

Isaiah 40:1-11

Isaiah 39 ends with a grim prediction that Babylon will be back not to admire Jerusalem's art collection but to destroy the city. (39:5-7) Approximately 150 years have passed since that time and now Judah's surviving remnant seems crushed under the grip of Babylon's power. But to these distressed and despondent people the comforting word of God comes. This comfort is located in God's glory, his word and his character.

God's glory (3-5)

Ezekiel described the departure of God's glory from the temple. (Ezekiel 10). Solomon had celebrated the joy and privilege of being a people whose God was at the centre of the nation's life, accessible to them in all their difficulties. The exile seemed to signal the end of all that. Isaiah announces the return of the glory.

God's word (6-8)

These people had been subject to human pride and empty promises. It was hard not to be intimidated by the threats of the latest dictator or wooed by the predications of some articulate prophet. Isaiah sums up the human scene. These are not the people in whom to invest your hopes. *All people are like grass and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.* (6) Their attention is redirected elsewhere: *The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures for ever.* (8)

God's character (9-11)

Isaiah directs the attention of the exiles to the character of their God. He is the Sovereign Lord and rules over all the events of history. (10) He comes with power and a mighty arm. To a people seemingly under the iron grip of an immensely powerful nation this rekindled their hope. But the greatness of their God does not stop at his power. The arm he rules by is also the arm with which he 'carries' his vulnerable people. (see 46:4) To the traumatised exiles these are words are a life line.

- Isaiah challenges us over where our hope is located: in people and their limited promises or in God and his enduring word?
- We may need God to remind us of his Sovereign power or we may need a glimpse of his tender care. Look out for both of these as you read through these chapters over the next 2 weeks.
- Remind yourself that the words *hopeless* and *impossible* are not in God's vocabulary?

Isaiah 40: 12-31

The rest of this chapter is comprised of a series of questions. These questions are intended to provide the exiles with some perspective as they consider their plight and consider God's word about the future. The entire chapter is spoken to rekindle hope in despondent men and women. It is intended to do the same for us.

With whom then will you compare God? (18)

We are familiar with the idea that everything is relative. Isaiah invites the exiles to measure their situation against their God. This is the one who dwarfs mountain ranges and vast oceans and who possesses all knowledge within himself. The world's superpowers may intimidate us but before this God they are reckoned to be no more formidable than *'dust on the scales.'*

The comparison moves beyond nations to their gods. We might find the respect given to shrines and images hard to comprehend but our culture has its idols. The 'markets' are treated with the utmost respect as if our lives depended on them. Sacrificial offerings are made to celebrities, to sports teams, to the world of fashion all conveying the value we place on them. But Isaiah directs us to the God who really does rule over our lives. *He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth....He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.* It is utter folly to leave such a being out of our thinking.

Why do you complain, Jacob.....my way is hidden from the Lord? (27)

Jesus invited his disciples to consider the birds that they would learn to trust in their heavenly Father's care. Isaiah points the exiles to the stars. For all their vast number they are known to their creator and he directs their orbit. *Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.* (26) The implication is clear. If the creator carefully oversees the 'starry host' how much more will the one 'who tends his flock like a shepherd' (11) provide and protect all his people.

The passage ends with a promise: *those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.* (31) The exiles are being directed to wait confidently for God to 'arrive' and fulfil the promises of the first part of the chapter.

- It is God's word that can bring perspective to our lives that all too easily become enthralled by the powers of this world. Keep reading it.
- Isaiah challenges us over anything we think is indispensable. Review those things we worry over or that regularly occupy our minds and set them down alongside this incomparable God.
- God is able to protect his people and to sustain them. Is our hope firmly in the Lord's great ability and shepherd-like love?

Isaiah 41:1-16

There are 2 themes running through these chapters. The first concerns Israel's return to the land and the second to their return to the Lord. The first of these will involve military intervention. V2 refers to 'one from the east' and 44:28 identifies him as Cyrus, the Persian king who will overthrow Babylon. None of this is to be thought of as 'regional politics'. *Who has done this and carried it through....I, the Lord - with the first of them and with the last - I am he.* (4)

Isaiah never misses an opportunity to pour scorn on idolatry. He pictures the response of the surrounding region to the advance of Persia. It's a response that involves stirring one another up and encouraging faith in the nations gods. *The metalworker encourages the goldsmith, and the one who smooths with the hammer spurs on the one who strikes the anvil. One says of the welding, 'It is good.' The other nails down the idol so it doesn't topple.* (7)

But Israel are not 'idol makers'. Their God does not need to be supported, quite the reverse. Verse 10 and 13 are among the great promises of the Bible. They are made to the descendants of Abraham who include all those who share the faith of Abraham (Gal 3:7) These are our promises too. The passage ends by predicting that 'little Israel' will reduce their enemies to 'chaff'. However we may understand the fulfilment of these words the message is clear: *So do not fear, for I am with you (10)....I am the Lord your God who says to you 'Do not fear' (13)Do not be afraid you worm Jacob (14).* If the God of Isaiah 40 is with us we certainly do not need to fear.

