

Session 1

December 1, 2024

## LOOKING FORWARD WITH HOPE

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

This week, many churches will celebrate the first Sunday of the season called “Advent.” Historically, the season covers the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. The term itself means “arrival,” and refers to the arrival of some notable event. For Christians around the world, Advent is a celebration of the coming of Christ. The “first advent” refers back to Christ’s birth. The “second advent” looks forward to Christ’s return. Whether or not your church marks these days formally by lighting colorful candles or marks them informally by simply focusing on the birth of Christ in the Sundays leading up to Christmas, no one will dispute the importance of Christ’s first “advent.”

Isaiah was one of God’s most prolific prophets. His ministry spanned four different Judean kings, from 739–681 BC. His message was one of pending judgment, but also pending deliverance. And no other prophet foretold the Advent of Christ more clearly than Isaiah. Three key activities are mentioned.

**Pardon (vv. 1-2).** Chapter 40 begins a fifteen-chapter series often referred to as the “servant passages.” Throughout, the twin themes of God’s servant nation (Israel) and God’s saving servant (Christ) are prominent. This chapter reminds God’s people that while judgment would come—in the form of the Babylonian captivity—it wouldn’t last forever. His deliverance would be characterized in four key ways. First, it would be a time of comfort. The double-use of the term (v. 1) is emphatic. In the midst of their suffering, the people would find comfort in the news that their punishment would come to an end. Second, their deliverance would end a time of enslavement and the forced labor their captivity would bring (v. 2). Third, their deliverance would have a spiritual component: their “iniquity” would be pardoned (v. 2). The word “iniquity” means “crookedness.” It likely referred to their overall sinfulness in general, and to their notorious sin of idolatry specifically. Finally, their deliverance was marked by a double-portion (v. 2). The meaning here is unclear. If connected to their sinfulness, receiving “double from the Lord’s hand” would refer to the Lord doling out “more than enough” judgment to cover their sins. If, however, the thought is connected to their future, it would refer to God’s blessings which would come in much greater portions than their judgements. For reflection: *Read Psalm 103:8-10. How do these verses inform our study?*

**Preparation (vv. 3-5).** Here, the prophet shifts his focus from the relatively near future to what I call the “messianic future.” Judah’s captivity by Babylon began about 586 BC and ended around 516. This familiar passage was not culminated until the ministry of John the Baptist five hundred years later (see John 1:23 and Matt 3:3). Notice Isaiah’s easy transition from the physical to the spiritual. Historians recount how the bumpy roads of antiquity were cleared, leveled, and smoothed to allow gentle passage for kings. But the imagery here is vaster! Isaiah had in mind not the rugged paths leading up to Jerusalem but rather the rugged path of human corruption that needed God’s further preparation. Only then would the “Glory of the Lord” appear. For reflection: *Read Galatians 4:3-4. How does this passage inform this week’s study?*

**Provision (vv. 9-11).** Here, the cry of comfort in verse 1 shifts into outright jubilation! The bearer of good news is Jerusalem itself. First, the people of God would proclaim their deliverance from the oppression of Babylon. But again, there is a messianic aspect. The deliverer to come was no earthly king, but rather a sovereign savior. He is introduced in verse 9 as “your God.” But His title is expanded in verse 10 to “the Lord God.” Notice that He brings with Him three things: power, rule, and reward. After generations of bondage to sin and depravity, humanity would receive its savior. And that is the good news of Advent. For reflection: *Look at the description of God’s provision in verse 11. What is the emphasis here? Why do you think the prophet here used such “soft” imagery?*