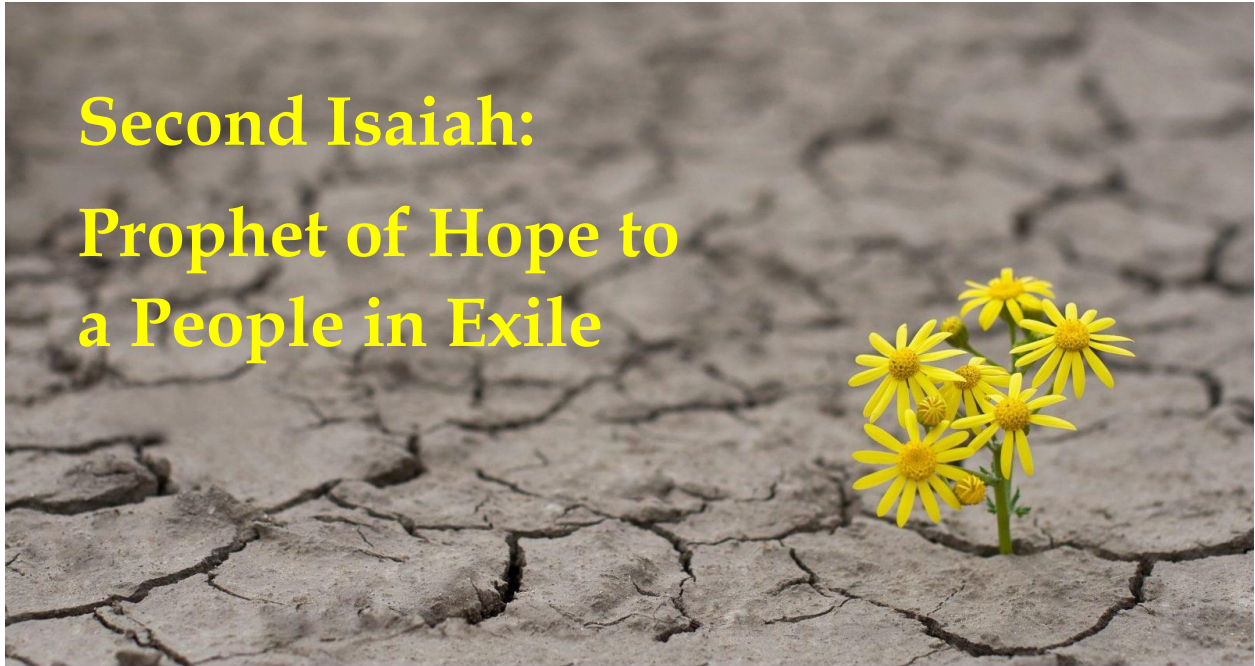


Second Isaiah: Prophet of Hope to a People in Exile



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‘Seasons of Hope – The Biblical Call to Hope.’

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STUDY NOTES

Isaiah 40:1-11 has been described as a prelude, like an overture to a symphony, that sets out the themes and establishes the tone of the chapters that follow – a message of comfort and hope. Addressing a people broken by the harsh and unrelenting experience of almost 50 years of exile and captivity, the prophet announces a three-fold message to the people.

- Forgiveness of their failures.
- The assurance that God has not abandoned them.
- The constancy and power of God’s word.

The opening verse sets the tone. ‘*Console my people, console them, says your God*’ [40:1]. The double call to consolation and comfort deliberately annuls the double indictment of Jeremiah 16:18: ‘*I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations.*’

Whereas Jeremiah has judged Israel's defeat by the Babylonians to be a sign of God's judgment:

⁹ I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the LORD, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. [Jeremiah 25:9]

now, in new circumstances and for a new generation, Second Isaiah proclaims a message of hope and restoration. The opening verse not only seeks to offer a message of consolation, more importantly it acknowledges that the people in exile are still Yahweh's people. God refers to them as 'my people' and to himself as 'your God.' They have not been abandoned or forsaken. The relationship has not been ruptured. God has not forgotten his people.

Walter Brueggemann asserts that '*the whole of the poetry of Second Isaiah is preoccupied with one overriding proclamation: homecoming.*' [Hopeful Imagination, 93] Isaiah 40:1-11 envisions a triumphal procession of the exiles being led by Yahweh back to Jerusalem. Isaiah 43:5-6 imagines a regathering of the scattered children of Israel:

Isaiah 43:5-6 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶ I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth.