- God rules over the politics of our world, raising up leaders and bringing other down. One of the advantages of reading the Bible is we see the big picture and the way in which world leaders are made to serve Gods plans.
- Isaiah exposes the futile faith of the nations. They spur one another on to make idols that won't fall over. It ought to spur us on to share with them the news of chapter 40.
- Memorise Isaiah 40: 10 and 13.

Isaiah 41:17 - 29

The arrival of Cyrus to effect the end of the exile does not answer all the problems. God may describe Israel as 'his servant' *'Jacob whom I have chosen'*(8) but they feel themselves to be in a desperate place. It summed up in this statement: *The poor and needy search for water but there is none;* (17) But these are the Lord's people and he will not forsake them. Rather he will lavishly answer their prayers. The poetry of these verses conveys how abundant God's provision is. (18-20)

Jesus spoke to those men who left their nets and livelihoods, in similar terms. *So do not worry saying "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.* (Matt 6:31,32)

The Bible relentlessly impresses on us the utter emptiness of idolatry. Isaiah exposes their inability to accurately predict the future or even to do anything either good or bad. (23) The idols know what it is to intimidate but they are ultimately empty. The gospel by comparison comes with comforting power. This is what is taking place through these words of the prophet. (40:1ff)

God knows the future because he controls the future. *I have stirred up one from the north and he comes..*(25) This is a further reference to Cyrus who previously (2) was described as coming from the east. Cyrus represents the kingdom of the Medes (north) and Persians (east). These are not events that anyone else has predicted. *I was the first to tell Zion, "Look here they are!" I gave to Jerusalem a messenger of good news.* (27)

- Jesus taught his disciples to trust the provision of their loving heavenly Father. Have we recognised that we too need to learn these lessons?
- Its not difficult to be intimidated by the views of the opinion makers of our culture. The academics, the scientists, the media people regard Christianity as utterly incredible. But the only sure word about the future is found in the bible. Let v21-24 speak to our anxieties and settle our troubled minds.
- We live surrounded by bad news. Media organisations channel the worlds woes into our homes. We need to tune into the good news of this prophecy.

Isaiah 42:1-9

Two figures dominate these chapters of Isaiah. One is Cyrus who will enable the exiles to return to their land and recommence their national life. The other is the Servant of the Lord. In the first nine verses he is introduced to us for the first time.

The Servant of the Lord (v1-9)

The nation of Israel has already been identified as the Lord's servant. *But you Israel my servant* (41:8) The failure of the first people to fulfil their God given task meant that Israel were appointed as the worlds evangelists.

They are to bring *justice to the nations* (1) and to provide teaching in which *the islands will put their hope* (4). They will carry out their mission by means of Gods Spirit and through Gods enabling they will become *a light to the Gentiles*. (7) But as will become clear from the end of the chapter (18,19) Israel will prove to be a deaf and blind servant.

The spotlight moves from the nation in general to their Messiah who Isaiah describes throughout his prophecy. This section provides the Messiah with his job description. He is to live dependently upon his God. (*Here is my servant whom I uphold*) He is not to be heard complaining about being overlooked or ignored. (2) His ministry must not crush the weak or overburden the vulnerable. (3) This mission is not to be narrow and nationalistic but is intended to extend to all kinds of unlikely people.

Its worth reflecting on how perfectly these predictions are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Prayer forms the central core of his life. His dependence on his Father will be witnessed as he rises early to pray, even choosing prayer over a night's sleep. He does not respond angrily when he is 'used' by people. He understands the concept of servanthood. Unlike the religious leaders he does not load people with heavy burdens but invites the weary to come to him for rest. His concern extends beyond the obviously religious to tax collectors and prostitutes, to dying criminals and Roman soldiers and even to the chief of sinners.

- Thank God for the Lord Jesus who perfectly fulfils his mission
- Pick out one aspect of this description and see it as part of your calling too.
- The next time someone fails to appreciate you or takes your service for granted remind yourself of what it means to be a 'servant'.

