

# OneBook.

DAILY-WEEKLY

## The Book of Isaiah

CHAPTERS 40-55

John Oswalt



A TWELVE-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

# **The Book of Isaiah**

**OneBook.**

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DAILY - WEEKLY

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**Chapters 40-55**

John Oswalt

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## WELCOME TO THE ONEBOOK: DAILY-WEEKLY

John Wesley, in a letter to one of his leaders, penned the following,

O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises. You may acquire the taste which you have not: what is tedious at first, will afterwards be pleasant.

Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days. . . . Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a Christian altogether.

Rarely are our lives most shaped by our biggest ambitions and highest aspirations. Rather, our lives are most shaped, for better or for worse, by those small things we do every single day.

At Seedbed, our biggest ambition and highest aspiration is to resource the followers of Jesus to become lovers and doers of the Word of God every single day; to become people of One Book.

To that end, we have created the OneBook: Daily-Weekly. First, it's important to understand what this is not: warm and fuzzy sentimental devotions. If you engage the Daily-Weekly for any length of time, you will learn the Word of God. You will grow profoundly in your love for God, and you will become a passionate lover of people.

### **How does the Daily-Weekly work?**

Daily. As the name implies, every day invites a short but substantive engagement with the Bible. Five days a week you will read a passage of Scripture followed by a short segment of teaching and closing with questions for reflection and self-examination. On the sixth day, you will review and reflect on the prior five days.

Weekly. Each week, on the seventh day, find a way to gather with at least one other person doing the study. Pursue the weekly guidance for gathering.

Share learning, insight, encouragement, and most important, how the Holy Spirit is working in your lives.

That's it. When the twelve weeks are done we will be ready with twelve more. Four times a year we will release a new edition of the Daily-Weekly. Over time, those who pursue this course of learning will develop a rich library of Bible learning resources for the long haul. Following is the plan for how we will work our way through the Bible.

**The Gospels:** Twelve weeks of the year the Daily-Weekly will delve into one of the Gospels, either in a broad overview or through a deep-dive into a more focused segment of the text.

**The Epistles:** Twelve weeks of the year the Daily-Weekly will explore one of the letters, sermons, or the Acts of the Apostles that make up the rest of the New Testament.

**The Wisdom Writings:** Twelve weeks of the year the Daily-Weekly will lead us into some part of the Psalms, Proverbs, or prophetic writings.

**The Old Testament:** Twelve weeks of the year the Daily-Weekly will engage with some portion of the Books of Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy), the historical books, or other writings from the Old Testament.

If you are looking for a substantive study to learn Scripture through a steadfast method, look no further.

# WEEK ONE

Isaiah 40:1–5, 8–14, 18–31

## The Incomparable God

### INTRODUCTION

The Judean people had lost everything. They had lost their country, their homes, many of their family members, their livelihoods—but even more, their hope. They had been sure that they were the chosen people of Yahweh, who was the sole God of the universe. They had been certain that he would protect them from the pagan Babylonians, who worshiped false gods, gods made with human hands. Surely, they thought, he would not allow his holy city and temple to be destroyed by people like that.

But now the unthinkable had happened. The Babylonians had captured all the land, and after a siege extending over two and a half years, had captured Jerusalem itself, desecrating the temple and destroying the city that had dared to rebel against them. Then they took the leadership of the nation into exile in Babylon, leaving only the poor and helpless behind.

But as bad as all that was, the worst thing was the almost inescapable conclusion that all their religious convictions had been wrong. Apparently they were *not* the chosen people; apparently Yahweh was *not* the sole god of the universe; evidently he was not even strong enough to defeat the Babylonian gods. All the promises that had shaped their lives were apparently false. How do you go on living when there is nothing left to live for?

To be sure, if the Judean people had listened to their prophets, they would have had a better understanding of what was happening. These recent events had not been a contest between Yahweh and the pagan gods, but were an example of Yahweh's ability to use even pagan nations to discipline his people. Indeed, the Judeans were his chosen people, but that did not, as they thought,

give them a “pass” to live any way they chose and still be guaranteed security, comfort, and pleasure. In fact, precisely because he had chosen them and entered into an exclusive covenant with them, the expectations were all the higher. What happened to them was the result of nearly a thousand years of breaking their covenant over and over until even the patience of God was worn out.

