The Word That Stands

> **Isaiah 40:8, 46:9-10** – The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever. … Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure."

Review

Lesson 40 closed the Hezekiah narrative. Four chapters of history answered why a book of prophecy stops to record what happened: the prophet's word about Assyria was proven by its fulfillment, a son of David trusted where his father had refused, and the narrative ended on Babylon, named for the first time as Judah's captor (39:6). The next word in the book is "Comfort" (40:1).

Before that word is opened, this lesson pauses at the seam of the book. It looks back over chapters 1-39 and forward over chapters 40-66. There is a reference sheet provided.

The Case So Far

The book opened in a courtroom. "Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; for the LORD speaks" (1:2) takes up the summons of Deuteronomy 30:19, where heaven and earth were called to witness against Israel if she broke the covenant. The LORD is the plaintiff, Judah is the defendant, and the charge is covenant breach. Chapters 1-39 present that case (*riv*), and the courtroom widens ring by ring before it narrows again to Jerusalem.

The Indictment (1-6)

Chapter 1 is the opening charge. Sons reared by the LORD have rebelled, the nation is sick from head to foot, and the faithful city has become a harlot (1:21); yet in the middle of the indictment the LORD calls Judah to "reason together" (1:18). Chapters 2-4 set Zion's future glory, when the nations stream to the mountain of the LORD's house (2:2-4), against her present pride, and the Branch of the LORD appears beyond the purging (4:2). The vineyard of Chapter 5 yields only wild grapes, and six woes follow. In Chapter 6, the prophet sees the Holy One on the throne and is sent to a people who will not hear, with a holy seed left in the stump (6:13). These six chapters are the prologue; every major theme of the book is introduced (Messiah, Holy One of Israel, The City of God, The Remnant, Judgment, Righteousness, Salvation, Trust, and Waiting).

The Book of Immanuel (7-12)

The case narrows to one crisis and one king. Ahaz, threatened by Aram and Ephraim, would not believe and hired Assyria instead (7:9; 2 Kings 16:7-8). The LORD gave the house of David the sign of Immanuel (7:14), the Child who is "Mighty God" (9:6), and the Shoot from the stem of Jesse on whom the Spirit rests (11:1-2). Assyria, the help Ahaz bought, became the rod of God's anger (10:5), and the rod will be broken as well. The section ends in the song of a remnant who has seen the LORD's anger turned away (12:1).

Judgment on the Nations (13-23)

The courtroom widens to every point of the compass. Ten burdens (*massa'*) fall, opening with Babylon, the great land power (13-14), and closing with Tyre, the great sea power (23). Between them stand Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Cush, Egypt, Edom, and Arabia, and in chapter 22 Jerusalem herself is placed among the nations in the Valley of Vision. No nation that Judah feared or trusted stands outside the reach of the Holy One of Israel.

The Little Apocalypse (24-27)

Once every named defendant has been tried, the walls of the courtroom come down. The earth itself is judged for breaking the everlasting covenant (24:5), and the LORD punishes the host of heaven on high with the kings of the earth on earth (24:21). Judgment and song alternate: the city of chaos broken down (24:10), the banquet on the mountain where death is swallowed up (25:6-8), the strong city of the redeemed (26:1), the dead raised (26:19), Leviathan slain, and the vineyard restored (27:1-6). The current judgment of Judah and her neighbors is shown to be a preview of the Day of the LORD.

The Six Woes (28-33)

The case returns to Jerusalem. Six woes (*hoy*) fall (28:1, 29:1, 15, 30:1, 31:1, 33:1): on the drunken crown of Ephraim, on Ariel (Jerusalem), on the counselors who hide their plans from the LORD, on the rebellious children who go down to Egypt, on those who rely on horses and do not look to the Holy One of Israel, and finally on the destroyer himself. Through them the LORD waits to be gracious (30:18), a King reigns in righteousness (32:1), and the LORD says, "Now I will arise" (33:10). In chapters 30-33 Assyria stands as a surrogate for the final enemy.

Two Panels (34-35)

Chapters 34 and 35 close the poetry of the Case as one oracle in two panels. One day of vengeance has two outcomes: the land of Edom unmade with the line of desolation (34:11), and the wilderness remade, with the ransomed returning to Zion on the Highway of Holiness (35:8-10). The lawsuit that began against Zion ends with the LORD pleading her cause: "a year of recompense for the cause of Zion" (34:8), where "cause" is the word *riv* (lawsuit/case) itself.

The Hezekiah Narrative (36-39)

The Case closes with evidence entered into the record. What the prophet said about Assyria came to pass in the days of those who heard it: the Angel of the LORD struck the camp, and Sennacherib went home to die (37:36-38). Hezekiah, confronted at the same conduit where Ahaz had refused to believe (7:3, 36:2), went to the house of the LORD. Then the narrative, placed out of its order in time, ends with the king of Judah welcoming envoys from Babylon and the word that all his house will be carried there (39:6).

