

Small Group Meeting week 6 on Isaiah 40

Review (20mins)

Reflect together on your experiences over the last week. What has God been teaching you? Where have you been growing in your walk with Him? Had you set yourself a challenge in your discipleship? How is that going? Share those experiences with your small group.

Read (10mins)

Recap on the sermon from last Sunday. Try to give a summary to those who were not able to be present.

Isaiah 40:1-31

Read the Bible passage for this week, slowly and prayerfully. It might help to use your imagination to picture the scene. At the end of the text you will find helpful background information in our 'Setting the Scene' section.

As you read, look out for *shockers* and *blockers*.

Shockers – a phrase, word, image or something from the text that resonates, stands out or connects with you.

Blockers – something from the text that raises questions for you.

Setting the scene:

- Chapter 40 marks a new beginning in Isaiah and in the path that God is leading his people on.
- There is a gap of just over 100 years between the end of chapter 39 and chapter 40. The Assyrian threat to Judah was 'removed' in Hezekiah's time (2 Kings 19:35). The kings after

Hezekiah 'did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord' and not even the reforms of godly Josiah could prevent judgment falling again on Judah.

- Babylon has replaced Assyria as the superpower and the people of Judah are progressively taken into exile, ending with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC.
- The people's mood in exile can be judged from Psalm 137 and from v6, 7a in chapter 40.
- However, chapter 40, addressed to those in exile, indicates that God is still on the move (the 'But' of v7b). Even in exile God still has a plan for his people (and the world, v5 'all people') – and that plan is spelt out in the rest of the book.
- **These passages always call for two horizons.** The first is how this passage relates to the current context that Isaiah speaks into. But the second horizon looks much further ahead and hints at the Messiah King many years (600) later. This would not have been so much a consolation to the people then. But with our hindsight – it's huge.

Reflect (20 mins)

After you have all had time to read the text, pause and be still to listen to God through the Scriptures.

Begin your reflection time by each naming your *shockers* and *blockers*. Listen carefully to each other, share your thoughts and reflect on this passage together.

You might also like to explore these questions:

Q1. Imagine yourself in exile; what words in v1-11 would be a reassurance that God has not forgotten you?

Q2. Think back to times in your own life when it has felt that God has been absent and share how you were comforted in those times.

Q3. The words of comfort in v1-10 lead on to the poem of God's greatness in the rest of the chapter. Isaiah uses astronomical and creation imagery as a means of reassuring the people that God is big enough to fulfil what he promises. Do you find that your scientific understanding (however small or large) of the universe enhances passages like this, or does it lessen their impact?

Respond (20mins)

As you draw near to the end of your session, consider how you might respond to your reading and reflection by "walking the talk". What are you going to be doing this week that will help you stretch the faith you have? It may be a challenge or activity that you are currently engaged with over many weeks. Be prepared to share how you are growing in that.

Some new challenge ideas

1 "With whom then will you compare God? To what image will you liken him?" 40:18

Find some time and space this week to reflect on how you 'see' God and consider what has formed that image. Is it God's revelation in creation and scripture (as in this chapter) or your own imaginings?

2 "Comfort, comfort my people ... those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength..." 40:1, 31

Think of someone you know who is being worn down by circumstances. Pray for them and find a way of encouraging them – a phone call, an e-mail, dropping by.

3 Renew your acquaintance with the heavens

As a group go on an evening walk and stop and look up. (For a warmer alternative arrange a group visit to the planetarium at In-Tech!)

Group Prayer

As a group, pray for one another this week: for many of us life is hectic and there are pressures we face. We need to know God's renewed strength. Pray for home and work situations that are particularly stressful and colleagues that you work alongside.

Two quotes to think about

'The gospel of Jesus Christ is the gospel of Isaiah 40 transposed into a new, higher key' (Barry Webb in *The Message of Isaiah* 164)

'For astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God. Wherefore, as ingenious men are to be honoured who have expanded useful labour on this subject, so they who have leisure and capacity ought not to neglect this kind of exercise...' (the reformer Jean Calvin on Genesis 1:16)

Additional note about 'Isaiah'

All commentators acknowledge that Isaiah 40 onwards is written for those in exile in Babylon; and hence recognise the chronological gap between chapters 39 and 40. This raises the question of whether our book of Isaiah is from a single person called 'Isaiah', or an anthology from two or more prophets speaking across the Assyrian and Babylonian period edited under the name 'Isaiah'.

For some, the words of chapter 40 onwards are predictive prophecy, thus maintaining a unity of authorship. Others, while acknowledging that predictive prophecy is a possibility, emphasise that a prophet's words usually make sense to their immediate audience. This would mean these chapters come from a later hand speaking at the time of the exile (making them a contemporary of Jeremiah and Ezekiel). This latter view also seems to fit with the description of Isaiah 1:1 which limits Isaiah of Jerusalem to a period up to Hezekiah.

Ultimately the question of authorship slides into the background; providing it is recognised that the intended audience for chapters 40 onward are those living in exile after the fall of Jerusalem.