

# Receiving Comfort and Strength

**Lesson Text:** Isaiah 40:1-5, 25-26, 29-31

**Background Scripture:** Isaiah 40:1-31

**Devotional Reading:** 1 Chronicles 16:23-34

## Isaiah 40:1-5, 25-26, 29-31

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. <sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. <sup>5</sup> And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

<sup>25</sup> "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. <sup>26</sup> Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

<sup>29</sup> He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. <sup>30</sup> Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; <sup>31</sup> but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

## LESSON AIMS

- **Facts:** to examine God's message of comfort to His people through Isaiah, His prophet.
- **Principle:** to understand that our reliable source of comfort and strength in troubled times is God.
- **Application:** to show that when we go through difficult times, we can turn to our God for strength and comfort; He will not fail us.

## LESSON BACKGROUND

**Time:** about 700 – 695 B.C. **Place:** Jerusalem

Isaiah was a prophet who lived about seven hundred years before Christ. It was during the reign of King Uzziah that Isaiah received a dramatic call from God in which he had a vision of the Lord seated upon His throne.

During this critical time in Judah's history, God needed someone to take His word to a rebellious nation.

In spite of the fact that Isaiah faithfully preached God's word to the people of Judah, they refused to repent. Hearing God's message would actually harden the hearts of many (Isaiah 6:9,10). Isaiah nevertheless was still called upon to proclaim the word of the Lord to the bitter end, after which the people would finally be carried away as captives (v. 11).

The first half of Isaiah foretells judgment upon Judah because of her sins. The latter half, however, offers a message of comfort and hope. God would restore them to the land and send His Servant, the Messiah, to atone for sin (chap. 53).

There were two captivities of Jerusalem. The first being the Assyrian captivity in 701 B.C. The second was the Babylonian captivity of 586 B.C.

## GOD, OUR COMFORTER (Isaiah 40:1-5)

When Isaiah wrote, both the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Captivity were still in the future. Once these events occurred, though, the people would realize that all of this had been prophesied by Isaiah. This viewpoint is supported by Isaiah 44:28; 45:1,13, which predicts the role of Cyrus in this deliverance (compare Ezra 1:1-4).

"Anticipating the future Captivity and God's restoration, Isaiah wrote to encourage the Judahites to live righteously in the present, despite forthcoming difficult circumstances" (Walvoord and Zuck, eds., The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Cook).

God, through Isaiah, repeated the word "comfort" (Isa. 40:1) to emphasize that He alone can bring comfort. Having rebuked sin during his long career as a prophet Isaiah was now called upon to speak "comfortably," or tenderly, to the people. The Hebrew word can be translated "to the heart." Previously, appeals to both head and heart had proved futile; the people were unwilling to listen to God's Word. After "her warfare is accomplished," the nation would be in a position to listen. The future years in exile would soften their hearts.

Research shows that people are more open to conversion when going through various life changes as opposed to those times when things are going smoothly. Of course, as Christians we must reach out to people at all times, but being aware of those times when people are more receptive should cause us to seize these opportunities to witness.

Once Judah repented of her sins, she could be pardoned. There is no forgiveness apart from the willingness to turn from sin (Isa. 55:6,7). God is willing to forgive, but man must be willing to repent (Psalm 51:17).

### ***1. Why did Judah need to hear a message of comfort? (Isaiah 40:1,2)***

"To receive double for all her sins does not mean to be punished beyond what she deserves but in keeping with what she deserves" (Walvoord and Zuck).

As a nation specially chosen to fulfill God's purposes, Israel had great responsibilities, not the least of which was to be "a light to the Gentiles" (Isa. 49:6). Now, however, the people were suffering because they had followed the Gentile gods instead of teaching the Gentiles about the true God. As Christ said, "'For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required" (Luke 12:48). This is true for nations and individuals!

### ***2. Why did Isaiah say that Jerusalem had received from the Lord "double for all her sins" (v. 2)?***

Isaiah now looks ahead to the time when Jerusalem will be visited by the ultimate king, the Lord God himself. This is not to be a surprise visit. It is proclaimed by the voice crying in the wilderness in order for proper preparations to be made.