The test for a prophet was set in the Law: “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken” (Deuteronomy 18:22). By that test, the Case ends with its prophet confirmed. The near word about Assyria was fulfilled before the eyes of the generation that heard it, and the word about Babylon was already on the record. The verdict of the Case is guilty, and the evidence is in. What remains is the LORD’s answer.

Introducing the Comfort

The Case and the Comfort

The book of Isaiah is one book. We previously set out the evidence: every manuscript, including the complete Great Isaiah Scroll from Qumran, carries chapters 1-66 as one continuous work with no break at Chapter 40, and every early witness attributes the whole to Isaiah son of Amoz. The theory of two or three authors, a “First,” “Second,” and “Third” Isaiah, rests on the assumption that a prophet in Hezekiah’s day could not name Cyrus or speak to exiles not yet in exile. That theory speaks of the parts of Isaiah as separate “books,” and its language is not borrowed here.

The division at Chapter 40 is still real. For that reason, the two parts are given names drawn from the text and from the lawsuit itself. Chapters 1-39 are **the Case**: the LORD’s charge against His people, the courtroom widened to the nations and the earth, and the evidence entered at the end. Chapters 40-66 are **the Comfort**, named from the first word the LORD speaks in them: “Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God (40:1). The names describe two parts of one lawsuit, not two documents. The Case closed with the LORD taking up Zion’s cause (34:8); the Comfort opens with Him telling His messengers to speak kindly to Jerusalem (40:2).

The Comfort is set in view of the Babylonian exile, and the critics take that setting as proof of a later hand. But the exile was announced in the Case, to Hezekiah’s face, while Babylon was still a subject kingdom of Assyria (39:6). The Comfort continues a word already spoken. It is addressed to the audience the book fixed in 30:8, written on a scroll “that it may serve in the time to come as a witness forever.”

The Word That Stands

The narrative of chapters 36-39 was placed where it is for a reason, and the Comfort shows the reason. The LORD’s argument in chapters 40-48 rests on prediction. The lawsuit is still in session, but the defendants have changed. In a series of trial scenes the LORD summons the nations and their gods to court (41:1-7, 21-29, 43:8-13, 44:6-8, 45:20-25), and the test He sets is the same kind of test the Law set for a prophet: “Let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place … declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods” (41:22-23). The idols cannot answer. The LORD can: “Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim them to you” (42:9).

The claim is repeated through the section. “Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it” (44:7). “I declared the former things long ago … suddenly I acted, and they came to pass” (48:3),

and He did it that way "so that you would not say, 'My idol has done them'" (48:5). Israel is called to the stand: "'You are My witnesses,' declares the LORD, 'and My servant whom I have chosen'" (43:10). We have already seen the word about Assyria come to pass; the army the Lord said would fall fell at the gates of Jerusalem. That record is the ground on which the Comfort asks to be believed. The word proven against Assyria announced the exile, and the same word now announces the return, the Servant, and the kingdom: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (40:8).

The Shape of the Comfort

Previously we divided Chapters 40-66 into three sections of nine chapters each, and the text itself marks the divisions. The first two end with the same refrain: "'There is no peace for the wicked,' says the LORD" (48:22), and "'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'" (57:21). The third ends with the wicked once more, in the closing verdict of the book: "their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched" (66:24).

- **40-48: The LORD and the idols.** The incomparable God, the trial scenes, Cyrus named as the LORD's shepherd and anointed (44:28, 45:1), the fall of Babylon (47), and the call to go forth from Babylon (48:20).
- **49-57: The Servant and Zion.** The Servant sent to bring Jacob back and to be a light to the nations (49:5-6), Zion comforted, the Servant's suffering (52:13-53:12), and the invitation to come to the waters (55:1).
- **58-66: Zion's glory and the Day of the LORD.** True and false worship, the glory of Zion (60-62), the day of vengeance (63:4), and the new heavens and the new earth (65:17, 66:22).

Chapter 53 is the focal point of the middle section, and with twenty-seven chapters in the second half of the book, it is also the middle chapter. The suffering of the Servant stands at the center, as we previously identified 52:13-53:12 the heart of the book. Babylon itself is not named after chapter 48. Once the return from Babylon has been promised, the horizon moves beyond it to the Servant and the kingdom.

