

Title: Isaiah Session 20: Comfort, Creation, and the Sovereign "I Am" (Isaiah Chapters 40 and 41)

Author: Dr. John Oswalt

Session: Session 20

Source: Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Comfort, Grace, Servanthood, Babylon, Cyrus, Wait, Idol, Maker, Anihu, I Am

Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt covers Isaiah chapters 40 and 41, introducing the division on "Grace, Motive, and Means for Servanthood" (chapters 40–55) set in the future context of the Babylonian exile. Dr. Oswalt clarifies that the command to "comfort" is better translated as "encourage" or "fortify," representing the Holy Spirit's work in steeling believers' backbones. The session explores the contrast between the fleeting nature of human empires (depicted as grass) and the eternal word of the Creator, who holds the cosmos in His hand and names the stars. Finally, the lecture introduces Cyrus of Persia as God's historical instrument of deliverance and outlines the initial reasons why Israel, as God's chosen servant, must not fear.

Outline

- **I. Introduction and Structural Context**
 - **A. Opening Remarks and Prayer**
 - **1.** Dr. Oswalt's personal reflections on feeling "peaked" and his appreciation for student attendance.
 - **2.** Prayer of thanksgiving for the capacity of laughter, music, and eternal hope through Jesus Christ.
 - **B. How the Prophets Wrote**
 - **1.** Scholars agree that prophets (except perhaps Ezekiel) spoke short oral messages that were transcribed by disciples and compiled later.
 - **2.** Ezekiel's writings are longer and more tightly organized from the outset.
 - **C. Overarching Structure of Isaiah (Mirroring Chapter 6)**
 - **1.** Chapters 1–6: The Call to Servanthood (problems in 1–5, solutions in 6).
 - **2.** Chapters 7–39: Trust as the absolute basis of servanthood.
 - **a.** Reflecting the Chapter 6 pattern: vision of helplessness (King Uzziah's death), vision of the Lord's glory, vision of self-uncleanness, and purification.
 - **b.** Hezekiah (Chapters 36–39) proved God's trustworthiness but was not the ultimate promised Messiah.

- c. Heart perfection (undivided devotion) versus perfect performance; God accepted Hezekiah's heart as true despite flawed actions.
- 3. Chapters 40–55: Grace, Motive, and Means for Servanthood.
 - a. Motivating force of servanthood: God's free, unmerited, and undeserved grace.
 - b. Sectional divisions: Chapter 40 (Introduction), Chapters 41–48 (Motive), and Chapters 49–55 (Means).
- II. The Time Frame and Authorship of Chapters 40–55
 - A. Geopolitical and Chronological Shift
 - 1. The setting shifts 150 years into the future (~560 BC) during the Babylonian Exile.
 - 2. The theological necessity of predictive prophecy: If God delivered Judah from Assyria but allowed Babylon to destroy Jerusalem, exiles would assume Babylonian gods defeated Yahweh.
 - 3. Holy Spirit inspiration allowed Isaiah to address future generations in their despair.
 - B. Single Authorship vs. Multiple Isaiahs
 - 1. Critiquing the scholarly division of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Isaiah.
 - 2. The "committee camel" metaphor: Greatest literary works are never produced by editing committees over centuries.
 - 3. The absence of specific historical details in 40–66: Since Isaiah did not know the microscopic details of the future, the Holy Spirit omitted them, except for the name of the deliverer (Cyrus).
- III. Chapter 40: The Call to Encouragement and the Greatness of God
 - A. Clarification of "Comfort" (Verses 1–2)
 - 1. The Hebrew word translated as "comfort" meant "encourage" or "fortify" in 1611 (steeling backbones), rather than merely providing warm fuzzies.
 - 2. Connection to the Holy Spirit as the "Comforter": the One who comes alongside to enable believers to stand when knocked down.
 - 3. Speaking "to the heart" of Jerusalem, mimicking Boaz's tender speech to Ruth on the threshing floor.
 - B. The Three Questions of the Discouraged Exiles
 - 1. Does God want to deliver us? (Or has He washed His hands of us due to our sins?)
 - 2. Can God deliver us? (Or are the Babylonian gods stronger?)
 - 3. Is God going to deliver us? (Why hasn't He done it yet?)
 - C. The Revealing of God's Glory (Verses 3–5)
 - 1. Preparation in the wilderness: Mountains leveled and valleys filled, quoting John the Baptist's announcement of Christ's coming.
 - 2. Letourneau Earthmoving Metaphor: God does not wait for us to make a way to Him; He takes the initiative to come to us in Christ.
 - D. All Flesh is Grass (Verses 6–8)
 - 1. Worldly empires like Babylon seem like towering monsters, but they are merely temporary grass.

