

Isaiah 40 Part 1 Handout

Chapter 40 marks a major turning point in the book. Chapters 1–39 were largely filled with warnings of judgment against Judah for their unfaithfulness. During these chapters the question about the Lord's trustworthiness was thoroughly answered. He alone is the one His people need to put their trust in. Chapter 40 opens a whole new section with a completely different tone. Instead of judgment, the focus shifts to comfort and restoration. Remember, 150 years have passed since the events of chapter 39, including exile in Babylon for the people of Judah. This chapter speaks directly to the emotional and spiritual exhaustion of the captives and anticipates the decree that will allow them to return home. Here in chapter 40, we are going to see God assure His people that their time of punishment has come to an end, and that He Himself is coming to lead them home. The chapter builds from opening comfort into a sweeping picture of just how big and reliable God is.

When talking about the Babylonian exile, Isaiah addresses the questions he knows the people of Israel would be prompted to ask. Chapters 40-55 answer these questions in two subdivisions:

- Chapters 40-48 address Israel's captivity. To truly serve and worship God in the Promised Land, the people must first be granted their freedom. These chapters show God's capacity to deliver as well as His desire to do so.
- Chapters 49-55 address the prior issue of what needs to be done about the sin that got them into their predicament in the first place.

Isaiah sees that being in exile will bring up questions about these issues. Even though the questions aren't specifically stated, the answers are given over and over to these implied questions.

Chapter 40 has two main divisions: verses 1-11 and verses 12-26 with verses 27-31 acting as a summary conclusion of sorts. In the first 11 verses, the question of whether or not God has cast His people away is addressed. Not only will He deliver them, He will also position them to tell the world of this deliverance. In verses 12-26 His ability to deliver them is addressed. The people only need to wait in hope for the time to come. Because this chapter is packed with so much, we are going to break it into two sections. Today, we are going to focus on the first eleven verses. As we look at the comforting promises of deliverance and restoration in this chapter, we are also going to look at Daniel 9. Isaiah wrote his book before the exile happened. Daniel actually lived through it. Daniel is a live witness and participant within the very moment Isaiah 40 is describing. This is a wonderful case study for this chapter because it shows us the real-time, real-life reaction of a believer experiencing the very promises Isaiah wrote about.

Verses 1-2

What is being called for in verse 1? _____

Notice the word comfort is used twice increasing its intensity. In Hebrew literacy, repeating a word was the highest form of emphasis. It would be like putting it in bold, capitalizing it and adding multiple exclamation points. It is showing the absolute certainty and abundance of God's consolation being poured out.

In Hebrew the word for comfort is nacham (nah-KHAHM) and goes far beyond polite sympathy or emotional validation. It carries a great wealth of meaning.

- In a literal sense, it is born of a primitive root meaning to sigh or breath heavily which infers relief. It implies the emotional release and relief that comes when a difficult burden or a period of extreme grief is lifted.
- To show compassion or to console. It reflects a deep, raw emotional response. It is a heart bending low to embrace someone in their pain, a lot like a parent comforting a crying child.
- To strengthen and encourage. In this context it means to fortify, bolster and instill a sense of absolute security.

Who is speaking here? _____

Who God is speaking to here isn't so clear. In the original Hebrew, the commands given (comfort, speak) are plural commands, so it is thought that God is not speaking to just one person, but to multiple beings.

- ❖ Many scholars see this scene as a view into God's heavenly courtroom where He is addressing His angels and heavenly messengers. He is commanding them to go down and comfort the suffering people of Judah.
- ❖ Other scholars view this as God addressing human messengers like Isaiah's disciples.

Regardless of who God is talking to, it is clear who God is talking about: the exiled Jews in captivity in Babylon. The message is also clear: "comfort my people".

How does verse 2 say they should talk to the people of Jerusalem? _____

In Hebrew, the phrase "speak tenderly" means 'to speak to the heart'. This carries a much deeper emotional significance than just being gentle. It suggests speaking with deep compassion and care to a loved one.

