

LESSON 8 *May 15-21

“Comfort My People”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

World War II ended in 1945 while a Japanese soldier named Shoichi Yokoi hid in the jungle on the island of Guam. Leaflets dropped from U.S. planes proclaimed peace, but Yokoi thought it a trick. A loyal, patriotic soldier of the emperor, he vowed never to surrender. He had no contact with civilization and lived on what he could find in the jungle.

In 1972, 27 years after the end of World War II, hunters came across Yokoi while he was fishing, and he only then learned that the message of peace had been true. While the rest of his people had been enjoying peace for decades, Yokoi had been enduring decades of privation and stress.—Roy Gane, *Altar Call* (Berrien Spring, Mich.: Diadem, 1999), p. 304, adapted.

Many centuries earlier, through the prophet Isaiah, God announced that the time of His peoples' stress and suffering was really over: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins” (*Isa. 40:1, 2*). Let's take a look at what this means.

The Week at a Glance: With what promise does Isaiah 40 begin? What good news is revealed in this chapter? How does the New Testament apply Isaiah 40? Why is idolatry such a sin against God?

Memory Text: “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (*Isaiah 40:9, NRSV*).

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 22.*

Comfort for the Future (*Isa. 40:1, 2*).

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

There are many answers to this question. There was the punishment administered by Assyria, the rod of God's anger (*Isaiah 10*), from which God delivered Judah by destroying Sennacherib's army in 701 B.C. (*Isaiah 37*). There was the punishment administered by Babylon, which would carry away goods and people from Judah because Hezekiah had displayed his wealth to the messengers from Merodach-baladan (*Isaiah 39*). And there was the punishment administered by one of the other nations against which Isaiah wrote messages (*Isaiah 14–23*).

Meanwhile, though "Assyria" and "Assyrian(s)" are mentioned 43 times from *Isaiah 7:17* to *38:6*, this nation appears only once in the rest of *Isaiah*, where chapter *52:4* refers to past oppression by Egypt and then by "the Assyrian." In the latter part of *Isaiah*, deliverance from exile in Babylon is mentioned (*Isa. 43:14; 47:1; 48:14, 20*), and it is Cyrus, the Persian who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., who is to free the exiles of Judah (*Isa. 44:28, 45:1, 45:13*).

Isaiah 1–39 emphasize events leading up to deliverance from the Assyrians in 701 B.C., but at the beginning of chapter 40, the book leaps ahead a century and a half to the end of Babylon, in 539 B.C., and the return of the Jews shortly thereafter.

Is the theme of return from Babylon linked with anything earlier in *Isaiah*? If so, how?

Isaiah 39 serves as a transition to the following chapters by predicting a Babylonian captivity, at least for some of Hezekiah's descendants (*vss. 6, 7*). Furthermore, the oracles of *Isaiah 13, 14, and 21* predict the fall of Babylon and the liberty this would bring to God's people: "But the Lord will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land. . . . When the Lord has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon" (*Isa. 14:1, 3, NRSV*). Notice the close connection with *Isaiah 40:1, 2*, where God promises His people there is an end to their suffering.

What do Bible promises about the end of suffering mean to you now, amid your present suffering? What good would our faith be without those promises?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: *Isaiah 40.*

Teachers Aim:

1. To show that God's promises are true.
2. To demonstrate the necessity of God's mercy and power.
3. To apply Isaiah 40 to Christ's first and second advents.

Lesson Outline:

I. His Promises Are True.

- A. God promises His comfort and deliverance, even before His people are taken captive.
- B. Beyond its immediate meaning, Isaiah 40 promises to deliver His people from spiritual captivity through the first advent of Jesus, who was preceded by those such as John the Baptist who came to prepare His way.
- C. Likewise, preparation is needed for Christ's second coming as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

II. Mercy and Power.

- A. In His mercy, God desires our salvation even while we are in the midst of our sins. He puts His omnipotence (which could just as easily be used to destroy us) at the disposal of His merciful ends.
- B. God's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence are among the many traits that idols do not possess and that we cannot convey through feeble human means.

Summary: It is the combination of God's mercy and power that makes our deliverance possible.

COMMENTARY

Introduction: Comfort For the Future.

