

# Notes on Isaiah 40—55

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## Chapters 40–41

Isaiah lived in the reign of Hezekiah, but it is doubtful that he benefited by these prophecies because he was only interested in his own times. These chapters tell the story of the day when the glory of God would triumph over the shame of his people. But, like all of Israel, and ourselves, Hezekiah's constancy (*hesed* = covenant love) was like the flower of the field (v. 6).

God spoke this word to comfort his people. He would smooth the way for their return from captivity and send a messenger to say 'Here is your God!' As the world's almighty King, he would tenderly lead his people. They would never find a way of understanding this God by human parallel or make an idol that could represent him. The power of princes (40:23–24), like the faithfulness of Israel (40:6), could be dried up by one breath of God. God's message comes to us as to them: God maintains the whole creation without wearying; he is not wearied by our slowness to know him; therefore, those who wait on the Lord renew their strength. John the Baptist was the voice crying in the wilderness, so we know that it is Jesus Christ in whom God has come to comfort and save his people.

God offered Israel a promise for their comfort. He did not clarify his agenda or, at this point, the particular person who would come from the East. Idolaters stir each other to make and sustain their idols, but it is God who makes and sustains the faith of his people. They are Jacob's and Abraham's people, the chosen ones. For them there will be water in the desert. They will discover how near God is to them so that they will glory in him. Idols cannot promise anything because they do nothing. Those who trust them should be despised. The good tidings for Israel was 'Here is your God!' (40:9). This God could make the ambitions of the coming ruler serve his ends and so, he announced his coming as good tidings. No idols could do this.

## Prayer

Father, you know how I have looked to things that are seen so that I may have a future and a hope. Forgive me! There is nothing of my own making that can secure my own good. But your promise is sure and your Son has come to ensure that there is a highway all the way to the inheritance you have planned for me. Who is like you Lord? You bring about what is good. You maintain your gracious purpose always. Your Son has come and ensured that there will be a future and hope for all who trust in you. Thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Chapters 42–43

Who will establish justice in the earth? In contrast to the nations, the Lord's Servant will do this. People will eagerly wait to do God's bidding. He will do it without any of the arrogance revealed by the nations because it will be the Lord's doing. We now know that Jesus Christ has fulfilled this prophecy. He has been the beloved of God and he alone has acted faithfully. God has made him to be the covenant with his people, revealing its true meaning and fulfilling its requirements so that we can participate in it with him. However, although it is our Lord who fulfills the calling of the Servant, the Lord's people are still God's Servant, and though they be blind and deaf, the Lord will be like a soldier ready for battle, or a woman ready to give birth, and will eagerly lead his people to fulfill their calling. They had been chastened, but . . .

The calling of God is more potent than the unfaithfulness of his people. God's decision to create a people who live for his praise brought them through the judgment that had overtaken them. Where would we be if this were not so? Our sins have been so black that nothing but the death of Christ could answer for them. But God brought his Son through this trial. He brings us through that judgment with Christ and proclaims this same message to us. Fear not! It is not ourselves that we should have in mind, but our God and Saviour. We are witnesses that God has brought us out of spiritual blindness into love for God and his word. He is our Creator and is King over all the nations. He makes these nations serve the purposes he has for us, and forgives our ungrateful sinning. This sinning has been from our earliest father (Adam, Abraham or Jacob) and has continued in all our leadership. But . . . the next chapter continues the story.

## Prayer

Father, your covenant with us has been confirmed by the blood Jesus offered for us. You have found in him a faithful covenant partner through whom justice will be established in the earth. Thankyou Father that your call has come to us as sinners. Thankyou that you have created us out of the chaos of our unfaithfulness. You have caused us to trust in you and your Son and so be witnesses in all the earth of your great favour and strength on our behalf. Speed the message of this gospel, and grant that we, your servants, may not be tempted again to trust in ourselves. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

## Chapters 44–45

The Lord had given Israel reasons why they should not be afraid, and they recur here. They were created by God, chosen by him and he is present to help them. Their descendants will be enlivened to continue the witness of Israel. He is Redeemer of Israel and prophesies their welfare and their witness in the world. Alongside of this, the idolaters look ridiculous and it is amazing that God's people do not see the difference between a God being God to his people and an idol having to be made and maintained. But to these people, God said, 'I have forgiven you, so return to me'. Through Isaiah, the Lord revealed his joy over Israel. He summoned the whole creation to break out into singing over all that he purposed for his people. Their Redeemer is also the Creator of all things, and (he now names his servant) 'Cyrus' will be the title of the person to perform the deliverance God has in mind.

