

Bible-Reading Coach Podcast Transcript

Week 31: Isaiah 40-66 *Judgment and Comfort*

Welcome to Week 31 of the Bible Reading Coach Podcast. My name is Karl Vaters and I'm here to help you read through the entire Bible in 52 weeks.

So let's remind you from last week of where we are, we are in the middle of the book of Isaiah, the first of the prophets and the first of the major prophets. As we learned last week, the major and minor prophets just simply refer to the size of the books. Isaiah, the first of the prophets is considered by many to be the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, He ministered for over 40 years. And his book, which is huge, is divided into two distinct sections. The first half, chapters one through 39, which we finished last week, is called the Book of judgment. The second section of chapters 40 through 66, which we'll read this week, is called the Book of comfort.

So last week, as we read through the first half of Isaiah, the prophet prophesied that judgment was coming to Israel, and to Judah to the two divided nations at the hands of the Assyrian Empire. As we read through last week, there were a handful of bright spots of hope mentioned, but mostly it was, quite frankly, a downer book, a difficult book of judgment. This week, there's a real shift in tone, there's a real shift in the content, there's even a shift in the language that's used in the original Hebrew. It is such a shift of tone, content and language, that a lot of scholars think that this book was actually written by two different authors at different times, that doesn't really matter.

What matters is the content. I happen to think that it is actually written by one author, namely the prophet, Isaiah, but he shifted his tone, his content and his language, because he had two very different messages. One might have been written very early in His ministry, another one later in his ministry, if you were to go back and hear my early sermons, you might be surprised that it's me, because it's changed a lot over the years that happens with people. I think that's probably what happened here.

So let's get into it. This book of comfort that begins in chapter 40, of the book of Isaiah. So Isaiah, chapter 40, verses 1 through 3 begins this way, "Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God". So how do we know it is the book of comfort? The first two words are the words, comfort. Verse 2, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, and that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the desert, a highway for our God."

So it begins with his idea of comfort that there will come a time when Jerusalem will have paid for her sins and it will be over. And then it has this verse in verse 3, that may sound familiar to you, if you're a regular Bible reader and church attender because this verse, chapter 40, verse 3 of Isaiah, is used in the New Testament to be seen as a fulfillment of the prophecy regarding John the Baptist, who had come to prepare the way for Jesus. And, in fact, in these opening chapters, chapters 40, through 43, that's really what these four chapters are all about. It's about the deliverer who is coming. Ultimately, Jesus. While we're on that idea of prophesying Jesus, let's pause for a moment to recognize a really important aspect out of the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah has so many Messiah prophecies, in fact, the book of Isaiah is quoted more often in the New Testament than any other Old Testament book, and by a whole lot, in fact, here's a

stat that may blow your mind. There are 260 chapters in the New Testament, all but 25 of those chapters contain a direct quote, or a general reference from Isaiah. All but 25 of the 260 chapters, that means over 90% of the chapters in the New Testament, make reference to Isaiah. That's how often it's referred to. That's how important this book of prophecy is. Which is why if you've been reading along so far, so much of it is familiar, but it might feel out of context to you, because you're probably more used to reading about it in the New Testament. And in the back half of the book was a whole lot of that as well. So that's kind of how it begins in 42, 43.

Then, we're going to go through chapters 40 and 45, where, after the first chapter is about the deliverer coming, there are a couple chapters about Jerusalem and Israel being God's chosen people. He reminds them again, of how much He loves them. Then in chapters 46 and 47. There's a prophecy about the coming fall of Babylon. By the time this is written, Assyria is the old school strong nation. Babylon is the ascending Empire, and that is forecast even before Babylon has ascended to its power. Its downfall is prophesied.

We then go to chapters 48 through 55. And in this longer section we have several chapters, encouraging God's people to stop resisting, because God wants to save them. That's why this is called the Book of comfort, even though it warns them against the wrong things they're doing, it is incompletely and really obviously, about I want to deliver you, I want to help you. But you got to get right with me first. These few chapters 48, or 55 also include some beautiful images of that freedom, and of God's loving salvation.

Then chapters 56, 59 references salvation for others, people who are outside of the Israelite nation, God reminds the Israelites, the Jews, that the promise to Abraham was that through him, the whole earth would be blessed, not just those who directly descended from Abraham. The idea that people like me, Gentiles, would come to salvation was not something that was created in the New Testament. It is something that was given in the original covenant with Abraham, through you, the nations of the earth will be blessed. Isaiah 56 to 59 reminds the people of that, that if God's people, including us, Gentiles, who serve the Lord today, if we get right with God, everyone else, even those around us who don't serve, God will be better off because of it. God wants everyone included in his blessings.

Then we conclude the book in chapters 60, through 66, with words of encouragement and a few words of warning that if they get their act together, things will go very, very well for this. With everything in this book, I keep coming back to this passage from two weeks ago. This is a much shorter week this week, because we've had a couple of longer and complicated lessons the last couple of weeks. But I want to conclude before we get to our final conclusions, with this longer passage. It's one of the most beautiful passages in the entire Bible. And whenever I think of Isaiah, this is the passage that I remember Isaiah six verses one through eight, which we read a couple weeks ago, but I think really, in a lot of ways summarizes the entire book, and it really gives the feeling of the book anyway.

Isaiah 6 verses 1 through 8. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 'Whoa to me', I cried, 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. And my eyes have seen the

King, the Lord Almighty.' Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar with it, he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away, your sin atoned for.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me.'"

Again, if you're a Bible reader and church attender that sounds familiar, because that is a picture of what happens in the book of Revelation. And the book of Revelation refers directly back to this passage several times, God ultimately will be in charge, he is ultimately in control, he will ultimately be honored in all things. So what do we take from this? This section I just read from two weeks ago, plus what we're about to read next week, what do we take from it? Here are a couple things.

First of all, note to the holiness of God, God is holy. Note that because he is holy, He wants His people to be holy. Every demand that he makes of his people in the book of Isaiah throughout the rest of the Bible, of course, is that we will be like Him. He calls us to holiness, because he is holy. He's not asking us to do something that is not already the central part of his own character.

Now, it's also important to note as we read through this, that holiness does not mean self righteousness, self righteousness is condemned in Scripture over and over again. Holiness means obedience to God. Holiness means to be set apart from evil. Holiness means to care for the poor and the weak and the vulnerable among us. Holiness means standing against temptation, no matter what the culture around you wants to do. Notice that that description of holiness comes up over and over and over again, in the book of Isaiah, as we read it this coming week.

As you read also, take note of God's love that even as he's pronouncing judgment on this people he's doing it as a God of love, like a loving parent to a child that's gone astray. A loving parent doesn't allow the child to continue to do evil. A loving parent stops that and when the evil happens anyway then corrects and punishes it, not because the parent hates the child or wants the child to be hurt, but because the parent wants the child to come back into right relationship with themselves and with the world around them. And with the God we should be serving. And God's love is like that for us as well, very much like a loving but strict parent.

So this week, the reading is going to be much, much more uplifting than last week's. Both are important, both are essential to understanding the character of God. But some of it's at least a little easier as it goes down. And this week will be one of those.

So that's the end of Isaiah. Next week, we will get to the next really great and big and long prophet Jeremiah, that'll be the following week. This week is your finish off Isaiah. Have a great time with it, get a lot out of it, and we'll see you next week.

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