So what does Yahweh say to these discouraged, disillusioned, defeated, sinful people? Is he done with them? Has he given up on them? If he is not defeated by the Babylonians, is he defeated by the Judeans’ persistent sinning? This chapter answers these questions with a resounding, “No.” God’s love for them has not changed; his power over all creation is not diminished, and his intention to deliver them is forever the same. He *wants* to deliver, he *can* deliver, and he *will* deliver. He says the same to you and me. Whatever the bondage in which we may find ourselves, this delivering word is for us.

## ONE

### Does He Care about You?

**Isaiah 40:1–5** *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.*

<sup>3</sup>*A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. <sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

**Understanding the Word.** Suppose you were given the responsibility of speaking to someone who had persistently hurt you, had broken every promise he or she had made to you, had borrowed a great deal of money from you and had never paid back a cent, and on top of it all, had slandered you repeatedly to other people. Now that person is in prison for having done those same things to a lot of other people, and you are supposed to go and talk with him or her. What will you say?

I think I might say something like, “Well, I hope you have learned your lesson. You have gotten exactly what you deserved, and you need to use your time in here to straighten up. Stop pitying yourself, and face up to what kind of a person you have made of yourself?” Would you say something like that too?

That was the situation God was facing with his people. They were experiencing the results of many years of persistently doing exactly what their sworn covenant with Yahweh had told them not to do. They had sworn in blood (Exod. 24:6–8) that they *would* do what reflected his character and would *not* do what did not reflect his character. Then they had turned right around and done the opposites.

In the light of all that, what God says to them (and us) is shocking. He says, “Don’t be discouraged! Don’t give up. I am going to come and help you!” This is the meaning of the Hebrew word that is translated “comfort.” It means to encourage, to strengthen, to stiffen. God takes no comfort when we are discouraged and depressed over our sins and failures. He does not say, “Well, good for you. I’m glad you finally got what you deserved.” No, although we may have richly deserved what has happened to us (“received . . . double for all her sins,” Isa. 40:2), he does not enjoy our ruin the way a vengeful human would. If he has brought us down, it is for the sole purpose of raising us back up.

How will he raise us up? He himself will come to us. He is so eager to do that that he calls for building a superhighway so that nothing will impede him (Isa. 40:2–3). All through the Scripture, the good news is that God is with us (see Genesis 39:2, 23). Yes, he is the transcendent one, who is utterly other than we are. Yet he enters into our lives and shares himself intimately with us. But is that just a metaphor, a figure of speech? No, it has become a fact. And the New Testament’s use of these words tells us how the promise has become a fact (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:2–3; Luke 3:4–6). Jesus Christ is the living evidence of God’s love toward us. In spite of our claims to self-sufficiency; in spite of our trying to be God, to take his place in our lives; in spite of all the sins we have committed, God has come to us in Jesus Christ. He is *with* us in the truest sense of that word. He knows what it is to be confined within with human limitations. He knows what it is to be tempted almost beyond endurance. He knows what it is to be pressed and harassed with all the cares of life. But most of all, by becoming one of us, while still being God, he has been able to take all our guilt and condemnation upon himself. So whatever you are facing today,

God says, “Don’t give up. Give it to me and let me carry it, and carry it away.” He, who is the full manifestation of the glory of God (John 1:14; Col. 2:9), has come to be with us.

1. What is the most discouraging thing you are facing in your life today? What will it take for you to give that over to God?
2. What encouraging word would God like to speak to you today?
3. What roadblock is standing in the middle of God’s superhighway into your heart today?