God also gives three things to proclaim to the people:

- Her hard service has been completed
 - In Hebrew the word for "hard service" refers to a time of forced labor, harsh military service or severe warfare. This is telling the people that their mandatory service in Babylon is now officially completed.
- Her sin has been paid for
 - The original word for "paid for" comes from a root which carries the sense of 'to be satisfied, accepted or paid off.' It was often used in a legal or sacrificial context of a debt being settled or an offering being accepted as sufficient. The idea here is that the penalty owed for Israel's sin has reached its full, sufficient measure.
- She had received double from the Lord for all her sins.
 - This is seen as a hard part of the verse to interpret and has different views on what it means.
 - Literally double punishment - some read this as Israel having received more punishment than was strictly deserved.
 - Some see "double" as an idiom for full payment - in the Near East, once a debt was fully paid, the document was folded in half and sometimes nailed

to a post or stake. This signified that the debt had been completely covered and the matter was legally satisfied and they are now free. In this case, the completion of the 70 years of exile in Babylon are over.

- Others see “double” in the sense of ‘corresponding to’/”matching” - some Hebrew scholars note the word for ‘double’ could carry a sense of an appropriate proportional response rather than a literal mathematical doubling. The punishment fully answered, matched or corresponded to the sin.

*Most conservative and mainstream commentators lean toward the second interpretation.

Let's stop here and draw in Daniel.

Daniel 9:1-3

“In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom— ²in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. ³ So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.”

We see that Daniel had been studying scripture and realized that the 70 years of captivity in Babylon were up. The word of the Lord that Daniel is talking about reading from Jeremiah is found in Jeremiah 25:11-12 where it says, *“¹¹ This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ¹² “But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt,” declares the LORD, “and will make it desolate forever.”*

So what we just read in Daniel 9 is the real time reaction to the decree of the first 2 verses in Isaiah 40.

What is Daniel's reaction to God's word? _____

The custom of incorporating these three elements was an ancient eastern custom that was done to show humiliation and repentance.

Sackcloth - a coarse, uncomfortable fabric that was usually made from rough goat or camel hair that was historically used for grain sacks. Wearing this was a deliberate choice to throw off luxury and show a repentant heart.

Ashes - they were usually placed on the head or were sat in to signify complete emptiness and ruin. Together, sackcloth and ashes were used as an outward sign of one's inward condition.

Fasting - refraining from food was a way to deny the body to focus entirely on spiritual things and show the seriousness of one's prayers.

Rather than just sitting back and waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled, Daniel seriously seeks the Lord in prayer.

Verses 3-5 (Isaiah)

The speaker of the voice in verse 3 is anonymous. The focus remains on the message itself, not the messenger.

Isaiah announces that a voice is calling out in the wilderness to prepare the way.

Who is the way being prepared for? _____

It goes on to say, “make straight in the desert a highway”. **For who?** _____

We’ve actually seen this ‘highway’ image already in Isaiah. Let’s stop a minute and see how it has been building, because here in verse 3 it hits on something new.

- **Isaiah 11:16 - Highway for the Remnant:** A highway for the returning remnant from Assyria, which is compared to the exodus from Egypt.
- **Isaiah 19:23 - Highway from Egypt to Assyria:** This expands the geography drastically hinting the image will eventually widen beyond Israel alone. It prophesies a physical and spiritual highway connecting former bitter enemies (Egypt and Assyria) and unifying them in worship of God.
- **Isaiah 35:8 - Highway of Holiness:** This highway gets a name - “The Way of Holiness,” adding a moral dimension. This raised road cuts through the wasteland or desert. It is reserved exclusively for the redeemed, protected from dangerous beasts, and characterized by safety and joy so that even travelers who are fools will not get lost.

Now let’s bring it back to 40:3 - this is a turning point. Notice the shift in focus. In chapters 11, 19 and 35, the highways are built for people to travel to God. Here in chapter 40, the direction reverses: the highway is built ‘for our God’. This is the first time the highway is explicitly for God’s own coming, not just the people’s. This image is going to keep developing as we move forward with the rest of the book of Isaiah, and will eventually become a banner drawing the nations

Isaiah seems to be using this ‘highway’ motif to hammer home a message: Whenever God decides to rescue His people or reveal His glory, He will clear away all obstacles and build a path to safely bring them home.