Ultimately, however, this verse points to the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah (compare Malachi 3:1). Isaiah 40:3 is so important that it is quoted in all four Gospels in reference to John (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23). In God's plan, John's purposes are to raise the expectations of the people for a Messiah (Luke 3:16, 17), to spur them to prepare their hearts (Luke 1:76-79), and to be God's designated revealer of Jesus as the Messiah at the proper time (John 1:29-34).

Of course, John's ministry literally was in the wilderness (cf. Matt. 3:1). He spent most of his life in the desert until he began preaching repentance (Luke 1:80; 3:1-5). John was, therefore, the voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord.

### ***3. Who was the "voice" in the wilderness"? (v. 3)***

These verses continue the imagery of road construction activities. The reference to valley . . . mountain. . . rough places is to the spiritual as well as to the physical.

Both in Isaiah's day and in the time of Christ, "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed" (Isa. 40:5). In Isaiah's time, God's glory would be seen in the return of the captives from Babylon. In the time of John the Baptist, however, God's glory was revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word (John 1:14).

### ***4. How was the way for the Lord prepared and His glory revealed? (vs. 4,5)***

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## **What Do You Think?**

### ***What are you doing to prepare the way for the Lord's return?***

Talking Points for Your Discussion –

- In setting a proper example
- In being available to serve
- In willingness to speak
- In forsaking sin

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## **GOD, OUR CREATOR (Isaiah 40:25,26)**

The final section of this marvelous chapter presents the Lord speaking more directly to us. He is “the Holy One,” untainted by sin and perfect in righteousness. He poses two rhetorical questions, two questions for which the answer is obvious.

First, who (or what) is a worthy object of comparison with the Lord? God might be called king, Father, or judge (see Psalm 5:2; 68:5). These are categories of human existence that are transcended by God in an absolute way. Thus, the answer to this first question must be “no one.”

Second, we are queried as to who might be equal to the Lord. This question is parallel to the first, but with a twist. In the ancient world, it was common for a nation to be identified by its national god. For example, the national god of the Moabites was Chemosh, while Molech was the national deity of the Ammonites (see 1 Kings 11:7). The power and glory of these localized gods was judged by the success of their nations. The truth behind Isaiah’s message, however, is that there is no real comparison in this area. Such fictitious gods are not in any way equal to the God of Israel, for He is the true God, the Creator of all things. The answer to this question is also “no one.”

### ***5. What questions does Isaiah pose to show that God cannot be compared to anyone or anything? (v. 25)***

We are now told why the God of Israel is beyond comparison: He, and He alone, is the one who created the host of the heavens. This is a reference to the stars and planets, which give witness to God’s glory by their constant shining (Psalm 19:1). These heavenly bodies are completely subject to God, for he calleth them all by names. We are reminded of God’s challenge to Job, asking if he is able to reposition the constellations of the Pleiades or Orion (Job 38:31).

Isaiah contrasted the true God with the false gods that had initially led Israel astray and into captivity. Concerning the idols worshiped by the heathen, they were merely the objects of human craftsmanship (Isa. 40:18-20).

Since God is so high and holy, man is at a loss to find anything or anyone on earth to which to compare Him. God is beyond both description and comprehension. While something of God can be known from the creation (Ps. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:20), He is more clearly revealed in Scripture, particularly in the Person of Christ, “for in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9).

### ***6. What are some differences between the idols worshiped by so many and the God revealed in the Bible? (v. 26)***

## **GOD, OUR CONFIDENCE (Isaiah 40:29-31)**

We move from the power required to fuel the stars to the power needed to empower a weak and falling people—“them that have no might.” The point is that with God there is always a surplus of strength. He experiences no brownouts or empty fuel tanks. The same God who placed the blazing sun in our sky can restore our strength. We can draw on our inner resources only for so long, and then we are empty and spent. We are called to “lift up [our] eyes” to God, for He “made heaven and earth,” and He has the power

to remake us in our weakness (Psalm 121:1,2). We are called to look outside of ourselves for the necessary spiritual vigor to survive our times of trial.

The universal nature of this need for God's empowerment is stressed. Even the young, the healthy and athletic, will run out of strength at some point (Isaiah 40:30). Our refrigerators may run day and night for 20 years without failing. But even these most reliable of appliances require an outside power source to continue functioning. We may run without God or away from God for a long time, but eventually we will "utterly fall" if we do not allow Him to come into our lives in a powerful, healing way.

