

## **Allan MacRae, Isaiah 40-56, Lecture 6**

This is lecture 6 delivered by Dr. Allan MacRae at Biblical Theological Seminary on Isaiah 40-56:

At first in this section of Isaiah 40-56, there is very little about sin and there is very little about rebuke. But there great emphasis is on comfort in general, on deliverance specifically, and then there is tremendous emphasis on God's power. When people are in great misery, that one thing they need is to realize God's supremacy, God's power, God's ability to bring his will to pass. Whatever happens in our lives, if we belong to him, he has a purpose for us. God's great power is the theme that we need to stress and to make people aware of, particularly when you are trying to bring comfort. So that theme of comfort of God's power is greatly stressed in these first few chapters, more than in any other section of the Bible with the exception of certain parts of the book of Job.

But here, when the Israelites in Babylon were oppressed and humiliated, it is important to give them some evidence that all this talk about God's power isn't just talk: that actually there is some true evidence of God's power. So the evidence that he gives here is evidence from prophecy, evidence from prediction. He is giving the assurance that God knows all things and that 150 years before the deliverance from exile, God not only predicted they would be delivered from exile, but told them exactly how it would happen--what he would do in order to bring about their deliverance.

So these are the great themes of the first part of the section of Isaiah that we are looking at this semester. Another theme that is touched on a great deal is the theme of the folly of idolatry. The other themes, of course, have tremendous relevance to us today. The folly of idolatry does not have direct relevance to us today because we have very little that we do that come into immediate contact with idolatry. Though we have much that is the same, in principle, as idolatry, making images of wood and stone is not in the experience for most of us. But there is much in chapter 40 and in subsequent chapters on this matter concerning the folly of idolatry.

Then we had this great introduction, this prologue, to the succession of presentations in our sections in chapter 40 where the themes that are vital for deliverance from exile are stressed as themes rather than presented as specific, predicted events. They are stressed as themes giving the general emotions that are vital for the whole section in chapter 40. In chapter 41 we begin the direct dealing with the situation.

So in chapter 41 we begin dealing with the situation and immediately we come in contact with the method that God is going to use to deliver the people from exile. He refers to the rest of the nations in terror because of the coming of a great conqueror. We read in chapter 41:2, “Who has stirred up one from the east calling him in righteousness to his service. He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow. He pursues them and moves on unscathed by a path his feet have not traveled before. Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord--with the first of them and with the last--I am He.”

You could apply that to any conqueror in the world’s history. God has permitted all great conquests that have occurred. God controls all things with his sovereign will. But this here describes a great coming conqueror whom he has raised up for a specific purpose. So this theme of the coming of Cyrus, as the means that God is going to use to deliver the people, this theme is one to which he returns again and again in these chapters. I wish you would have in mind the different passages in which he speaks directly about Cyrus.

Now, in this particular section, if this is all we had, you might not know that it is Cyrus with whom Isaiah is dealing. You might ask “Who is that?” You will find a number of different commentaries that say this is describing Abraham. But Abraham did not pursue for a great distance. He did capture the rear guard of a tremendous army that was heading back across the desert to Babylonia and was carrying some of Abraham’s relatives as prisoners. He attacked the rear guard with a sudden, unexpected attack, and he, with his 300 soldiers, were able to throw the rear guard of this army in confusion and to rescue the people and the booty from Sodom and Gomorrah. You might say, if you

had only this, yes, God enabled Abraham to do this; this is speaking of Abraham. But as we go on through the chapters, we see very specific evidence later on that it is Cyrus of whom he is talking. So, we are justified in taking what we learn in later chapters and seeing that is what is spoken of here and for a number of chapters we keep recurring to this theme of Cyrus, the great conqueror, whom God has raised up with the specific purpose of using him to deliver Israel.

Then right after mentioning Cyrus Isaiah brings in a new theme not yet touched upon. Chapter 41, verse 8, “But you Israel are my servant, Jacob whom I’ve chosen; you descendants of Abraham, my friend. I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners; I called you; I said, ‘You’re my servant. I have chosen you and not rejected you, 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 hand.’”

This is a tremendous statement of why God called Israel to be his servant; that is, to say Israel has been set apart to receive God’s blessing. I believe God gave Israel great blessings time after time in its history, and still continues to.