Isaiah 40 marks a turning point in the book of Isaiah. From this point to the conclusion, Isaiah receives an unfolding vision of God's triumph. The vision depicts His people's legacy as joint heirs with Christ and brings the earthly conflict into cosmic perspective. Isaiah 40–66 is similar to Jesus' last talk with His disciples (*John 14–16*) in that it states God's plan to evangelize the world with the gospel. This is accomplished through the exaltation of a crucified and risen Savior who, through the Spirit, directs all His efforts toward saving humanity. Use a concordance to discover how often Isaiah refers to God's Spirit in these chapters and contemplate its significance.

MONDAY May 17

Presence, Word, and Roadwork *(Isa. 40:3-8).*

How do God's people receive comfort? *Isa. 40:1-8.*

An unnamed herald announces that God is coming to reveal His glory (*vss. 3-5*). Another voice proclaims that although humans are transient like foliage, "the word of our God will stand forever" (*vs. 8*).

After the exile, God's people gain back what they had received at Mt. Sinai and then rejected through the apostasy for which they were punished: God's Presence and His Word. These are the basic ingredients of God's covenant with Israel, which were enshrined at His sanctuary in their midst (*Exod. 25:8, 16*). Because they had violated His Word, God had abandoned His temple (*Ezekiel 9-11*), but He is coming back. His Presence and His eternally dependable Word bring comfort, deliverance, and hope.

What preparation is necessary for the Lord's coming? *Isa. 40:3-5.*

It is not fitting for a king to be jolted by a rough road. So his coming is preceded by roadwork. The more so for the King of kings! His coming, apparently from the east, where He has been in exile with His people as a sanctuary to them (*Ezek. 11:16*), would require major rearrangement of the terrain. Construction of a literal, level super-highway through the rugged hills east of Jerusalem would be daunting, even with dynamite and bulldozers. God is the only One who can do the work: It is He who turns "the rough places into level ground" (*Isa. 42:16, NRSV*). But He doesn't need a literal road for transportation, because He has an airborne chariot of cherubim (*Ezekiel 1, 9-11*).

The New Testament explicitly applies Isaiah's prophecy to the spiritual roadwork accomplished through the preaching of John the Baptist (*Matt. 3:3*). His message was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (*vs. 2, NRSV*) and the baptism that he performed was "of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (*Mark 1:4, NRSV*). So, the roadwork was repentance, willingness to turn away from sin, in order to receive the comfort of God's forgiveness and presence.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 proclaimed the same spiritual message in plenty of time for the exiles of Judah to understand the spiritual nature of roadwork for God. In this passage, the Lord promises a fresh start to those who are willing: a "new covenant" in which He puts His law in their hearts and pledges to be their God. They know Him and His character, because He has forgiven them.

Read carefully Isaiah 40:6-8. What hope can you, who fades away as does the grass, derive from what the verses say?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

I. Divine Comfort.

Although Judah was far from repentant at this time (*see Isa. 29:13, 59:1-15*), God was looking to the day when they would return to Him, so He would have a receptive people to whom He could declare words of pardon and comfort. (*Read Isa. 40:1, 2.*)

II. The Word and the Work.

God looked forward to the day when His truth would be declared and welcomed in preparation for receiving the Messiah. This was not to be a Messiah who would cater to the schemes of priests or other people but One who would reveal God's entire counsel as it relates to redemption. John the Baptist's work as a forerunner of the Messiah is prophesied in Isaiah 40:3-5. Gabriel revealed this fact before John's birth.

God's message reveals His glory (*Exod. 33:19-22, 34:5-7*) so that we may behold and be transformed into His image (*2 Cor. 3:17, 18*). Isaiah 40:6-8 highlights that this world's glory is an illusion that rapidly fades. God's Word, however, endures forever, and those in whom its power resides also endure (*see John 15:7, 1 Pet. 1:23-25, 1 John 2:15-17, Rev. 14:12*).

III. The Great Commission.

If we are willing, God will liberate us from sin and fill us with His own nature (*see 2 Pet. 1:3, 4*). When this transaction and transformation occur, they will urge us to bring others to the Savior, for He wishes to save everyone (*1 Tim. 2:4, 5*). Salvation for everyone is presented on exactly the same terms. This involves abandoning anything we might once have thought of as righteousness within ourselves, total acceptance of Christ as our Savior, and total submission to His grace and authority (*see Rom. 9:29-10:13*). To the legalist, this seems heretical, because it does not commend human merit. To the hedonist, it seems fanatical, because it makes no concessions to the carnal nature. But to the one who actually experiences salvation through the power of the gospel, the joy of liberation and redemption is real and lasting.