### ***7. Why can we, and should we rely on God as our source of strength? (vs. 29,30)***

To "wait upon the Lord" is not to give up in complete passivity. "Waiting," in this biblical sense, is an act of faith, a move of trust. It is to change the focus of our empowerment from ourselves to the Lord.

When we run ahead of God and His plans, we are assuming that we know more than He does! Many of us have made quick decisions in the past only to discover that we must live with the consequences of those choices. When God's will is clear, we should act; but if we are unsure, we need to be patient and wait on the Lord.

For those who do wait on the Lord, God promises the renewal of strength. In the context of Isaiah's message to Judah, difficult days lay ahead for the nation. Judah would fall to her enemies, Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed, and the people would be carried off to Babylon. Indeed, the future appeared bleak. For both those listening to Isaiah's message and those who would hear it at a later time, this was a message of hope. Nevertheless, they must put their hope in God.

### ***8. What does it mean to "wait upon the Lord" (v. 31)?***

Isaiah tells us that this commitment of faith is rewarded, using one of the most striking metaphors in all of Scripture: we are to be given "wings as eagles" (v. 31). We are blessed with the ability to soar above the daily troubles that beset and discourage us.

Furthermore, we become the tireless runner and ceaseless walker. When we yield to God's power and control in our lives, we may not immediately be a soaring spiritual eagle. We might not even be a relentless runner. But all of us can at least be a tireless walker, journeying with God in faith and assurance that we do not walk alone.

### ***9. What benefits are there to waiting on God today?***

## **PRACTICAL POINTS**

1. God does discipline His people, but He greatly desires to mend their hurts (Isaiah 40:1,2).
2. Seeing the glory of God requires spiritual preparation (vs. 3-5).
3. Today individual believers can behold God's glory in Jesus, but all will see it when He returns to reign.
4. God is incomparable in every way and attribute (v. 25).
5. God's power is visually displayed in every night sky for all who wish to see (v. 26).
6. God gives enduring strength to those who seek Him and then wait upon Him (vs. 29-31).

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Spiritual Eagles**

The soaring eagle has been an inspiring sight since ancient times. They have enormous wingspans. This is combined with precision eyesight in their quest for food. Eagles may cover as much as 100 miles in this daily search, and some claim that they may reach an altitude of 10,000 feet. From this vantage point, they are able to see a wide territory, locate their prey, and quickly swoop down to seize it. Yet eagles do not attain these incredible heights merely by flapping their wings. They find updrafts in the atmospheric patterns, stretch their wings fully, and soar.

Our age of aircraft has taken away some of the wonder of soaring eagles, for many of us have looked out an airplane window at 30,000 feet. Yet we can still look at the soaring eagle with a sense of longing, a desire to use our personal wings to rise above the trees and buildings and roads. What freedom that would be! How exhilarating! How empowering!

Isaiah promises that if we trust in the Lord, we will soar like spiritual eagles. This will not come from laborious flapping of our spiritual wings, but by catching God's updraft and riding its power to new heights. Our perspective then will change. What seemed so big and intimidating on the ground will look tiny at 10,000 feet. We still must deal with the hard issues of life. But we can gain a little bit of God's perspective, the large view that He is in control and we draw on His strength.

The Messiah provides that strength. He is God's ultimate servant in bearing the sins of people as an atoning sacrifice (Isaiah 53:5). This promise is for everyone. Even the dispossessed and "he that hath no money" can "come ..., buy, and eat" at the table of the Lord (55:1). When the time comes for us to enjoy the Christmas season, we should remember that the season is possible because of those who prepared the way for the king who has come. We remember Isaiah, who was given a glimpse of the Messiah's future glory. And we remember John the Baptist, who seized Isaiah's messages as a definition of his own ministry of preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus (see Matthew 3:3). What role will you play in preparing an unbeliever's heart to receive the Messiah?

#### **PRAYER**

Heavenly Father, grant that we might take "the long view" of history. It is there we will find comfort because we realize that history will end when Your Son Jesus returns. In His name we pray, amen.

**THOUGHT TO REMEMBER** - Test your God-given spiritual wings!