup> Verses 13-14 very much indicate that Yahweh cannot be judged, or advised. Who would be qualified, only those whose arrogance is beyond measure. No one taught him justice, or knowledge (verse 14), nor conveyed to him understanding. By comparison to God, the nations are nothing more than a drop from a bucket, they are as nothing by comparison.

There is no burnt offering that is sufficient to truly be sufficient for Yahweh, not even if all the rich and abundant forests of Lebanon

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 22-23.

were to be used and all of its animals. The imagery here is meant to indicate extremely large numbers of animals and extremely abundant forests of trees (verse 16). In verse 17 we return once again to the comparison of God to the nations who are not even worthy of account by comparison to Yahweh. They are nonexistent and unreality by comparison. They are formlessness (*tohu* תֹהוּ) as was the creation in Genesis 1:2. The argument here reflects the view that nationalism can be a form of idolatry when it fails to recognize the place of God. “Nations, like idols have no ultimate substance in God’s eyes.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, p. 622.

# Synopsis

As we begin this section, it appears to refer to a time some 160 years after what has gone before in chapter 39. In this chapter Yahweh turns toward his people that have been taken from Jerusalem into exile in Babylon; their period of punishment has now been completed and they have received the recompense for their sins, even double it says. We then come to verse 3, which indicates a voice crying out to prepare a highway in the wilderness for the return of Yahweh to Jerusalem. The indication is that this will be a great highway for the greatest of occasions, the time when Yahweh will return to his dwelling place with his people in Zion. As we have the vision of Yahweh leaving Jerusalem here now we have a prophesy forecasting his return. The indication is that this will happen because Yahweh has spoken it and it will become a reality.

It appears as always that there is a voice of pessimism and this voice cries out asking what is the message that is to be delivered? The answer that is given is that the people and their loyalty are like grass. They are temporary and inconstant. They are compared to the

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flowers of the field and the grass of the field which withers in the heat and with the force of the hot wind. In part, this section is meant to answer the charges that Yahweh has forgotten his people and that he has been inattentive to their needs. This section of Scripture indicates that even the breath, or the Spirit of Yahweh, is too much for human beings and causes them to wither and wilt. In spite of what seems like a hopeless cause, because of the word of God, there is hope. The word, the promises of God are constant and can be relied upon even in the face of abject hopelessness. The word of Yahweh will stand and his sovereign decrees will become reality. The people can rely upon his promises to come true even in the heart of their despair. He has not forgotten his words and they will come to pass.

The challenge then goes out in verse 9 to get up to Zion and become the herald of good news to Judah that they are meant to be. They are told to do this fearlessly because “Here is your God.” This is to be the basis of their fearlessness and their determination. Yahweh is the source of their hope, their strength, and their faith. He is like no other, and his words are to be listened to as the unique and only

creator, the source of all knowledge, understanding, and justice.

There is no need to be afraid of the nations who are something formless before the power and stature of Yahweh. The comparison here must certainly be meant to remind us of the unformed state of the world as it is described in Genesis 1. In verse 2 of this chapter “formlessness” is the state of the universe and with his voice he forms all that follows according to his will and decree. So now too that same voice calls for the formation of his people into the beacon he has called them to be.

It is certainly no wonder that this passage of Scripture has proven to be so inspirational and powerful both among the Jewish people and then among those who would become followers of Jesus Christ. These words impact our hearts and ignite our imaginations with the possibilities that exist as God lives in the midst of his people.

# Questions

1. Why do you think the initial cry of the prophet in this chapter is for comfort?
2. What are some things in which you find comfort?
3. What are some things that shatter your calm and remove your comfort?
4. What do you think it means for Jerusalem to have received double for her sins?
5. What do you think it means for Yahweh to return to live among his people?
6. Why do you think the imagery of traveling on a flat highway is a comforting image?
7. How long do you think it would take for people to build such a highway as is described in these verses? How do you think this relates to the oracle here?
8. Why do you think we are told that the glory of Yahweh would be revealed and that all the people would see it (verse 5)?
9. What does it mean for the mouth of Yahweh to speak something?
10. Why do you think people are so often pessimistic?
11. Why do you think the loyalty of people is described as like a withering flower of the field? Do you think that description is accurate in your experience? Why or why not?
12. What do you think it means for the breath of Yahweh to blow?
13. What comfort is there in the fact that the “word of God” stands forever?
14. How is the commissioning here of Jerusalem by Yahweh meant to remove their fear?
15. How should we seek to avoid the temptation to evaluate what God does?
16. How do we come to trust in his goodness even in the midst of tribulation and troubles?
17. Why do you think Yahweh has any concern for people at all?