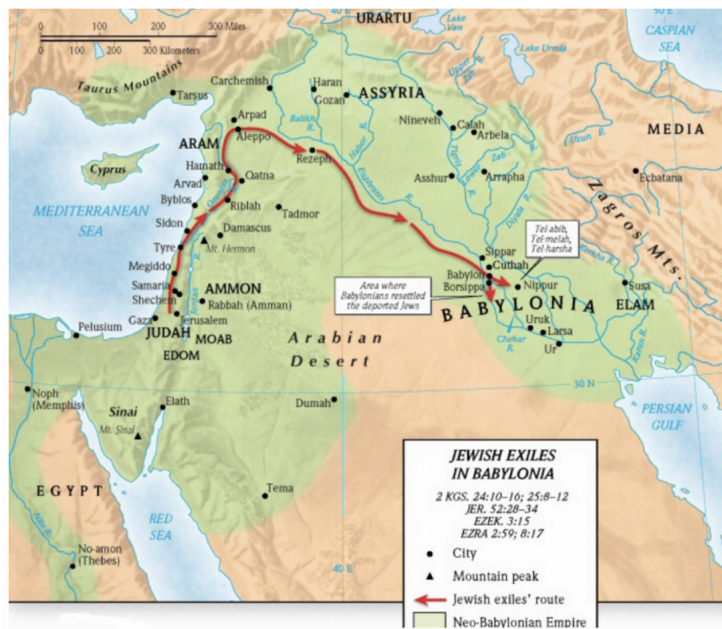
Verse 3 is the exact verse that all four Gospels quote to identify John the Baptist as the literal fulfillment of the “voice crying in the wilderness” (Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:2-3, Luke 3:4-6, John 1:23) preparing the way for Jesus. Of all the highway references in Isaiah, the Gospel writers go to this one because it’s the one where the road is being prepared for God’s own arrival.

In the Ancient Near East, it was customary for kings to send a herald ahead to command the local citizens to repair the roads. They filled in holes, leveled steep hills and straightened sharp curves so the king’s chariot could travel smoothly and safely.

The word ‘wilderness’ in Hebrew (midbar) refers to an uninhabited, uncultivated territory that was primarily used for driving flocks. It would be a rugged region with no pathways.

The word ‘desert’ in Hebrew (Arabah) refers to an arid, barren plane.

These two words describe the harsh, dry land of the Jordan Valley and the Syrian Desert that lay directly between Babylon and Jerusalem.



In verse 4, we get a picture of transformation taking place in preparation for the Lord:

- Valleys will be raised up
- Mountains will be made low
- Rough ground will become level
- Rugged places will become a plain

This is an impossible construction project. This verse mirrors Isaiah 35:8 where God promises a ‘Highway of Holiness’ through a desert that suddenly bursts into bloom and gushes with water. Together, chapters 35 and 40 show us that when God prepares a path, He completely transforms the environment. This isn’t talking about literal transformation, but rather it symbolizes how He removes every emotional and physical barrier so that His people can travel safely.

On a spiritual level it can be applied to the hearts of the people and the obstacles there. It’s not just restoring their faith and hope in the Lord, but leveling the pride, sin and rebellion that has entangled them for so long. In this case, the road being smoothed is the heart of the nation, making it ready to receive His presence again.

The question now becomes, *how do broken, exiled people actually do this? How do they prepare the way for the Lord?*

We get the answer in Daniel 9:4-14

“I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed:

“Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁵ we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. ⁶ We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.

⁷ “Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame—the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. ⁸ We and our kings, our princes and

our ancestors are covered with shame, LORD, because we have sinned against you. ⁹ The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him; ¹⁰ we have not obeyed the LORD our God or kept the laws he gave us through his servants the prophets. ¹¹ All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. ¹² You have fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing on us great disaster. Under the whole heaven nothing has ever been done like what has been done to Jerusalem. ¹³ Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come on us, yet we have not sought the favor of the LORD our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth. ¹⁴ The LORD did not hesitate to bring the disaster on us, for the LORD our God is righteous in everything he does; yet we have not obeyed him."

