

# Sermon Outline

## God's faithfulness in times of suffering – Isaiah 40:1-11

*This sermon outline can be used at a Suffering Church service or meeting. It can be read out as it stands (you may want to omit the Bible references in brackets). You could add some illustrations of your own or take some from the information on pages 10-18. You might also find helpful material in the small group Bible study on page 22 or the eight-day Devotional Booklet. Alternatively, the outline can be used as a framework for your own ideas and applications. A PowerPoint to accompany the sermon can be downloaded from [barnabasfund.org/scaaw](http://barnabasfund.org/scaaw)*

### Introduction

The land is desolate and laid waste, Jerusalem and the temple destroyed. The people of God are in exile in Babylon, afflicted and oppressed.

This is the situation addressed by Isaiah's prophecy, which gives a message of hope and consolation for a crisis

that was still many years in the future when he brought this message from God. What was in the future for Isaiah is in the past for us, but the deep riches of these words, with their many layers of meaning, are given to us in Scripture for our hope and consolation too.

### 1. The angelic message of comfort and forgiveness (v.1-2)

The scene at the beginning of chapter 40 is set in heaven, in the court of the King of kings, who is speaking to His angelic messengers, sending them out with a message of comfort, deliverance, hope and love to His beleaguered people.

We live not only in a physical world but also in a spiritual world. It is in heaven that decisions are made about what happens on earth. Nothing is left to "chance" and God's purposes will ultimately be fulfilled. Our lives are not at the mercy of haphazard random events, for God is in control.

In verse 1 of our passage, God is instructing His angels<sup>1</sup> to bring a message of comfort to His people. In verse 2, God tells His angels to pass on the message tenderly. It is the Hebrew word for wooing and literally means speaking "to the heart".

The message is for people who are suffering, people who have endured a period of "hard service". The Hebrew word is *saba*, which describes a time of discipline, hardship and pain – but of limited duration. The message the angels bring is that the *saba* has reached its end. From our perspective, on the other side of the cross, we can hear the message as a promise that the time of striving legalistically for an unbroken relationship with God

has come to an end, because Christ has died to take away our sins.

But for the first hearers of Isaiah, the *saba* was their exile in Babylon, a punishment for their sinfulness. Now they are forgiven. "Her sin has been paid for" (v.2 NIV) is translated in some Bible versions as "her iniquity is pardoned". This is not the pardon available to us because of the atonement of the Lord Jesus. It is impossible for us to atone for our sins, let alone doubly atone for them; only our Redeemer can do that. But God in His graciousness speaks to His people as if they had somehow earned what in reality He is giving as a free and undeserved gift. This forgiveness and restoration is the core of the message of comfort.

Genesis chapter 3 tells us that Adam and Eve's sinful rebellion against God was what brought pain and suffering into the world. Not all suffering is a *direct* result of sin. Many suffer, whether it be cancer, Covid or cyclones, simply because of the natural order of things in our fallen world. But at the beginning of Isaiah 40, the sufferings of the people of God were directly due to their rebellion against Him, displayed in their corruption and idolatry.

Sin is serious. It is rebellion. It is grievous in the eyes of the Lord.

### 2. Preparing for the coming deliverance (v.3-5)

With the message of comfort and forgiveness comes a message of hope. Something marvellous is about to happen: the LORD will lead His people out of Babylon and back to their own land. A fitting highway must be prepared and all obstacles removed, just as was done in the ancient Middle East before a conquering monarch.

This was also a prophecy about John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ (Matthew 3:3). John's method of preparing a straight, level, smooth road was to call the nation to ready themselves spiritually, for their God was about to come and redeem them.

The desert or wilderness is a place of suffering, where the Divine may seem absent. Yet Moses encountered the LORD in the burning bush at "the far side of the wilderness"

(Exodus 3:1-2). Elijah, exhausted and afraid, went into the wilderness and prayed to die, but there the LORD sent an angel to bring him food that gave supernatural strength (1 Kings 19:3-8). The wilderness was the scene for Jesus' temptations, after which angels came and cared for Him.

So the desert is a place where God is encountered. It is a place of purification and therefore of hope. When God delivered His people from Egypt and led them in the desert, they were sorely tried and their sinfulness was exposed. But from this experience came a renewed people, faithful to their God.

