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# Comfort for God's people

## Isaiah 40

### 1. Introduction

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God's people have been carried into exile. The Promised Land has been conquered and the inhabitants have been forced from their homes. There appears to be no future for the land or the people.

Has God forgotten his people?

It is understandable that the Israelites raise this question. We ourselves sometimes struggle with doubts about God's way. When there are troubles in our life, we can have scores of questions: Does God really care for us, why does he allow this to happen? Doubts about God's care for his people form the setting of this chapter in Isaiah. But God overcomes these questions by pointing to his wisdom, power and mercy. God does not let go of his people even though they more than deserved it because of their sins. But in love for his people, he again opens a way to the future.

### 2. General remarks

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#### 1. *Who are addressed here?*

Isaiah 40 begins with the words, "Comfort, comfort my people". Comforters have to encourage Jerusalem. Why does Jerusalem need to be encouraged?<sup>2</sup> In what difficult circumstances do God's people find themselves?

In the first part of Isaiah we find prophecies that especially relate to Isaiah's own time. The second part takes us to a different era.

We now find the people living in very different circumstances. In Isaiah 39 the exile is foretold. In Isaiah 40-66 the exile has become a fact. We hear Isaiah speak that her warfare is ended and that her iniquity is par-

done (Isaiah 40:2). Isaiah also lets the people speak: “Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God”?” (Isaiah 40:27) These words reveal how discouraged the people are: Surely God has forgotten his people.

Israel is doomed. It has been trampled underfoot by the world powers, first Assyria, then Babylon. There is no hope for the future.

In this time of exile, in a seemingly hopeless situation, Isaiah may speak words of comfort. The LORD, who indeed has punished his people severely, returns to his people. He will restore, he will send salvation.

God is indeed able to do that. Israel may be an insignificant nation compared to the world powers, but the God of Israel is incomparable. He is the Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth. The awesome power of God is emphasized here to comfort the people: he is *your* God (note the possessive pronoun, see vv. 1, 3, 8, 9).

We do not know for sure when the people heard these words of Isaiah. They may have heard already before the exile that a time of restoration would come again for them. It is also possible that these words were kept until the time when the exile was already a fact. (cf. Introduction in Outline 1; see also the chronological chart)

## 2. *A great perspective*

In Chapter 40-66 Isaiah often prophesies about the coming salvation. We should not limit that salvation to the return from exile. The goal has not been reached when Israel once again lives in the Promised Land. Living again in the Promised Land has a different purpose. Israel will be restored as a nation because the LORD wants the Messiah to come forth from them.

Restoration in the national-political sense was actually very limited. Zedekiah was the last king of David’s house to sit on the throne in Jerusalem. Foreign powers reigned over Israel after the exile.

But this limited restoration is sufficient for what God has in mind for his

Let us then make sure that the LORD is not hindered by us, but that we may confidently look forward to his coming. When we repent from our sins and seek God with all our heart, we are preparing the way for him to come to us with salvation. The voice of the herald has sounded!

### **5. Suggestions for the introduction and preparatory study**

1. Use a concordance to find the places where Isaiah uses the word *comfort*, and try to explain how we may apply this comfort practically.
2. Discuss the validity of a twofold fulfillment of prophecy: an immediate or initial, and the final and definite fulfillment.
3. Discuss the significance of John the Baptist and the connection between his work and the words of Isaiah in the first part of Chapter 40.
4. Use a concordance to understand uses of the words *create*, *creator*, and *form* in the book of Isaiah. Explain why Isaiah speaks repeatedly about God's work of creation.
5. Use some easy to understand literature about the universe to gain an understanding of what Isaiah says about the starry firmament and tell something about numbers, measurements, and distances within the universe. Explain what comfort this gave to God's people then and to us today.

### **6. Ideas for the discussion**

1. May we still say today that for certain sins God inflicts temporal punishments on his people or on someone personally? Or is this something of the old covenant only and are these punishments a thing of the past, since Christ has suffered for us?
2. Isaiah speaks of the way that has to be prepared for God. We are waiting for the second coming of Christ. How should we be busy preparing the way for him?
3. Are we allowed to criticize God's work or his guidance in our life, and to what extent (cf. vv. 12-14)?
4. What are the similarities and/or differences between the exodus from Egypt and the return from Babylon?