The Servant

The word "servant" runs through the Comfort with two referents, and the text keeps them apart. The first is the nation: "But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen" (41:8; see 44:1). This servant is chosen and not rejected (41:9), but he is also blind and deaf: "Who is blind but My servant, or so deaf as My messenger whom I send?" (42:19). The second is an individual, the Servant whom the LORD formed from the womb "to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him" (49:5). He is called "Israel" in 49:3, yet He is sent to Israel, and His work reaches further still: "I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49:6). The Servant is the One who does what the servant nation was called to do and did not.

His work is set out in four songs: 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12. The New Testament identifies Him. Matthew cites the first song for the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 12:17-21), and when the Ethiopian official reading chapter 53 asked whether the prophet spoke of himself or of someone else, "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him" (Acts 8:35). Some Jewish interpreters read the Servant of chapter 53 as the nation of Israel; we will address that when we get there.

Three Horizons

The Comfort looks across three horizons, and each is a specific prophecy with its own fulfillment.

The first is the return from Babylon under Cyrus. The LORD says of him, "He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire," and of Jerusalem, "She will be built" (44:28). He calls Cyrus "His anointed" (45:1) and says to him, "I have also called you by your name … though you have not known Me" (45:4). Cyrus took Babylon in 539 BC, and in his first year he permitted the exiles to return and rebuild the house of the LORD (Ezra 1:1-4). The prophecy named him about a century and a half before he took the city. This return is a peak in its own right, a prophecy fulfilled in history; it is not a first fulfillment of the kingdom promises. Babylon in these chapters is the literal city and empire, and chapter 47 is its literal fall. Where Revelation later speaks of Babylon (Revelation 17-18), that is a shared motif, to be weighed when the series reaches it.

The second is the suffering of the Servant. Chapter 53 was fulfilled at the first advent, in the death of Jesus, as Philip preached from it (Acts 8:32-35).

The third is the Day of the LORD and the kingdom that follows: the day of vengeance (61:2, 63:4), the same day named in 34:8; the glory of Zion (60-62); and the new heavens and the new earth (65:17, 66:22).

The nations are present throughout the Comfort. The Servant is appointed "as a light to the nations" (42:6; see 49:6), foreigners join themselves to the LORD (56:3-8), and the nations come to Zion's light (60:3). These promises are kept through restored Israel in the kingdom. How the apostles used them, as when Paul cites 49:6 in Acts 13:47, is sorted where each text is reached.

The foreshortening must be understood here. From where Isaiah stood, the return from Babylon, the Servant's suffering, and the kingdom appear in one frame, sometimes within a few verses of one another. The New Testament separates them. The return came in 538 BC; the Servant suffered some five centuries later; the day of vengeance has not yet come. Between the second peak and the third lies the present age, which the prophet did not see and the New Testament discloses. The sequence is held firmly, the timetable loosely, and every peak is literal.

Hermeneutic Checkpoints

Start literal. Babylon is Babylon, Cyrus is Cyrus, and Zion is Zion. The names in the Comfort mean the places and the people they name.

A specific prophecy is its own peak. The return under Cyrus fulfilled what was said of Cyrus. It is not a near fulfillment of the kingdom promises, and it does not exhaust them.

Let the text identify the Servant. The distinction between the servant nation and the Servant who restores it is drawn in the text itself (49:5-6), and the New Testament names Him.

Keep the method consistent. Whoever reads the naming of Cyrus as literal prediction must read the rebuilt Zion and the new heavens and new earth the same way.

Tying the Threads Together

The Messianic Hope. In the first half (the Case), the Hope was a King: Immanuel (7:14), the Child on David's throne (9:6-7), the Shoot of Jesse (11:1), the King who reigns in righteousness (32:1). In the Comfort the same Person is the Servant. The LORD puts His Spirit upon Him (42:1), as the Spirit rested on the Shoot of Jesse (11:2), and He is the despised One to whom kings will bow (49:7). The second half (The Comfort) adds what the Case had not shown: the King suffers before He reigns.

The Motif of the City. The Case showed the faithful city become a harlot (1:21) beside the promise that she would again be called "the city of righteousness" (1:26), and the city of chaos (24:10) beside the strong city (26:1). In the Comfort, the proud city is Babylon, the virgin daughter told to come down and sit in the dust (47:1). Zion is rebuilt (49:14-26, 52:1-2, 54, 62) until the LORD says, "I create Jerusalem for rejoicing and her people for gladness" (65:18).

The Holy One of Israel. In the Case the Holy One was despised by His people (1:4), seen enthroned in the temple (6:3), and not looked to when Judah went down to Egypt (31:1). In the Comfort His title is joined to another: "your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel" (41:14; see 43:14, 47:4, 48:17, 49:7). "Redeemer" (*go'el*) comes from the verb *ga'al* seen in 35:9: the kinsman who buys back what was lost. The Holy One who brought the case against His people is the One who buys them back and brings them home.