I lived in Germany for 2 years. I came to love the German people; I had tremendous regard for them. I was dismayed when Hitler got control over that nation because I had every reason to feel Hitler was a monster rather than a true deliverer. In the situation in which they were, they were ready to recognize almost anyone who promised deliverance in their situation. But when I heard how they attacked the Jewish synagogues, and how they were persecuting the Jews, I felt terrible misery for my good friends in that nation because I knew God’s promises to Israel continue. God said, “I will bless those that bless you, and I will curse those that curse you.” I knew then already that there was terrible misery for the German nation ahead. Of course, after Hitler’s great conquest had run its course, then when he had disappeared and most of the Nazis themselves were in prison, the German nation suffered 3 years of terrible hunger, cold, and misery, and many died. I could foresee it several years ahead when I saw their acting toward Israel.

God has a blessing for his ancient people of Israel. There has not been a generation

from the time of Christ when there have not been Israelites and Israelites who have become leaders in the Christian Church and in the presentation of Christian teaching. But the nation as a whole continues to this day and will continue until that time when God has promised when those who remain of the nation have converted to Christ. That is a wonderful promise for them.

But here we have this assurance from Israel, then, that God has a purpose for Israel. Of course, the primary purpose he had for Israel was to keep alive the knowledge of the true God and to prepare the way for the coming of his son who would give his life as a ransom for many. So Israel is God's servant, and Israel may not fear the coming of Cyrus because God is bringing Cyrus in order to accomplish God's purposes through him. Please know this carefully, in the succeeding chapters the reference to Cyrus, because it is very important for the understanding of the section. In verse four the emphasis is that Cyrus comes because God called him. Verse two, "Who has stirred up one from," gives the implication that it is God who had. Verse four, "Who has done and carried it through calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, with the first of them and the last; I am he". Further emphasis is on the power of God, and also on the prediction of God that he is predicting that Cyrus is coming 150 years in advance.

So we have in chapter 41 the great arraignment of the idols, the declaration of the coming of Cyrus the great conqueror of whom all the nations fear, of whom Israel is not to fear because he will come as a deliverer for them, but we have the assurance that God's purpose is going to be fulfilled, and the beginning of this theme: Israel is God's servant.

In chapter 42, in the first 7 verses, we have the picture, not of Israel as it is, but of the work of the servant; what the servant is to accomplish. You might say this is the pattern of God's purpose towards the servant, but it is also the assurance of what God will accomplish through the servant. That is the first part of chapter 42. God is his path and the assurance of the task. God is going to accomplish what he predicts, and the work of the servant will not be completed until, as verse 4 says, "He establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope." This is the rule of the one who

represents Israel; the one who is called from Israel and comes from Israel; the one who honors Israel and bears the work of the servant; this one whose work will continue until "he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope." The whole world is to be covered with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the seas because of the work of the servant. It is to bring this servant into the world that God has called Israel. So this is the great theme of the first part of chapter 42.

But yet we read in 42:18, "Hear you deaf; look, you blind and see. Who is blind but my servant and deaf like the messenger I send?" What a strange thing to say after saying, "He will not shout in a crowd or raise his voice in the streets." He will not falter or be discouraged until he establishes justice in the earth." And yet now, "Who is blind but my servant and deaf like the messenger I send?" He is now looking at Israel as it is in Isaiah's day. He is seeing the tremendous difficulty of Israel performing the work of the servant, work Israel must perform. Israel has been called into existence for this purpose, and yet look at the situation of Israel. How can Israel ever fulfill this purpose? "Who is deaf and blind like my servant," God says.

Then in verse 21, "It pleased the Lord for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious, but this is a people plundered and looted, all of them trapped in pits or put in prison. They have been plundered with no one to rescue them; they've been made loot so no one can send them back." Israel is in exile. How could Israel ever fulfill the work of the servant? But when this is happening, he turns this way in sympathy and pity to look at Israel in the condition they are in, in exile and in suffering. Most of this section is one of comfort, but now having looked at them in their condition, how can they ever fulfill the work of the servant when they are in exile and they are in suffering?

God says in verse 24, "Who handed Jacob over to become loot and Israel to the plunderer? Was it not the Lord against whom we have sinned?" That's the answer to the question of "who handed Jacob over?" The prophet answered, "Was it not the Lord against whom we have sinned? 'For they would not follow his ways,' the Lord says. They did not obey his law. He poured out on them his burning anger, the violence of war. Enveloped in flames they did not understand it; it consumed them, but they did not

take it to heart." This section from verse 18 to the end of chapter 42 is a great section of rebuke. Tremendous rebuke against the people. You're in exile; you're in suffering; you're in misery, but you brought it on yourself by your turning away from God.

