

“Comfort My [God’s] People”



SABBATH—MAY 15

IT IS OVER! World War II ended in 1945. But a Japanese soldier named Shoichi Yokoi was hiding out in the jungle on the island of Guam. Sheets of paper dropped from United States planes announcing peace. But Yokoi thought it was a trick. He was a loyal soldier of the Japanese Emperor. He had promised never to surrender. Yokoi lived on what food he could find in the jungle. It was a hard life for him.

In 1972, 27 years after World War II ended, hunters found Yokoi while he was fishing. Yokoi then learned that the message of peace had been true. The rest of the Japanese people had been enjoying peace for many years. But Yokoi had been going through many years of hardship.

Many hundreds of years earlier, God announced through Isaiah that the time of His people’s hardship was really over. “‘Comfort my people,’ says our God. ‘Comfort them! Encourage the people of Jerusalem. Tell them they have suffered long enough and their sins are now forgiven. I have punished them in full for all their sins’” (Isaiah 40:1, 2, TEV).

This week, we will learn what Isaiah 40:1, 2 mean.

A LOOK AT THIS WEEK’S LESSON: With what promise did Isaiah 40 begin? What good news is shown in Isaiah 40? How does the New Testament use Isaiah 40? Why is idolatry (idol worship) such a terrible sin?

MEMORY VERSE: “Jerusalem, go up on a high mountain and proclaim [announce] the good news! Call out with a loud voice, Zion; announce the good news! Speak out and do not be afraid. Tell the towns of Judah that their God is coming!” (Isaiah 40:9, TEV).

SUNDAY—MAY 16

COMFORT FOR THE FUTURE
(Isaiah 40:1, 2).

In Isaiah 40:1, 2, God comforts His people. Their time of punishment has ended. What punishment is that?

There are many answers to this question. There was the punishment given by Assyria (Isaiah 10). But God saved Judah by destroying Sennacherib’s army in 701 B.C. (Isaiah 37). There was the punishment given by Babylon. Babylon would carry away goods and people from Judah because Hezekiah¹ showed off his wealth to the messengers from Merodach-baladan (Isaiah 39). And there was the punishment given by one of the other nations. Isaiah had written messages against this nation (Isaiah 14–23).

Meanwhile, “Assyria” and “Assyrian(s)” are mentioned 43 times from Isaiah 7:17 to Isaiah 38:6. But this nation appears only once in the rest of Isaiah. Isaiah 52:4 mentions attacks by Egypt and then by “the Assyrian.” The later part of Isaiah explains that the Jewish people would be freed from Babylon (Isaiah 43:14; Isaiah 47:1; Isaiah 48:14, 20). Cyrus, the Persian king who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. is named as the one who would set the Israelites free (Isaiah 45:13; Isaiah 44:28; Isaiah 45:1).

Isaiah 1–39 point to event² leading up to freedom from the Assyrians in 701 B.C. But at the beginning of Isaiah 40, the book jumps ahead one hundred and fifty years to the end of Babylon in 539 B.C. and to when the Jews were free to return home.

What is the Jews’ return from Babylon connected to in an earlier part of Isaiah? Isaiah 13; Isaiah 14; Isaiah 21.

Isaiah 39 serves as a change to the following chapters by making a prophecy about the capture of some of Hezekiah’s future children by the Babylonians (Isaiah 39:6, 7). The prophecies of Isaiah 13, Isaiah 14, and Isaiah 21 predict³ the fall of Babylon and the freedom of God’s people. “The Lord will once again be merciful⁴ to his people Israel and choose them as his own. He will let them live in their own land again. . . . The Lord will give the people of Israel relief from their pain and suffering and from hard work they were forced to do. When he does this, they are to mock [laugh at] the king of Babylon . . .” (Isaiah 14:1, 3, 4, TEV). Notice the close connection with Isaiah 40:1, 2, where God promises His people an end to their suffering.

What do Bible promises about the end of suffering mean to you?

