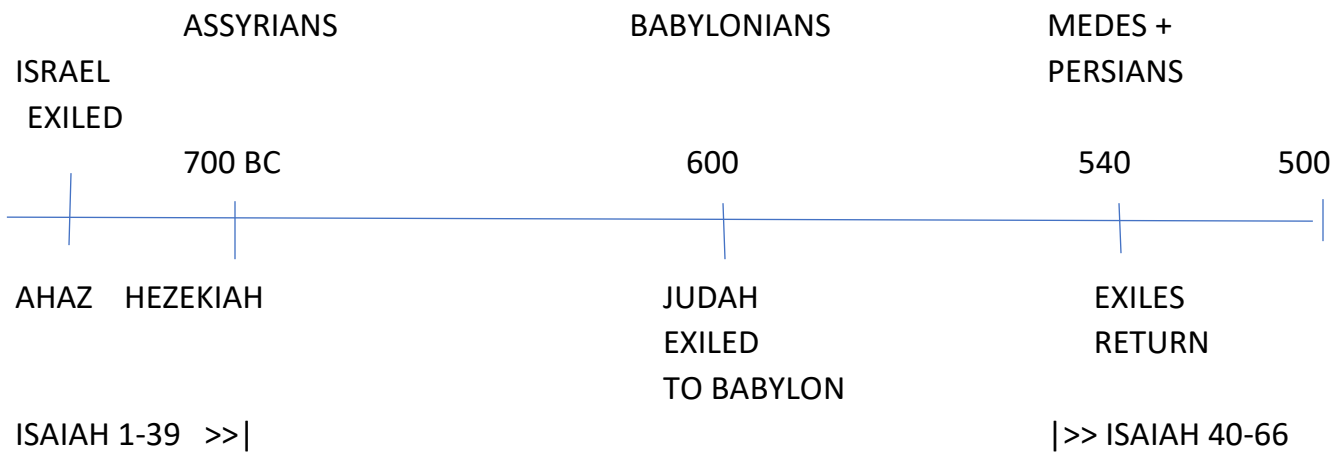


Comfort My Exiles

Isaiah 40-41

ISAIAH TIME LINE: COMFORT MY EXILES (Isa. 40-41)



Turn to Isaiah 40 please. Let's first talk about this time line you are seeing, the history of the Jews from 700 BC to 500BC, more or less. Along the top we see the superpowers of that time. The Assyrians came to power about 730BC. In 722, they conquered the northern ten tribes, known as "Israel" as divided from "Judah," and the Assyrians resettled them all in Assyria.

The Assyrians lasted until about 600BC, and then the Babylonians defeated them, and then in 540BC the Medes and Persians defeated Babylon and took over.

Ahaz was the king of Judah when the Assyrians came to power, and when he died his son Hezekiah ruled in his place. We went over the two Hezekiah stories in Isaiah 36-39, the rescue of Jerusalem from the Assyrians, and then Hezekiah's healing and what happened after that. Those things happened around the year 700.

Remember that at the end of Isaiah 39, Isaiah told Hezekiah by the word of the Lord that the Babylonians would defeat Jerusalem and take its people to Babylon. That prophecy was fulfilled about 100 years later, around 600 BC. 2 Kings has all these stories in detail.

In about 540 BC the Medes and Persians defeated Babylon and took over. And they offered the Jews to go back to their homeland, and helped them resettle in Palestine.

Up until chapter 39, the book of Isaiah is about Jerusalem during the rules of Uzziah, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Chapter 39 ends with the prophecy about Babylon defeating Jerusalem and taking the Jews to Babylon. And then, beginning with Isa 40:1, Isaiah is very different book than it was.

If you read Isa 40-41, you can tell that something has changed. Beginning with 40:1, Isaiah is writing to those exiles in Babylon. Isaiah skips about 150 years, from 700 to 550, and beginning with 40:1, Isaiah writes to exiles 150 years in the future, just before the Medes and Persians come. And that continues to the end of Isaiah. So from Hezekiah in Isa 39, we jumped 150 years.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem (40:1-2) *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 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.]*

*Comfort my people, says your God.* Our God is talking to someone, telling them to comfort us. We could understand it this way, “Somebody out there,” says God, “somebody comfort my people, somebody speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” Our God is calling for messengers to talk to us.

Our God is calling for voices who will bring his people comfort, voices that will speak tenderly to us on his behalf. The comfort theme occurs to the end of Isaiah, throughout Isa 40-66.

