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Isaiah “Comfort My People”

From the time they were first uttered, the words of the prophet Isaiah have been etched, even embedded, into our consciousness. They are unforgettable words, heavy laden not only with meaning but with hope and with promise, words

like “ ‘God with us’ ” (*Isa. 7:14, The Living Bible*). “For unto us a child is born” (*Isa. 9:6*), “Every valley shall be exalted” (*Isa. 40:4*), and “he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (*Isa. 53:5*).

Words create pictures, images, echoes; weak, paltry words create weak, paltry pictures; powerful, refined, well-crafted words create powerful, refined images and loud, crisp echoes. This, of course, explains why Isaiah’s words speak so loudly, so crisply to us—even after 27 centuries.

In his suffering-servant poem, for instance (*Isa. 52:13–53:12*), Isaiah brings a picture of the Messiah into finer resolution than anywhere else in the Old Testament. This section alone is enough to justify his sobriquet, “the gospel prophet.”

Plus, his prediction of Cyrus, by name, a century and a half before the Persian king conquered Babylon (*Isa. 44:28–45:6*), is so stunningly specific that some scholars have attributed much of Isaiah to a later “second Isaiah,” a hollow creation of those unable to see past the crusty intellectual confines of human imagination.

With a unique blend of vivid imagery, matchless poetic rhythm and balance, Beethovenlike dramatic contrasts, and a rich weave of profound themes that recur in a sophisticated symphonic process of ongoing elaboration and development, Isaiah’s inspired book is a worthy literary vehicle for divine thoughts that are higher than the mundane as the heavens are higher than the earth (*see Isa. 55:9*). Even in translation, which loses the evocative word plays and alliterations of the Hebrew, the book of Isaiah has few peers in the history of literature, either secular or sacred.

We know his words, so eloquent, so poetic, so emotive, and powerful, but do we know the man Isaiah and the world in which he wrote, prayed, and prophesied? As the cruel Assyrian Empire rose to its height of power, it was a time of crushing peril. Even worse, the people of Judah, the chosen people, were sinking ever deeper into moral weakness. Greed and misery fought in the streets. In their struggle for wealth or survival, some puffed the narcotic vapors of vain euphoria while others withered in despair. Seeking to preserve his nation’s identity by taking a remnant from a state of denial and anchoring them in reality, Isaiah called upon his people to behold their God, the Holy One of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth, the One who knew them

by name and who promised to redeem them from fire, but only if they would listen . . . and obey.

Isaiah counseled kings. When the slender thread of God's remnant line was confined to one city doomed by Assyrian legions, it was Isaiah's prophetic words that strengthened King Hezekiah to look for the miracle that was Jerusalem's only hope (*Isaiah 36, 37*). If Jerusalem had fallen at that time, rather than to the Babylonians a century later, the Assyrian policy of scattering conquered peoples could have vaporized the national identity of Judah. Thus, there would have been no Jewish people from whom the Messiah, the Savior of the world, would arise.

Isaiah called upon his people to behold their God, the One who knew them by name.

Isaiah's God said: "Comfort ye my people" (*Isa. 40:1*), a comfort that pierced through a gloomy valley of desperate, deepening shadows to a brighter, gentler world. It contained a hope that kept the community of faith alive through some painful, even potentially faith-destroying, times and trials.

This quarter, we take a look at Isaiah, at his words, his times, his predicaments, but mostly at his God, the God who, back then as well as today, cries out to us, "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine" (*Isa. 43:1*).

What is the message of Isaiah? What did he write back then that speaks so powerfully to us today? What warnings does he offer, what promises does he make? And what does he tell us about our God that we, today—whoever we are and wherever we live—need so desperately to know?

This quarter's Bible Study Guide was written by Dr. Roy Gane, a Hebrew scholar and a teacher of Old Testament studies at Andrews University Seminary, in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Roy brings to these lessons not only his linguistic and historical expertise but his obvious love of the Bible and (even more so) of the Lord whose Holy Spirit inspired its creation. It is our prayerful desire that, as you study these lessons, Dr. Gane's passion for the Lord will rekindle yours, as well. These words reveal to us the One who, back then and even now, proclaims with the same longing desire, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" (*Isa. 40:1*).

How to Use This Teachers Edition

The teachers comments demonstrate different methods of teaching the Standard Bible Study Guide. Five parts make up the teachers comments:

- ▶ **Key Text, Lesson Aim, and Outline:** The key text is taken from the standard edition guide. The lesson aim is designed to: (a) help class participants understand and know about the lesson material, (b) evoke an appropriate feeling about the lesson material that complements the lesson content and helps to internalize it, and (c) help class participants apply the lesson material to their daily lives. The lesson outline may not always follow exactly the material that appears in the standard guide. It may reflect additional perspectives as it attempts to stimulate class discussion.
- ▶ **The Commentary** follows the traditional teaching methods of Sabbath School. It explains Bible passages and provides appropriate information leading to spiritual applications.
- ▶ **The Inductive Bible-Study Method** emphasizes careful, methodical discovery of the meaning in a text. The teacher encourages and supports the learner's investigation and discovery, using distinctive approaches: (a) Study a text thoroughly and systematically before drawing a conclusion. (b) Look for textual meaning carefully and thoroughly; understand the passage in context; avoid misquoting the author. We must not develop opinions without biblical proof. (c) Share insights through group discussion as students examine a Bible passage together. (d) Apply the text to life today. (e) Allow the Holy Spirit to minister to class members during Bible study.
- ▶ **The Focus-on-Witnessing Approach** should be used in conjunction with other methods of Bible study to demonstrate how particular passages of Scripture can be used to encourage people to commit their lives to Christ and to nurture spiritual life once it has been awakened.
- ▶ **The Life-Application Approach** demonstrates how issues that grow out of Bible study can be shared in a small-group setting. This section uses an approach suitable for discussion in a small group in which interpersonal sharing and dialogue are key elements.

Use a combination of teaching methods. Within one class period it is often possible to draw from all five methods demonstrated in the teachers comments. Some teachers will prefer to focus on one method of teaching, drawing heavily on the material in the teachers comments.