

Lesson 22
Isaiah 40:1 – 42:25
The Greatness of God (Part 1)

Memory verse: “I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:13 NIV)

The book of Isaiah can be called “a Bible in miniature.” There are sixty-six chapters in Isaiah and sixty-six books in the Bible. The thirty-nine chapters of the first part of Isaiah may be compared to the Old Testament with its thirty-nine books, and both focus primarily on God’s judgment of sin. The twenty seven chapters of the second part may be seen to parallel the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and both emphasize the grace of God.

The “New Testament” section of Isaiah opens with the ministry of John the Baptist (40:3–5; Mark 1:1–4) and closes with the new heavens and the new earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22), and in between there are many references to the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and King. Of course, the chapter divisions in Isaiah are not a part of the original inspired text, but the comparison is still interesting.

In the “New Testament” section of Isaiah, the prophet is particularly addressing a future generation of Jews. In chapters 1 to 39 his audience was his own generation, and his primary message was that God would defend Jerusalem and defeat the Assyrian invaders. But in chapters 40 to 66 the prophet looks far ahead and sees Babylon destroying Jerusalem and the Jews going into captivity. (This happened in 586 BC) But he also saw God forgiving His people, delivering them from captivity, and taking them back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and restore the nation.

The primary world figure in Isaiah 1 to 39 is Sennacherib, king of Assyria; but in chapters 40 to 66 the world leader is Cyrus, king of Persia. It was Cyrus who defeated the Babylonians, and in 541 BC issued the decree that permitted the Jews to return to their land to rebuild the city and the temple (Ezra. 1:1–4). When Isaiah wrote these messages, Babylon was not yet a great world power, but the prophet was inspired by God to see the course the international scene would take.

Chapters 40 to 66 may be divided into three parts (40 - 48; 49 - 57; and 58 - 66), with the same statement separating the first two sections: “There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked” (48:22; 57:21). Chapters 40 to 48 emphasize the greatness of God the Father in contrast to the vanity of the heathen idols. Chapters 49 to 57 extol the graciousness of God the Son, the Suffering Servant; and chapters 58 to 66 describe the glory of God in the future kingdom, and the emphasis is on the work of the Holy Spirit (59:19, 21; 61:1ff.; 63:10–11, 14). Thus, there seems to be a trinitarian structure to these chapters.

The Jewish rabbis have called Isaiah 40–66 “The Book of Consolation,” and they are right. Isaiah sought to comfort the Jewish remnant in Babylon, after their difficult years of captivity, and to assure them that God was with them and would take them safely home. Along with words of consolation, the prophet also revealed the Messiah, God’s Suffering Servant, and described the future regathering of Israel and the promised kingdom. Isaiah saw in Israel’s restoration from Babylon a preview of what God would do for them at the end of the age, after the “day of the Lord” and the destruction of the world’s last “Babylon” (Rev. 17—19).

So as you study Isaiah 40–66, keep in mind that it was originally addressed to a group of discouraged Jewish refugees who faced a long journey home and a difficult task when they got there. Note how often God says to them, “Fear not!” and how frequently He assures them of His pardon and His presence. It is no surprise that God’s people for centuries have turned to these chapters to find assurance and encouragement in the difficult days of life; for in these messages, God says to all of His people, “Be comforted!”

Let’s look at the greatness of God as revealed in chapters 40 to 48 over 3 sessions.

Scripture reading: Isaiah Chapter 42:1-9

Things to learn: 1) God is greater than our circumstances 2) God is greater than our fears
3) The Messiah Servant

Discussion Questions:

Q1. How could the needy remnant Jews returning home see the greatness of God in their circumstances and be comforted by the words in Isaiah 40?

Q2 As the remnant Jews faced the challenge of the long journey home and the difficult task of rebuilding, they could think of many causes for fear. In what ways did God allay their fears in chapter 41?

Q3. Compare and contrast the two servants in chapter 42.