Now we look at the condition of our nation today. We look at violence in the streets. We look at the robberies and the murders. I was just reading yesterday of a man who went to New York in 1954 to live. And he said at that time there was an average of one murder a day in New York. Twenty years later he said there was an average of four murders a day in New York. Charles Dickens hated the United States because unscrupulous American printers were printing and distributing his works without paying him any royalty. So when he made two trips to this country he went back to England and wrote very unflattering descriptions of America. But despite Dickens' feelings against America in general, he states that he found that in America, at that time about 100 years ago, he found that the condition was such that he said a woman could walk at anytime of day or night, at any place in the United States of America--as it was then--in perfect safety because no one would lift a hand to touch her or to injure her. How different from our situation today. We bemoan our situation and we think how terrible the situation has gone, but how much of it is our own fault for allowing humanists and unbelievers to gain control of our school systems, from grammar school into college, to brainwash children with unbelief and attitudes quite different from the moral standard that characterized our nation in its early day.

So the Lord says, "Who handed Jacob over to become loot? Was it not the Lord against whom we have sinned? So he poured out on them his burning anger." If our nation goes along the way it seems to be going with only about 40% of the people even taking any interest in who is going to be our next president, or whether our nation is going to turn away from its present ungodly course, if it continues this way we should not be surprised at what may happen.

But you notice how the chapter ends with this great section of rebuke and yet is immediately followed by the very opposite, and that is characteristic of this section of Isaiah. God is bringing comfort. That is his first purpose in this section: is to bring

comfort to people who are in such sorrow that in it is hard for them to look at things rationally and calmly. He is bringing them great assurances of comfort, but then just sliding in a few words, sometimes very strong words, of rebuke, but not for long on any one occasion in this section. So the chapter division happens to be put right here, and it is an important minor break in the thought.

Just after saying how it was God who did it, Isaiah says in chapter 43, “But now this is what the Lord says, he who created you O Jacob, he who formed you O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.’”

What a sharp change from rebuke to blessing here between chapters 42 and 43. This is a sudden sharp change because the principle theme here is rebuke. There will be Bibles which will say at the end of chapter 42, “stern rebuke against Israel,” and at the beginning of 43 they will say, “God’s blessing for the Christians.” They will give all the blessings to the Christians and all the curses to Israel; and that, of course, is not the fair way to deal with the Scripture. In this whole section, God is talking about Israel his servant, but God is also speaking to us who are the followers of his great servant Jesus Christ. So we need to think very deeply to how great an extent do we need the rebuke that is contained in the chapter, and we also have a right to take to ourselves the blessings that it gives and the assurance that if we have been saved through Christ, we are the followers of this servant, and we are entitled to, and will receive his blessings, in spite of our failures and of our sin. So he gives this wonderful assurance to them, and when you come to verse 3 there, “For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior,” he says, “I gave Egypt for your ransom, Kush and Seba in your stead. Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life.”

What does he mean by that? What do Egypt and Kush and Seba have to do with this anyway? Scholars have pondered over this question, and I believe that most of them would say, in fact, the only interpretation of it I have ever heard is that Cyrus and his son Cambyses, after they conquered Babylon and released the Israelites and gave them permission to go back to their homeland, they proceeded to go down into Egypt and into Kush and Seba, the regions south of Egypt and west of Egypt, and to conquer those also. God is going to carry on his blessing to Cyrus not simply up to the point where he has accomplished God's will and lets the Israelites go, but that he will even conquer Egypt and the Sudan south of Egypt. Now that is not very clear in the passage, but I have never heard another suggestion given for the meaning of this, and it fits with the history of the time. So we should have in mind when we think of the passages that are dealing with Cyrus; he is probably the one spoken of here and I know of no other interpretation for it than that it is speaking of God's continuing blessing on Cyrus, the great conqueror, whom God is going to use in order to deliver his people.

Then you go on with a promise which you wonder about because it is so strong, whether it is talking simply about the return from exile or whether God is looking far on beyond that to still further in the future deliverance of the Israelites. He says in chapter 43, verse 5: "Do not be afraid for I am with you, I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west." It is rather questionable whether there were exiles in the west in that time; they had been carried off to the east. "But I will gather you from the west; I will say to the north, 'Give them up,' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back. Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who has called my name whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.'"

It would seem that the prophet's vision here goes beyond the deliverance from the Babylonian exile, and looks to God's mercy to the Israelites in a time far beyond that, and we can well question whether this has yet been fulfilled as fully as would seem to be required by the statement here.