Isaiah 44:28 and Isaiah 49:17 proclaim that Jerusalem /Zion will be rebuilt, and the Temple reestablished:

Isaiah 44:28 ²⁸ The Lord says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose"; and who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid."

Isaiah 49:17 ¹⁷ Your builders outdo your destroyers, and those who laid you waste go away from you.

Isaiah 52:8-9 and Isaiah 42:10-17 speak of the restoration of joy for the people.

Isaiah 52:8-9 ⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion. ⁹ Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

Isaiah 42:10 Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth!

Isaiah 42:12 Let them give glory to the LORD, and declare his praise in the coastlands.

The hope proclaimed by Second Isaiah entails a complete reversal of the devastation experienced in the exile: the people return to their homeland and are gathered as one people, Jerusalem is rebuilt and the Temple is restored and the people joyfully sing the praises of God.

It is hard for us to overstate the power of such a message of hope for a people on the verge of despair, feeling either that the Lord had forsaken them entirely or that the power of the Lord had been broken by the superior gods of the Babylonians. After almost fifty years the exiles were securely and perhaps despondently exiles. They could not imagine any other possibility.

Brueggemann insists that such prophetic imagination has the power not only to describe reality but to shape a new reality by articulating a vision that dares to see new possibilities and not only invites, but inspires, an oppressed people to dream of freedom. In that sense the prophet not only describes a new reality, but wills it. For Brueggemann, a prophet *'creates the sense of new realities that can be trusted and relied upon when the old realities have left us hopeless. It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order. Energizing is closely linked to hope. We are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given..... it is precisely the prophet who can energize towards futures that are genuinely new.'*[Prophetic Imagination,14]

The Basis of Hope: The Sovereignty of God.

Second Isaiah is obviously aware of the political reality of his time and of the increasing power of the Persian Empire and Cyrus' policy of repatriating exiles to their homeland. However his hope is informed by, but not based on, political analysis. His message is grounded in a theological conviction of God's sovereignty that underpins his hope. To the disheartened exiles, Second Isaiah calls out, 'Here is your God'[40:9] He assures them that God has not forsaken them, neither has the LORD been defeated by the Babylonians or any foreign power. The Lord is the supreme ruler of the universe and all nations of the earth are subject to him.

Isaiah 40:17 'Before him all the nations are as nothing, they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.'

The Lord is the creator of the heavens and the earth. Whatever exists depends on him. He alone has the power to create and is the only presence whose purpose can be discerned in the course of history.

Isaiah 40:23 'He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of the world to nothing.'

To a people who have grown weary of their captivity and who have despaired that a time will come when they can return to their homeland, Second Isaiah proclaims a subversive message of comfort and hope.

Harris asserts: *'More than any other prophet before him, Second Isaiah makes categorical claims about the uniqueness, universality and eternity of the Biblical God. Without beginning or ending, Yahweh alone is the Creator and the ruler of the cosmos, other gods do not exist: they are nothing: their images wind and emptiness.'* [41:29]. Isaiah 40:12-26 proclaims the majesty of God both in creation and in history:

Isaiah 40:12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?

Isaiah 40:21-26 ²¹ Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? ²² It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; ²³ who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. ²⁴ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. ²⁵ To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. ²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

For Second Isaiah, God's will is irresistible, shaping human history in unforeseen ways to achieve his people's salvation. Because the Lord is all-powerful and all-wise, the Lord alone can predict the covenant community's restoration and guarantee its future reality. Brueggemann insists that *"the first step out of exile and despair is the clear embrace of a faithful sovereign."* [Hopeful Imagination, 91]

Isaiah 46:9-10 ⁹ Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, ¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, "My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention."

To the prophet, the LORD is both transcendent and immanent. From his heavenly perspective, mighty empires and nations are insignificant, no more

than ‘a drop on a pail’s rim’ (40:15). Although the Lord effortlessly commands the innumerable stars of heaven he also reaches out to earth, inspiring his frightened and exhausted people to trust in the restoration of Judah’s fortunes and giving them ‘wings like eagles’ for the return journey home (40:25-31). Within this vision of God’s unrivalled sovereignty, Second Isaiah interprets his own political context – the decline of the Babylon and the rise of Persia under Cyrus - as concrete evidence of God’s control over history and a concrete sign of hope.

The Power and Constancy of God’s Word

The foundation of this hope is proclaimed at the very outset of Second Isaiah in Isaiah 40:8.