Isaiah 42: 10-25

The servant we meet at the start of chapter 42 will bring *justice to the nations* (1) and he will be *a light for the Gentiles* (6) The next section (10ff) opens with an invitation to the world to rejoice in this prospect. *Sing to the Lord a new song his praise from the ends of the earth...* (10) The picture we have in chapter 40 of the arrival of the Lord is an event full of hope for the whole earth. (40:3-5) The poetry of v13-15 sets out in graphic terms Gods victory over his enemies. This though is a victory that will be effected not with swords and spears but by the obedient life of the Lord's servant. By his suffering he will *free captives and release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness* (42:7)

- Take a moment to reflect on Gods gracious rescue. Let it cause you to pause and consider what kind of 'song' your life is producing.

In the next section (18-25) attention turns to the 'blind servant' (18,19). There is a blockage in this process by which the nations are to be informed of Gods salvation. Israel appointed to be a channel of blessing to the world is found to be both blind and deaf.

This blindness is not unfortunate but wilful. *You have seen many things but you pay no attention.* (20) John 9 illustrates Israel's culpable condition. Confronted with a blind man miraculously healed by Jesus the Jewish authorities steadfastly refuse to see this as a sign of Jesus deity. They duck and dive to avoid the self-evident truth and in so doing identify themselves blind servants and deaf messengers.

- These religious people are a warning to those of us familiar with these things. We all have our blind spots. Wisdom would teach us to yield to Gods word when it exposes our sin.

At the heart of this blindness is a rejection of Gods law. *It pleased the Lord for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious.* (21) This refusal resulted in serious consequences for Israel. *Who handed Jacob over to become loot... Was it not the Lord? For*

they would not follow his ways; they did not obey his law. Israel's problem though was their inability to see this. (25)

- Thank God that he has not left us at the mercy of a blind and deaf servant. He has come *to open the eyes of the blind* (7) Welcome his ministry and submit to his ways.

Isaiah 43:1-13

Isaiah not only brings good news of rescue he also appoints the nation to its God given mission. To this restored people Isaiah speaks on behalf of their God: "*You are my witnesses,*" declares the Lord "*that I am God*" (12)

A renewed sense of identity (1-7)

The chapter begins by striking a strong note of reassurance. Israel are the Lord's people not only through creation but also redemption. Our minds are taken back to the events of the Exodus where it was at the expense of Egypt that Israel was chosen. (3)

Chapter 42 ended on a distressing note. *So he poured out on them his burning anger.... It enveloped them in flames* (25) Chapter 43 opens with words of reassurance for those caught up in the burning heat of exile. (2) Despite the trauma of exile there remained certain changeless realities. For all their failure Israel was still God's protected and cherished people. Even when our sin brings painful consequences into our lives we are entitled to remind ourselves that the Lord will not give us up to our folly. He will not allow us to be swept away by these things.

A clear sense of mission (8-13)

The setting of this section is a court room. There are various officials and witnesses and a verdict to be delivered. The issue being contested is simply, 'Who is God?' The nations are invited to call their witnesses and present their case (9) The questioning centres on the accuracy of their predictions. The outcome is left hanging. Does anyone verify their claims or confirm they spoke honestly?

Attention turns to Israel. What of these witnesses and their testimony? Tragically they prove to be blind and deaf (8) (see 42:18) The outcome of this failure is God must act as his own witness and the rest of the section records his testimony. He has no predecessors and there will be no successors. He is the only Saviour. His grip on events is firm. *No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act who can reverse it?*

The section ends with God repeating his commission. '*You are my witnesses*' declares the Lord '*that I am God.*' (12) Failure is not final. A new chapter is about to open for these people. Will they seize the opportunity?

- Isaiah impresses upon us the value of being clear about our identity. We do not look back to the Exodus to see the value God has placed on our lives but to the one who '*gave his life as a ransom for many*' (Mark 10:45). It is a huge reassurance to know that even in our sin God continues to love us and that he will not desert us even when the consequences are at their most severe.
- You are my witnesses. This becomes the commission given to the NT church. Thankfully we are not left to ourselves but are enabled through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid but gives us power, love and self discipline.* (2 Tim 1:7)

Isaiah 43:14-28

It's not hard to imagine how despondent life in Babylon must have been for the exiled people of God. You might listen to the news avidly to see if your oppressors had any viable opponents. But even if another power arose to threaten Babylon would Israel not simply exchange one set of jailers for another? And what hope of return? Hundreds of miles of hostile territory lay between them and Jerusalem.

In v14,15 God speaks to them as their powerful redeemer and mighty king. He promises to bring the Babylonians down as fugitives. This promise is followed up by a reminder of the events in Egypt hundreds of years before. The exodus was not merely an escape from an oppressor it was followed by a homeward journey and a new beginning.