## TWO

# The Word, the Mighty Arm of God

**Isaiah 40:8–11** *The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. <sup>9</sup>Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”<sup>10</sup>See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. <sup>11</sup>He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

**Understanding the Word.** God had promised to come to his people and deliver them from the consequences of their sin. Those consequences were twofold: captivity in Babylon and alienation from God. But the questions remained: Could he do that, and how would he do it? For the fact is, human power and obstinacy can often seem almost inseparable. Perhaps you have encountered some of this in your own life, both in others and in yourself. We are in some unhealthy relationship, and there seems no way out. Someone is in a position of authority over you, and it seems as if he or she “has it in for you.” You have tried to make some positive changes in your own behaviors and attitudes, and it has just seemed to come to nothing. What can God do about these kinds of things? Religious hope is a fine thing, but sometimes we just have to face reality, don’t we?

The Judeans certainly felt this. After all, God hadn't seemed able to do anything to protect his city and land from the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar. And as for themselves, God didn't seem to have been able to produce any real changes in them in the previous millennium or so. Human power and obstinacy seem like pretty enduring things.

But Yahweh's response was very direct and forthright. He said human beings are to him nothing more than a field of blowing grass. Grass comes up in a great hurry and produces pretty little flowers, and a whole field of it seems very impressive. But it takes nothing more than a hot wind (and in Israel, they knew about hot winds) to dry up that whole field in a matter of hours.

For us humans, God's word is that hot wind. That is an interesting point. It is not that we humans are grass compared to God, but we are grass compared to God's word. Why does Isaiah say it like that? I think "word" here has three connotations. First, it speaks of God's power to command. All the Creator has to do to make something happen in his creation is to speak the word. The Roman centurion recognized that Jesus had power like that (Luke 7:6–8; see also Isaiah 11:4; 49:1). The second connotation is the absolute reliability of God's promises. If he says something will happen, you *know* it will happen. But there is an even deeper significance here. Yahweh is, above everything else, the God who speaks. He is the God who communicates. So it is no accident at all that Jesus is called "the Word" (see John 1:1, 14). Jesus is the final communication of the Creator's unchanging promise to save the world (1 Peter 1:24–25). No human will ever stand against the Word of God. What we can do is climb the highest mountain and shout to the world, "God's Word has come!"

But there is another image that appears in this passage. That is "the arm" of God (Isa. 40:10). This is especially a symbol of God's strength to accomplish his purpose. That thought is very clear here. God is coming, and he is going to reward some and pay back others. His mighty arm is going to strike out and deliver his people, no matter what the Babylonians think or plan. He is going to pick his people up out of the dust they have so richly deserved and seat them on thrones.

But the final verse in today's passage portrays another side to God's mighty arm. Here we see that twenty-seven-inch bicep being a pillow for a sleeping lamb, while with his other great arm, he gently leads the mother. Our God is mighty enough to deliver us from any human enemy and tender enough to

restore us to himself from our deepest sins. All flesh is grass, but God's word is forever, and his arm can deliver us from anything.

1. What "enemy" holds you captive today? What does God say about it?
2. What is the right perspective on your situation? What can you do to maintain that perspective?
3. What are some ways in which God's mighty arm has been displayed in your life?

## THREE

### The Incomparable God

**Isaiah 40:12–14, 18–20** *Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?<sup>13</sup> Who has directed the spirit of the LORD, or as his counselor has instructed him?<sup>14</sup> Whom did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice? Who taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? . . .*

<sup>18</sup>*To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?<sup>19</sup> An idol?—A workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains.<sup>20</sup> As a gift one chooses mulberry wood—wood that will not rot—then seeks out a skilled artisan to set up an image that will not topple.*

**Understanding the Word.** The first eleven verses of this chapter spoke of God's desire and power to save his people from their captivity. But we can hear the Judean captives saying, "That is all well and good. But what about the Babylonian gods? They are not just going to stand by and let Yahweh take their slaves away." So the question is: How is it that God can actually make good on his promises? This is a very important issue, but a somewhat complex one, so stick with me here.