Notice how Daniel doesn't blame the Babylonians for the exile or make excuses for his people. Instead he gives a completely honest assessment of what the people of Israel had done, and it's not pretty. He shows us what preparing the way looks like. Confession is the primary tool used to clear away the sin, pride and rebellion of the people so God can return to them.

Daniel isn't just praying about a hope for someday — he's praying right as it's happening. He's read Jeremiah, done the math, and realized the seventy years are up. So his prayer is a real-time human response to the very moment Isaiah's promised restoration was breaking into history — a picture of someone taking seriously that God's word was actually coming true around him, and responding with urgent repentance rather than passive assumption.

Back to Isaiah:

The climax of these three verses comes in verse 5.

What is the ultimate result of leveling the ground? _____

All humanity will witness it together. All of this will come about because *"the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

A clear, unhindered heart is essential because it is the thing through which God's presence is reflected and experienced. If our heart is cluttered or filled with things like pride and rebellion, then the reflection of God in our lives becomes distorted or blocked entirely. One heart can obscure God's glory while another reveals it.

These verses in Isaiah provide the prophecy of preparation, Daniel gives us a pattern of repentance. His prayer comes right at the historical moment the exile was ending, modeling the kind of humble confession that fits a people about to be restored. John the Baptist gives us the direct, practical fulfillment – the very 'voice' Isaiah promised, calling the nation to that same repentance as Jesus, the one in whom God's glory is finally revealed arrives. (John 1:14)

Verses 6-8

We get two distinct voices speaking in verse 6.

What does the first voice say? _____

What response does the second voice give? _____

The text itself gives no explicit identification to who these two voices are.

There are two main views:

- ❖ First voice
 - A heavenly herald
 - Voice of God
- ❖ Second voice
 - The prophet Isaiah
 - Angelic messenger/herald

What does the first voice say that all people are like? _____

What is their faithfulness like? _____

Verse 7 tells us that the grass withers and the flowers fade because the breath of the Lord blows on them. The verse ends with 'surely the people are grass'.

We get a huge contrast between verses 7 and 8. Verse 7 says that grass withers and flowers fade.

What does verse 8 say about the Word of the Lord? _____

Humanity is frail, unfaithful and temporary like grass, but God's Word is everlasting. His promises will never fail.

Daniel showed in his prayer just how much the people of Israel had failed. He exposes their utter moral failure, shame and frailty. He also shows where all his hope lies: in the Lord who keeps His covenant and is steadfast in His love for His people. Daniel is holding strong to the unshakeable character and word of the Lord.

How does the unchanging nature of God's Word provide a deeper, more lasting comfort than the temporary comforts we often rely on?

Verses 9-11

These verses shift from the preparation described in verses 3-5 to the actual proclamation of God's arrival. We see that God's deliverance of His people is not just a blessing for them, but it was to be used as a blessing to the entire world.

In verse 9 we see a joyful command to boldly and publicly proclaim the "good news" that God will return and deliver His people from exile.

What are they to say according to the end of verse 9? _____

This is the ultimate good news.

Verse 10 explains the good news by saying how the Lord will come:

- Comes with power - God is not passive; He is strong enough to shatter any opposition that comes against His plans for His people.
- Rules with a mighty arm - represents strength and divine authority.
- His reward is with him - reward in Hebrew (sakar) here in this context refers to the spoils or booty won in battle.

- His recompense accompanies Him - recompense in Hebrew (peullah) refers to work or labor itself or the rightful compensation given for hard work.

Scholars say that the original audience would have heard a dual promise embedded in these words “reward and recompense”. The arrival of God’s “reward” meant freedom and the end of their suffering. God’s “recompense” meant that justice was coming. Babylon would be held accountable for its cruelty.

Verse 11 shows a contrasting side to God’s strength and might from verse 9.