God's sovereignty extends to the natural world. The wilderness and the wild animals answer to the Lord's commands. God is able to sustain his people as they travel through inhospitable terrain. *I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland to give drink to my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise. (20,21)*

At v22 the focus changes from what the Lord desired in his people (21) to what he found (22). Attention shifts from Babylonian oppression and Israel's captivity to their spiritual state. *'Yet you have not called on me, Jacob' (22)* The consistent picture of the earlier part of the prophecy is not of a scarcity of religion but rather of a mindless commitment to ritual. Chapter one spoke of *meaningless offerings* and *worthless assemblies*. Although God has not abandoned them their relationship with him is in a critical condition. This state of affairs will not be remedied by the recommencement of sacrifice but only by something much deeper.

Alex Motyer has written, *"Isaiah's message in these verses is the same as in 1:10ff. There was much religious fervour but no religious reality. At the point where they might have expected to please God they wearied him. (24)* The purpose of these words is to turn the attention of the people off themselves and their systems and onto God. *I even I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own name sake, and remembers your sins no more. (25)* We are heading towards the momentous 53rd chapter where precisely how that will happen will be made clear.

- Make a note of the ways God describes himself in this passage?
- God reveals himself through what he has done in the past. It's a wise thing to be regularly reviewing the great events of our faith.
- We are tempted to settle for ritual. Isaiah would urge us not to settle for anything less than fellowship with the living God. (Recall 1 John and its emphasis on true fellowship with the Father and the Son)

Isaiah 44:1-8

Chapter 43 ends on a bleak note: *I consigned Jacob to destruction*. But chapter 44 strikes a positive note. They are not to fear that judgment is God's last word for them. Rather they are invited to listen to what they mean to him. *But now listen Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen. (1)* Hosea was a contemporary of Isaiah who conveyed similar truth to God's people. *How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel....My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger nor will I devastate Ephraim again (Hosea 11:8,9)*

What God plans for them is not judgment but refreshment. In the same way that rain refreshes barren land so God's Spirit will be poured out on the spiritually arid lives of these people. It is an attractive picture of God's ability to revive the life of his people. The experience described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah provide a glimpse of this process.

The returned exiles are at a low ebb but through the ministry of God's Spirit they are not only able to renew their external defences but also their trust and love for their God. (see Nehemiah 8&9)

This refreshment surfaces in the lives of the nation as a new pride in being part of God's people. (4,5) *Some will say, "I belong to the Lord", others will call themselves by the name of Jacob; still others will write on their hand, "The Lord's"*. For people who have all too readily been mesmerized by the gods of the nations they are invited to pause and appreciate the incomparable greatness of the Lord their God. (6-8) *Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.*

- Pause and consider what you mean to God. Jesus reassured the disciples that they were not merely servants but friends. (John 15:15) Paul reminds us of the huge transition from enemy to friend effected through the gospel and its implication. *For if while we were God's enemies we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more having been reconciled shall we be saved through his life! (Rom 5:10)*
- Do we stand in need of the refreshing ministry of the Holy Spirit? Are we justly proud of what it means to be one of God's people or does this thought make little impression on our outlook?

Isaiah 44: 9-28

The prophecy of Isaiah relentlessly confronts idolatry. That it makes so much of the issue underlines the place it occupied in the world of those days. That it has been preserved for us in God's enduring word tells you that this is a permanent problem for humanity. We are incurably religious. That is, we are all worshippers, people who will give our loyalty to certain people or things. The statues and images of long ago have given way to our pursuit of success and meaning through jobs and money, sex and family. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus warned of the impossibility of serving two masters. He went on to say: *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness* What we seek first is our god.

Idolatry exposed (9-20)

Idolatry is a human initiative. It involves the blacksmith at his forge or the carpenter at his bench with chisel and compasses. These people are described as craftsmen (11) and doubtless they exhibit considerable skill. But they are *only human beings* (11). There is a side to the picture that Isaiah paints that is full of absurdity (15) But his main point is not that this is stupid but that it is impotent. The idol be it ancient or modern has no power to change the human heart. (18-20) *He prays to it and says, 'Save me! You are my god.'* But the tragedy is set out in v20. *Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a lie' (20)*

Divine initiative (21-23)

This section is bookended with God speaking of himself (6-8 and 21-23). Jacob needed to remember that in contrast to the idols: *I have made you, you are my servant. (21)*. He is not a product of their ingenuity, they owe their existence to him. And then comes this great announcement of God's ability to work deep within their lives: *I have swept away your offences like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. (22)* And in the light of this they are urged to discard the impotent idols and *Return to me for I have redeemed you. (22)*

- Ask God to disclose to you what you 'seek first'
- People can do great things but they are unable to change the human heart. It is only the ministry of the Holy Spirit that is able to bring about internal

transformation and produce the fruit of godly character. How is your relationship with the Spirit?

- Is there any sense in which we need to return to the God who has ‘swept away our sins like the morning mist’?