Why have people constructed gods, not only physical idols, but also the concepts behind the idols? The answer is fairly simple. We want to control the forces of the cosmos, whether they be psychic, social, or physical, for our own benefit. So around the world people have imagined these forces as humans;

we have made them in our image, as it were. We have done this because we think we know how to control humans. But for purposes of control, it is necessary that there be no boundaries between the human, the natural, and the divine. This way, what I as a human do here will automatically be duplicated in the divine realm, and that will be duplicated in the natural realm. The idol is the perfect expression of this: it is a natural object in human form that is an expression of the divine. So I want rain? I do a ritual that perhaps involves pouring out water on the idol. That means that the god pours out water in heaven, which means that the heavens pour water on the earth.

But if the gods are just humanized cosmic powers (rain, sun, moon, storm, passion, fertility, etc.), where did they come from and what is the purpose of it all? There is, of course, no answer. There are complicated stories about how the gods emerged sexually from the watery chaos that has always existed, and then took counsel among themselves how to destroy chaos and make order, but none of that explains why we are here, and for what reason we exist. Just as the sun knows no answer to such questions as these, neither does the sun god.

It is over against that understanding of reality, the one that permeated the whole ancient world all the way up to Rome, that Isaiah is writing. He reflects a completely opposite understanding of reality, the one that totally permeates the Bible. Yahweh, I AM, is a divine person who exists outside of the cosmos. He made the world by himself on purpose. He made it to be a home for persons like himself, whom he could bless in a life-giving relationship with himself. In short, he made us to share his character and his life. So where is the hitch? The hitch is that he is not the world and cannot be manipulated through the world. We cannot make him do what we want. We can only surrender our needs and ourselves to him, trusting that he knows our needs better than we do and that all his purposes toward us are good. Scary!

But that is exactly what Isaiah is saying. No human has made God in our image. He is the only God, and there is no other. He is not one of the forces of this world, with a human mask on. He didn't have a conference with some other gods to figure out how to destroy chaos. He made this world with a great and blessed purpose. We *can* trust him, if we will. But we must be forever careful of thinking that we can manipulate him to supply our needs. To do that is to reduce him to an idol, a god we have made so that we can control our world. Yahweh is a God unlike any of the human creations that we call gods.

He had the power to create the world from nothing, and he has the power to deliver us.

1. What are some ways that we think we can manipulate God through our actions?
2. The apostle Paul says that covetousness (greed) is idolatry (Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:5). Why do you think he says that?
3. Washing my car on Sunday does not mean the car is my idol. But when can the car, or anything else, become an idol for me?

## FOUR

### Who Is My Equal?

**Isaiah 40:21–26** *Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?<sup>22</sup>It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; <sup>23</sup>who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.*

<sup>24</sup>*Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*

<sup>25</sup>*To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. <sup>26</sup>Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.*

**Understanding the Word.** In these verses Isaiah continues his argument that there is no other power in the cosmos that can prevent Yahweh from accomplishing the deliverance that he promises. Here he underlines Yahweh's absolute uniqueness, the point that he began to make in verse 12 and following. The technical term for this uniqueness is *transcendence*. This is the idea that God is absolutely other than his creation. It did not somehow emerge from his body; it is not a manifestation of his essence; he is outside of it and beyond it.

This is the true significance of the term that is a particular favorite of Isaiah's: "the Holy One" (v. 25). To be holy in essence is to be somehow out of the ordinary. But the Old Testament writers declare that none of the gods has a right to be called holy. A block of wood carved to look like a man . . . holy? Of course not! Human passion conceived of as a divine woman . . . holy? Never. There is only one truly holy being in the universe, these verses tell us: Yahweh, I AM, the one who is completely other than everything else that exists.

In today's passage Isaiah expresses these ideas in poetic ways. He starts by speaking of the beginning of things. As I said yesterday, the human understanding of reality is remarkably consistent, whether ancient primitive or modern secular humanist. This is the idea that chaotic matter has always existed and will always exist. That makes a lot of sense if this psycho-socio-physical cosmos is all there is. Matter was here before we were born and will be here after we die. Furthermore, if order is let go, it will never become more orderly, it will always tend to become chaotic. But Isaiah says this is not so. There was a moment when this cosmos began; there was a moment when the earth received its foundations. The Hebrews (and we) have been told this, and it is recorded in the book of Genesis. Have we not heard; have we not believed? Please don't get hung up on the question of how many days or hours or years it took. That is not the point. The point is that the human view of reality is wrong. It is not chaotic matter that has always existed; it is that an intelligent, divine Person has always existed, and that this Person *spoke* the cosmos into existence at a certain moment. This is why the big bang theory is so exciting (and why it is so annoying to the secularists). Science confirms what the Bible says: there was a moment when this cosmos began to exist, a moment before which it did not exist!

