

In chapter 39 Isaiah spoke of the coming judgment against Jerusalem.

The house of David will be taken into captivity into Babylon,
and the treasures of Jerusalem will be carried off.

But wait!

Isaiah is the prophet who has said over and over again:

“I will deliver you and this city” (38:6)

“I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake,
and for the sake of my servant David.” (37:35)

“Behold Zion...an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent,
whose stakes will never be plucked up.” (33:20)

How can it be that now he speaks of the exile of Judah?

Isaiah chooses not to explain it directly.

Instead he turns to the future.

Because indeed Zion will never be plucked up.

Unlike Babylon and Edom, which will uninhabited and desolate “forever,”
Zion will endure forever.

That does not mean that the exile will never happen;

it means that Jerusalem will come through exile into glory.

Isaiah 38-55 turns our attention to the Servant of Yahweh.

And the Servant must travel the same path as Israel, through exile into glory.

So Isaiah turns immediately from Hezekiah’s personal comfort in 39:8,
to Jerusalem’s comfort in 40:1.

Chapter 40 consists of three voices responding to the call of verses 1-2.

There is the “voice” of verses 3-5,

the voice of verses 6-8,

followed by the herald of verses 9-24.

These voices prepare the way for when the Holy One himself speaks in verse 25.

The three heralds explain why we should listen to God.

1. Two Heralds of Comfort (v1-8)

a. Comfort Jerusalem! (v1-2)

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,*

and cry to her

that her warfare^[a] is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the LORD's hand

double for all her sins.

Verses 1-2 set up the whole second section of Isaiah's prophecy.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly, literally, speak to the heart of Jerusalem,

and cry to her that her warfare is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

The portion of the firstborn was a double portion.

Isaiah is not saying that Jerusalem has received twice as much as she deserved,

but rather that she has received the full inheritance of sin.

Her exile is over; her iniquity is pardoned; her warfare is ended.

Jerusalem now sits as a forgiven city—but still sits alone.

What is the comfort that will come to Jerusalem?

b. A Voice: Prepare the Way for the LORD (v3-5)

³ *A voice cries:*^[b]

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ *Every valley shall be lifted up,*

and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,

and the rough places a plain.

⁵ *And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,*

and all flesh shall see it together,

for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

A voice cries! (v3)

This is the voice of the first herald—

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;

make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

In 33:8—the highways to Egypt were laid waste,

but God promised that a new highway would be built,

"The Way of Holiness" on which only the redeemed would walk. (35:8-9)

Now Isaiah returns to that theme.

After the Exile—when the ransomed of the LORD will return to Zion,

there will be a highway in the wilderness,

a straight path through the desert to Zion.

But this is not just the highway for the Exiles,

this is the highway for our God.

God will dwell with his people.

He will reveal his glory, “and all flesh shall see it together.”
“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.”
When Yahweh comes to Jerusalem,
all of creation will hasten to get out of his way!

When the glory of the LORD is revealed, mountains shrink and valleys are raised.
You know the commercial with the car driving through the desert,
and roads and bridges form under its wheels as it drives.
They borrowed that image from Isaiah.
When God comes in glory to Zion, all creation will serve its king.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

This is why all four gospels cite this verse when talking about John the Baptist.
John came preaching this gospel!
He was – as it were – the first voice bringing comfort to Zion.

c. A Voice: All Flesh Is Grass (v6-8)

⁶ *A voice says, “Cry!”
And I said,^[c] “What shall I cry?”
All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty^[d] is like the flower of the field.*
⁷ *The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.*
⁸ *The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

Then comes the second herald:

“A voice says, “Cry!”
And I said, “what shall I cry?”
All flesh is grass and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath–spirit–of the LORD blows on it.
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.”
The first statement declares that flesh–or the people–are grass.
The middle statement is identical–the grass withers, the flower fades.
And the last statement contrasts the fleetingness of man with the permanence of God.
His Spirit–his breath–blows on the grass and it fades.
When God blows upon man, he withers and dies.
(See 40:24–God blowing on the rulers)

But that same breath that withers both the grass and man,
also brings life.
Because it is that breath that God breathes out in his word.
God's Word, enlivened and empowered by his eternal breath endures forever.

Both 1 Peter 2 and James 1 cite this passage –
highlighting the importance of the Word of God.

The first two voices emphasize the importance of the Word of God.
The Mouth of the LORD has spoken.
The word of our God will stand forever.
Listen up!
Because God has something to say!

But Isaiah doesn't tell us what it is yet.
No, there is yet a third voice—a third message that we must hear,
before we can hear God's voice.