Because God prepared the way for Cyrus, and predicted his success and his role in Israel's return, he should realise that only Israel's God was the true Lord. (We have

no record that he actually did so.) The terms of his calling suggest that he is like a Davidic king and so the prophet cried out for God's righteousness to rain down and produce a worthy result on the earth. Others may have asked how God could use an idolater to fulfill his covenant with Israel? Perhaps this is why Israel was striving with their Maker, saying that this sort of thing should not happen. But God would do as he chose. He is the Maker of all things and of his people in particular and would use all powers to effect his purpose. Israel would only be able to confess one thing: 'we have been saved by the Lord'. Again, the world's idolaters are summoned to consider this, acknowledge that there is only one God and turn to this God to be saved.

## Prayer

Our Lord and our God, we have been met by you in your Son Jesus Christ.. Through him you have shown us what joy you have in saving us and being God to us. You have not permitted our sins to stop your purpose but have given him up as an offering for us. Then Lord, may our joy rise up to greet you as your joy reaches out to us. Let us not be surprised at your many mercies or be perplexed at the strange ways you use to bless us. Only let your grace and truth be proclaimed and known in all nations. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

## Chapters 46–47

A god who must be ingloriously carried through the streets is scorned by the Lord who has carried Israel always and will carry her to the end. Perhaps Israel was blinded by the gold and silver lavished by idolaters (cf. 39:2). The Lord must proclaim himself to his people for they are too dull to see what he has done and who he is. He saved them when they were distressed by their enemies; he has announced beforehand how he will save them (as he has done concerning a new king from the East). 'Deliverance is not far away', says the Lord, 'because I am near, and Israel is the outshining of my glory!'

God's people have a Redeemer, so when he speaks to the world, he speaks of how they have treated his Son and his people. To Babylon, he spoke of their lack of mercy to his people and their presumption that their wickedness would never be punished. They had thought that their position among the nations was secure. He asked them to call up their astrologers on whom they had always relied. They would be no use now, because the Lord still loved his people and would restore them.

## Prayer

Father, manifest your glory in me and in all your people. Let me not be frightened of the display of your glory, whether this be by my own being lifted up or being cast down. Sufficient that you display your own glory and manifest your goodness. How wonderfully you have purposed all things so that we, being carried by you all our days, may come to your inheritance for us.

How shall I pray for the nations? They are careless in their national pride and still reject the Saviour you have appointed to us. Let me not fear what they do, but grant that the gospel may be preached to them so that they may know that you honour your Son in the earth. May they know the power of his resurrection and see him as the Saviour to whom they may turn. For his name's sake I pray. Amen.

## Chapters 48–49

The perversity of God's people had shown itself in their wanting to take credit for anticipating the course of their history, or giving credit to their idols. The Lord had always avoided this by prophesying, and then doing things that Israel could not expect. This is what he would do again, in sending Cyrus. The grace of God always comes as a surprise. Who could have anticipated that God would be kind to those who crucified his Son? Even the disciples could not understand that Jesus would rise from the dead after being killed. In Isaiah's prophecy, Cyrus would be the deliverer sent by God. The victory would not only be unexpected but undeserved. Now, however, they should rise up and thankfully receive their salvation. Apart from this there would be no peace.

Within Israel, and bearing the name of Israel, a Servant of the Lord would arise. He would be a prophetic voice to call the nations to God. He would know that he is the focus of God revealing his glory in the earth, and, though ignored in the world, he would yet be honoured and strengthened by God. He would restore Israel to the Lord and be a light to the nations. It is Christ who fulfilled this prophecy. God promised that nations who despised him would bow down to him. He will be the fulfillment of the covenant of God with the nations so that God can give his people their inheritance. To such a people, those who belong to Christ, God promises that they will be lead through sun bleached places to living water. Though they still complain of being forgotten, God will remember them, increase their number and send the nations to them. They will certainly not be put to shame.

## Prayer

Father, you have exalted your Son as your Servant, and he has turned us to you. How blind we were! We could not see that Jesus was your Son. We thought we could plan the way of our own well being and did not care that Jesus was killed. Thankyou Father that he whom we killed you have raised and given to us as a Saviour. Where once we thought we were abandoned, now we know that you have glorified yourself among us and in us. Father, under your blessing, grant that the nations may come to your truth and acknowledge Jesus Christ your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## Chapters 50–51

Israel had no reason to believe that their chastisement was a final divorce. God's covenant could not be abandoned like that. Israel had ample reason in her history to see that God would save her after she had been 'sold into slavery' for her sins (e.g. Judges 3:8–9; 6:9). The one who would understand this saving love of God was the one who learned from God (Isa. 8:16) and could teach others. The Servant of the Lord, however, would pay dearly for his living by the grace of God rather than by the dictates of the nation's self-interest. He would be condemned in his day. But what of this! He would endure it without shame because God would help him. It is no small thing to understand the kindness of God; and, who but our Lord has proclaimed it to us in its fullness? He suffered for the knowledge of grace that he had and proclaimed. Now, as the risen Lord, he can encourage us to live by this same grace (Heb. 12:3). We can walk in the darkness and still trust in the Lord. Woe to those who light their own fires of protection!

