

# Sermon Outline

## God's Faithfulness in Times of Suffering – Isaiah 40:1-11

*This sermon outline can be used at a Suffering Church service or meeting. It can be read out as it stands (you may want to omit the Bible references in brackets). You could add some illustrations of your own or take some from the information on pages 10-18. You might also find helpful material in the small group Bible study on page 22 or the eight-day Devotional Booklet. Alternatively, the outline can be used as a framework for your own ideas and applications. A PowerPoint to accompany the sermon can be downloaded from [barnabasaiaid.org/scaaw](http://barnabasaiaid.org/scaaw).*

### Introduction

The land is desolate and laid waste, Jerusalem and the temple destroyed. The people of God are in exile in Babylon, afflicted and oppressed.

This is the situation addressed by Isaiah's prophecy, which gives a message of hope and consolation for a crisis that was

still many years in the future when he brought this message from God. What was in the future for Isaiah is in the past for us, but the deep riches of these words, with their many layers of meaning, are given to us in Scripture for our hope and consolation too.

### 1. The Angelic Message of Comfort and Forgiveness (vv.1-2)

The scene at the beginning of chapter 40 is set in heaven, in the court of the King of kings, who is speaking to His angelic messengers, sending them out with a message of comfort, deliverance, hope and love to His beleaguered people.

We live not only in a physical world, but also in a spiritual world. It is in heaven that decisions are made about what happens on earth. Nothing is left to "chance," and God's purposes will ultimately be fulfilled. Our lives are not at the mercy of haphazard random events, for God is in control.

In verse 1 of our passage, God is instructing His angels' to bring a message of comfort to His people. In verse 2, God tells His angels to pass on the message tenderly. It is the Hebrew word for wooing and literally means speaking "to the heart."

The message is for people who are suffering, people who have endured a period of "hard service." The Hebrew word is *saba*, which describes a time of discipline, hardship and pain – but of limited duration. The message the angels bring is that the *saba* has reached its end. From our perspective, on the other side of the cross, we can hear the message as a promise that the time of striving legalistically for an unbroken relationship with God has come to an end, because Christ has died to take away our sins.

But for the first hearers of Isaiah, the *saba* was their exile in Babylon, a punishment for their sinfulness. Now they are forgiven. "Her sin has been paid for" (v.2, NIV) is translated in some Bible versions as "her iniquity is pardoned." This is not the pardon available to us because of the atonement of the Lord Jesus. It is impossible for us to atone for our sins, let alone doubly atone for them; only our Redeemer can do that. But God in His graciousness speaks to His people as if they had somehow earned what in reality He is giving as a free and undeserved gift. This forgiveness and restoration is the core of the message of comfort.

Genesis chapter 3 tells us that Adam and Eve's sinful rebellion against God was what brought pain and suffering into the world. Not all suffering is a *direct* result of sin. Many suffer, whether it be cancer, Covid or cyclones, simply because of the natural order of things in our fallen world. But at the beginning of Isaiah 40, the sufferings of the people of God were directly due to their rebellion against Him, displayed in their corruption and idolatry.

Sin is serious. It is rebellion. It is grievous in the eyes of the Lord.

### 2. Preparing for the Coming Deliverance (vv.3-5)

With the message of comfort and forgiveness comes a message of hope. Something marvelous is about to happen: the LORD will lead His people out of Babylon and back to their own land. A fitting highway must be prepared and all obstacles removed, just as was done in the ancient Middle East before a conquering monarch.

This was also a prophecy about John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ (Matthew 3:3). John's method of preparing a straight, level, smooth road was to call the nation to ready themselves spiritually, for their God was about to come and redeem them.

The desert or wilderness is a place of suffering, where the Divine may seem absent. Yet Moses encountered the LORD in

the burning bush at "the far side of the wilderness" (Exodus 3:1,2). Elijah, exhausted and afraid, went into the wilderness and prayed to die, but there the LORD sent an angel to bring him food that gave supernatural strength (1 Kings 19:3-8). The wilderness was the scene for Jesus' temptations, after which angels came and cared for Him.

So the desert is a place where God is encountered. It is a place of purification and therefore of hope. When God delivered His people from Egypt and led them in the desert, they were sorely tried and their sinfulness was exposed. But from this experience came a renewed people, faithful to their God.

We should never be afraid of a wilderness experience. It