God does not say "I know that you have embraced My salvation, but I fear you will do a poor job of explaining the gospel to others. So please keep quiet, and let my angels do all the witnessing. They are sinless and flawlessly competent." Instead, He declares to us, as He did to the healed demoniacs, "Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you" (*Mark 5:19, NKJV*).

"There are many who need the ministration of loving Christian hearts. Many have gone down to ruin who might have been saved if their neighbors, common men and women, had put forth personal effort for them. . . . In the very family, the neighborhood, the town, where we live, there is work for us to do as missionaries for Christ.

TUESDAY May 18

The Birth of Evangelism *(Isa. 40:9-11)*.

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

Later in Isaiah there appears a male herald with good news for Jerusalem (*41:27, 52:7*). But in Isaiah 40:9 the herald to proclaim “‘Here is your God!’ ” (*NRSV*) from a mountain is a female, a fact brought out in the Hebrew.

In Psalm 68, David praises God because He “gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity” (*vs. 6, NRSV*). Though these words here apply to the Exodus from Egyptian bondage, Isaiah uses the same ideas with reference to proclamation of a second “Exodus”—the return from Babylonian captivity.

Is there also a later application of Isaiah’s prophecy? If so, what is it?

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

Even earlier than John, others spoke about the good news of His coming. Among the first of these were the elderly Simeon and Anna, who met baby Jesus when He was dedicated at the temple (*Luke 2:25-38*). Like Isaiah’s heralds, they were male and female. Simeon was looking forward to the consolation/comfort of Israel in the form of the Messiah (*Luke 2:25, 26*).

In light of Isaiah’s prophecy, it does not appear coincidental that Anna, a prophetess, was the very first to announce publicly at the temple mountain to the people of Jerusalem that the Lord had come: “At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (*Luke 2:38, NRSV*). This was the birth of Christian evangelism as we know it: proclamation of the gospel, the good news, that Jesus Christ has come to bring salvation. Later, Christ entrusted to another woman, Mary Magdalene, the first tidings of His triumphant resurrection (*John 20:17, 18*), which ensured that His gospel mission to Planet Earth was accomplished. Flesh is like grass, but the divine Word who became flesh is eternal (*compare Isa. 40:6-8*)!

Look at Isaiah 40:11. What kind of imagery is presented here? Write out for yourself a paragraph on how you, personally, have experienced shepherding by the Lord. Why is it good to recount in your mind the way the Lord has led you?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

If we are Christians, this work will be our delight. No sooner is one converted than there is born within him a desire to make known to others what a precious friend he has found in Jesus. The saving and sanctifying truth cannot be shut up in his heart.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 141.

Note the emphasis on Christ’s identity as the Good Shepherd, a recurring motif in Scripture (see *Ps. 23:1, 2; Ezek. 34:11-16; John 10:11-18*).

IV. The Creator-Redeemer’s Might and Mercy.

Read Isaiah 40:11-31. God’s mercy, humility, and tenderhearted love do not detract from His power and justice. With the expanding emphasis on Christ as the suffering Servant and world’s Redeemer in Isaiah 40–66, it is appropriate to underscore the power, wisdom, and authority of God. Even the mightiest of nations and empires is of microscopic strength in comparison to God. No alliance of

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Psalms 77:12; 119:50, 105; Romans 15:4; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5; Philippians 4:8.*

- 1 When God gives us a time of peace in our lives, we should rejoice and enjoy this gift. But why do we so often *borrow* trouble from tomorrow? Why do we worry about another time of trouble to come or forget that it is God who has given us this peace and other blessings we now enjoy? How can we enjoy the peace of God on a steady basis? *Ps. 77:12, Phil. 4:8.*
- 2 How does staying in God’s Word comfort us in the midst of hardship? How does Scripture affect our view of those hardships and trials? What promises do we have from God about His Word? *Ps. 119:50, 105; Rom. 15:4; 2 Cor. 1:3-5.*
- 3 Wednesday’s study enforces the truth that the Sabbath commemorates God as our Creator. What does the Sabbath say about who we are to Him? How can we be comforted by knowing these truths?
- 4 Think of something you have created with your own hands. Though it may not have turned out perfect, did you want to destroy it? What fragile things do you own that you take special care of? Compare this to our relationship with an all-powerful God who has created us.