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” What’s Jerusalem? Jerusalem is a city in Palestine that in the time of the exiles is just a pile of rubble. Who does God want comforted? Faithful exiles in Babylon, Jews in Babylon who still trust in the Lord. Bring **them** good news. Comfort **them**.

Jerusalem has changed. “Jerusalem” is now God’s faithful people living in Babylon. They are still “Jerusalem,” but it is no longer an actual city. It is faithful people in a foreign godless land. The same is in 41:27 – *I gave Jerusalem a messenger of good news.* What God means is, I gave faithful exiles in pagan Babylon a messenger of good news.

Same as Revelation, where “Jerusalem” is God’s faithful people in a land ruled by the godless. Faithful people in exile are the Holy City. It starts in Isaiah 40, and Revelation continues this.

The Three Voices 40:3-11 In vv3-11, three voices respond to God. In vv1-2, God called for voices to speak tenderly to his people, to comfort his people. Voice #1 is in vv3-5, voice #2 is in vv6-8, and voice #3 is vv9-11.

Let’s summarize the three voices. Voice #1 and #3 say basically the same thing: God is telling us, “I’m coming to you, I’m coming to get you, I’m coming to free you, I’m coming to take care of you. I’m on the way. Prepare the way for the Lord. Make a highway for God. Here is your God. The Sovereign Lord comes with power. The God who is, who was, and who’s *coming!*”

And just like that, we are talking about Advent. Advent is a poetic word for “coming.” Our Lord came once, and we celebrate, and he’s coming again, and we wait and hope.

Does these words sound familiar? 40:3 A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” That’s JnB in the Gospels.

They asked John who he was (Jn1:23). *He answered, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord.”* John was a second fulfillment of this.

Voices #1 and #3 promise that God is coming. Voice #2 reminds us that God keeps old promises. People don’t keep old promises, we can’t even we they want to, because we get old and die. But God lives forever, and God’s promises live forever, and God does not forget old promises.

Let’s look at the end of voice #3: 40:11 *He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.*

This is not future. This is what God always does. He tends like a shepherd, he gathers his people in his arms, he carries them, us, close to his heart, he gently leads us.

And Isaiah knows that the exiles will not buy this. “No, God is not like that. He is not gathering us and carrying us. The Lord can’t see my life. My God ignores my troubles. The Lord has forsaken me. The Lord has forgotten me.” (40:27; 49:14). By the time the Jews have been exiled, and lived in Babylon in 50 years, that’s how they will think about God, and Isaiah knows it.

The exiles have a God-problem. Back 400 years in David’s time, there were just small nations with their gods: Israel, the Philistines, the Edomites, the Moabites, the Arameans, and so on. In that day, everyone assumed that the more successful a nation was, the greater their god was.

Small nations with small gods. Then came the huge Assyrians, with their big god, then the Babylonians with their big god, and soon the Medes and the Persians will come with their big gods. So what about YHWH, the God of the little nation Israel. His city has been destroyed, his temple destroyed, his line of David kings is totally defeated. Is he a player at all in the big world?

Exiles were hanging on to God blindly, but the best they could do was: “The Lord can’t see my life. My God ignores my troubles. The Lord has forsaken me. The Lord has forgotten me.”

And as soon as Isaiah writes 4:11, he knows this: *He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.*

Isaiah knows they will not believe that, and he does not blame them, but they are so wrong. And so Isaiah begins to re-educate God’s people about their God.

40:12 *Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?* Our God is immense, vast.

He measures the oceans with the hollow of his hand. His outstretched fingers measure the universe. He puts all the mountains in his scale, and weighs them. All these nations, great and small alike, are a drop in his bucket. The gods of those peoples are shapes of metal and wood.

40:26 *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. One by one, each one by name, not one is missing.*

Does God do less with you? So, in vv12-26, Isaiah re-introduced Israel to their God, reintroduces us to our God. He does this because of what God's people say:

40:27 Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God"? Why do you say, "The Lord can't see my life, my God ignores my troubles"? God never minimizes our troubles. God's people have long and severe troubles. God knows it is so. BUT, let's be careful what we conclude about God.

God is vast, immense, and tender with the small and defenseless. He gathers helpless lambs in his arms, carries them close to his heart. In Luke 12 Jesus tells the disciples that not one sparrow is neglected before God. He says the hairs on each of our heads are numbered. We need to be taught again about our God.

40:28 *Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.*  
29 *He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.*  
30 *Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;*  
31 *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.*

This is God comforting, speaking tenderly: God gives strength to the weary who hope in him, who trust in him. God increases the power of the weak. Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will not stumble and fall. They will keep running the race.