¹Hezekiah—one of Judah’s later kings. Hezekiah was a good king who made mistakes late in his life.

²events—things that happen.

³predict—say what will happen in the future.

⁴merciful—to be full of mercy. Mercy is kindness we do not deserve.

What good would our faith be without these promises? Why is it so important to hold to these promises, no matter what?

MONDAY—MAY 17

**PRESENCE, WORD, AND ROAD-
WORK (Isaiah 40:3-8).**

How do God’s people receive comfort (Isaiah 40:1-8)?

Someone announces that God is coming to show His glory (Isaiah 40:3-5). Another voice announces that people’s lives are as short as grass and flowers, but “the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:6-8).



We last no longer than the flowers.

After their stay in Babylon, God’s people get back what they had received at Mount Sinai: God’s presence and His word (law). These are the important parts of God’s covenant⁵ with Israel. God’s presence and law were enshrined (honored) at His sanctuary. The sanctuary was in the middle of the Israelite camp (Exodus 25:8, 16). Because the people had broken His law God had left His temple (sanctuary) (Ezekiel 9–11). But He is coming back. God’s presence and His eternal⁶ law bring comfort, deliverance (freedom), and hope.



God’s law was in the mercy seat of the sanctuary. His presence was in the light around the mercy seat.

What step is necessary to prepare for the Lord’s coming? Isaiah 40:3-5.

⁵covenant—an agreement between God and His people.

⁶eternal—without beginning or end; lasting forever.

It is not right for a king to have a bumpy ride because of a rough road. So roadwork needs to be done before his coming. The king has stayed in Babylon with his people as a sanctuary to them (Ezekiel 11:16). So much work would be necessary to pave the road. It would be tough to build a level superhighway through the rough hills east of Jerusalem, even with dynamite and bulldozers. God is the only One who can do the work. God turns “the rough places into level ground” (Isaiah 42:16). But He does not need a real road for travel because He has a flying chariot of angels (Ezekiel 1; Ezekiel 9–11).

The New Testament clearly points Isaiah’s prophecy to the spiritual “roadwork” done through the preaching of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:3). John’s message was: “Repent,⁷ for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 3:2, NIV). The baptism that John did was “of repentance⁸ for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). So the “roadwork” was repentance and a desire to turn away from sin. In this way, the comfort of God’s forgiveness and presence may be received.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 preaches the same spiritual message to help the Jewish people in Babylon understand the spiritual nature of “roadwork” for God. In Jeremiah 31:31-34, the Lord makes a promise to people who wish to make a fresh start. The promise is a new covenant. In the new covenant, God prom-

ises to put His law in their hearts and to be their God. They know Him and His character because He has forgiven them.

What hope do you get from Isaiah 40:1-8? What should these verses warn us against putting our trust in?

TUESDAY—MAY 18

THE BIRTH OF EVANGELISM⁹ (Isaiah 40:9-11).

What kind of event is described in Isaiah 40:9-11?

The Hebrew language makes it clear that a male voice is giving good news to Jerusalem in Isaiah 41:27 and Isaiah 52:7. The Hebrew language also makes it clear that a female voice is giving good news in Isaiah 40:9.

In Psalm 68, David praises God because He “gives lonely people a home to live in and leads prisoners into happy freedom. . . .” (Psalm 68:6, TEV). These words speak about the Exodus (escape) from Egypt to slavery (Exodus 13; Exodus 14). But Isaiah uses the same examples to show a second “Exodus”: the Jews return to Judah from Babylon.

What is a later use of Isaiah’s prophecy?

⁷repent—to say you are sorry for your sins and that you want to stop sinning.

⁸repentance—being sorry for your sins, and turning away from your sins.

⁹evangelism—the spreading of the gospel to the world.

The New Testament points Isaiah 40:3-5 to John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus. Jesus became the Lord’s presence in flesh among His people (John 1:14).