Where could the Lord look to find an illustration of his intention to bless Israel? Only the things he had done before. There is no adequate illustration of grace other than grace. So God directed them back to Abraham to whom God promised that he would become a great nation. This happened, and the blessing God gave him made a part of the earth like Eden. God directed them back to the Exodus. God revealed his righteousness in the world through saving Israel from Egypt, and the faithful in the land still knew that the law he gave them at that time was the way of life for them. They should not fear the reproach of the nations. Rather, they should expect another exodus. So then, why do they fear? How is that they have forgotten their Maker? There seems to be none to console them, so God himself said: the bitter cup you have drunk will now be taken from you forever and given to those who torment you.

## Prayer

Father, by your teaching of Israel, I understand what a strange and wonderful thing it is that you are gracious to us. I also understand that the world hates it to be this way, and that it killed your Son. Father, grant that, walking in the way of your grace, I may be daily instructed by your Son to be patient in suffering. Surely, nothing can separate me from your love revealed in him! The judgment due to us has already fallen on him, and now your blessing is upon us, fully and freely. May your consolations teach me to live in the blessing by which Eden is restored in this world. I give thanks to you, in Jesus name. Amen.

## Chapters 52–53

When Israel was unfaithful to God, God 'sold' them to their enemies. But no money changed hands and God was free to come and take back his own. He brought Israel out of Egypt and saved them from Assyria. Therefore, he had good reason to say to Israel 'Put on your beautiful garments', 'Loosen your chains', 'Your God reigns!' There is no news like this news, particularly when it is announced to us by the risen Christ. Therefore, the people of God should rise up and leave their captivity behind. The victory won will be so decisive, that haste, as in leaving Egypt, will not be necessary.

We are introduced to the Servant again, the one by whom this powerful work of God will be effected. His work among the nations would be brought about through his own history: his unexpected greatness would be preceded by an unthinkable suffering, but, in a priestly action, he would sprinkle many nations, making them clean. It is surely remarkable that God provides such a one to befriend his people, and remarkable that it is announced beforehand. It is even more remarkable when we see Jesus Christ bringing it about in our history.

The Servant was not esteemed by us because he came so sorrowfully. Who would believe in such a deliverer? We actually thought he was being judged by God but was actually bearing the judgement on our sins. He now heals us because God caused our iniquities to fall on him. He revealed the grace of God by suffering without protest and dying without recognition. His victory is that he offered himself up for our guiltiness so that we no longer suffer under God's wrath. Now the pleasure of God prospers in his hand. His people are made righteous by God. All this has occurred because the Servant got under our load and bore it for us, and then, drew us up to his God.

## Prayer

Father, you have saved us by your own power and by your Servant Jesus Christ. You have raised him up, he who bore our sin and condemnation. He has brought us to you and so we live in your peace. Grant now, our Father, that we may never again be ashamed of him whom you have appointed to us. We honour him who bore our shame. We rejoice in your rejoicing over what he has accomplished and pray that the many for whom he gave himself shall come to faith in him. In his name we pray. Amen.

## Chapters 54–55

So complete has been the victory of the Servant on behalf of the people of God, that new expectations need to be learned. Christ's death and resurrection, which have fulfilled this prophecy, have opened up new horizons and God's calls his people, the church, to possess them. The blessing God has brought to his people through his Servant Christ is for all nations. God's people now have a restored relation as wife of God. All the riches that God has in his grace are freely available to his spouse. In the New Testament, this is fulfilled in the church being the Bride of Christ. His momentary anger with her unfaithfulness is swallowed up in his everlasting loving kindness. This relation is his covenant which it is impossible for God to break. She is like an immensely rich and impregnable city whose security is righteousness. They are justified by God and cannot be condemned by anyone.

We should delight ourselves in God's abundance. No contribution from us can pay for it. The covenant made with King David, and the good that flowed to the nation from this, is a witness to what is coming. We now know that the suffering Servant, through whom all this good comes to us, is Christ the King. God has glorified himself in bringing glory to his people. This is the glory of redemption (44:23) and of being made God's righteous people in the earth (60:21). Therefore we should turn from our unrighteousness and receive God's compassion. We should not be limited by human considerations because God's word creates what it promises. Anticipate joy! Anticipate the all the creation rising up to aid and abet this purpose of God to bless us!

## Prayer

Covenant Lord and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have been faithful to us and given us an inheritance. Nations have come to the light that has shone on us, and together, we share in the righteousness of your Son. We need not fear the oppression of man. Therefore, we rejoice in you and constantly sing of your mercy. We look to you and your word to fulfil all your purpose for us in this world and in the age to come, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.