But then in chapter 43, verse 8, he again returns to the theme of rebuke – "Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf." Is he here talking



about his servant, about the Israelites, or is he here talking about the nations who worship idols. It would seem likely that the latter is what is involved, though you would not know that simply from this part, from this verse alone.

But he says in verse 9, “All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. Which of them foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things?” Here are the Israelites in Babylon, the great processions go past them with the Babylonian gods held up and the statues held up in the air and the people bowing before them, and the Israelites seem like a strange minority that does not recognize the power of the Babylonian gods who have conquered most of the then known world. But God says, “Which of them foretold this? Who proclaims to us the former things? Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right so that others may hear and say it is true.”

The theme of prediction: God says, “I have predicted the future and it has come to pass, and there are many predictions of future events that happened hundreds of years after the predictions had been given”. There are not a tremendous number of them; God did not choose to give us a great many of them but He gave a very considerable number. There are cases where predictive prophecy seems to fit with future events. But it is hard to be dogmatic, and I think some go to an extreme in being dogmatic on questionable cases, but there are a number of statements in the Bible of physical events that happened in ways that no human being could possibly have seen hundreds of years after the predictions were given. And God is saying, “Who has been able truly to predict the future? I have done it,” and we find that in the Scriptures.

Frederick the Great, the King of Prussia, had it all. Prussia was a strong a nation of people who were strong followers of the teachings of Martin Luther. It got a king who was a great conqueror and a very able man, but a thorough going skeptic, a great friend of Voltaire. But in the court, they had all the forms of piety and Frederick the Great turned to his court chaplain and he said, “Give me in one word some evidence that Christianity’s true,” and the chaplain said, “The Jews,” and in one word there he called attention to the fact that Egypt and Assyria and all the great nations of antiquity had disappeared over the

course of the centuries, but that the Jews, though hated, despised, and scattered through the nations, still maintained their existence as God had predicted that they would.

So there's this great theme of prophesy, and in chapter 43, verses 10 and following, he says, "'You're my witnesses,' declares the Lord, 'and my servant, whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.'" Again there is a great emphasis on God's power: "'Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me... You are my witnesses,' declares the Lord, 'that I am God, yes from the ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act who can reverse it?'" Then in the verse 14 he speaks very specifically of bringing back the fugitives from Babylon. He is going to deliver these, who are captives to Babylon. But when Isaiah wrote, Babylon was subject to Assyria, and no one with natural knowledge would ever then have dreamed that Babylon would be the conqueror; they would think it was Assyria.

I wonder how many references to Assyria you found in these chapters that I assigned you for this week. Assyria you'll find mentioned over and over in the early part of Isaiah, but here it is Babylon that is mentioned, because Isaiah is looking forward to the Babylon captivity, and so Babylon is mentioned over and over.

Then in chapter 43, verse 16, he points back to God's power as shown in ancient times. "This is what the Lord says, he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the armies and reinforcements together, and they lay there never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick." What is he talking about in these two verses? I think most people by this time see that he is here speaking about opening the way through the Red Sea during the exodus from Egypt. He says, "I am the one who opened the way through the Red Sea and made it possible for the people to go through on dry land." And when the Egyptians endeavored to follow them, the waters came back and overwhelmed them and they lay there never to rise again. So God is referring to what he has done for the people in ancient times and giving assurance that if God could do that, then he can open a way from Babylon to bring them back across the desert to Israel. By implication, though Isaiah is not getting into it

much in the same way, God can open a way through the morass of sin and can lead us out into redemption.

So he says in verse eighteen, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I'm doing a new thing. Now it springs up; I'm making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland." He's going to open up the way for the people to come back across the desert to their homeland, and he's going to open up a way for all who put their trust in Christ to find their way through the desert of this life and to give them streams and provisions as they go along.

In chapter 43, verse 21 we read, "The people I have formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise." But look at the contrast in verse 22: "Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob. You have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel. You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor have you honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. You have not brought any fragrant calamus for me or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices." Here God is complaining that the God who has done so much for them in the past, they are neglecting him; they are not thinking of what they can do for him, but only of what he can do for them.

So he says, "But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and remembers your sins no more." God says, despite the fact that all men have turned away from him, that all we have sinned and gone astray, that he is going to open a way of deliverance for us and of removing our transgressions and remembering our sins no more. "Review the past for me. Let us argue the matter together. State the case for your innocence." Now, what a strong rebuke after the poignant statements they just received; a strong rebuke. Then in verse 27 he says, "Your first father sinned; your spokesman rebelled against me. So I will disgrace the dignitaries of your temple, and I will consign Jacob to destruction and Israel for scorn." There are sharp, sudden changes in this section, from wonderful blessing to rebuke for sin.