Even earlier than John, other people spoke about the good news of His coming. Among the first of these people to speak the good news were the elderly Simeon and Anna. They met Baby Jesus when He was dedicated at the temple (Luke 2:25-38). Like the voices in Isaiah 41:27; Isaiah 52:7; and Isaiah 40:9, they were male and female. Simeon was looking forward to the comfort of Israel through the Messiah (Luke 2:25, 26).

Anna was a prophetess.¹⁰ Isaiah 40:9 points to the words she spoke when Baby Jesus was being dedicated. “She arrived and gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were waiting for God to set Jerusalem free” (Luke 2:38, TEV). So Anna was the first person to say to the people of Jerusalem at the temple mountain that the Lord had come. This was the birth (beginning) of Christian evangelism: the preaching of the good news that Jesus has come to bring salvation. Later, Jesus trusted another woman, Mary Magdalene, to first announce the news of His victorious resurrection¹¹ (John 20:17, 18). The Resurrection made sure that Jesus’ salvation mission to planet Earth was successful. Flesh is like grass. But the God who became flesh is eternal (Isaiah 40:6-8)!

¹⁰prophetess—a female prophet.

¹¹resurrection—rising from the dead; returning to life from the grave.

What symbol does Isaiah 40:11 give? How have you experienced shepherding (being guided) by the Lord? Why is it good to remember the way the Lord has led you?



Anna told other people about the Child who would set Jerusalem free. That was the beginning of evangelism.

WEDNESDAY—MAY 19

**MERCIFUL CREATOR
(Isaiah 40:12-31).**

How does Isaiah 40 develop the ideas of God’s mercy and power?

Throughout Isaiah 40, God’s mercy and power are joined together, because both mercy and power are necessary for God to save His people. He wants to save them, because He is merciful. He is able to save them, because He is powerful.

Mercy (Isaiah 40:1-5)—comfort: the coming of the Lord to save His people.

Power (Isaiah 40:3-8)—glory: eternity¹² and human mortality (death).

Mercy (Isaiah 40:9-11)—the good news of freedom: God is the Shepherd of His people.

Power (Isaiah 40:12-26): the all-powerful Creator.

Mercy (Isaiah 40:27-31): as Creator, God gives power to weak people.

Isaiah has explained God’s power as His glory and permanence¹³ (Isaiah 40:3-8). Isaiah now describes God’s power and great wisdom. God’s power and wisdom make earth and its people seem small and weak (Isaiah 40:12-17). Isaiah’s deep questions and clear descriptions about earth and its parts, sound the same as God’s answer to Job (Job 38–41).



“Can anyone . . . weigh the mountains . . . on scales?” (Isaiah 40:12, TEV). There is no one as powerful as God!

¹²eternity—life without end.

¹³permanence—ability to last forever.

¹⁴compared—showed how things are the same. Isaiah 40:18 says that no one or no thing is the same as God.

¹⁵ancient—very old.

¹⁶attitude—how people think and feel about something.

What is the answer to Isaiah’s question: “To whom can God be compared?”¹⁴ (Isaiah 40:18, TEV).

For Isaiah and Job, the answer is, No one. There is no one the same as God. But Isaiah deals with the answer that many ancient¹⁵ people gave: God is the same as an idol (Isaiah 40:19, 20).

Isaiah says that it is very foolish to picture God as an idol. But just to make sure that people get the message, Isaiah points to God as the only God. Isaiah then adds the unanswerable (final) argument that God is the holy Creator (Isaiah 40:21-26).

How does Isaiah 40:27 show the attitude¹⁶ of the people who received Isaiah’s message? In what ways are we guilty of having the same attitude?

The purpose of God’s message is to comfort people. The same as Job, the people’s suffering made them confused and discouraged about God’s character.

Read Isaiah 40 again. Isaiah 40 talks about God’s mercy and His power and about the fact that He is the Creator. Why is it so important to

understand that God is the Creator? How does the weekly Sabbath help support the fact that God is the Creator?