We should never be afraid of a wilderness experience. It is a *saba* to be embraced. For there the disciplining hand of God works in our lives.

And what is the purpose? Verse 5 tells us it is to reveal the glory of the LORD, to display His mighty work as a covenant-keeping God who delivers His people from bondage and brings them back to their own land. This would demonstrate Yahweh's faithfulness and redound to His glory and praise.

The glory of the LORD is His goodness, as shown in His mercy and compassion. The coming of the

Messiah would show the glory of the LORD to an even greater degree.

God's glory is also described as dazzling radiance. Ezekiel, for example, wrote of glowing metal, fire, brilliant light and rainbows as he struggled to describe what he called "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (Ezekiel 1:26-28).

### 3. Confidence in the unchanging Word of God (v.6-8)

Humankind is as frail and short-lived as grass (v.6-7). The feebleness of humankind makes it all the more wonderful that the Word became flesh in the incarnation (John 1:14).

But if humans are like grass, what do the flowers represent? Many Bible translations say our "glory" or "beauty". But these words are way off the mark. The word in Hebrew is *hesed*, meaning a steadfast and unswerving love like that shown by our covenant-keeping God. Our own *hesed*, however, is as fragile as a wildflower. Our faithfulness cannot be relied on, our loyalty wavers, we break our promises, our kindness is sporadic.

Human technology may fool us into thinking that we are strong, powerful and eternal, until we realise that a tiny microbe can destroy our world. Then we grasp

that humankind is fundamentally weak and vulnerable. But this need not trouble us, for our God truly is strong, powerful and eternal. And He is faithful. Unlike our frail *hesed*, His *hesed* is completely dependable.

The steadfast love (*hesed*) of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23 NRSV)

We can trust confidently in His unfailing Word, which stands for ever (v.8). Because of God's faithfulness, His promise of deliverance to His people in Babylon was dependable and so is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:25).

### 4. Enfolded in the eternal arms of God (v.9-11)

There are several interpretations of verse 9, all of them uplifting. According to one interpretation, good news is being proclaimed *by* Jerusalem (also called Zion) to the other cities of Judah. In another interpretation the good news is proclaimed *to* Jerusalem. Either way the desolate, long-forsaken cities are told that happier times are about to return as Yahweh is coming back, bringing the exiles with Him.

The phrase "do not be afraid" often announces the appearance of God, as here in verse 9. At the birth of Jesus, the angels used the same words to Mary and to the shepherds (Luke 1:30; 2:10). They appear often in Isaiah.

Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come..." (Isaiah 35:3-4)

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

A third interpretation says that the LORD's messenger must bring the good news to His people, who are addressed as Zion and Jerusalem, the good news that "Here is your God!" (v.9)

Then we read two descriptions of that God, showing His power and His gentleness. "His arm rules for Him" (v.10) means that Yahweh has no need of any outside help to accomplish His purposes, whether it is rescuing the exiles in Babylon or defeating Satan at the cross.

But we also read that He is like a shepherd, strong to protect the flock but sensitive to their needs, carrying the lambs in His arms. The strong arms of deliverance are also the gentle arms that bear up the youngest and weakest. They are the everlasting arms of our eternal God (Deuteronomy 33:27). They are the arms of Jesus.

For a Christian cannot read of the LORD who tends His flock like a shepherd without thinking of the Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:14-16; 27-28). Here, indeed, is our God!

Let us conclude by looking at what is perhaps the most astonishing, thrilling and humbling part of the whole passage.

See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. (Isaiah 40:10)

Verse 10 tells us that the Sovereign LORD is going to be rewarded for the years of misery that He endured while His wayward people rebelled and suffered their punishment. To see His people's joy as they return to their land will be His reward.

Dare we also say that He missed them while they had wandered away from Him? Like Rachel weeping for her children, He wept for us (Jeremiah 31:15-20). Like the father of the prodigal son, in the parable Jesus told, He considers our returning home a cause for tremendous celebration (Luke 15:11-24).

This is how much our faithful God loves us. Let this thought comfort us whatever suffering we may be enduring. And let us resolve to bring Him joy and glory by walking closely with our Shepherd.

<sup>1</sup> Some interpretations see this as an instruction to prophets or other human leaders.