- 2. The vital difference: Human beings wither, but those who receive the eternal Word of God possess the flavor of eternity.
- E. Herald of Good News (Verses 9–11)
 - 1. Proclaiming God's deliverance before there is any physical possibility in sight, similar to Abraham buying a baby buggy before Isaac's birth.
- IV. The Sovereign Creator vs. Helpless Idols (Isaiah 40:12–26)
 - A. Rhetorical Questions of Creation (Verses 12–17)
 - 1. God did not take counsel with any magician or advisor, standing in sharp contrast to pagan polytheistic pantheons.
 - 2. Echoing God's speech to Job regarding His unsearchable wisdom.
 - 3. Nations are a "drop in a bucket"—tracing King James idioms in the English language.
 - B. Sits Above the Circle of the Earth (Verses 18–24)
 - 1. God holds the entire cosmos within the span of His hand, yet sits above the circle of the earth.
 - 2. The absolute absurdity of comparing the transcendent Creator with crafted, stationary, wood-and-gold idols.
 - C. The Host of Heaven (Verses 25–26)
 - 1. Stars were worshiped as gods (Venus/Inanna) in ancient Sumer 5,000 years ago.
 - 2. Yahweh is not one of them; He calls the stars out by name like a master commanding servants.
- V. Is God Going to Deliver? The Discipline of Waiting (Isaiah 40:27–31)
 - A. The Exiles' Complaint (Verse 27)
 - 1. Complaining that their way is hidden from God and their rights are disregarded.
 - B. The Everlasting Creator (Verses 28–30)
 - 1. God does not grow weary or faint, and He actively increases the strength of the powerless.
 - C. The Meaning of Waiting (Verse 31)
 - 1. "Wait" (Kava/Haka) means active, trusting expectation, fused like tea and water.
 - 2. Incarnational experiential knowledge: Since Christ's coming, God knows human suffering experientially. There is now a human being on the throne of heaven.
 - 3. Why Israel forgot the stories of deliverance: Human self-reliance and the prideful desire to supply our own needs independently of God.
 - 4. "Walking with the turkeys is hard": It is easy to soar with eagles during revivals, but we need the Holy Spirit for the steady, straight daily walk of faithfulness.
- VI. Chapter 41: Cyrus and the Sovereign "I Am" (Isaiah 41:1–13)
 - A. God Raises Cyrus of Persia (Verses 1–4)
 - 1. Cyrus is raised from the east (Persia/modern Iran) to conquer Babylon (modern Iraq).
 - 2. God identifies Himself: "I, Yahweh, the first and with the last, I am He."
 - 3. Hebrew Anihu ("I am He") is translated in Greek as ego eimi ("I am"), forming the basis of Jesus' "I am" claims.

- **B. The Panic of the Nations (Verses 5–7)**
 - **1.** Terrified nations construct new, bigger idols in a frantic attempt to find salvation.
- **C. Israel, My Chosen Servant (Verses 8–9)**
 - **1.** God reassures Israel that they are His chosen servant, not cast off despite their failures.
- **D. The Initial Two Reasons Not to Fear (Verses 10–13)**
 - **1.** Reason 1: "I am with you" (Verse 10)—Immanuel is present in the middle of their despair.
 - **2.** Reason 2: "I will help you" (Verse 13)—God has a firm grip on His people, walking together with them to strengthen their stumbles.