THURSDAY—MAY 20

THE PROBLEM WITH IDOLATRY (IDOL WORSHIP) (Isaiah 40:19, 20).

Idolatry destroys our close and special relationship with God by replacing Him with something else (Exodus 20:4, 5; Isaiah 42:8). So prophets point to idolatry as spiritual “adultery” (Jeremiah 3:6-9; Ezekiel 16:15-19).

How does Isaiah describe idols? Isaiah 41:29. Why is this description of idols a good description?

Ancient idol worshipers believed they worshiped powerful gods through idols or symbols of idols. Worshiping an idol as another god breaks the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me [God]” (Exodus 20:3). But if an idol is used to show the true God, as the golden calf was (Exodus 32:4, 5), the Lord does not accept the idol. This is because nobody knows how to picture Him (Deuteronomy 4:15-19). Nothing can show His glory and greatness because there is no other glory and greatness like His. An idol takes the place of God. So worshiping

the idol breaks the first and second commandments.

God’s people do not need idols because they have His real presence with them in His sanctuary. To worship an idol means to deny God’s presence.

An idol fails to represent God. An idol really represents nothing, because all those other gods are not real gods (Isaiah 44:6). Psalm 115:8 laughs at people who make idols: People who make idols “will be like them [the idols] and so will all [people] who trust in them” (Psalm 115:8, NIV).

What kinds of idolatry do we face as a church today?

Does idolatry appear more hidden in the church today? If so, how?

We know from historical writings that idolatry interested people because it was about materialism (things). People liked to worship things they could relate to. Idolators (idol-worshipers) honored things they believed could give them fertility¹⁷ and wealth. Idol worship was “self-help” religion. This should sound familiar. Today, people buy thousands of self-help books!

Before God comes again, His way will be prepared by the “roadwork” of a final Elijah message¹⁸ (Malachi 4). The choice will be the same as in

¹⁷fertility—ability to bear (have) children; also when the ground grows good crops.

¹⁸the Elijah message—a message of warning to believers to strengthen their relationship with God before the Day of the Lord comes.

the days of Isaiah: Will you worship the Creator? Or will you worship something else (Revelation 13:14)? We always worship something.

FRIDAY—MAY 21

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read “Behold Your God!” in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 311–321.

“In Isaiah’s day, the spiritual understanding of humanity¹⁹ was dark through misunderstanding about God. Satan had long tried to lead people to look upon their Creator as the author of sin, suffering, and death. Satan had succeeded in deceiving people who thought God was hard and strict. They thought of God as ready to criticize and reject sinners. They also thought He was unwilling to receive sinners as long as there was a legal excuse for not helping them. The law of love rules heaven. But Satan gave people a false picture of God as trying to limit people’s happiness by giving them a heavy load they would be glad to escape. Satan declared that God’s law was too strict to obey. Satan also claimed that God gave strict punishment to some people but not to other people.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 311.

“Many people who say they are Christians are serving other gods be-

sides the Lord. Our Creator requires full loyalty to Him. Anything that causes us to love God less or to serve Him less becomes an idol.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, pp. 1011, 1012.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Write in your own words the message of Isaiah 40:12-31. Use modern images or symbols that show very clearly the great power of our God. Share what you wrote with your class.
2. How does Isaiah’s description showing the permanence of God’s word and the transience²⁰ of human life (Isaiah 40:6-8) speak to your fear of death? How does Isaiah’s description help you with your hope of resurrection (Job 19:25-27; Daniel 12:2; 1 Corinthians 15:51-57; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)?
3. How could we be cured of pride if we fully accept Isaiah 40:12-31?

SUMMARY: Isaiah shows that God brought comfort to people who had been suffering. Their time of trouble had ended and God was returning to them. For this reason, they should not be discouraged and confused. Instead, they should trust Him to use His power as Creator to help them.

¹⁹humanity—all the people of the world.

²⁰transience—not lasting a long time.