2. Zion: The Herald of the Gospel (v9-24)

a. Behold Your God – the Gentle Shepherd (v9-11)

⁹ *Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;^[e]
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;^[f]
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”*
¹⁰ *Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.*
¹¹ *He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.*

Isaiah reminds us of *why* we should listen to God.

The ESV rightly translates verse 9 in such a way that Zion is the herald here.
It is as though Jerusalem hears the voices of verses 3-8,
and now responds by announcing to the cities of Judah the coming of God.
Some translations say “herald of good news to Zion,”
but the problem is that the participle is a feminine singular,
and Zion is the only feminine noun that matches it.
Normally an anonymous prophetic voice (as in verses 3 and 6) is masculine,

so it seems clear that Isaiah is speaking of Jerusalem as the third herald.
This fits Isaiah's consistent usage of Zion as the mother of the people of Judah.

The city of God now speaks to the rest of the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!
Behold the Lord Yahweh comes with might, and his arm rules for him.
Behold his reward is with him, and his recompense before him."

This threefold "behold" in verses 9-11 is echoed by a threefold "who" in verses 12-14,
concluded by a final "behold" in verses 15-17.

The cities of Judah are called to behold your God!

Behold the Lord Yahweh as he comes in might,
down the highway in the wilderness!

Behold he is coming to reward his people and destroy his enemies.

Did you know that God has an arm?

"His arm rules for him."

God's arm refers to his power and might.

We sometimes call this "anthropomorphic"--

that God is using images of the human body in order to explain himself to us.

But there is more to it than that.

God created us the way he did in order to reflect something about himself.

We are created in the image of God.

Fish are not.

Fish have nothing that corresponds to God's right arm.

Somehow "God's dorsal fin" would not communicate the same thing.

There is something about the human arm that expresses in a physical form
what is true of God's eternal power.

But not only is God the powerful king,

he is also the good king--the shepherd king to whom David pointed.

"He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms;

He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young."

Behold your king!

Pilate used those words.

Isaiah would have appreciated the irony.

He will, after all, use the image of sheep again

to describe the work of the servant of the LORD.

But having set forth the coming of Yahweh as king with his threefold "behold,"
now he asks three "who" questions.

b. The Wisdom of God (v12-14)

¹² *Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a span,*

*enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure
and weighed the mountains in scales
and the hills in a balance?*

*¹³ Who has measured^[g] the Spirit of the LORD,
or what man shows him his counsel?*

*¹⁴ Whom did he consult,
and who made him understand?
Who taught him the path of justice,
and taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding?*

Or I should say, Zion asks three “who” questions,
because this is still the third herald speaking.

“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span,
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales,
and the hills in a balance?”

Does this sound like God speaking to Job?

Or Wisdom speaking in Proverbs 8?

Isaiah is reminding us of why we need to listen to God’s voice.

He is speaking at the end of the 8th century in Jerusalem,

reminding his hearers that although they must endure exile,

they must also remember that God is faithful to his promises.

You may patiently endure through suffering

because you can see the glory of God coming down that highway!

Throughout this second section of Isaiah,

we will often hear the doctrine of creation

used as a lens into the doctrine of redemption.

The creation of the heavens and the earth is paralleled

by the creation of Israel as the elect people of God.

Then comes the second “who”

Who has directed the Spirit of Yahweh, or what man shows him his counsel?

Are you wiser than God?

Can you govern the breath of the LORD which smites the grass and destroys it?

If not, then you had better listen when the Spirit of the LORD speaks.

Paul cites this verse in Romans 11:34 as a reminder that God’s wisdom and knowledge
are unsearchable.

No one tells God what to do!

Verse fourteen declares the third “who”

“Whom did he consult,
and made him understand,
and taught him the path of justice,

and taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding?
Where can you find wisdom that is greater than Yahweh's?
Who can claim to have schooled God?
The gods of the nations all had to seek counsel from each other before creating the world,
but who can claim to have counseled Yahweh?

In answer to these questions, Zion declares (verses 15-17).

c. Behold the Nations – Like Dust on the Scales (v15-17)

¹⁵ *Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as the dust on the scales;
behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust.*
¹⁶ *Lebanon would not suffice for fuel,
nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering.*
¹⁷ *All the nations are as nothing before him,
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.*

Why are you afraid of the nations?

They are like a drop from a bucket.
All the beasts in Lebanon are insufficient for a burnt offering that would satisfy God,
and a forest fire in Lebanon couldn't produce a sufficient fire.
All the nations are as nothing before him.
So why are you afraid of them?

Zion—the third voice—concludes with two final “who’s.”

To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?
An idol—the work of men’s craft?
Made out of gold, silver or wood?
You would compare the living God to that?!!