Isaiah 40:8 ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

The basis of hope is the word of God that stands forever. The basis of hope is the trustworthiness of the word of God. If you are one of the exiles in Babylon, there is no objective proof of the restoration that Second Isaiah promises. You have to take it on trust. You have to believe in the power and the constancy of God’s word. The divine comfort comes only to those who believe in the power of God’s word and Second Isaiah repeatedly emphasizes that power and that constancy. The Lord does what the Lord says.

Isaiah 46:11 I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it.’

Indeed it is notable that the prophecies of Second Isaiah are bracketed by references to the power and efficacy of God’s word in Isaiah 40:8, as mentioned above, and in Isaiah 55:10-11:

Isaiah 55:10-11 ¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

A Reassuring Hope

One of the recurring refrains as you read through Second Isaiah is the phrase: ‘Fear not!’ Scholars alert us to the fact that there are a total of 11 ‘Salvation Oracles’ in Second Isaiah which exhort the people not to be afraid and assure

them of salvation. These oracles reassure exilic Israel that the Lord's presence and solidarity with his people more than offsets the threat and power of Babylon.

Isaiah 41:9-11 You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off"; ¹⁰ do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. ¹¹ Yes, all who are incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish.

Isaiah 43:1-2 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Isaiah 44:1-3 But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! ² Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you: Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. ³ For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.

The fear of Babylon is overcome by the promise of God to be with and redeem his people.

A hope rooted in the memory of God's past deeds.

The hope-filled vision of Second Isaiah is not simply wishful thinking. It is rooted in the memory of what God has already done in the history of the people of Israel. Second Isaiah proclaims to the exiles that their own history as a people gives sure and firm reasons for hope. Abraham and Sarah [51:2] trusted in the promises of God even when they were delayed. Sarah, considered barren and forgotten by God, becomes the fruitful mother of a whole new community [54:1-3]. Noah is remembered as a model of trust in God's steadfast love which leads to a new beginning [54:9-11]. The prophet finds in the memory of past blessings, particularly at moments when all hope seemed lost, power for the present and the future.

But the most powerful image that Second Isaiah draws upon is Israel's experience of the Exodus. The promised return to Jerusalem is presented as a 'new' or 'second' Exodus. Second Isaiah begins and ends with lyrical descriptions of the new exodus in Isaiah 40:3-5 and Isaiah 55:12-13. In

between, several passages refer to the theme of the new exodus: [40:35, 41:17-20, 42:14-16, 43:16-21, 48:20-21, 49:8-12, 51:9-10, 52:11-12] whilst the language of the new exodus is also present in 40:3-11, 41:17-20, 42:14-17 and 43:1-7.

By presenting the promised return as a 'new exodus' Second Isaiah helps to anchor God's future promise in what God has already done for his people. By repeating themes and images of God's rescue in the past, Second Isaiah is providing consolation and confirmation about God's plan of rescue in the future. In other words Second Isaiah is saying to this people in exile: 'God has done it before..... God will do it again!' Equally, just as the Exodus demonstrated God's superiority over the false gods of the Egyptians [Exodus 12:12 and Numbers 33:4], Second Isaiah proclaims that God will again demonstrate his authority over the impotent gods of the Babylonians. [41:23, 42:17, 46:1-13]. Indeed Isaiah 46 offers a withering contrast between the gods of Babylon and Yahweh. It imagines the Babylonians leaving their capital city with their gods packed on their back, carrying their gods to safety, compared with the God of Israel who carries his people:

Isaiah 46:3-4 ³ Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; ⁴ even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.

The exodus from Egypt was the single most important event in the history of Israel. It was the moment when Israel was born as a nation and received its mission to be God's people in the world. By presenting their promised liberation from exile in Babylon as 'a new exodus,' Second Isaiah is connecting the people with their own sense of identity as a people and anticipating a new beginning in which Yahweh will establish a new relationship with Israel.

A hope born of 'newness'.

Yet the anticipated liberation is not simply a restoration or a return to past glories. Second Isaiah speaks of this liberation as a new event, a new creation and the source of this 'newness' lies in the freedom of God to act as he wills.

Isaiah 43:16-21 ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give

water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

God remains free to act and it is this freedom that makes hope possible because it means that God can still speak a new word and will new realities into being. This radical freedom of God stands at the heart of the hope that Second Isaiah seeks to inspire in this people in exile.