WEDNESDAY May 19

Merciful Creator *(Isa. 40:12-31)*.

How does Isaiah 40 develop the themes of God's mercy and power?

Throughout this chapter, God's mercy and power are interwoven (see below) and even blended together, because they are both necessary in order 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 (vss. 1-5): comfort, coming of the Lord to deliver.
Power (vss. 3-8): glory, permanence versus human weakness.
Mercy (vss. 9-11): good news of deliverance, Shepherd of His people.
Power (vss. 12-26): incomparable Creator.
Mercy (vss. 27-31): as Creator, gives power to the faint.

Having introduced God's might in terms of His glory and permanence (*vss. 3-8*), Isaiah elaborates on His power and superior wisdom, which make earth and earthlings appear puny (*vss. 12-17*). Here Isaiah's style, with rhetorical questions and vivid analogies referring to the earth and its parts, sounds like God's answer to Job (*Job 38-41*).

What is the answer to Isaiah's rhetorical question: "To whom then will you liken God" (*Isa. 40:18*)?

For Isaiah, as for Job, the answer goes without saying: no one. God is incomparable. But Isaiah picks up on his question and refers to the answer that many ancient people implied by their actions, which is that God is like an idol (*vss. 19, 20*).

To this notion Isaiah responds. Already it looks foolish to use an idol as a likeness of God, but just to be sure people get the point, he elaborates on God's uniqueness and brings in the unanswerable argument that He is the holy Creator (*vss. 21-26*).

How does verse 27 reveal the attitude of the people addressed by Isaiah's message? How are we guilty of having the same?

The purpose of God's message is to comfort people who need it! Like Job, their suffering had made them confused and discouraged concerning His character.

Why is the truth about God as Creator so important to understand? How does the Sabbath, help reinforce this point?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

nations, no earthly system of beliefs, can overturn His authority or make void His gospel. No form of idolatry will prevent God from revealing salvation to the world (*see Isa. 45:22-25*).

Idolatry is blasphemous and degrading. In character and conduct, idolaters fall below the level of the things they worship (*see Ps. 115:1-8, Rom. 1:18-32*). Idolatry includes the exaltation of human ideas and passions above divine counsel and revelation (*see 1 Sam. 15:23, Ezek. 14:3-7, Col. 3:5*; Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 583–585). Those who reject idols and wait on the Lord may be sorely tried and scorned by the world, but their strength shall be renewed like the eagles', and they shall rise to heights of character development the world knows nothing about (*John 15:15-21, 1 John 3:1-3, 5:18-21*).

Witnessing

You are watching the evening news when suddenly the anchor lifts her hand to her earpiece and listens intently to what is being said from the control booth. Her face registers complete shock as she announces, “After many years of research into the cause and complexities of pain, loneliness, and grief, scientists at the End of the Line Research Center in Heartbreak, Foreverland, announce that they have discovered a cure for all of humanity’s suffering. Regardless of its cause, duration, or intensity, suffering now can be totally eliminated by ingesting one small gel cap each day. If you miss a day’s dosage, however, suffering will return with a vengeance.”

Madness, right?

Not exactly. You see, God already has prepared the antidote to help us cope with suffering and pain. This antidote is not a small pill you swallow. Rather, it is in the form of a gift that completely envelops us. He freely offers us this gift and urges us to accept it—no strings attached. All you need to do is “set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed [returns]” (*1 Pet. 1:13, NIV*).

How much easier can it possibly be?

As you go about your life this coming week, look for someone who is lonely or who is experiencing pain or grief. Do something nice for that person and share with him or her the hope you have found in Christ when you have experienced similar times. Continue to be this person’s friend. Christian friendship, like the gel cap from End of the Line Research Center, is meant to be taken daily.

THURSDAY May 20

The Problem With Idolatry (*Isa. 40:19, 20*).

Idolatry destroys a unique, intimate relationship with God by replacing Him with something else (*Exod. 20:4, 5; Isa. 42:8*). So, prophets refer to idolatry as spiritual “adultery” (*Jer. 3:6-9, Ezek. 16:15-19*).

Read Isaiah 41:29. How does Isaiah characterize idols? How do you understand what he is saying there about them? Why is that such an accurate a depiction of any idol, no matter what it is?