(read)

d. God vs. Idols (v18-20)

¹⁸ *To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him?*
¹⁹ *An idol! A craftsman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold
and casts for it silver chains.*
²⁰ *He who is too impoverished for an offering
chooses wood^[h] that will not rot;
he seeks out a skillful craftsman
to set up an idol that will not move.*

Too often we act as though God was a creation of our own imagination.

We think that *we* can decide who God is, and what God is like.
But we do not define God.
He defines us.

Francis Schaeffer borrows from Isaiah 40 in his book titles:
The God Who Is There –
and “He is there and he is not silent!”

And Zion goes on to say:
(Read verses 21-24)

e. Remember Who God Is – and Who We Are (v21-24)

²¹ *Do you not know? Do you not hear?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?*
²² *It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;*
²³ *who brings princes to nothing,
and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.*
²⁴ *Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows on them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it.
The gods of the nations are enclosed within the heavens.
There is no transcendence in the gods of the nations.
If you think that you can manipulate your god to get him to give you what you want,
then you are worshiping the wrong god.
Because Yahweh is sovereign.
He rules over all things.
He sits there above the circle of the earth—
Isaiah’s picture is of God’s throne at the pinnacle of that blue dome above us.
And he looks down—and from that great height, we look like grasshoppers!
That image was used once before in Israel’s history.
In Numbers 13, when the spies returned from the Promised Land,
they said that they looked like grasshoppers compare to the nations.
Now Isaiah says that the nations look like grasshoppers to God!
God has spread out the heavens above as a tent to dwell in.
Do you really think that the nations—or their gods—can stand up to him?
When he blows on them, they wither.

The tempest of his breath—of his Spirit—destroys the wicked.

So then, God finally speaks!

(Read v25-27)

3. The Holy One Speaks (v25-31)

a. The Greatness of God Revealed in the Heavens (v25-26)

²⁵ *To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.*

²⁶ *Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?*

*He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name;
by the greatness of his might
and because he is strong in power,
not one is missing.*

Jacob has complained that God does not see.
That Yahweh has disregarded his right.

(read 28-31).

b. Wait for the LORD (v27-31)

²⁷ *Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,*

*“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?*

²⁸ *Have you not known? Have you not heard?*

*The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

*He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.*

²⁹ *He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.*

³⁰ *Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;*

³¹ *but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;*

*they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.*

Now, finally, at the end of Zion’s message,
we hear the promise given to those who would return from exile—
to those who long to see Jerusalem once more!
Yahweh is the everlasting God.
He has promised to bring you back—and he will do what he has promised.

And those who wait for him shall renew their strength.
What do they need strength for?
The journey.
The long road from Babylon back to Zion.
This is a journey for which no human strength can avail.
Even youths shall faint on this path.
Young, strong men shall fall exhausted along the way.
For this a path that crosses numerous valleys and mountains.
And those who refuse to wait for God will perish in some nameless pass.
But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

This is the image of the exodus.

In Exodus 19:4 God says that he brought Israel to himself on eagles' wings.
He lifted his people up out of bondage in Egypt, and delivered them.
Now Isaiah says that once more God will bring his people home on eagles' wings.
The one who trusts in the LORD will have a strength beyond that of mortal men.
They shall run and not be weary.
They shall walk and not faint.

You can understand why all four gospels tell us that John the Baptist is
“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.”
Isaiah is speaking of the return from Exile.
And yes, there was a return from Babylon,
but the Jews understood that until the Son of David sat upon his father's throne,
the exile was not over.
And so John came as the first voice, proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God.

Peter quotes verses 6-8 in 1 Peter 1:24-25,
and then declares that “this word is the good news that was preached to you.”
Peter is speaking to the “elect exiles of the Dispersion.”
He is telling them of their need for patient endurance through this exile,
as we share in the sufferings of Christ—sufferings that are yet tinged with glory—
as we look forward to the full revelation of Jesus Christ.
So the apostolic preaching is the second voice, proclaiming the enduring word of God,
calling us to listen to him.

Are you tired?
Weary?
Heavy-laden?

Wait for the Lord.

Wait patiently for him.

Jeremiah speaks in Lamentations 3:22—in the midst of the exile—

“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

The LORD is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him.

The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.”

As he sits in dust and ashes, bewailing the destruction of temple and city, Jeremiah declares

“It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth...

For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief,

he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love.”

He has not forgotten you.

He knows well what trials you endure,

for he endured them as the servant of the Lord.

He suffered exile and passed through death and hell for you.

And now he has been exalted to the right hand of the Father—

in that glory he has now prepared for you,

so that you who share in his sufferings might also share in his glory.