

Isaiah 40 – 66

‘Hope in Dark Times’

Introduction

Rock fishing is a dangerous sport. There are more fatalities from rock fishing than from any other sport (except perhaps for lawn bowls). I have stood on rocks 10 metres above the sea and still been drenched by the spray of seas pounding the rocks. Through experiences of my own, and the tragic experience of a friend, I have learned to treat the sea with fear and respect. Some years back, hours before dawn one morning, I anxiously followed a friend to his favourite rock on Crampton Island, near Lake Tabourie. Having crossed to the island and made our way around the shore platform in total darkness, I was shown the rock on which we would fish. By torchlight I watched the sea rolling over the rock. The rock seemed less than a metre above the deep blackness of the ocean. The rocks to the right and left seemed more inviting and secure, but my friend asked me to put my trust in his word. He was literally calling me to trust my life to his word. And cautiously, I did. My legs didn't offer me the support I needed. Adrenaline and doubts competed for my attention. But I fished that rock, in total darkness, in safety. As the light crept into the sky I began to see clearly where we were, how the rock formations were shaped, and the path of the sea. I saw more clearly the hidden dangers of nearby ledges. I discovered the reasons for the security of 'our' rock. I had my faith confirmed.

In Isaiah 40 to 66, Isaiah calls the people of Judah to trust God in the darkness. God's people had avoided the Assyrian crisis, which had cast a dark shadow over chapters 1 to 39, only to fall to the Babylonians many years later. Isaiah, and other prophets, had warned that Babylon would take God's people captive if they continued in their rebellion. This is what happened in 586BC. Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed and the people of Judah are held captive in exile in Babylon. In chapters 40 to 66 Isaiah looks forward to the time when God will again rescue to his people. God will not forget his covenant. He will bring a new exodus. He will redeem his people and bring them home.

Furthermore, God will deal with the deeper issues of corrupt hearts and the need for forgiveness. By the work of the servant, sin will be atoned for and God's people can look forward to a future of paradisiacal proportions. Big promises, indeed! But then this is a big God, and this is his big gospel! While Judah was called to trust God in the darkness, we have seen the dawn. The light

has come into the world. We can look back on the promises of Isaiah and see clearly what even angels longed to understand (1 Pet 1:10-12). And yet, we too, must look forward in faith and hope as we await the return of our Servant King.

Isaiah 40 to 66 calls us to a deep trust in the abundant promises of God. These chapters are a wonderful celebration of the gospel. They give much reason for rejoicing, and still they challenge us to continually assess our focus and priorities. Again, we are in the presence of greatness and God is calling us to let him be God, and for us to live in confident hope as his holy people.

Please take the time to read over Isaiah 40 to 66 over the coming days and weeks. This majestic portion of Scripture shines its light on our majestic God and Saviour. Throughout this term we will look together through different windows at the hope God gives—a hope that can be trusted whatever circumstances we are facing. Our sermons will call us to stop trusting in the weak and transitory promises of this world and to rely on God for hope eternal. Our bible studies will take us a step further and encourage us to let this hope shape the way we live.

The following studies are intended as a **guide only**. Leaders should prepare the study as part of their own preparation, but feel free to explore the passage in their own way. They may add questions, explore other ideas, focus on one or two main points, or depart from this material entirely. Our aim is not to ‘complete a set of questions’. Rather it is to delve into God’s word together so that we can encourage one another with God’s great news of hope. Let’s not be satisfied with pat answers, but allow the scriptures to examine our hearts. Make sure you find your hope in the word of God and explore seriously how this can translate into changed lives. We’re not aiming at heads full of knowledge but hearts filled with hope. Let your head shape your heart.

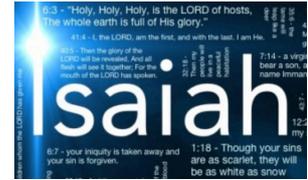
Further study

If you would like to spend more time delving deeper into the message of Isaiah, let me recommend the following books to assist you. I have found each of these books useful and have drawn some of the ideas for these talks and studies from their material.

Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah (Bible Speaks Today commentary)*

Kirk Patson, *Isaiah: Surprising Salvation (Reading the Bible Today commentary)*

David Jackman, *Teaching Isaiah*



Isaiah 40 'Hope in Dark Times' Week 1

Isaiah looks well ahead of his time, to the exile to Babylon and beyond, to reveal the wonder of the one true faithful God. He prepares God's people for a time when all hope seems lost and they are struggling in the darkness.

When God's people were captive in Babylon, what things would they be missing and how might they have felt about God? (See 2 Chronicles 36:15-19 and Psalm 137 to help you capture the emotion of this time.) What might have caused them to say the things in verse 27?

Has there been a time in your experience where you have struggled to believe in the presence or goodness of God? If you are willing, describe your circumstances and what you think caused the doubts and fears. If appropriate, share what helped you to rediscover hope in God during this time.

Isaiah 40:1 announces 'comfort' to Judah in dark times. Read through the whole of Isaiah 40 (preferably have someone read it aloud) noting as many reasons as you can for God's people to be comforted. What lies at the heart of these reasons for hope?

How are your ideas about God challenged and expanded by the description of God and his words and works in Isaiah 40? What changes do you need to make to how you perceive and relate to God?

Mark's gospel (1:2-3) introduces the message of good news through Jesus Christ by quoting from Isaiah 40. How does the gospel of Jesus Christ fulfill the reasons for hope that are promised in Isaiah 40?

How does Isaiah 40 bring comfort to us *now* in our circumstances?

Isaiah 40:29-31 are oft quoted verses from this chapter. You can find even them on posters and bumper stickers. Having looked through this chapter how might you be able to apply these words to bring hope to yourself and others?

What is one thing from this study that you can share with someone. Plan now *who, how,* and *when* you will share this. Pray that God will help you to encourage another by doing this.

Spend time praying together, using the words of Isaiah 40 to give thanks and praise to God.

Pray for one another in the midst of difficult circumstances you are experiencing.

Pray for those who are tempted to give up hope in God because of their struggles, doubts, and fears.