Isaiah then goes on to picture God enthroned "above the circle of the earth" (v. 22). How interesting! Again, he is speaking poetically of Yahweh's transcendence. He is not of the earth; he is over it. And from that perspective, he has a realistic view of us humans. Earlier he spoke of us as the fragile grass. Now he sees us as less than grasshoppers. Make no mistake: he sees us as the most valuable creatures in the cosmos. But if we get an inflated view of our own powers or significance, we need to be reminded of the heavenly perspective. Then the poet returns to the grass imagery (v. 24). Who will survive on this earth? The princes and mighty men of the world? Those who presume that they can thwart the will of the Transcendent One, the one who calls the

stars by name, whom the pagans thought were gods? Of course not! They are nothing more than grass that springs up suddenly and is blown away in an instant. The God who wants to deliver and intends to deliver *can* deliver, and nothing created can stop him.

1. Identify some people, or circumstances, that you honestly think are too much for God to deliver you from. What is it about each that is too much for this God Isaiah is describing?
2. What are some of the evidences you can think of that support the theory of an intelligent designer?
3. What does the theory of chance development (the so-called evolution theory) say to us about the meaning of life?
4. What does the doctrine of transcendence teach us about the possibility of transcending our heredity and environment?

## FIVE

### He Has Not Forgotten You

**Isaiah 40:27–31** *Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God”?<sup>28</sup> Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.<sup>29</sup> He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.<sup>30</sup> Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;<sup>31</sup> but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

**Understanding the Word.** This final section of Isaiah 40 is a fitting conclusion to the chapter as a whole. It speaks first of all in verse 27 about the discouragement of the exiles. They had thought they were the chosen people of God who would one day rule the world. They had thought that God had promised to bless and preserve them. Now it seemed to them as if God had forgotten all about them and had broken all his promises to them. None of that

is true, of course. Their memories, like ours, were very selective. God had not promised that they would rule the world, but that they would be “a kingdom of priests” (Exod. 19:5–6 RSV). That is, they would be the mediators between a lost world and a saving God. Second, they would be God’s special possession and would receive his care and protection *if* they kept their side of the covenant. Somehow they had conveniently forgotten that “if.” They thought God owed them that care and protection even if they broke every one of the covenant stipulations governing their behavior.

How often we are guilty of the same kind of faulty thinking. We have made a profession of faith; we have joined the church; we have been relatively (sometimes rigorously) faithful in church attendance, and we think that gives us some sort of “lock” on God. Never mind that we are jealous and envious, that we cherish bitterness toward others, that we are stingy toward the poor and outcast, that we are hypercritical, that we are oppressive toward those who work under us. God owes us something, we think. Yes, he does, but it may not be what we think.

But Yahweh does not chide the exiles for these faulty understandings. Rather, he calls attention to who he is. In verses 28 and 29 he says five things about himself that bear on their condition. First, he is the eternal God. That is, he is not conditioned by time. For him, says the apostle Peter, a thousand years is as a day, and a day as a thousand years (2 Peter 3:8). He can do something in a moment that should have taken forever and, as Peter goes on to say (v. 9), he will keep his promise at precisely the right moment.

Second, he is the Creator. This means that he can do something unlike anything that has ever happened before. The so-called gods can never do a new thing; they are doomed to do what they have always done. Imagine the sun coming up in the west some day! Ridiculous! But the infinitely creative one is never hampered by what he has done in the past (Isa. 43:18–19).

