

Session Five

Isaiah Part 2: Prophet of Consolation



The Prophet Isaiah (detail from the Isenheim Altarpiece) by Matthias Grünewald

A. Establish the Context

Isaiah's "Book of Woe" (Isaiah 1–39) addressed the people of Judah during the Assyrian assault on Israel and Judah. He prophesied "woe" to all who opposed God and confronted the people of Judah with their failure to keep the covenant. He called them to return to the God who saved them from Egypt and lovingly raised them. When Israel was destroyed by Assyria, they saw the consequences of trusting in other gods. Even so, Ahaz and then Hezekiah turned to Egypt for help, which drew the Assyrian army to the gates of Jerusalem. Prompted by Hezekiah's prayers, God saved Jerusalem in a dramatic display of power, destroying Sennacherib's army without any human intervention. With such undeniable evidence of God's care, one might predict that Judah would return to him.

In Isaiah 1–39, however, Isaiah does not offer us much hope of Judah's return to fidelity. He closes the "Book of Woe" with a cautionary incident in the life of Hezekiah. The king of faraway Babylon sends envoys and gifts after Hezekiah is cured. Hezekiah shows off all his treasures—an act that will foreshadow a future and more powerful Babylon, which will carry those treasures and God's people into captivity. In the first half of the book of Isaiah, there is little hope to cling to except the vision of the Holy One of Israel (Isaiah 6) and the sign of the child and promised Messiah, "God with us" (Isaiah 7, 9 [NAB 8:23–9:20]).

In 587 BC, Babylon, under King Nebuchadnezzar, will have replaced Assyria as the dominant regional power and will destroy Jerusalem and the Temple and carry most of the remaining Judean population into exile.¹ Isaiah 40–66, often called the "Book of Consolation," is addressed to these exiles. In the words of Pope Francis, "The Lord is going to pour out over the Holy City and its inhabitants a 'cascade' of consolation, a veritable overflow of consolation. ... 'As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you'" (Isaiah 66:13).² This "cascade of tenderness" in the second half of the book of Isaiah promises the restoration of the nation and looks to the glorious future kingdom of God.

A final word about this session: Studying Isaiah 40–66 in a single session is like visiting Italy for the first time and trying to see everything in a single day. Not only does the text cover a lot of ground, it is filled with places of historical value, exquisite beauty, and deep spiritual meaning—all of which beg to be savored. Here, we find

¹ Two prior waves of deportation in 605 and 597 BC see the exile of the prophets Daniel, Baruch, and Ezekiel. We will follow Ezekiel and Daniel into that exile in future sessions.

² Francis, Homily, July 7, 2013, vatican.va.

the Servant Songs and many passages used by the Gospel writers to describe Jesus and his life and mission.³ And here, as in the “Book of Woe,” we find the source of the lyrics of Handel’s *Messiah*.⁴ This session aims to give you the “big picture” of Isaiah’s “Book of Consolation” by touching on a few highlights. We hope this will be just the start of the time you will spend savoring its bounty.

B. Read the Story

Before beginning the questions, read Isaiah 40, 42, 44–45, 63–66. Do not worry if you do not understand everything; simply read to get a feel for Isaiah’s “Book of Consolation.” The following questions will take you for a deeper look at some of the highlights.

Going Deeper (optional): To get the entire story and message of Isaiah’s “Book of Consolation,” read Isaiah 40–66.

As always, pray before you read.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering these questions will draw you into the heart of the story. If you do not understand something, make a note of it to bring up in the small-group discussion.

“COMFORT MY PEOPLE”: RESTORATION PROMISED (ISAIAH 40–41)

1. Recall that Isaiah begins in 1:2 with God’s complaint against his rebellious sons. All through the years of Judah’s rebellion and lack of repentance, God’s message is “woe.” Read Isaiah 40:1–2. Now that they are years into captivity, what is God’s message to them?

2. From the time of the Exodus, God has promised to be with his people and to dwell among them. This is signified by his presence in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. In 587 BC, though, the Temple is destroyed. Now God’s people are in exile, and they may wonder where he is. Read Isaiah 40:3–11. What good news is Isaiah asked to cry out to the people of Judah to bring them comfort?

3. a. For many generations, the people of Judah have witnessed firsthand the terrible power of nations that stand in defiance to God and against them. Read Isaiah 40:12–31. Who is the LORD, that they should listen to his call, let alone trust him and obey?

³ Some of these and other messianic prophecies, along with New Testament references, can be found on the chart on pages 11–12.

⁴ See Isaiah 7:14, 9:2 (NAB 9:1), 9:6 (NAB 9:5), 11:1–5, 35:5–6, 40:9, 40:11, 53:3–6, 53:8, 60:2–3.