There is rhetorical language there. “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I’m doing a new thing.” He’s not saying the past doesn’t matter. He just is saying how wonderful were the things God has done for them in the past. But he says in comparison to that, what he is going to do in the future is so tremendous that those past deeds will seem like nothing. It’s like the statement where Jesus said that the man that does not hate his mother and his father is not worthy of him. He doesn’t want us to hate our parents; he wants us to love our parents and to care for them. But in comparison with the love we should have for him, it is like hate. So here he says, “Remember what God has done in the past,” but he says, “forget the past; I am going to do even greater things in the future.” It’s a rhetorical statement, and that’s important in understanding the Bible or any other literature. We can’t grab a rhetorical statement out by itself and take it alone. We have to interpret matters in context.

We were looking at the end of verse 28 where we find a strong rebuke. Given God’s strong rebuke for sin, you would almost think the phrase, “I will consign Jacob for instruction and Israel for scorn,” that means Israel is through; but we know Israel wasn’t through. God certainly continued his blessing in bringing Judah back from exile and preparing the way for the coming of Christ. What it means is that those who sin have destruction to look forward to. But immediately after this rebuke at the end of chapter 43, we have the blessing again in chapter 44, “But now listen, O Jacob, my servant; Israel whom I have chosen. This is what the Lord says, he who made you, who formed you in the womb and who will help you. ‘Do not be afraid, O Jacob my servant, whom I have chosen.’” He goes on with tremendous blessing for Israel, which goes way into the future and eventually includes not only Israel according to the flesh, but also Israel that includes all who will believe on “The Great Israelite.”

These words would refer to all the people, no matter how great they were, for they all sinned. Even from the very beginning you have sinned, as all mankind has. God rebukes our sin, and we shouldn’t think lightly of our sin. Our sin is laid on Christ; the guilt is entirely laid on him, so we should not be beat down with guilt; rather we always should be grateful of what he has done for us.

So in chapter 44 there is a blessing to the people, and there is condemnation of idol worship; but I want to call your attention very specifically to the last part of chapter 44, verse 24: "This is what the Lord says, your redeemer who formed you from the womb." Now, we have a long sentence that runs through many verses where the Lord tells what he has done. The Lord has made all things; the Lord alone stretched out the heavens, and the Lord spread out the earth by himself. This is the foundation: the creative power of God. Then the Lord is seen as the one who can predict the future; who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners; who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense. But the true God carries out what he has predicted carries out the words of his servants, and fulfills the predictions of his messengers. Here he is speaking very definitely of one particular prediction. In chapter 44, verse 26: "Who says of Jerusalem, 'It will be inhabited,' of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be built,' and of their ruins, 'I will restore them.' Who says to the watery deep, 'be dry,' and I will dry up their streams." That's a figurative statement referring to the Mesopotamia, the land between the two rivers. "I will dry up their streams"; it's not physical, it's literal. It is a reference to the great empires of the time.

He continues in 44:28, "Who says of Cyrus." Here we have the word "Cyrus" used 150 years before he ever lived. "He is my shepherd, and will accomplish all I please; he will say of Jerusalem 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of its temple, 'Let it's foundations be laid'." Who rebuilt Jerusalem? Cyrus! He doesn't actually rebuild it, but he gave the edict, which made it possible for Jerusalem be rebuilt.

Isaiah continues right on into chapter 45, verse 1: "This is what the Lord says to his Messiah." "Messiah" is the word "anointed," is the same as the word "anointed." We read, "To his anointed [Messiah], to Cyrus." Twice he uses the word "messiah" referring to Cyrus, "whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor." He goes on and tells of his blessings to Cyrus.

Chapter 45, verse 4: "For the sake of Jacob my servant, and of Israel my chosen, I call you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me. I am the Lord, and there is no other." And so you notice another reference to Cyrus, and

there's still another in this same chapter 45 over in verse 13 where it says, "I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness; I will make his way straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for price or reward," says the Lord Almighty." In verse 14 he refers back to Egypt: "This is what the Lord says, 'The products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush and those tall Sabeans - they will come over to you and will be yours.'" That reinforces our interpretation of the previous point that Cyrus is God's anointed.

We will pick up here next time.

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