Third, standing outside of time and with limitless power, he never gets tired. The gods, being simply humans on a grand scale, may indeed get tired and need some rejuvenation by their human clients. Such a thing is unthinkable for the true God. If he has not yet taken action, it is not because he is tired.

Fourth, he understands everything and so much more. His understanding simply transcends anything we can even conceive of. Sometimes our praying gets a bit ludicrous. We think we have to remind God what the situation is in

case he has forgotten, and then we have to tell him how to solve the problem in case he cannot figure that out. The Judeans seem to have been a bit like that: God needs a little coaching to remember just what our condition is here.

Fifth, Yahweh takes particular pleasure in helping the helpless. As Paul says, his strength is shown in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Those who are superior in intelligence, good looks, strength, and wealth all too often foolishly think they do not need God, and in so doing they deprive themselves of all the incredible resources of heaven. Then, when their gifts begin to fail them, they have nowhere to turn. But those who know their need find to their delight that God supplies what is lacking in them.

Thus, we come to the well-known final verse. Since God is all the things I have just enumerated, what is the very best thing we can do? We can wait in eager expectation for the wonderful, unexpected, and creative things God will do on our behalf at the right moment. In the Old Testament *wait* is a frequent synonym of *trust*. This is not waiting simply in the sense of passing time, but rather in the sense of refusing to run ahead of God as though we alone truly know our need and how to meet it. To wait in this sense is to confess both our ignorance and our helplessness, and to throw ourselves on his resources. This is not to counsel passivity as though we do nothing, simply waiting on God to do everything. God will commonly use what abilities and intelligence we have, but it is in his way, not ours; in his time, not ours. I think the order of the verbs here is intentional. Life with God involves moments when we soar, and hours when we run, but most of all it involves a steady, unflagging, purposeful walk with our hands in his.

1. What do we have to give up when we wait for God to take action in our lives?
2. According to this passage, how can we know that God will take action in our lives?
3. Why is “walking” the Christian life more difficult than “soaring”?

## COMMENTARY NOTES

The book of Isaiah is centered on the theme of servanthood. Just as Isaiah had his lips cleansed so he could speak a message to the nation, so the nation was to experience a similar fiery cleansing so it could convey God's message to the world. Isaiah had a vision of God's breathtaking holiness—his transcendence (6:1–3), and in many ways that is what chapters 7–39 are about. In those chapters the Holy One of Israel (a favorite title of Isaiah's that only occurs five other times in the Bible, but twenty-six in Isaiah) is displayed as the unique and only ruler of the universe. But the section is also about the need for his servants to trust him completely. They are to trust Yahweh and so be empowered to display his glory to the nations (see 7:4; 12:2; 26:3–4; 30:15, 18; 36:7). Unfortunately, they were more inclined to be seduced by the glory of the nations and so trusted them instead of God. Because of that Isaiah declared that one day they would be taken captive by those very nations that they trusted. In chapters 40–55, we see that this prediction has been fulfilled. The Judean leadership is experiencing the fire of captivity. But just as with the fire that touched Isaiah's lips, God does not intend this experience to destroy them, but rather to cleanse them. In fact, he intends to use the evidence of their experience as proof that he alone is God. Far from casting them off for their sins, he calls them his chosen servants. The final section of the book (chaps. 56–66), probably written to the Judeans

who had returned from captivity, shows what God is going to have to do for them and to them so that they can indeed be a clean lamp through which his light can shine out to the nations (see 60:1–3).

Chapters 40–55 are divided into two sections (41–48, 49–55), with chapter 40 serving as the introduction to the entire unit. Chapters 41–48 deal with deliverance from Babylon, and especially with Yahweh's power to deliver his people from the Babylonian gods. In chapters 41–46 Yahweh again and again calls the gods into court, demanding that they produce evidence to show that they deserve to be called gods. He challenges them to bring witnesses forward who can produce such evidence, and asserts that they cannot do so. Then he calls upon his own people as witnesses on his behalf. The evidence they produce is that Yahweh has indeed specifically predicted future events and those events have occurred. This is something the gods cannot do since they are simply humanized cosmic forces, which cannot know the future.