What image is given of God in verse 11? _____

- Tends His flock
- Gathers the lambs in His arms
- Carries them close to His heart
- Gently leads those who have young

The people of Israel needed to see both sides of their God. They needed Him to be strong and mighty, but also gentle and loving.

Verse 10

The Sovereign Warrior
He is strong enough to break their chains

He conquers their brutal oppressors

He rules with a commanding shout

Verse 11

The Gentle Shepherd
He is kind enough to care for
their wounds
He protects the weak and
vulnerable
He carries the weary close
to His heart

How does seeing both His strength and His tenderness together shape your understanding of how God comforts His people?

Verses 9-11 paint this wonderful picture of God as a tender shepherd, gathering His broken lambs and bringing them home. But how do people who have been trapped in exile in Babylon for 70 years actually experience this embrace? How do they move forward to the reality of restoration? Daniel 9:15-19 shows us what it looks like to move from promise to lived hope. Daniel gives us a model of one way a person actually processes and responds to a promise like Isaiah 40:9-11, rather than passively waiting for it. He takes God’s promises to heart and pleads with the Lord to step in and act.

Daniel 9:15-19

¹⁵ “Now, Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong. ¹⁶ Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us. ¹⁷ “Now, our God, hear

the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. ¹⁸ Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. ¹⁹ Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name."

Verse 18 here in Daniel is so powerful – *"We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy."* Daniel anchors his request in something that never changes: God's mercy.

The word Daniel uses for mercy (rachamim) comes from the root word racham which is closely related to the word for womb (rechem). The meaning is deep compassion, tender mercy, or womb-like protection and unconditional care.

An interesting thing here is that Daniel could have appealed to Israel's history, their covenant status and more. Instead, right after he's laid out just how deeply they have failed, he grounds his entire request in God's mercy – His gut-level, parental compassion.

How does this thought that *"we do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy"* perfectly flatten human pride?"

"Look at how you typically pray. Are your requests usually based on your needs and behavior, or on who God is?"

There is an exercise I want you to try sometime this week.

"Daniel 9:18 says, 'We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.'"

Step 1: The Spiritual Resume (2 Minutes)

We all have a secret "spiritual checklist" that we think makes us acceptable to God, or a list of failures that makes us feel disqualified.

- **Write down or think about 2 or 3 things** you did this past week that made you feel like a "good Christian" (e.g., *I read my Bible, I was patient with my coworker, I avoided a temptation*).
- **Now, write down 1 or 2 things** that made you feel like a failure (e.g., *I lost my temper, I ignored someone in need, I didn't pray*).
- **The Reflection:** Honestly ask yourself: *Did I subconsciously believe God would hear my prayers more today because of the good list? Did I feel like I had to hide from Him because of the bad list?*

Step 2: The Mental Delete (1.5 Minutes)

Look at those lists. Daniel tells us that when we approach God, our "righteous deeds" are not the currency we use to buy His attention. Neither list changes how God feels about you.

- **The Action:** Physically cross out, delete, or mentally erase both lists.
- **The Reflection:** Let go of the pressure to be perfect to get God's attention. Let go of the shame that tells you you're too dirty to talk to Him. Recognize that the door to God's presence is opened by *Him*, not by your performance.

Step 3: Flipping the Request (1.5 Minutes)

Think of the most heavy, urgent prayer request on your heart right now (health, a broken relationship, finances, a big decision).

- **The Shift:** Instead of begging God to answer because you *really need it* or because you are *trying your best*, anchor it purely to His character.
- **The Prayer:** Whisper this short prayer in your heart:
"Lord, I am bringing this situation to you today. I'm not asking you to move because I deserve it, because I don't. I am asking you to move simply because You are faithful, You are kind, and Your mercies are great. I stake this prayer on Who You are, not what I've done."

Step 4: Resting in the Shepherd (1 Minute)

End the silence by connecting this back to Isaiah 40:11. Because God acts based on *His* mercy and not *your* strength, you don't have to perform. You just have to let Him carry you.

- **The Meditation:** Take a deep breath. Spend the last 60 seconds completely still, resting in the safety of a God whose mercy is bigger than your best days and your worst mistakes.