- b. In what ways have you experienced God's strength and support in your life? How do these verses speak to you?

4. **New Testament Connection:** There are sometimes “layers” of fulfillment to prophecies, each pointing to something beyond the last. The immediate fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy will be when Judah is rescued from Babylon and allowed to return to the Promised Land of Israel. According to Matthew 3:1-3, to what future “rescue” and “return” do Isaiah’s words point? Who will pick up the cry of the voice heard in Isaiah 40:3?

“BEHOLD MY SERVANT”: AGENTS OF RESTORATION (ISAIAH 42–55)

In Isaiah 41:8, God’s people (both Israel and Judah) are called God’s “chosen” servant. They have been created to be God’s witnesses to the nations—yet, by turning their hearts from God, they have become spiritually blind and deaf and are no longer capable of bearing his message (Isaiah 42:18-20, 43:8-10). In fulfillment of his promise, God chooses to redeem them by sending another Servant (Isaiah 42–55). This Servant is the subject of four “Servant Songs” that progressively reveal the Servant’s character and mission.

5. In the following chart, read each of the four Servant Songs, and record what you learn about the Servant’s identity, character, and mission.

SERVANT SONG IN ISAIAH	THE SERVANT’S IDENTITY AND CHARACTER	THE SERVANT’S MISSION
42:1-4		
49:1-6		
50:4-9		
52:13–53:12		

6. Each of the Servant Songs is followed by a kind of unfolding or expansion of the song, like a commentary. These verses speak of the effects or significance of the Servant's work. Read the following passages along with the comments you made above and write what you learn from the commentary verses.

SERVANT SONG "COMMENTARY" IN ISAIAH	THE SIGNIFICANCE OR RESULTS OF THE SERVANT'S WORK
42:5-20	
49:7-13	
50:10-11	
54:1-17	

7. Reading these Servant Songs in the bright light of the Cross, it is not hard to see the face of Christ. Yet, like many prophecies, they have both an immediate and a future fulfillment. We will look first at the temporal restoration promised to Judah and the immediate "servant" God sends to perform it.
- In Isaiah 43, God promises to overthrow Babylon, free his people, and restore them to their land. He then names the person who will enable them to return in Isaiah 44:28. What is his name, and what specific task will he be given?
 - Read Isaiah 45:1-7. For whose sake will God help this pagan ruler overthrow Babylon, and for what purpose?

CYRUS

Cyrus is called God's "shepherd" in Isaiah 44:28 and his "anointed" in Isaiah 45:1. Both of these titles are significant. The rulers of God's people are called "shepherds," and Psalm 23 refers to the LORD as "Shepherd." "Anointed One" is the English equivalent of the Hebrew "Messiah," and it has normally been reserved for the God-anointed king in David's royal line, although priests (and sometimes prophets) were also anointed. In the present context, it means one chosen by God to fulfill a particular task. Either of these titles applied to a pagan king like Cyrus would be offensive to the people of Israel. Yet, Isaiah makes it clear that God is God over all of the kingdoms of the earth (Isaiah 44:6, 44:24). Cyrus acts only under the sovereign command of the LORD and to carry out his purposes. Jesus makes this concept clear in his words to Pontius Pilate in John 19:11a: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above."

8. **New Testament Connection:** As wonderful as the hope of a political redemption through Cyrus must have been, Isaiah gives a much more profound hope—of a spiritual Redeemer who will free all people from the grip of sin by taking on the punishment due them. Who is the "real," or ultimate, Redeemer-Servant to whom Cyrus points? Read Acts 8:30-38.
 - a. What part of Isaiah is quoted here? *Isaiah 53*: _____
 - b. How does Philip interpret this passage?
 - c. Read Isaiah 53:4-7. How are some of the details fulfilled in Jesus Christ, according to the following New Testament verses? Make a note of which verses in Isaiah 53 provided your answers.
 - Matthew 27:12-14:
 - John 1:29:
 - 1 Peter 2:23-25:
 - Romans 5:8:

"ARISE, SHINE; FOR YOUR LIGHT HAS COME": ZION RESTORED (ISAIAH 56–66)

For the remainder of Isaiah, the focus shifts to encompass not only the return of Judah to the land, but to an even more distant fulfillment—the "New Jerusalem," the final destiny of God's people and the Church as it is intended to be for eternity. Because of this, Isaiah 56–66 has particular meaning for us, God's people, who belong to the kingdom established by the ultimate Suffering Servant, Jesus, yet who wait for the final establishment of that kingdom at his second coming.