Ancient idolators believed they worshiped powerful divine beings through images or symbols of them. Worship of an idol representing another god breaks the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (*Exod. 20:3, NRSV*). But if an idol is intended to represent the true God, as the golden calf was (*Exod. 32:4, 5*), the Lord rejects it as a likeness of Himself, for nobody knows how to depict Him (*Deut. 4:15-19*), and nothing can represent His incomparable glory and greatness. Thus, an idol itself functions as another god, and worshiping it breaks the first and second commandments.

God’s people don’t need idols, because they have His real Shekinah presence with them in His sanctuary. To worship an idol is to replace and, therefore, deny His real presence.

Also, an idol not only fails to represent the Lord but it represents really nothing, because all those other gods have no existence (*Isa. 44:6*). As in Isaiah, Psalm 115:8 is clear: those who make idols “are like them; so are all who trust in them” (*NRSV*).

What kinds of idolatry do we, as a church today, face? Does idolatry appear in more subtle forms in the church today? If so, how?

We know from ancient writings that idolatry was attractive, because it was about materialism: Using modes of worship people could relate to, idolators honored forces they believed could give them fertility and prosperity. It was *self-help* religion. Sound familiar?

Just before the Lord comes again, with His way prepared by the roadwork of a final Elijah message of reconciliation (*Malachi 4*), the choice will be the same as in the days of Isaiah: Will you worship the Creator, or will you worship something else (*Revelation 13–14*)? For, in the end, we always worship something.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: What is the common thread running throughout the following verses? *Exod. 20:3, 4; Ps. 96:4; Jer. 50:38; 1 John 5:21.*

These verses show us that we are not to allow idols and graven images into our lives. Why are such things detrimental to our Christian experience? Why is repentance so crucial in achieving salvation's goal?

Thought Questions:

❶ Read Luke 15:7, 10. It seems that, at times, we place a great deal of emphasis on the *number* of individuals brought into the faith through baptism. Instead, what does the Bible focus on?

❷ Consider the principle of *cause and effect*. *Cause*: losing faith in God. *Effect*: hopelessness. Without faith or hope, we search for something to fill the void. This searching creates a perfect opportunity for Satan to tempt us with an alternative to faith and hope—idolatry. Perhaps our type of idolatry is dabbling in the occult. Perhaps it is material gain. Whatever the alternative, Satan intends to lead us as far away from God as possible. When that happens, is there any way to get back to God? Explain.

Application Questions:

❶ What idols are present in your life? How can you remove those idols from your life? How can you help others rid themselves of their idols?

❷ Review Hymn 294 in *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*. How do you interpret the phrase “pow’r in the blood,” and what is its message for today’s world?

FRIDAY *May 21*

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Behold Your God!” in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 311–321.

“In Isaiah’s day the spiritual understanding of mankind was dark through misapprehension of God. Long had Satan sought to lead men to look upon their Creator as the author of sin and suffering and death. Those whom he had thus deceived, imagined that God was hard and exacting. They regarded Him as watching to denounce and condemn, unwilling to receive the sinner so long as there was a legal excuse for not helping him. The law of love by which heaven is ruled had been misrepresented by the archdeceiver as a restriction upon men’s happiness, a burdensome yoke from which they should be glad to escape. He declared that its precepts could not be obeyed and that the penalties of transgression were bestowed arbitrarily.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 311.

“Many who bear the name of Christians are serving other gods besides the Lord. Our Creator demands our supreme devotion, our first allegiance. Anything which tends to abate our love for God, or to interfere with the service due Him, becomes thereby an idol.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 1011.

Discussion Questions:

❶ **Summarize in your own words the message of Isaiah 40:12-31. Write it using modern images, such as modern scientific discoveries that show even more graphically the awesome power of our God. Share your summary with the class.**

❷ **How does Isaiah’s description of the permanence of God’s Word versus the fragile transience of human life (*Isa. 40:6-8*) speak to your fear of death? How does it relate to your hope of resurrection (*Job 19:25-27, Dan. 12:2, 1 Cor. 15:51-57, 1 Thess. 4:13-18*)?**

❸ **By taking Isaiah 40:12-31 to heart, how could one be cured of pride and arrogance?**

Summary: Through Isaiah, God brought comfort to those who had been suffering. Their time of trouble had ended, and God was returning to them. Rather than being discouraged and confused, they could trust God to use His creative power on their behalf.