Isaiah 48:6-7 ⁶ You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forward I make you hear new things, hidden things that you have not known. ⁷ They are created now, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them, so that you could not say, "I already knew them."

In creating the covenant community anew, the Lord extends to the entire exiled people his promise to David. God's everlasting covenant, originally made with David, now encompasses the whole people [Isaiah 55:3-5]. The Lord summons the people of Israel to a new role on the world stage. Yahweh will make them a 'light to the nations' [42:6], witnesses to his glory [43:10] so that the ancient promise to Abraham that his descendants would ultimately be a source of universal blessing might be fulfilled.

Isaiah 55:5 ⁵ See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

The Suffering Servant of Yahweh.

In the visions of Second Isaiah the covenant people are collectively Yahweh's servant, witnesses to his unique nature and purpose in human history. In a series of poems called 'Songs of the Suffering Servant' Second Isaiah grapples with the question of the meaning of human suffering. Whilst it is not possible in this presentation to deal comprehensively with the Songs of the Suffering Servants, which merit a presentation in their own right, a few words about how they fit into the wider vision of Second Isaiah are appropriate.

The problem that troubled the prophet Habakkuk – why the just suffer and the wicked prosper – had become one of the major issues for the exiles in Babylon. Traditionally misery and suffering was interpreted as a punishment for failure to be faithful to covenant living. Whilst Israel recognized that its failings had contributed to its downfall, they were not as unjust or wicked as the nations to which they were made captives. Second Isaiah opens up a new vista in the understanding of suffering. He does not deny that suffering may be a just punishment for the people's failures, but he insists that not all suffering should

be interpreted in this way. Having in mind the hardships endured in exile, he is able to see in their captivity something more than a punishment for past failures. He sees the captivity as an opportunity to do something noble and generous for the benefit of those who held them in bondage. Instead of the Israelites suffering for their own sins, he sees in their experience of exile the possibility of a voluntary suffering because of the sins of others. Such suffering could be the means of winning over their enemies to a new way of living and so allow Israel to fulfil its calling to be 'a light to the nations.' What could not be accomplished by force or argument might be achieved through the power of love as manifested in the voluntary suffering of the innocent for the guilty.

Whereas Isaiah 49:4 expresses the anguish and pain of the exiles: "*I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity,*" in the following verses the Lord responds:

Isaiah 49:6 "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

The enduring power of hope.

In her diary Anne Frank famously wrote:

Where there is hope, there is life! It fills us with courage and makes us strong again.

In many ways her words perfectly capture the message of Second Isaiah. Addressing a people who had grown despondent and dispirited by almost fifty years in exile, a people struggling to hold on to their self-identity and sense of community, a people grappling to reconcile the promises made to their forefathers and the crushing reality of suffering and exile, Second Isaiah proclaims a message of comfort and hope. He interprets the changing political context – the decline of Babylon and the rise of Persia under Cyrus – as concrete evidence of God's control over history and a sign of hope.

But the basis of hope he insists lies in the sovereignty and the freedom of God. The Lord's word is effective and is to be trusted. Drawing on memories of God's past magnanimity in creation and in the history of Israel, the prophet seeks to foster a renewed trust in God as the foundation for hope. For Second Isaiah, the first step out of exile and despair is the clear embrace of the sovereign God, Yahweh alone is God, and compared to Yahweh all other gods are naught. Trust in God, trust in the power and constancy of his word to will into being all that he wishes, trust in God's freedom to reshape history and create anew are the pillars on which he builds the hope of redemption, restoration and return presented in the extended metaphor of a 'new exodus.'

Walter Brueggemann reflects on the lyrical quality of Second Isaiah as essential to his articulation of hope: *‘Speech about hope cannot be explanatory or scientifically argumentative: rather it must be lyrical in the sense that it touches the hopeless person at many different points. More than that his speech must be primarily theological, which is to say that it must be in the language of covenant between a personal God and a community. Promise belongs to the world of trusting speech and faithful listening.’* [Prophetic Imagination, 67]

Using some of the most beautiful and lyrical poetry of the biblical tradition, Second Isaiah invites Israel to hope in God, in the possibility of what God might yet do because of who God is and because of what God has done in the past. He urges the people in exile to choose hope over despair and trust over despondency. In so doing he does indeed fill them with courage and gives them new strength.

In many ways Second Isaiah answers the call set forth in the First Letter of St Peter centuries later: *‘Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.’* [I Peter 3:15]

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