9. Earlier we saw the figures of Cyrus and of the Servant, chosen and sent to redeem.
 - a. Now read Isaiah 59:15b-21, and describe the messianic figure pictured there. What is his mission?
 - b. Read Isaiah 61:1-7. What additional details does this tell us about the mission of the LORD's coming Anointed One?
10. Read Isaiah 65:17-25. Based on this passage, how would you describe the promised new creation, the New Jerusalem?
11. **New Testament Connection:** Read Revelation 21:1-5, in which John is given a vision of a new heaven and new earth and of the arrival of the New Jerusalem. How does John's vision fulfill Isaiah's prophecy?

D. Application

This question will help you apply one of the key themes of the session to your life. After meditating on it, respond to God with a brief written prayer if you choose.

Do you ever feel like you are away from God, like you cannot feel his presence? Do you ever feel forsaken or desolate? Review your notes about the Servant Songs and commentaries (questions 5 and 6). Choose the one that means the most to you and read it again. What consolation does it offer?

Dear Lord ...

SESSION FIVE TALK NOTES

Isaiah Part 2: Prophet of Consolation**I. Setting the Stage**

- A. Background
- B. “To comfort the afflicted”
- C. Revealing the Messiah (blended layers of prophecy)

II. Major Themes

- A. The Holy One of Israel is in control
- B. Promises of return, restoration, new creation
 - 1. Words of comfort (Isaiah 40:1-2)
 - 2. Your warfare has ended (*avodah* = “service”)
 - 3. A voice in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3-4)
 - a. Prophetic promise of return
 - b. Something missing; multi-layered fulfillment
 - c. New Testament fulfillment in John the Baptist – a future, deeper Exodus
 - d. Herald of Good News (Gk., *euangelium*; Isaiah 40:9-11)
 - i. God himself will come with might to feed, lead, gather
 - ii. Challenge to wait on God’s promises
- C. The promise of the Messiah
 - 1. Four Servant Songs – “snapshots of the Savior,” who will:
 - a. Bring justice (Isaiah 42:1-4)
 - b. Lead a new Exodus; be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:1-6)
 - c. Bring a word to the weary; suffer (Isaiah 50:4-9)
 - d. Suffer, take away sin and guilt, bear judgment, be vindicated by God (Isaiah 52:13–53:12)
 - 2. Putting the pieces together
 - a. May describe the people in exile, even Isaiah
 - b. In hindsight, all the pieces come together in Jesus

III. The Suffering Servant Songs Point to Jesus (Songs I and IV)

- A. Isaiah 42:1-4, “Behold my servant” (first Servant Song)
 - 1. Foreshadows Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:17; John 1:33)
 - a. “I have put my Spirit upon him”
 - b. He will bring forth justice to the nations
 - c. The lamb

2. "Commentary" Isaiah 42:5-17: "I have given you [the servant] as a covenant to the people" (Isaiah 42:6)
 - a. Gives new meaning to the Last Supper and the Mass
 - i. Jesus identifies himself with the New Covenant
 - ii. The Servant will heal (Isaiah 42:7-9)
 - "Justice" – *mishpat* (king initiating a jubilee)
 - He will make all things new
 - b. Their response – Sing to the Lord a new song (Revelation 5, 15)
- B. Isaiah 52:13–53:12, the Suffering Servant (fourth Servant Song)
 1. Quoted at least seven times in New Testament
 - a. Gospels
 - b. Stephen's sermon (Acts 7)
 - c. Ethiopian eunuch
 - d. Paul — two times in Romans
 - e. 1 Peter 2, suffering of Church united to Jesus' suffering
 2. Five parts, three verses each; climax in the middle (Isaiah 53:5)
 - a. Describes the Passion
 - b. He "was" bruised – seems past tense (in Septuagint translation, changed to future tense)
 - c. A word still "in waiting" – anticipates something yet unfilled
 3. Substitutionary suffering
 4. He shall see the fruit of his suffering: our salvation (Isaiah 53:10; see Hebrews 12:2)

IV. The Victory Applied (Isaiah 54–55)

- A. Isaiah 54 for Zion
- B. Isaiah 55 for the world

V. A Vision of the Church, the New Israel of God (Isaiah 56–66)

- A. A unique section; different focus and feel
 1. A "third Isaiah"?
 2. Looks to the future, to the New Israel of God
- B. "Gap" between first coming of Messiah and final coming of Christ: a call to faithful waiting
- C. The Our Father, a prayer of waiting and working for the kingdom here and yet to come
 1. Isaiah 63 and 64 – first time God invoked as "our" Father

D. Isaiah closes on a high note (Isaiah 66:10-13)

1. The New Israel of God drawn from all the nations
2. Rejoicing and consolation

VI. Conclusion: Prayer of Renewal⁵

⁵ For the text of this prayer, which is prayed at the close of each session, see page 12.