The second part is chapters 49–55. These chapters deal with a further question about deliverance. Supposing that Yahweh can deliver his people *from* Babylon; how can he deliver them *back* to him? That is, what about the sin that took them to Babylon in the first place and alienated them from him? Is he merely going to act as if those sins had not taken place, as though there had never been a breach in relations between

him and them? The answer found in these chapters is that God is going to take their alienation upon himself, and in so doing remove it from the record. Chapters 49:1–52:12 are filled with anticipation of this great deliverance, whereas chapters 54–55 contain a ringing invitation to enter into it. It is 52:13–53:12, the sacrificial death of God’s Servant, which accounts for the change from anticipation to invitation.

The years 900–333 BC saw the rise and fall of three great empires in the ancient Near East. The first and third, the Assyrian and the Persian, were relatively long-lived, whereas the second, the Babylonian, was quite short-lived. The Assyrians ruled from 900 to 609 BC. They practiced the policy of exile. That is, when they conquered a people, they resettled the leadership elsewhere in their empire, and brought people in from yet somewhere else to settle in the conquered land. This had at least three effects. The first was terror. You could know that if you resisted the Assyrians and were defeated, you would be dragged off into captivity. The second was to short-circuit rebellions. Why fight for the freedom of a land where you were a stranger? The third was to make it easier to rule an empire full of diverse peoples, cultures, and religions. Exile tended to mix them all up together, to “homogenize” the mass, as it were. The Babylonians, who ruled from 609 to 539, and to whom the nation of Judah had fallen, followed the same practice.

Thus, from 900 until 539, exile had been the rule of the day. During that entire time, no one had ever gone home from exile. To go into exile was to disappear as a distinct people. It fell to the Persians (539–533 BC) under their first emperor, Cyrus, to reverse that practice, just as Isaiah had predicted he would.

Chapter 40 is clearly addressing three questions that Isaiah knew the exiles would be asking. Has God rejected us? Verses 1–11 answer that with a resounding, “No.” He loves them and wants to deliver them. But *can* God deliver us? Aren’t the Babylonian gods too strong for him? Verses 12–24 again answer, “No.” Yahweh is in a class by himself. Those man-made “gods” are not even worthy of the name. In some ways the third question is the most poignant. All right, so God *wants* to deliver us, both from Babylon and from our sins, and he *can* deliver us. Is he actually *going* to deliver us? Here the answer is a resounding, “Of course!”

The terms “Israel” and “Judah” can become a little confusing. Israel is used two ways in the Bible. First, it can be used to refer to the nation as a whole. But second, it can be used to refer to the Northern Kingdom, which came into existence when the kingdom of Solomon broke in two. What was left when that Northern Kingdom broke away was called Judah. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was destroyed by Assyria in 722 BC, and Judah by Babylon in 586 BC. Isaiah is writing to Judah, which is the remnant of the nation of Israel.

## WEEK ONE

# GATHERING DISCUSSION OUTLINE

- A. Open session in prayer.
- B. View video for this week's readings.
- C. What general impressions and thoughts do you have after considering the video and reading the daily writings on these scriptures?
- D. Discuss questions selected from the daily readings.
  - 1. **KEY OBSERVATION:** God's response to the people's condition is grace and love.  
**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** How does this address the common misconception of many people that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath?
  - 2. **KEY OBSERVATION:** God's word is eternal, while humans are as temporary as grass.  
**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** Why do you think it says that his word is eternal rather than that *he* is eternal?
  - 3. **KEY OBSERVATION:** Since God is transcendent, he cannot be manipulated by our behavior.  
**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** What are some of the ways we try to manipulate God?

**4. KEY OBSERVATION:** God cannot be represented in any created form.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** Why are there no descriptions of Jesus' physical appearance in the New Testament? Suppose there were, what would the result be?

**5. KEY OBSERVATION:** God calls on us to wait for him to take action in our lives.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** Why does God do this? What are we saying when we won't wait?

**E.** What facts and information presented in the commentary portion of the lesson help you understand the weekly scripture?

**F.** Close session with prayer.