The trouble is, for the exiles and for us, we do not feel God giving strength to us, or increasing our power, we don't feel like we are running and not growing weary. We don't feel God gathering us in his arms, and carrying us close to his heart. What's going on?

Here is an example of something happening that I could not feel. This is how I explain this to myself. When I was in grade 8, I was 4'10" tall. When I was in grade 11, I was 5'10" tall. In three or four years, I grew a foot, three or four inches a year. This is not unusual.

Something remarkable was happening in my body, and I felt nothing. I did not feel the growth spurt begin, and I did not feel myself growing while it happened. I measured myself, knew I was growing, thought it was cool I was getting taller, but felt nothing. I could not tell when it ended, except the marks on the wall stopped rising.

My body felt nothing during of whole that process. It was exiting and remarkable, and I had no awareness. So I cannot say God is not helping and strengthening just because I do not feel it. We feel what we feel, but if feelings have the last word on these things, we are denying our God.

That's about what I feel. Here's a picture I use about "seeing" God. I am standing in front of God's throne, in front of the same King, the LORD Almighty, that Isaiah saw in the temple, but I have a heavy blindfold over my eyes. That immense God is right in front of me, but I can see nothing. It is not his problem, it is the blindfold. I can't see, but he is no less near and close.

Sometimes the blindfold is not so thick, some light gets through, I have some sense that God is there. But often it is thick. The thing is, He's still right in front of me. And will I stop thanking and praising him because I can't see him? No, I don't want to do that.

He's there though I do not see him, he's helping though I do not feel it, so I pray to him and worship him. If not one sparrow is neglected, if my hairs are numbered, he's with me.

There are two more comfort sections like this in Isa 41, let's look at those.

41:8-10 *"But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend (and Gentiles who trust in Christ are included as descendants of Abraham), 9 I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. 10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."*

We all need to hear God speaking to us this way: *I said to you, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.*

I am with you. I am your God. Our God cannot be someone's God without also being with them. If he is my God, he is with me. Other gods could perhaps operate at a distance, but our God has never done that, and never will. When God says "I am your God" and he says "I am with you," for him that's two different ways of saying the same thing. But that's not all.

41:10b *I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

In the Bible, when God is with us, it is not because we are lonely, it is because we are weak. He's not with us to keep us company, he stays with us to help us. God is beside us, but his hands are never in his pockets. Never. If he's our God, he's with us. And if he's with us, he's helping.

When he says he's our God, that means he *with* us. And when he's *with* us, that means he is *strengthening* us, *helping* us, *upholding* us with his righteous right hand, *carrying* us, and so on.

Last section for today: 41:13-14 *For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob, little Israel, do not fear, for I myself will help you,*” declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

“Worm” here is a kind and tender word. God knows how small we are. God takes our right hand and says, ‘do not fear, I will help you, do not be afraid, do not fear, I myself will help you.’

Summary: Three themes in Isaiah 40-41. One, how the exiles understand God: The Lord can’t see my life, my God ignores my troubles, the Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me. These lines lurk in us all. Our God is either not big enough, or he does not care enough.

Two, our God is unimaginably great, great enough that these lines of despair are completely impossible. In 40:21, Isaiah ask the despairing people, “do you not know? Have you not heard? Has this not been told you? Have you not understood this all along?”

When we say, “the Lord can’t see my life, the Lord ignores my troubles,” what we are really saying is, “I don’t know the first thing about my God. If I’d been taught properly, if I’d been listening, if I’d understood, I’d know better. But I don’t.”

So, the first theme is that the exiles, and we sometimes, despair about God. He’s not big enough, or he doesn’t care enough. Second theme: if we could grasp what our God was like, we would know that neither of those was remotely possible.

Three: God wants to comfort his people, he has a great compassion the small, the weak and troubled and neglected: to speak tenderly to us, to gather us, carry us, encourage us, help us, strengthen us, uphold us with his right hand, take us by the hand, and take away our fear.

And it is out of this desire to comfort and help and rescue that he sent the Christ. He came to us in his Son. John the Baptist saw himself as a voice in a wilderness that would announce God’s comfort and good news.

Here is the message. God is talking to our church, and to each one of us individually. Hear God speak: 40:11 *He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.*

40:29,31 *He gives strength to the weary, and increases the power of the weak... 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.*

41:9b-10 *I said to you, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you, and have not rejected you.*

*10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.*

*I will strengthen you, and help you; I will uphold you, with my faithful right hand.*

41:13-14 *I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand, and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid, do not fear, I myself will help you,*” declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. Amen, and Amen.